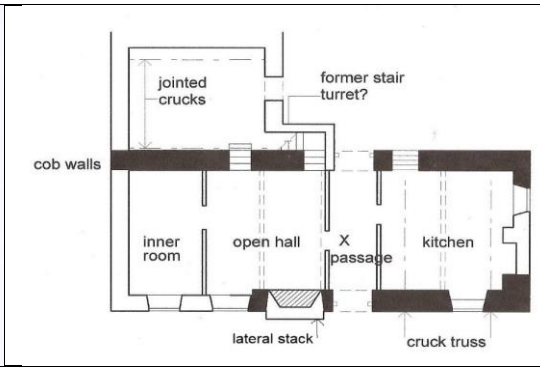
Talk by Mary Ewing on 24.10.20

The Early Dunster Project was set up in 2018 as a result of a bid to Historic England under their "Early Fabric in Historic Towns" initiative. The project was to have end ended this September but soon after starting, we realised that that was too ambitious in view of the amount of early building evidence and we now have a two year extension as a minimum. This year there would have been a final event originally, but we decided to keep it as an interim update of what we had found so far and where we are heading.

When we first started our recording group in 2013, our main surveying work was initially at Porlock, and when it came to Dunster (where the group's launch was held) I was curious at the big difference in buildings between Porlock and Dunster, settlements which are of a similar size and fairly near each other. Of course once we started at Dunster it soon became apparent that the remaining building fabric here is much older than in Porlock. And of course it had the Castle, then the Priory and also a medieval port, which at the time was said to be second in importance only to Bridgwater as a Somerset port. Dunster is an extraordinary place for a number of reasons - mainly, at least as far as we are concerned, because of the early roof structures here. When I say early, I am talking about 1300s and 1400s. We knew there were a lot of medieval roofs from recordings made by past members of the SANHS Historic Buildings Committee in the 1970s and 80s and then this was confirmed by dendro-dating of roofs in Dunster by Time Team over the last few years.

Known cross passage open Hall houses to date (2020)

Park Street	1
Mill Lane	1
West Street east	3
West Street west	1
Church Street	4
High Street	1
Marsh Street	2
Total	13

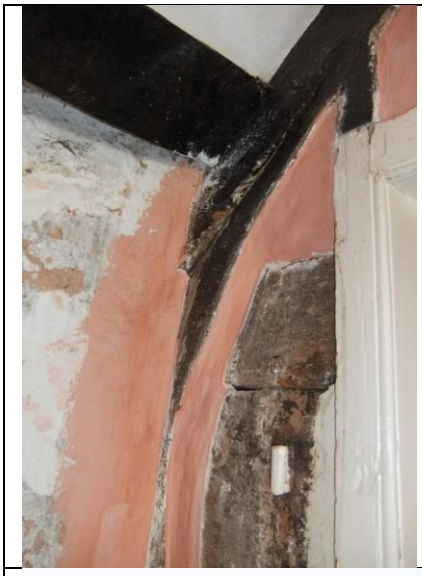


Once we started on this project, we became increasingly aware of the large number of 3 room cross passage houses. Many of the early houses identified so far, apart from the Old Priory, conform to this plan with an open Hall where the central hearth would have been and extending up to the roof often with associated decorative structural roof timbers. So far we have found 13 of these and there are more suspected in the High Street. As you can see, they are scattered right across Dunster from Park Street to Marsh Street. Nearly all of them have been separated into two dwellings or sets of premises but one was still in use as one house with classic form as recorded in 1988 by Cdr. Williams. *(recording copies in Somerset Record Office)*

