

# SANHS Building Research Group (West Somerset)



## EARLY DUNSTER PROJECT

### Newsletter 16 – Summer 2022

The Project is now due to finish in May 2023 and we will be holding a completion event in the Tithe Barn in early June. The SANHS Building Recording Group will then be continuing with work elsewhere including Milverton and Porlock. To date, 31 full surveys have been carried out and six reports completed, with a further six in the pipeline. A reports group is now focused on getting these all sorted out. Another three surveys are being planned, and apart from that we have six properties still to be looked at and another five which we would like to access. All the most important early buildings should then be covered. We are still carrying out surveys in small groups, owing to various difficulties, but would like to organise a group survey of street frontages, perhaps in September or October if members are willing.

Hopefully we may be able to visit the gatehouse next winter off-season. We didn't have enough time to organise it earlier this year. There is also a possibility of surveying Martin Fortune's house in Roadwater, which he tells me he believes is older than 11 West Street. If you have any other ideas for meeting up, please let me know.

Already, I am thinking about a format for a book on the work we have been doing at Dunster and Ruth suggested that we have a brain-storming session. We could meet at Rohans in Dunster, or in the Museum, and thrash out ideas. If anyone is keen on following up on background history, topography, local economy, agriculture etc. etc., there is a lot of information online and we would be delighted to hear from you. We are now getting very good material from this project and your shared input has made it really enjoyable.

