

Historic Building Survey and Watching Brief

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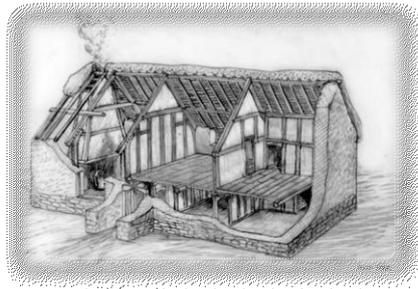
OLD MAIDS' COTTAGE, LEE, ILFRACOMBE, DEVON

By R.W. Parker

An Appendix to

*“ARCHAEOLOGICAL BUILDING SURVEY OF
OLD MAIDS' COTTAGE, LEE, ILFRACOMBE, DEVON”*

*By R.W. Parker and A.G. Collings
Exeter Archaeology Report No. 09.132*



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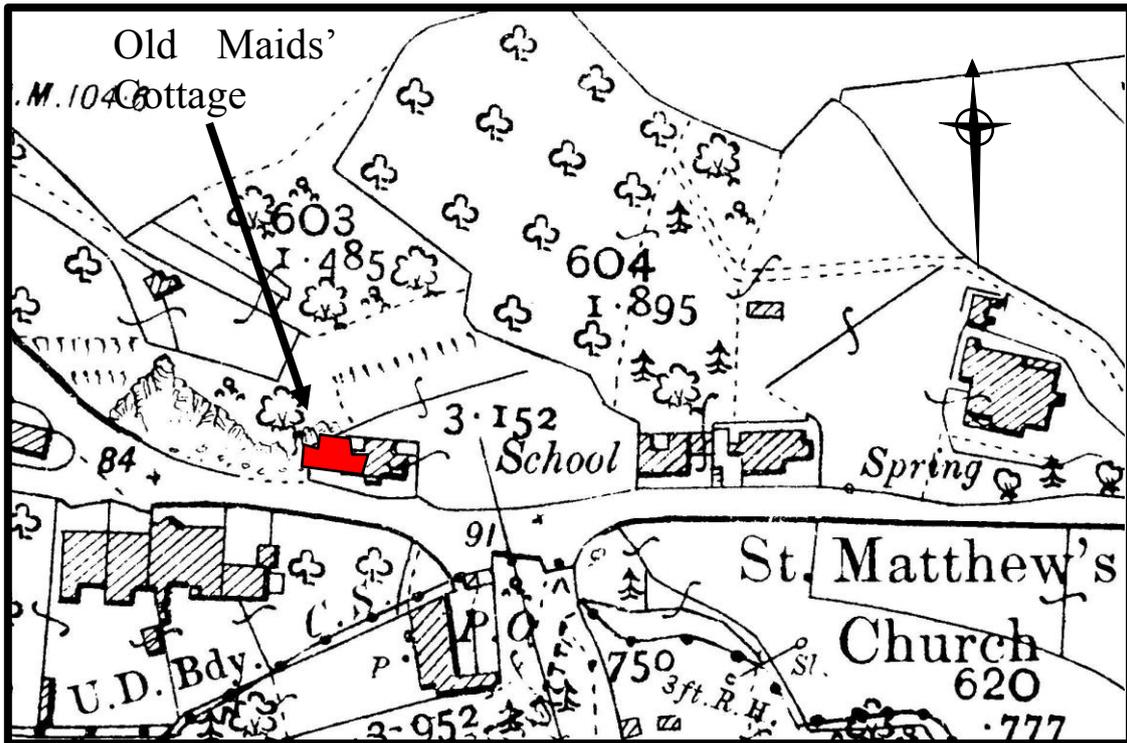


Fig. 1 Location of the site. Extract from the OS 2nd-edition 1:2500 map sheet Devonshire IV.3, published in 1904

1. INTRODUCTION

‘Old Maids’ Cottage’, or ‘Three Maids’ Cottage’ is an highly picturesque Grade II Listed thatched house standing on the north side of the main road passing through Lee, near Ilfracombe, on the north coast of Devon (SS48512 46325). This report describes the results of archaeological building recording and a watching brief carried out at the cottage during repairs, reinstatement and extension of the building following a long period of dereliction and decline. The works included the repair and reinstatement of the roof structures and internal floor structures; the removal and realignment of internal partitions and part of a large fireplace; the demolition and replacement of a 20th-century extension at the rear of the house and its replacement with a new building. To the north and east of the house terracing and other ground works were undertaken in the gardens to provide a site for the new extension and for a new driveway and parking area. The archaeological works were commissioned by Jonathan Rhind Architects on behalf of the current owners of the property, the Robertson-Bond family, and undertaken by Richard Parker Historic Building Recording and Interpretation during the refurbishment works in 2011-2012.