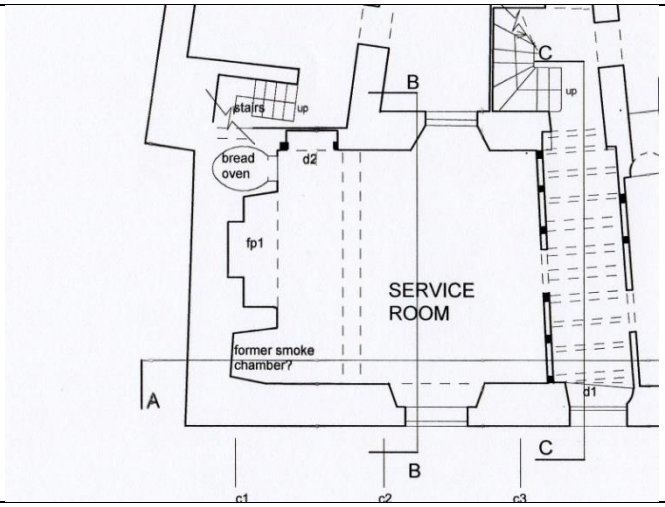
Above is the layout of that one as it was recorded at that time (it has since been divided). This sort of layout is found in early houses all over Somerset, mostly in rural areas, but to find so many in what was a medieval town is unusual. Traditionally they have been associated with yeomen farmers and landowners but we assume here that they were for successful merchants or those doing business with the Castle or Priory. W. Pantin who wrote an article in the 1960s on medieval town houses identified as the first plan type, the open hall house parallel to the street and with a cross passage, though not necessarily with 3 rooms. By way of example two 12th century houses in Lincoln are both

of cross passage type with 2 rooms, one on either side of the cross passage. Another type of plan that he mentioned was the courtyard house which we suspect may have been found here but as yet we have no conclusive evidence of them. *(Ref."Medieval English Town House Plans" by W. Pantin; Medieval Archaeology Vol.6 pps.202 - 239)*

The layout shown here is in West Street and interestingly the size of the rooms correlates very closely with other houses further along on the same side of the street. We are investigating the possibility of the development of an early row of houses here, as Alison Bunning who helped with a survey in 2015 had pointed out similarities with a row of houses that she had seen at Silverton in Devon. As at Silverton, the rear wall in every case is of cob, front walls presumably having been rebuilt here, and in each there is evidence of a lateral stack insertion at a later date. Silverton again has a similarity of room size and it is noted that Silverton is on the route between Dunster and Exeter along the Exe valley, possibly implying an early connection. The 3 room cross passage type that we have found here consists of an open hall, an inner room leading off of this for owners' privacy and a service end - sometimes known as buttery and pantry on the other side of the cross passage but shown here as a kitchen. *(Report on Silverton by John Thorpe, unpublished)*



In Dunster, we have evidence of solars in some of these houses. The solar would have been above the inner room or else above the service room and cross passage (we have examples of both) and may have been added later on. This slide shows a door frame below the jointed cruck truss and behind a modern door frame. The moulding of the door frame is still visible as are the pintels that the door would have hung on. The hanging of the door on this side indicates that it must have been accessed from the open Hall, probably by a ladder.



Over time, fireplaces with stacks would be added in and eventually the whole of the ground floor would be ceiled to provide additional rooms above. When stacks were inserted in the Hall in Dunster, these were usually lateral stacks at the front or rear of the building, sometimes with a small window set in the recess. Many of the stacks have now been removed but evidence may remain, such as the side window or differences in wall thickness and in one house, there is what appears to be a fire back below one of the front windows. Generally speaking we think of chimneys being inserted between the mid 16th and mid 17th century but here in Dunster, the historian Maxwell Lyte, tells us

of an ordinance in 1493 that "nobody in the borough shall henceforth make a fire outside the chimney, in any house covered with thatch". 1493 is quite an early date for chimneys to be built. *(Ref: "A History of Dunster, Part I" by H D Lyte, London 1909, p.308)*