Mary Ewing

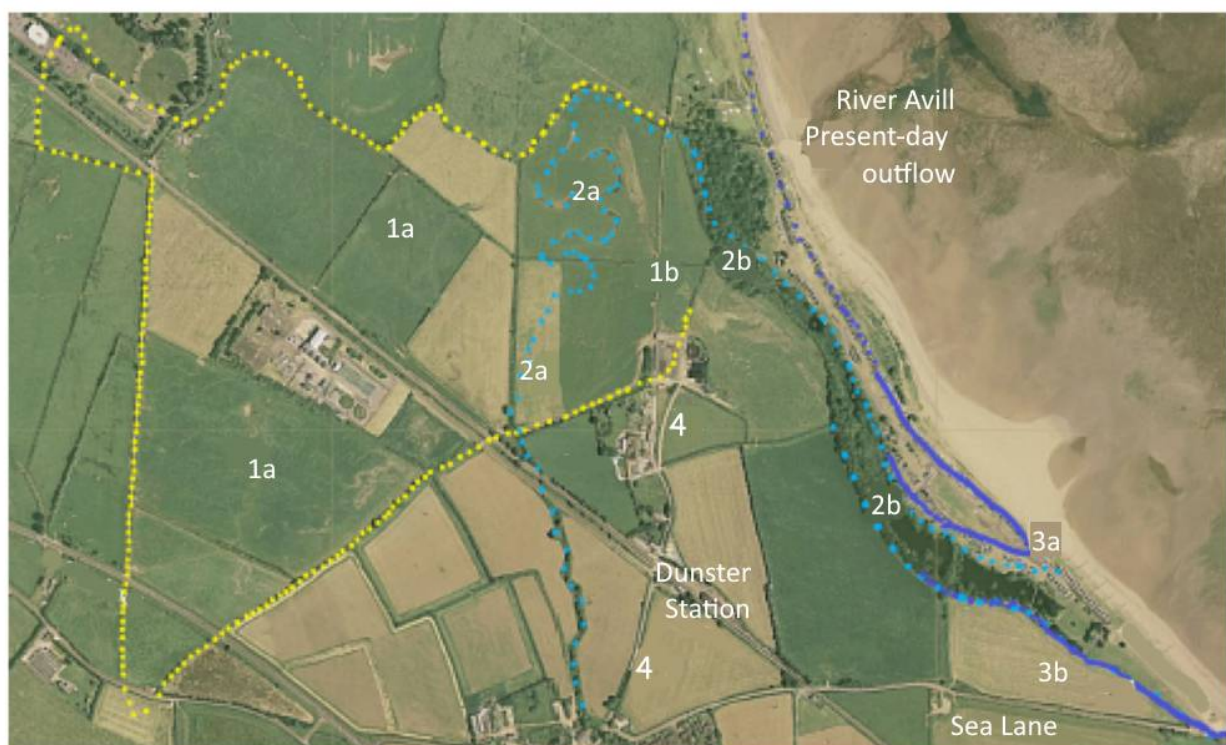


*Above: The roof timbers in the hall of the Old Manor (Lower Marsh Farmhouse), built in the fifteenth century.*

## Lower Marsh & Dunster's Medieval Port

*For the past couple of years Barbara Hoffbauer has been researching documents and old maps to try to find evidence of the location of Dunster's medieval port. On a sunny April afternoon, she led a short EDP expedition across Dunster's Lower Marsh to the beach to look at some of the sites she has been investigating. Here she tells us more:*

There's quite a lot of evidence in the documents to prove that there was a port at Dunster. In 1183 the Reeve of Dunster was fined £5 for illegally exporting corn, and thirteenth-century accounts list receipts from the tolls that more law-abiding citizens paid at the port. In 1375, during the Hundred Years War, the French captured the Saint Marie, a 75-ton "cog of Dunsterre", near the mouth of the Loire. A quarter of a century later, in 1403, Dunster was the port of embarkation for 70 soldiers and archers heading up-channel to Carmarthen, tasked with helping bring to heel the rebel Welsh independence leader Owain Glyndwr.



### KEY:

- |  |                                       |   |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1 Dunster Marsh  | 2 Old course of River Avill           | 3 Extent of dry land c. 1840 (from Tithe Map) |
| 1a Salt Marsh Common (burgesses)                                     | 2a Meanders through the Dunster Marsh | 3a Spit, extended to approx end of Hawn today |
| 1b Estmarsh (reserved for the Lord of the Manor)                     | 2b Estuary, probable site of the port | 3b 1840 coastline                             |
| 4 Possible route of the "road to the port" mentioned in 1307 charter |                                       |   |



By the fifteenth century port activity was beginning to shift to Minehead, possibly because there was safer anchorage for larger ships in the lea of North Hill. The Luttrell family had bought Dunster Castle from the de Mohuns at the end of the fourteenth century, and they built Minehead's first wooden pier (a "juttee") in the 1420s. A sixteenth-century Survey of Ports declared that Dunster was "...not fytt nor mete to charge nor discharge", though added that "... small botes ... do come in with salte, wyne, wood and coole".

Locating the port is more problematic. The 'Gesta Stephani', (the 'Life of Stephen'), an 1160 manuscript, implies that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century the sea reached much further inland. Describing the attempt in 1138 by Stephen to capture Dunster Castle (which was held by William de Mohun III for Matilda during the Wars of Succession), the unknown author says that the castle had impregnable defences, "*inaccessible on one side where it was washed by the sea*, and very strongly fortified on the other by towers and walls, by a ditch and outworks." But archaeological evidence (medieval fishing weirs, roman pot finds, Anglo-Saxon ironworks) at or closer to the present coastline, and the general topography, means that we have to conclude that the author was totally wrong or grossly exaggerating - a bit of medieval spin-doctoring to excuse that fact that Stephen failed in his bid.

A 1307 charter of John de Mohun gives us a much more plausible proposition. The purpose of the charter was to confirm the rights of Dunster's burgesses to graze their plough cattle on the salt marsh, and in doing so says the marsh lies to the west of the road to the port. Today its likely route is followed by Station Road, passing the Old Hall at Foremarsh, the fourteenth/fifteenth-century home of de Mohun and Luttrell stewards (and so a good place to keep an eye on port traffic and collect tolls...)