1.1 General Description

The house is a small cottage of mixed cob and stone under a thatched roof, lying on a plot of land just to the west of the school and the parish church of St Matthew, Lee, with the cliffs and woods behind the house rising steeply to the north and west (Fig 2). The unusual situation and picturesque appearance of the building made it something of a tourist attraction for excursionists visiting Ilfracombe and North Devon during the late 19th- and early 20th-century tourist boom in the area, and the house soon became extremely well known. By the early 20th century it was being marketed as the home of the (probably fictional) ‘Three Old Maids of Lee’, subject of a late 19th-century popular song by Frederic Weatherley (author



Fig. 2 View of the south front of Old Maids' Cottage from the south east, showing its location against the cliff face and woods behind.



Fig 3 Picture postcard of the interior of the cottage, by an unknown 20th-century photographer (No. 467 of a series possibly by 'REAL PHOTO'), showing the cottage furnished as the residence of the 'Three Old Maids of Lee' (Author's Collection).

of ‘Danny Boy’ and other fine parlour songs). The interior of the property, suitably furnished to evoke the character of the spinster ladies (Fig 3) could be visited and the exterior was featured in thousands of picture postcards. The house has even been reproduced as a china model by the ceramics firm W.H. Goss of Stoke-on-Trent, one of a range of models of famous cottages released by Adolphus Goss in 1893. The house remained a tourist attraction well into the 20th century but was later compromised by inappropriate alterations and subsequently fell into decay.

1.2 Previous Archaeological works

An archaeological building survey was undertaken by the present writer and his colleagues at Exeter Archaeology in 2009 (Parker *et al* 2009, EA Report No. 09-132). Documentary research by A. G. Collings within this report established that the property could be traced back into the 1780s, and that the landholding had earlier formed part of the manor of Lower Warcombe, the original name for this part of the present hamlet of Lee. The date of construction of the present house could not be determined with certainty, but it was certainly in existence by 1840, when it appears upon the tithe map of the area.

The building survey undertaken in 2009 argued that the house may have originated as a small single-celled dwelling, perhaps a ‘squatter’ cottage or a labourer’s cottage in the 17th or 18th centuries. The house was later extended by the addition of western part of the present cottage, perhaps in the early 19th century. The building was subsequently ‘improved’ in the late 19th century by the addition of picturesque features including the rustic porch, leaded lights and barge-boarded dormers. The house was known in the late 19th century as ‘Swiss Cottage’, but it had become identified as the house of the ‘Old Maids of Lee’ by the early 20th century and the name was changed accordingly. It is uncertain whether or not the house had any genuine connection with Frederic Weatherley and the Three Old Maids, or whether the association was made opportunistically by the then owners of the property, seeking to capitalise on its fame. For a full description of the documentary background and the detailed building survey see Parker & Collings, 2009 (above).

1.3 Method

The archaeological works were carried out in accordance with a written scheme of investigation (WSI) for archaeological work required by the Local Planning Authority, North Devon District Council and the Devon County Council Historic Environment Service, under conditions attached to the grant of planning permission and Listed Building Consent (Nos 50027 and 50028) for the refurbishment and enlargement of the cottage.

Site visits were made at the request of the architects and building contractors, timed to coincide with major interventions in the fabric or the surrounding grounds, such as the demolition of the modern rear extension, the removal of floor surfaces and internal partitions and the groundworks for the new driveway, rear extension and parking areas.

The watching brief on the works to the historic building were carried out by Richard Parker and that on the groundworks by Marc Steinmetzer. Recording consisted of the production of manuscript notes and a photographic record in digital format. Although some plans and sections were produced, the works to the historic building were of a nature that did not justify the production of a full drawn record and, consequently, plans supplied by Jonathan Rhind Architects, or Devon Build, the contractors, were utilised as the basis of the plans in this report.

The aims of the archaeological recording were:

- to produce a record of any historic building fabric exposed during the conversion works to augment the existing archaeological record summarised in the earlier EA Report; and
- To monitor other works associated with the development in order to identify any surviving archaeological features and to preserve any such remains through record.

The areas affected by the development included the house and the land immediately north of it and also a second area within overgrown garden land to the east of the house, which was to be terraced and levelled to provide the driveway and hard standing. These areas are shown in Fig 4.

The resulting site archive will in due course be deposited at the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon with the Accession No: 2010.71.

2. HISTORIC BUILDING RECORDING AND WATCHING BRIEFS

2.1 Site visit: 25th March 2011

This site visit was undertaken to monitor the demolition of the 20th-century rear extension behind the cottage in preparation for the construction of the new rear extension.