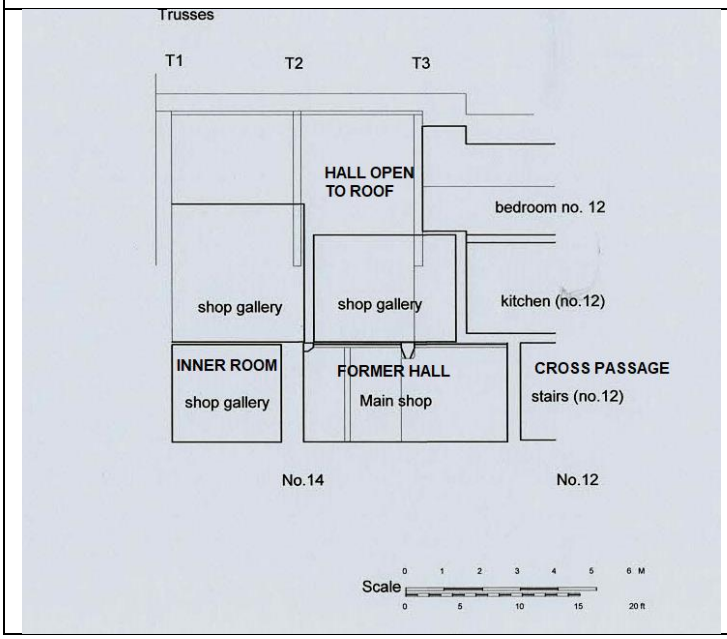
Fireplaces were also provided for service rooms and often were then more functional and with a wider variety of locations. This one shown above is in the gable wall of the service room. The fireplace range could be the hub of food production in the house and in this one, there may have been a curing/smoking chamber in the left hand recess as well as the bread oven at the right hand side. Here there would have been a staircase winding above the bread oven and fireplace, an arrangement that has been seen in other houses in Dunster as well as at Minehead and Porlock. At the first floor level, there are various recesses cut into the masonry of the stack and these may have been for storing grain and seed in dry conditions.

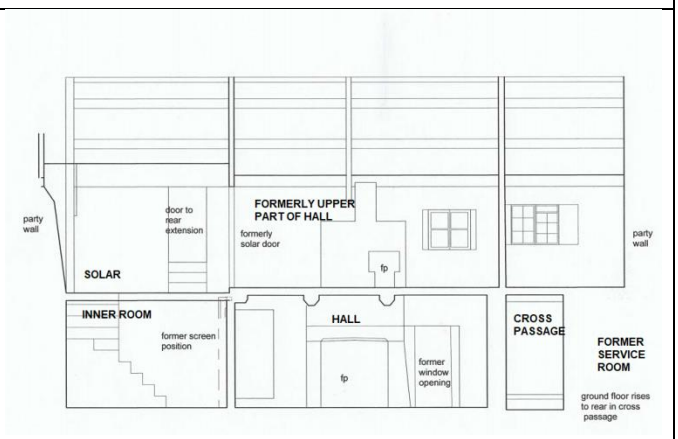
Rooms mentioned in Dunster probate inventories 1635 - 1746

Hall	Hall chamber	Parlour /inner room	Parlour chamber	Kitchen	Kitchen chamber
17	10	7	3	9	4

Buttery	Buttery chamber	Shop	Shop chamber
6	4	10	4

For Dunster there was a set of 64 probate inventories from the 17th and 18th centuries and these were kindly transcribed for us by Mark McDermott. Interestingly, names of rooms were mentioned and quite a few of them at that time still retained the earlier titles like "Hall" and "buttery". The "parlour" may well have been the inner room. Chambers would refer to the rooms above these. A number of the inventories mention shops as well as house accommodation and in some cases it has been intriguing to speculate as to the occupation from the tools or stock of these shops. Our researcher Jill has done quite a bit of work on this.





The complex arrangements relating to the later division of these houses has been challenging to work out, like this one at left where there is a zig zag line in elevation between the two properties. The drawing is a long section - as though the front wall has been removed. Houses may have been divided for commercial purposes - or perhaps to give access to shops and workshops at the rear via a former cross passage. On the other hand, they may have been divided for further generations of the family as has been suggested by Isabel Richardson.

In the one at right, the outer (service room) has been separated off and outside the building it is possible to see the original extent of the house where the roof line changes. At the rear of this and the neighbouring house there were early ranges at right angles with further jointed cruck truss roofs in them. In this particular one, the screen separating the Hall from the x passage was replaced at some stage with a stone wall. We know this because the owner found the head-plate of what would have been the screen during building works. The truss frame on the first floor above is still partly infilled, but above this in the attic, you can see the infill is not wattle and daub as are other infill trusses in the house

In this close up, you can see that the plaster here is on a rush base, which is of a later date. So the implication may be that originally there was a timber partition and that this was strengthened up over time to give more security from the cross passage when public access was needed possibly to the rear of the house and also to separate off the section next door.