Visiting the area in 1633, the antiquarian Gerard wrote that he followed the course of the River Avill to the sea and "... in the mouth of this River which we have traced hither, there is a pretty harbour." The Avill's meandering course was changed when the marsh was drained in the late nineteenth century, but old maps show that Dunster Hawn was then a tidal estuary, bounded on its northern side by a spit of land created by longshore drift as the mouth of the Avill met the sea currents, which gradually extended over the centuries. In the early twentieth century the sea access was closed off completely, when the chalets were built, and today Dunster Hawn is a freshwater lake and nature reserve.



As mentioned above, the Old Hall at Foremarsh was home to the Ryvers and the Loty families in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and as stewards and constables to the de Mohuns and Luttrells they were able to accumulate significant holdings of land and tenements in Dunster and Carhampton. In the sixteenth century the property passed by inheritance to the Poyntz family, who lived at Leighland (Roadwater) and the Hall was let to a succession of tenant farmers. During the twentieth century it was a hotel for many years, and is now a very substantial holiday home. It is currently being surveyed by EDP and will be reported on in the future.

*Barbara Hoffbauer*

*After our stroll to Dunster Beach, we returned to Lower Marsh Pavilion, built at the end of the nineteenth century, where we were treated to tea in the garden and a tour of the house. Owner Dave Walmsley takes over the story:*



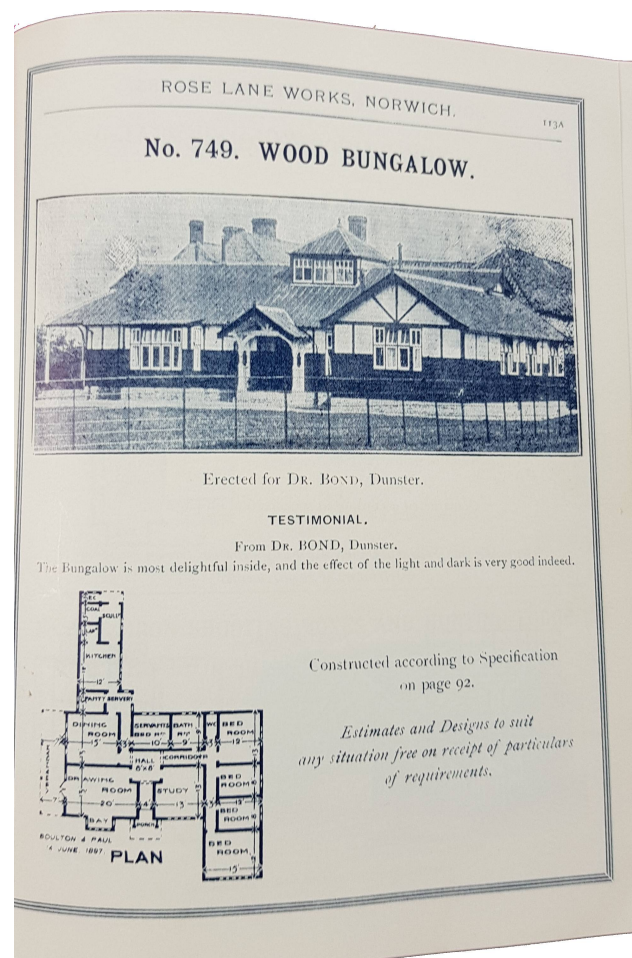
## Lower Marsh Pavilion



We believe we are the first owner-occupiers of The Pavilion, which is protected under the Grade 2\* Listing of The Old Manor. The house did not show on the OS map of 1888 but was clearly in place by the 1901 edition. During renovations a label was found on top of one of the window frames, showing "Boulton & Paul Ltd", and The Pavilion appears in the company's 1898 catalogue.

Boulton & Paul was a Company based in Norwich, founded in 1797 and initially dealing mostly in Ironmongery. By the late 1800s they had branched out into fencing (supplying much of the rabbit wire fences to Australia), greenhouses, orangeries and ferneries, all manner of agricultural buildings, tin chapels, drill halls, barrack rooms, field hospitals and "portable bungalows". They also supplied the building for Scott of the Antarctic on his ill-fated expedition.

