

SOUTH SOMERSET JOINTED CRUCKS — SOME PROBLEMS

BY R. G. GILSON

The cruck catalogue for Somerset now (mid-1976) contains some 227 buildings in which are over 500 separate jointed cruck trusses (these figures do not include 'true' cruck buildings). The vast majority of these jointed crucks have a joint between the post and principal rafter which consists of a long tenon on the post entering a mortice in the rafter and secured by, usually, 4 or 5 pegs through the joint (Fig. 1, termed 'long tenon'). Recently however a number of houses studied in South Somerset have proved to have a different type of joint, in all cases the rafter and post being united by a slip tenon entering a mortice in both and laterally pegged in position, and a further 2 large dowels finishing the joint (Fig. 2, termed 'face jointed').

The first face jointed example found by the writer was listed in the 'Further Catalogue of Somerset Crucks' (*Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 117 (1973) 102-106) as No. 33, being Parsonage Farmhouse, Dinnington, and examples have now been found in Hinton St. George and Hardington Mandeville. In all three of these villages jointed crucks of the common long tenon type have also been found.

Further examples have been seen by Sir Robert Hall at Bere Chapel Farmhouse in Winsham (now in Dorset), and by Cdr. E. H. D. Williams at Dairs Barton, Tatworth, Chard (with dowels but no slip tenon and in a roof that is unquestionably medieval). The type is known in Dorset, the majority being in open halls but some appearing to be later, and in Wales where the joint is much simpler and without the slip tenon and is dated as late as the 17th/18th centuries (there is possibly no connection between the South West and Welsh types: the latter are in a limited area and the two have no obvious links of geography, culture, or date). In Devon the face jointed cruck (not identical to the Somerset examples but having the same elements of slip tenon and dowels) is known in the medieval period and examples are found at Poltimore, Farway, and Bury Barton, Lapford.

A building certainly relevant to this present study is the barn at Forde Grange, Thorncombe, Dorset, studied by Cdr. E. H. D. Williams and found to have a mixture of 5 true and 3 face jointed crucks. The roof has been windbraced and the apices in all cases are variations of type B in the National Cruck Catalogue, i.e. the principal rafters meet in a vertical line and have a loose tenon, and some also have a triangular yoke below. The combination of true crucks and an early apex form indicates a medieval date for this building, and a date not later than the 14th century has been suggested.

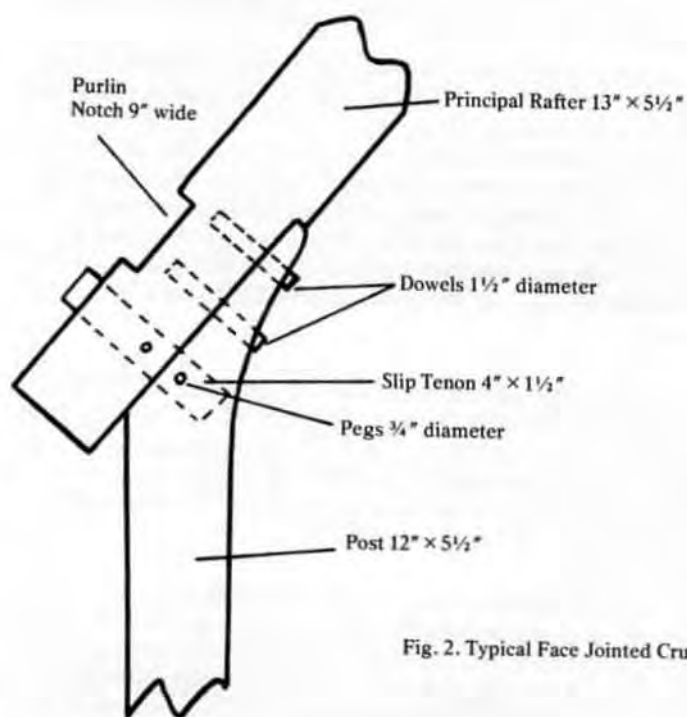
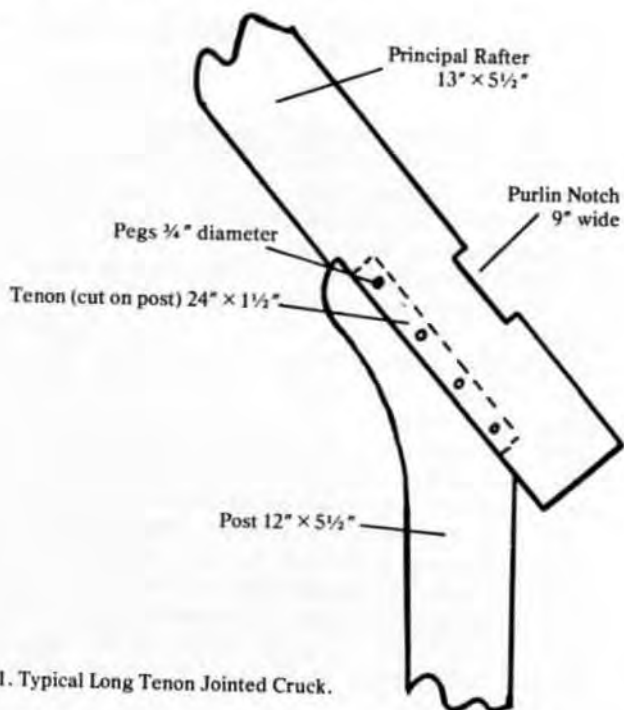
To revert to the Somerset examples which the writer has studied in some detail, the village of Hardington Mandeville has, on the basis of present knowledge, three jointed cruck houses. These are:—