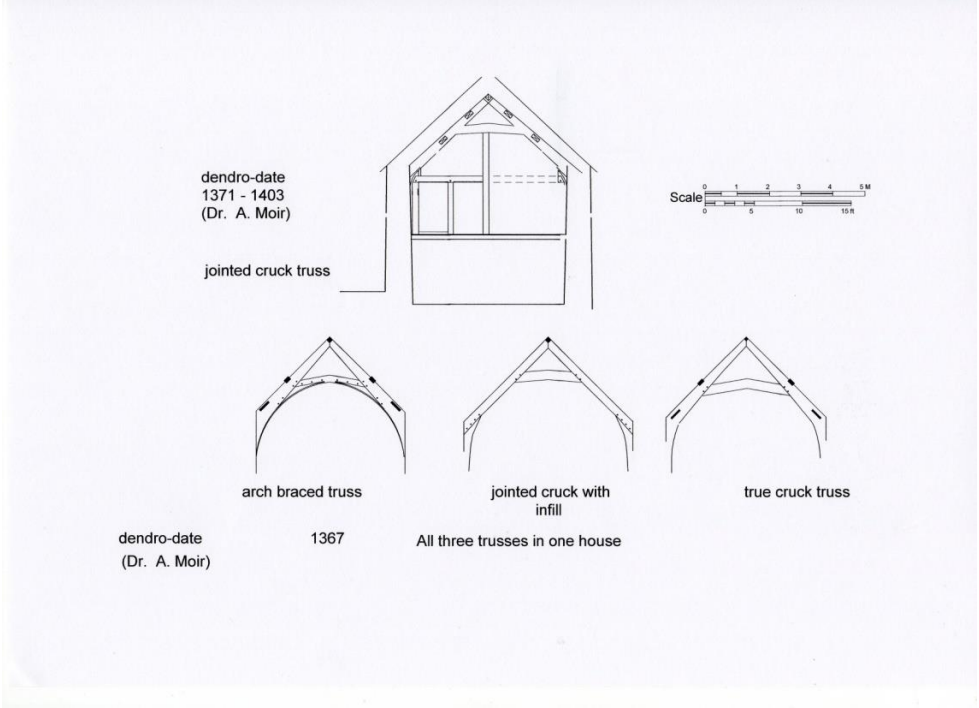
As mentioned before, the most important part of our work is on the roof structures. The plethora of early roof trusses like this one has been a golden opportunity for us to compare features such as apex types, joints and carpentry techniques. Tony, one of our volunteers, is taking a particular interest in this and has put together that section in our on-line exhibition as well as trying to re-construct some of these joints himself! Nat Alcock gave a very informative talk last week about cruck frames and the earliest ones we have arch braced trusses and true cruck frames. The base of this arch braced truss shown above and dendro-dated to between 1270 and 1302 is only slightly curved at the base and the working of it is similar to another arch braced roof in a nearby house dated to 1337. In general the workmanship of these early roofs is exceptionally fine and quite a number have arch bracing and wind bracing.

From the Somerset dendro-dating project 1996 - 2004, I have extracted structures relevant to Dunster and the surrounding area on this chart below. SVBRG who put this project together, have had quite a bit of dendro-dating carried out since then but most of their work has been on the east side of the county. The dates found in this work suggested true cruck trusses as usually being of the C14th (which matches the dating found by Time Team) but being followed on date wise by jointed cruck frames.