The catalogue entry provides a detailed specification of what Boulton & Paul supplied (delivered to the nearest railway goods station), and what the owner was responsible for, namely building the foundations and any chimneys, and providing labour to help with transportation from the station and to help with erection of the building.





We think that the original house had a toilet and separate bathroom, a drawing room, dining room, study and five same-sized bedrooms. With no kitchen in the original building, we presume that it was serviced from the kitchen in the farmhouse next door.

The structure of the house is very different from a modern timber frame building. There are no vertical studs within the panels. The drip rail runs through the full depth of the frame. Each panel is bolted to its neighbour. The window frames are integral to the panels with the side of the window frame forming a vertical rail from top to bottom of the panel. Wood was planed or milled from the profile above and below the vertical window frame part to give it the same profile as the rest of the panel framing (which is of course concealed behind the cladding).

It is in general a very lightweight structure and the cladding (internal and external) gives it much of its structural support. We believe it would have been assembled 'bare' and then interior matchboard and exterior cladding was applied onsite: there are no joins showing in the cladding or matchboard where the panels are joined.



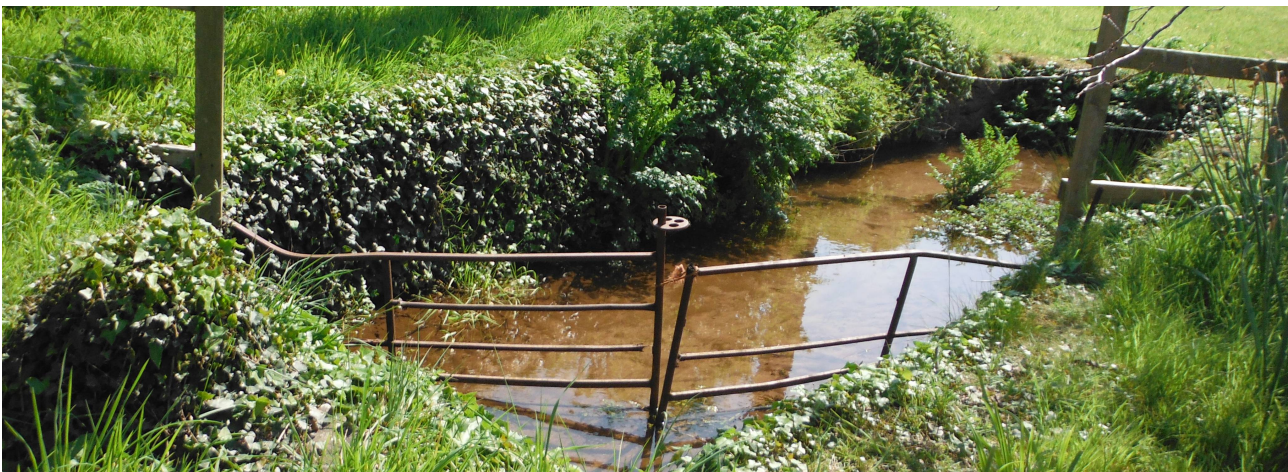
There are very few rafters and purlins. The roof is covered in the same  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch matchboard that the walls are clad with and we believe the building originally had a tin roof (now clad with cedar shingles). The ceiling joists are spaced at approximately two feet (61cm). The living room and bedroom ceilings are mainly vaulted, with an "M" shaped support to the roof and an interesting "V" shaped roof void above the central supporting wall. Interestingly, this "M" shape is slightly offset from the top of the roof pitch as the two rooms are different widths (the central wall is not actually central!).





According to the catalogue, the house was erected for Dr Thomas Bond, a well-documented London Surgeon with a passion for hunting. He lived in London but it is recorded that he held a property in Minehead for some years and latterly in Dunster. His brother-in-law (also a doctor) lived in Dunster.