1. MIDWAY (ST 311118)

This house has been very greatly altered and added to and virtually all early ground floor work has gone, but the roof has the remains of 4 jointed crucks of the long tenon type; there are no windbraces or archbraces but all the timbers are heavily smoke blackened. Subsequent work (16th century?) made this a 3-room/cross passage house with what appears to be a stone fronted smoke bay in the service room and the stair to the inserted floor housed in an external rear projection.

2. 342/343 HIGH STREET (ST 512115)

This again is a much altered house built on a jointed cruck framework, the details of which cannot be seen. Its main interest lies in a fourth room added to the earlier plan, probably in the 17th century, which re-uses for the roof 2 trusses which were originally face jointed crucks. It may be that these are the original gable trusses of the house, now replaced by stone walls. There is no smoke blackening visible in this house.



3. GRASS HILL (ST 511115)

This is a much more substantial survival than either of the previous houses. Three face jointed crucks exist in their entirety (the apex is, however, hidden in all cases) and what is probably a fourth is visible in one stone gable, although now partially cut away around an inserted chimney. The house has been rebuilt in stone and two dates (1665 and 1687) near the front door probably relate to this rebuilding. The plan (Fig. 3) is of 3 rooms with cross passage, the hall fireplace backing on the cross passage. The inner room (parlour?) has what appears to be an original upper room over it, the fireplace and the solid oak baulk stair beside it both being inserted. There are indications in the purlins of the room above the hall that a fire hood of some sort may have existed before the present hall fireplace.

If the present room arrangement is original, the layout would be a one-bay inner room, a one-bay hall, and a service passage of one and a half bays. It is more likely that the lower part of the present hall/inner room partition was open and the earlier arrangement had a two-bay hall with one half lofted over and accessible by ladder. The service room was certainly open to the roof. The probability is that this house dates from the early 16th century.

In Hinton St. George 4 houses have to be considered:—

4. FOSSWAY (ST 442126)

The relevance of this house is that it contains at least one long tenon jointed cruck but insufficient evidence is available to give any date.

5. THE PRIORY (ST 420126)

This also has jointed crucks and is medieval in origin, the style of the building is superior to any other local example, and the joints, where visible, are long tenon.

6. OLD FARM (ST 419125)

The house is stone and thatched, with late 17th century mullioned windows and other details of the same period, but when studied it proved to have one face jointed cruck at the west end, and four other trusses. Since then further building work has revealed that the truss at the east end is a similar face jointed cruck: the probability is now that the other three are of the same type. It is impossible to determine the original plan: it is now of 3-room/cross passage type, but as neither of the crucks appear to be smoke blackened the house is probably not medieval.