(Ref: Somerset Dendro-dating Project, SANHS Proceedings vols.139,140,142 & 149)

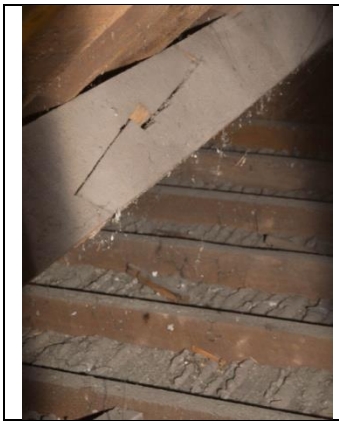
We have in Dunster a number of houses with both jointed and true cruck trusses and one house in fact has 3 types of truss as you see below - an arch-braced truss, an infilled jointed cruck truss and a true cruck truss. Time Team's work here does seem to imply an overlap between the two true cruck and jointed cruck truss which we hope to investigate further. We do know that jointed cruck trusses in Devon have more commonly been found to be of an earlier date than in Somerset and that there is evidence in Devon of both types of truss being used in the same building. Links with Devon medieval vernacular are an intriguing question to follow up on.

Data from SVBRG Dendro-chronology Project 1996 - 2004	PARISH	TIMBER FELLING DATE (centuries)			
Examples in West Somerset only		13th	14th	15th	16th
BASE CRUCKS AND AISLE END TRUSS (1 example near Minehead not dated) Dates between 1287 - 1358	* Milverton * Stoke St. Mary * Taunton	1287 1267 - 1299	1323 - 1324		
TRUE CRUCKS (8 Properties known in Dunster) Dates : 1278 - 1414	*Selworthy		1315		
JOINTED CRUCKS (At least 12 properties known in Dunster) Dates : 1391 - 1632	*Luccombe * Selworthy * Allerford			1437	1509 1544 -1545
ARCH - BRACED COLLAR TRUSSES (At least 2 Properties known in Dunster) Dates: 1431 - 1489	*one dendro-dated by Time Team to 1455*			Elsewhere in Somerset	



(Ref: Time Team dendro-dates by Dr. Andy Moir published in Vernacular Architecture vols. 47, 48, 49 & 50)

nd this will be available from Dunster Museum and from SANHS office at the Heritage Centre.



Other unanswered questions relate to types of joint. For example this keyed under-squinted, splayed and tabled scarf joint which seems to have been found to be medieval in other parts of the country has been found in a number of houses in a much later context here - late 18th or early 19th centuries.

We are hoping that dendro-dating included in this project will help us to understand the conundrums. In addition we hope it will help us identify dates for later alterations like insertions of floors and screens and will extend the knowledge gathered by the work of the Somerset dendro dating project .

Details of buildings can be informative particularly if consistent throughout the building, and may be useful in estimating dates using comparative charts like this one as a guide. This particular sheet was prepared by Cdr. Williams, a member of SANHS who carried out thousands of recordings all across Somerset. As you see from this, the door frame in the left picture below, can be described as medieval.

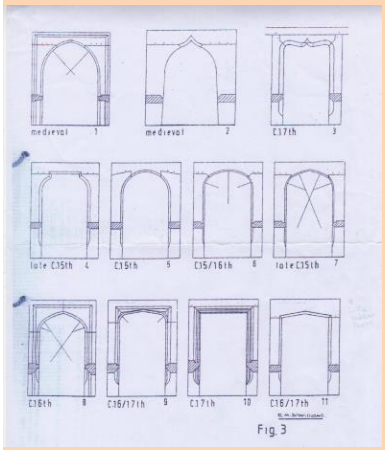


Chart from SANHS Williams Collection

Door frame dating

Photograph by Tony Harding

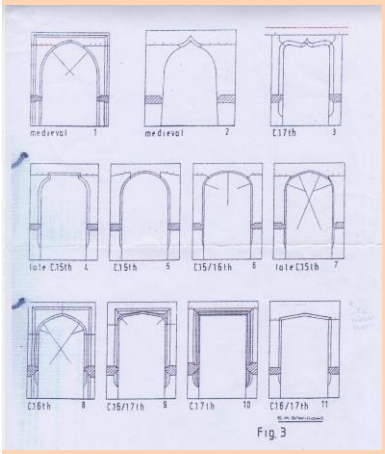


Chart from SANHS Williams Collection

Door frame dating

Photograph: Alison Bunning

(Ref: Door chart in private collection of SANHS Historic Buildings Committee)

The door frame at right above, follows on time wise and looks to be late C15th. A very good source for this type of comparative dating is the work of Linda Hall who has published quite a bit on the subject of details and fittings from dated houses. Her work has mainly been in Gloucestershire and Hampshire as far as I know and although fashions in details may vary from one region to another, it is still a way of finding a rough dating guide for particular features. In later work, there is more likely to be a difference in decoration according to status as you can see in these examples below left where the style and finish suggest the 17th century. At that time, mouldings and moulding stops were getting more and more elaborate as you can see in the door frame at the right hand side with its roll and cyma stop.