We believe Dr Bond leased the Old Manor from the Luttrells and commissioned the Pavilion to provide additional accommodation for family and friends when he was visiting for the hunting season and at other times. It is recorded that he contributed to improving the road from Dunster Station to the farm. Sadly he did not live long after The Pavilion was built, falling to his death from a window in his London home in June 1901. In 1939 the property started operating as a hotel / guest house (which continued up till around 1998). At some stage during this period we believe the Pavilion was split into two apartments, each with their own kitchen and bathroom facilities.



During renovation work and work in the paddock we have also unearthed evidence of changes to the watercourses, presumably to alleviate flooding in the farmhouse and the Pavilion. There is an interesting 'sump' by the drive, shown on the 1888 OS map, which is fed by an underground culvert from the leat that serves the farm.

*Dave Walmsley*

## Isabel Richardson

1926 – 2021



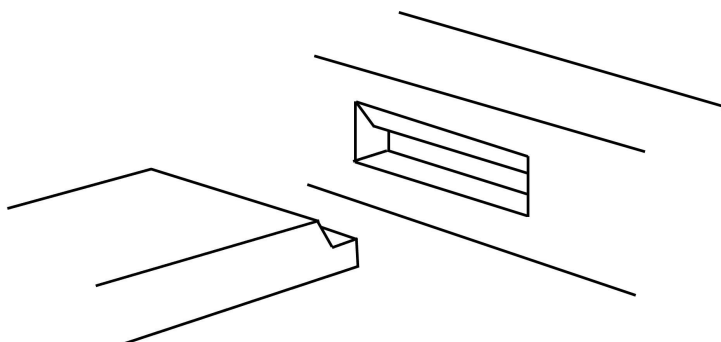
The loss of Isabel Richardson who died in October 2021 was a terrible shock for the Early Dunster Group. She was still working on the project to the weekend before we heard the sad news. Apart from her enormous contribution with the analysis of the Castle Gatehouse, her supportive presence was always quietly reassuring. Isabel's knowledge of vernacular building in West Somerset was invaluable when the SANHS Recording Group was set up in 2013. By 2018, she was very enthusiastic about the Group's application under Historic England's "Early Fabric in Historic Towns" programme. She joined us on many surveys, helping with interpretation and measuring, and is described by other volunteers as "lovely to work with". She was indeed lovely to work with and will be sorely missed by the group.

## A First for Dunster?

Our surveys at the Old Priory have revealed an interesting piece of carpentry, which may even be the earliest example of this particular form. The joint in question is a "tenon with diminished haunch" - a form of mortice and tenon joint specifically designed to resist the considerable twisting and shearing forces acting on it.

One of the definitive historic carpentry references - Cecil A Hewett's "English Historic Carpentry" - describes this same joint being used in the roof of King's College Chapel, Cambridge, built by Master Carpenter Richard Russell around 1510 and thought to be the first known example of its use. Information in the King's College archives goes a little further, saying that although the roof in question was indeed built by Russell, it was part of a design produced by an earlier Master, Martin Prentice, in or after 1476, and again it claims it as a probable first example.

We know however from tree-ring analysis carried out by the Time Team project, with further studies by the Early Dunster Project, that the part of the Priory in which our example of the same joint was found dates from no later than 1471 - five years earlier than Prentice's design!



*Tony Harding*



## West Dorset Church Porches

During lockdown, my twin sister Virginia and I worked on a project together recording West Dorset church porches. Virginia is a writer and poet and we both have an intimate knowledge and love of Dorset. We realised during the first lockdown that although churches were generally closed their porches were often left open and we discovered how people were using these places in many ways. We found food banks, flower arrangements, cushions to sit on, bed rolls for those sleeping rough and notes left by the homeless. Visiting these porches made us think about them historically and architecturally and the purpose these liminal spaces served during that strange time.