7. OLDWAY LODGE (ST 418125)

From the outside this appears to be an 18th century house, stone-built and thatched, but has within three face jointed crucks. The plan (Fig. 4) is again the familiar 3-room/cross passage type with the main fireplace backing on the cross passage, but the uneven arrangement of the crucks (giving unequal bays—one just under 12 feet, the other nearly 16 feet) suggests an earlier smoke bay or fire hood in the present fireplace position. This view is reinforced by the framed ceiling in the centre room (hall), which stops well short of the fireplace but could perhaps have fitted up against the earlier feature. The roof is entirely clean and unblackened. This too would appear to be a house of the early 16th century.

By far the most interesting of these houses containing face jointed crucks is the only cruck house in the village of Dinnington, this example actually having both types of joint:

8. PARSONAGE FARMHOUSE (ST 403128)

This was the priest's house for this parish, and although now altered sufficiently to make interpretation of the plan form (Fig. 5) almost impossible, a number of features of interest still survive. The earliest part is most certainly the hall: at the ground floor there is a good stud and panel partition in oak, unusual in this elm

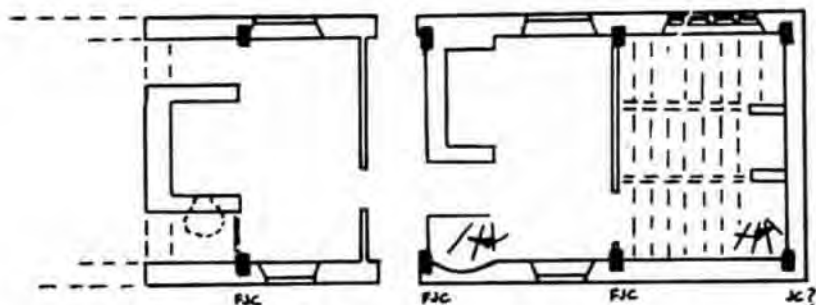


Fig. 3. Grass Hill, Hardington Mandeville.

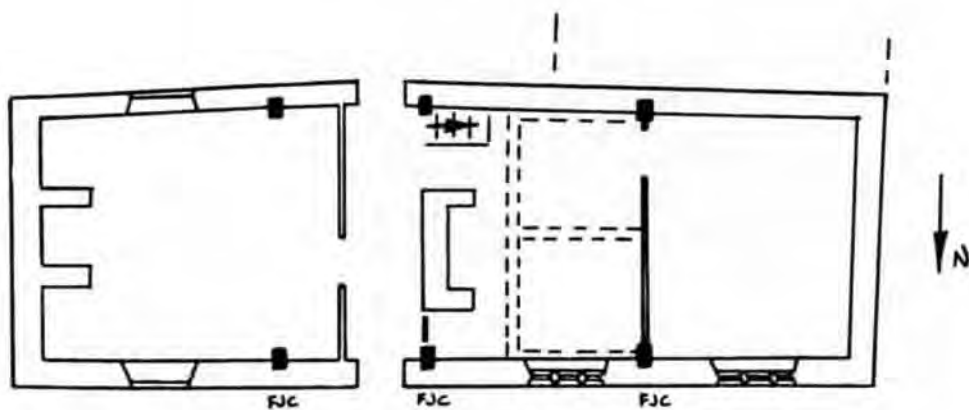


Fig. 4. Oldway Lodge, Hinton St. George.