(Ref: "Fixtures and Fittings in Dated Houses 1567 - 1763" by N W Alcock and Linda Hall, 1994 CBA)

Photograph: Alison Bunning

Photograph: Tony Harding

Door frame dating

Shoulder headed doors

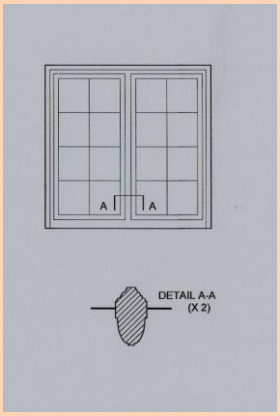
Photograph Tony Harding

We have found evidence for early screens which would have separated the cross passage from the open Hall or service room, or the inner room from the Hall. These two examples above right both show remains of what appear to have been shoulder headed doors - in the top picture, you can see the curve with a short vertical section and in the bottom picture, a similar detail has been slightly broken off, but the chamfered moulding indicates the line of the curve. If we look back at the door frame chart the shoulder headed door appears to date from late C15th in Somerset. Sometimes all that remains of a screen is a headplate which still has mortices indicating where the posts would have been.

This external framing here had us confused for a while. Roof trusses in the building facing us have been tree ring dated to 1377. The best guess we have for this timber framing is that two ranges at right angles to each other must have been connected with a stair turret or possibly a gallery in a courtyard and these presumably were the frames for access doors. Referring back to the door chart again, this type of door frame looks to be medieval so it could have been part of the original building.

Coming on to windows, very few early windows are still intact, as they are frequently replaced, but there are some like these 15th century ones in Church Street. These early windows were generally very small as glass was expensive although we do have records of a glazier putting in glass windows at the castle in 1406. The Dunster Historian, Maxwell Lyte writing in 1906 describes a house in High Street as "Glasiars House" so presumably there was enough trade locally for the business to continue over many centuries!

(Ref: "A History of Dunster, vol 2" by H.D. Lyte, London 1090 p.307)