Little work has been done on church porches and they seem sadly neglected in architectural writing. In the past they were the in-between space where the village met the church, neither wholly sacred nor secular in nature, yet often they are small architectural masterpieces in their own right and seem to symbolise the lockdown version of life, where you could only go "so far".

We made a record of this unusual time, with a series of architectural drawings accompanied by poems written in these locations.

### St Andrew's, Monkton Wyld



The spire is visible for miles,  
the entrance harder to find  
folded away off a twisting uphill lane –

dank and filled with beech mast –  
where a gap in the holly and laurel  
leads up a tapering path edged

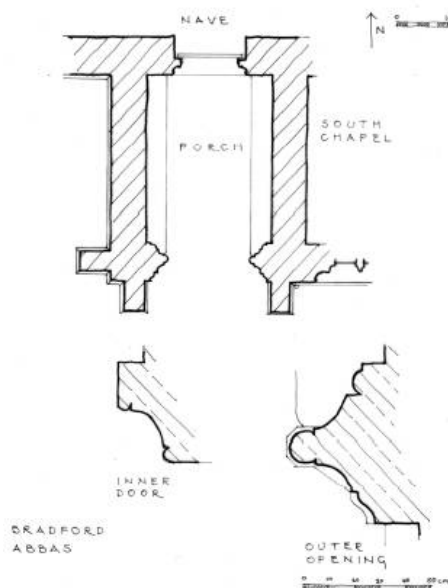
with lopped Irish yews, like goblets,  
to a wooden porch with slender columns  
and trefoiled tracery, poised

like an elegant hostess waiting  
out in the rain to greet us.  
Wind hollers through the open sides

and as my sister starts to sketch  
I unscrew a flask and wonder how it was  
in our silent spring

to hear the oak stir  
without the burr of the A35  
under an unblemished sky.

## St Mary's, Bradford Abbas



A south porch where above the arch  
a weather-beaten face with flaring hair  
watches as we study the scratch dials  
high on the buttress. Stepping inside  
I'm aware of my footsteps, of swallows  
nesting under an elm roof.

A vase is filled: Alstroemeria, campanula, pinks, honesty.  
Ahead the church doors are closed  
the oak's medullary rays  
defined in their French-grey paint  
while across the road  
the happiness of children leaving school.

## St Francis, Frome Vauchurch

On the hottest day of the year so far  
we pause by the table top tombs  
under the yew's wide branches  
as a summer shower passes, is replaced  
by an antiphon of birdsong  
a train along the valley, someone cutting grass.  
Beyond the hedge the fields slope down –  
hemmed with hawthorn, lined with buttercups –  
to Mrs Crocker's farm.  
With a finger I trace blackened letters  
Mary Bridle – 1709, a skull and crossed bones.  
The earth around's soft with decayed needles  
and I think of all that lies below –  
a warren of loves, of disappointments.  
Frayed, the sunlight falls on the porch  
on bands of scalloped and plain clay tiles  
on bird lime splashes from swallows' nests  
wedged in each corner of the roof.



*Alison Bunning & Virginia Astley*



## House History

House history research continues in fits and starts - some of the surveyed properties are proving difficult to identify in the documents - but transcription of several sets of source records (Land Tax, Church Rate etc) is making it easier to trace the history of individual properties. One interesting recent investigation, drawing on a number of sources, was the Old Hall at Foremarsh.

In 1689 a petty chandler called John Stride paid £30 for the lease on three lives of a burgage tenement in the High Street. The lessor was the widow Prudence Poyntz of Old Cleeve, whose late husband had inherited the Poyntz Dunster and Carhampton estates, which included the 'Old Hall' at Foremarsh and 22 tenements in Dunster.

John Stride died in 1713, and his probate inventory tells us that he was a comparatively wealthy man with assets amounting to £297, of which £136 was for his shop goods. It's probable that John's wife (the second life in the lease) had already died, and so the property devolved to their daughter Mary, who, in 1718, married Nathaniel Ingram. During his lifetime, Ingram had a number of business interests in the town, including the fulling mills at the south end of West Street which became known as 'Ingram's Mills' (on the list for an EDP survey).