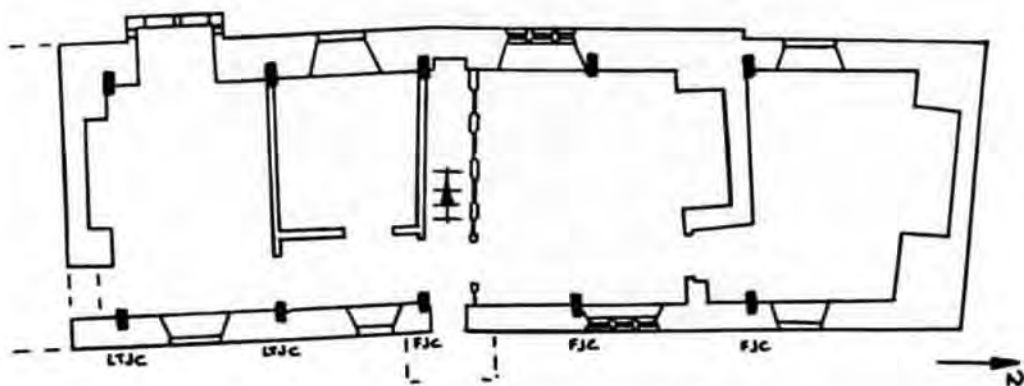
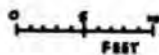


Fig. 5. Parsonage Farmhouse, Dinnington.



district, and an inserted fireplace with a stone three-centred doorway in line with its front, also unusual. The ceiling is inserted and the beams have keeled stops, not a common feature but known in a few houses in the Ilminster district. The windows in this hall are both of three lights, hollow chamfered with a heavy ogee surround, in Hamstone, and have a rebated face on the inside which indicates that they were probably originally unglazed and internally shuttered.

The roof of the hall is medieval: three face jointed crucks can be seen, the centre one being arch-braced, and there is a row of windbraces between lower and middle purlins. As usual in South Somerset there is no wallplate. To the north of the hall the roof has been replaced by a roof with a lower, nailed collar and tenoned purlins, of around 1800. To the south the roof has also been altered, and scarfed purlin joints on the south truss of the hall indicate that the building of which the hall is the surviving part originally extended further: this area is now occupied by a further two bays of building, not a single rebuild but extended in two stages, and the two jointed crucks in this part are of the more common long tenon type. The hall roof is heavily smoke blackened; the later jointed crucks are clean. The core of this house must date at least from the 15th century, with alterations in the 16th century and later.

To state the problem—the long tenon jointed cruck is found from all times within what might be termed the cruck period, from the joint that makes two timbers into an approximation of a true cruck (a good example existing at Rodwell Manor, West Lambrook) to the fully developed form illustrated. Buildings also exist in which true crucks have been extended above the collar and in some cases a joint has been used which could be termed a long tenon (Strangmans, Heale, Curry Rivel being one). There is thus no difficulty with the long tenon joint: we have a large number of examples, it appeared well within the medieval period (e.g. Midway, Hardington Mandeville) and continued in use in the post-medieval period (e.g. the extension or replacement at Parsonage Farmhouse, Dinnington).

The face jointed cruck is the problem type—clearly from the examples found in the earlier phase of Parsonage Farmhouse, Dinnington, and in the Forde Grange barn at Thorncombe this type also appeared well within the medieval period, and its continuation on into the 16th century is demonstrated by Grass Hill, Hardington Mandeville, and Oldway Lodge, Hinton St. George. Why then do so few examples exist, and why only in this limited area, mainly South Somerset?

It could be argued perhaps that this is a more primitive style of joint and that it has been superseded by the long tenon type, but this does not explain the late examples found which are identical to the earlier ones, and it is also not likely that an obsolete joint would continue in use alongside its successor.

It could be argued too that it is the product of a local school of carpentry, but there is a very long date range for so few examples and it exists side by side with the more common long tenon joint throughout the whole period, making such a suggestion less likely.

A third possibility has been suggested, that the joint itself is weak and the low number of survivors is due to a high failure rate. The joint may be weaker but this is not a critical factor in this present study: it is more than adequate for the stresses normally imposed upon it and in the buildings where it is visible no evidence of joint failure is apparent.

Whatever the reason for this joint or for its survival, we should look most carefully at any further examples uncovered by fieldwork, both in Somerset and elsewhere, in the hope that its distribution, both geographically and in date, will give some clue to its origins and dissemination.

The writer is grateful to Cdr. E. H. D. Williams for comments and information regarding the buildings he has studied which are mentioned above.