The demolished building was a large, single storey structure with a flat roof, which had been linked to the older house by a passage cut through its rear wall and roof at first-floor level, truncating the large chimney stack which had risen through the building between its eastern and western rooms (Fig. 5). The building overlay the lean-to structures at the rear of the house. These seemed initially to have been cut into the rising ground to the north, the earth being revetted by walls at the rear of the building. These lean-to structures had already partially collapsed by the time of the survey in 2009, but such evidence as remained showed that they were modern structures of any historic interest. They appear to have occupied the sites of an earlier extension to the rear of the cottage, from which the revetment walls presumably survived. Nineteenth and early 20th-century early maps (Fig 1) show a projecting structure at the centre of the rear wall of the cottage which must represent the earliest of the lean-to structures.

The new extension was to have a much larger footprint than the earlier structure and, consequently, a larger terraced area was created by the removal of the sloping ground to the north of the original house. The battered revetment wall defining the earlier lean-to structure behind the cottage was retained and the new structure was built over and above it. The ground levels to the rear of the house were reduced and the cliff cut away to accommodate the footprint of the new building. After trowelling the site to clean the deposits it was apparent that the virgin rock in this area is so distorted that the layers are almost vertical, lying parallel to the rear wall of the cottage. Overlying this, and forming a vivid band across the site, is a layer of yellow clay containing much-disturbed areas of grey slate and outcrops of pulverised or degraded bedrock, but clearly representing a natural deposit. This band runs across to the very corner of the extension and there is no trace in it of a cut for the revetment wall. This may imply that the clay has slumped against an upstanding wall or that the wall was constructed hard against a vertical cut in the clay. Overlying this clay is a dark brown garden soil containing many fragments of perforated brick and pieces of plastic pipe. This deposit also lies up against the rear face of the revetment wall with no trace of a cut for the wall.

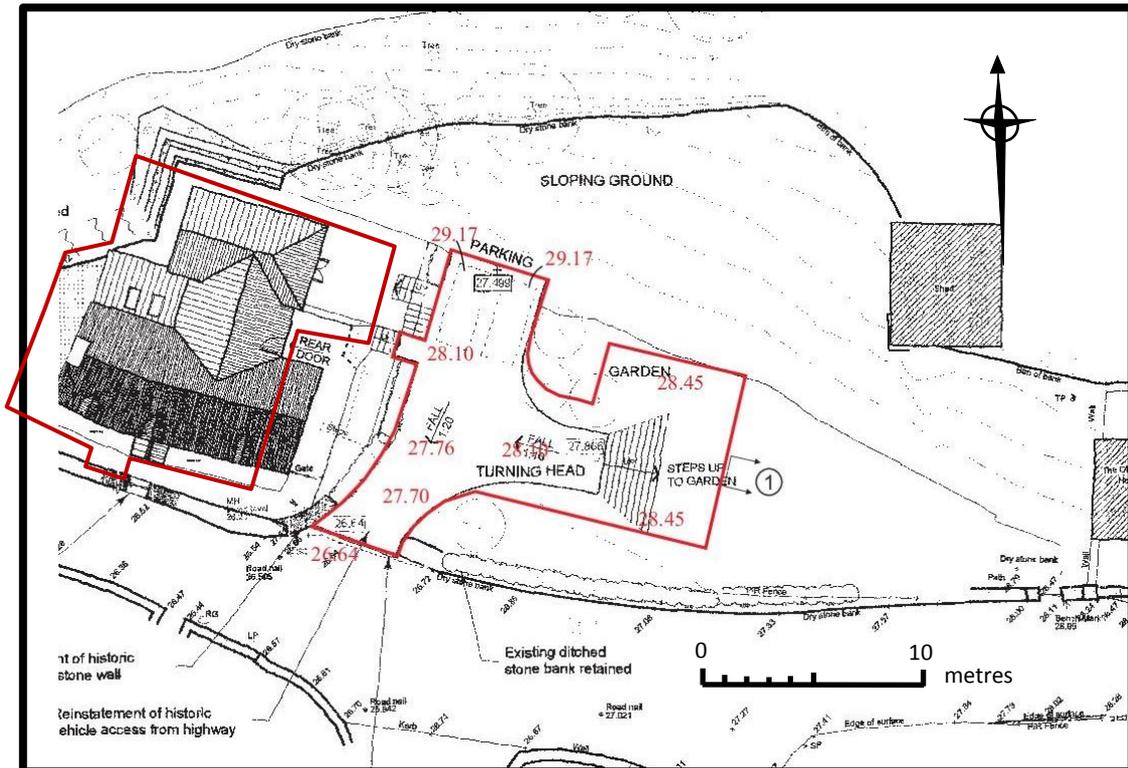


Fig. 4 Areas covered by the watching briefs on the historic buildings (left) and the groundworks for the driveway and parking areas (centre) outlined in red. The base map is taken from a drawing by Jonathan Rhind Architects.