Mary was a widow by the time she died in 1765, and with her death the 1689 lease expired, and by that time the Poyntz family had sold all their local property interests to the Luttrells. (Nathaniel, it should be said, had made ample provision for his two children, who were settled in other properties in the town, one of which has been surveyed by EDP).

For the next 125 years Old Hall was let or leased by the Luttrells to a number of unrelated tenants - a butcher, a cordwainer, a couple of carpenters, a tailor. By 1891 another carpenter, Edward Hole, had moved in with his wife Emma. A delve into the parish registers revealed that Edward, born in Dunster in 1857, was a great-grandson of Susan Ingram, daughter of Nathaniel Ingram and Mary Stride who had lived in the house over a century before.

Edward and Emma had eight children, and one of them, Elsie, married George Maidment, a stone mason from Withycombe, in 1921. George and Elsie were living in the property when it was put up for auction by the Luttrell Estate in 1951, and they bought the freehold as sitting tenants. We can only wonder whether Elsie knew that her g-g-g-g-great-grandfather had paid £30 for the leasehold over 250 years before.

*Barbara Hoffbauer*

### Who Lived Where In Dunster?

The Dunster Estate Sale Catalogue included details of over sixty Dunster properties that were auctioned in 1951, and a number of them have been subject of an EDP survey.

Using the sale catalogue as a starting point, Barbara has recently started working with several older Dunster residents to create a record of who lived where in **all** the Dunster houses in 1951, capturing some memories along the way.

During the summer she will be holding in drop-in session at Dunster Museum every Tuesday morning from 11:00 to 13:00 - so if you're in the area, please "drop in" to see how the project is progressing.

## MAYA Visit to the Town of Dunster

At 10.30am on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2022, a group of about 16 young people from Mick Aston's Young Archaeologist group met at the Visitor centre in Dunster, along with parents and helpers. Barbara Hoffbauer led the walk. We were told to look for 3 important things beginning with C - *Castle*, *Church* (Priory) and Cloth - to think about in relation to Dunster's medieval history.

The tour took us firstly to the Yarn market, where Barbara explained about how in medieval times people measured cloth in *ells*. An ell is about 45 inches (so longer than a yard, which is 36 inches). We also looked at the carpenter's marks on the timber framing of the building. We then walked up to the Ball, where it is possible to get a good view of the High Street and the Castle. We walked along Priory Green to the area where the medieval Priory once stood. We looked at the Priory Garden and saw where Time Team had dug a test pit several years ago and discovered foundations of walls where the refectory and dormitory might have been.



The group then walked down through the church yard and had an interesting discussion about the differing heights between the interior and exterior of the buildings in the church yard. The reason for the ground being higher on the exterior is because of the bodies buried in the graveyard take up space - a lot of it. Barbara asked how we decide how old buildings are. We discussed dendrochronology dating - taking a core of wood from the timbers in the building, perhaps a wooden window or a part of the timber framing, from the building and comparing the tree rings on the core with existing data of tree rings. By comparing it is possible to work out the date.



At the top of Mill Lane we stopped at the Wesleyan School, built in 1825 and said to be the first in the village.



*Photograph of children in front of the Wesleyan school, taken about 1900*



*Our group in front of the same window*



We walked down to the Gallox Bridge which crosses the River Avill, was originally the main entrance to the town - the main road running across the hill from Carhampton. The Gallox Bridge is so-called because is near where *gallows* used to be - placed at the entrance to the town as a warning to all newcomers that they must behave themselves!



Our final port of call was the Castle gatehouse, built in 1420 and almost the earliest remaining part of the Castle.



We returned tired but happy to the museum to collect parents and carers and have a much-needed lunch.

*Lizzie Induni & Barbara Hoffbauer*

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