Drawing by Mary Ewing

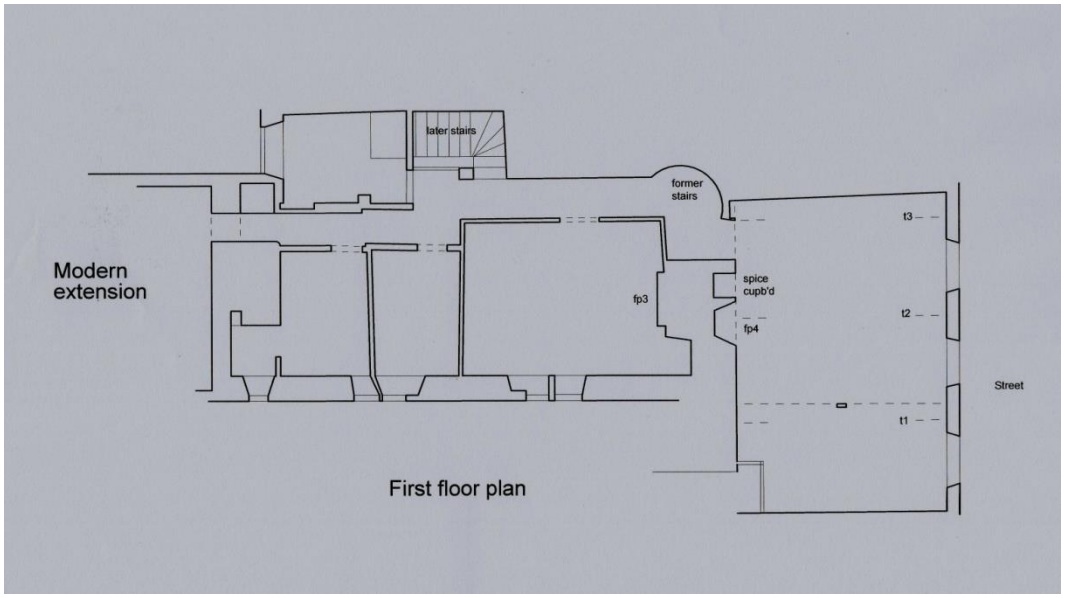
Photograph by Maggie Dinning

In an ordinary house without glass, shutters like the above now in an outhouse, would have been generally used. The shutter is made of one plank of wood and is hung on pintels. We have seen similar ones in Porlock where a pair of one plank shutters are still used in a kitchen.

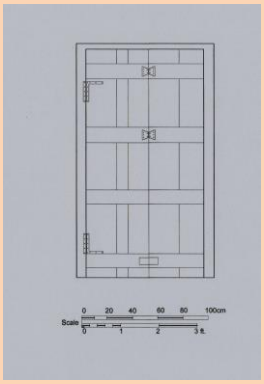
By the C17th, glass did become more common, but was set in leaded lights attached to a diamond- set iron upright so that the panels could be removed easily and there are quite a few of these in Dunster. Opening casements of metal or timber may be added in as here. The timber frame itself tended to be quite chunky at that time and the ovolo type moulding was often used for the frame as in this example. This style of ironmongery with long window stays has also been seen in a number of households locally. Sometimes the ovolo moulded windows are part of a longer run of windows as is the case here. This seems to have been quite fashionable in towns at one time if you look at old prints of town centre scenes. There is some other evidence of this elsewhere in the High Street and in Church Street. Jettied upper floors too, seem to have been more prevalent at one time from evidence that we have seen.

In a number of cases, the nature of infill of timber framed walls is apparent: here you can see the original wattle and daub in a roof space and this can be inferred as at right where the mortices for the vertical posts are visible, and which would have formed the base for the wattle and daub.

Photographs by Tony Harding



We have come across a couple of spice cupboards in Dunster, one being in this property and I always associate them typically with the 17thC when spices were first introduced to the country and were very expensive. Again this dating is approximately in line with the findings of Linda Hall and similar types have been dated to between 1630 and 1680 .



Drawing: Mary Ewing
Photograph: Tony Harding

Another feature in the building is this unusual door and I have only seen one of this type before and remember some-one calling it a "Cromwell door". As you see it is divided vertically in the centre and the two leaves are joined with butterfly hinges. Again, one like this is featured in the Linda Hall book that I have and is dated to 1634.

In the main front range roof space, there is a collar joint (see below) which has been picked up in other parts of Somerset by SVBRG and identified in one of their village studies as fitting with the 1600s and at the bottom of the relatively modern staircase is a partly blocked up window with the ovolo moulded mullions that we saw earlier. So, with other features fitting with this dating for the 17th century, we can be confident that the original fabric dates from then even though it has been very much altered since, especially at the front.

Photograph: Tony Harding

Notched half lap
Collar joint

C17th
window

Photograph: Maggie Dinning

I can't leave this talk without paying tribute to our volunteers who have a tremendous range of useful skills. As well as volunteer surveyors, there are those working on documentary input and in the project team everyone has pulled their weight in all that we have achieved to date. Our on-line exhibition has a wide range of input from many of our members. The Project will run for at least another two years and together with more research including further detailed tree ring-dating, we should have good results by the end of 2022. Many thanks also to the owners who have allowed us to survey their property and have been so encouraging and supportive. Some people have been waiting for quite a while for us to survey their property but we hope to reach them all eventually. Our priority, especially now, is to study early details first as far as possible. We are planning a small booklet based on the on-line exhibition and this will be available from Dunster Museum and from SANHS office at the Heritage Centre.