Fig 5. The house from the rear, looking south west, showing the excavated site of the new building and the 20th-century passage cut through the rear wall through the site of the former chimney stack (centre).



Fig. 6 The cleared site of the 20th-century extension during cleaning, looking west showing the band of yellow clay crossing the site diagonally.

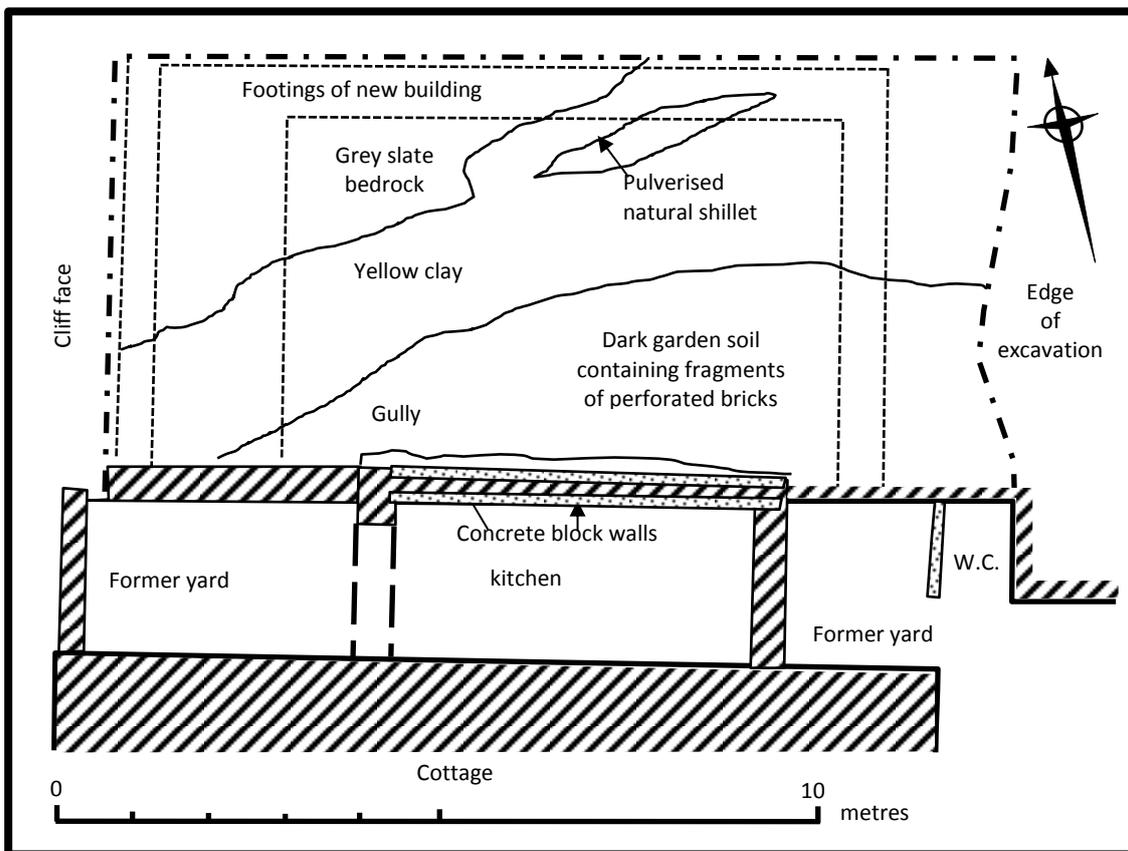


Fig. 7 Plan showing the features in the cleared ground north of the cottage.

The deposit is probably a modern dump or levelling layer, designed to create a level surface for the construction of the recently-demolished 20th-century extension at the rear of the house. Any earlier ground levels are assumed to lie at a much deeper level. The upper parts of the buildings at the rear of the house may originally have stood either wholly or partially above ground. They may have been buried to a degree by natural slumping and build-up of debris from the hillside above as well as by modern dumping to level the ground for the construction of the extension.

The rear wall of the house has joist sockets at two levels. At the far western end these appear to be cut into the stone walls of the house. They contain no dating evidence, but may relate to the shallow-pitched roof of the extension only recently removed. Historic maps suggest that this area was formerly an open yard and that the roof over this area was probably added in the 20th century. At the extreme western end of the house it is possible to see that the rear, northern wall and the gable wall are of different types and periods of construction, the western end of the rear wall butting against the gable wall. The gable wall may therefore be earlier. The northern wall may have been rebuilt in the context of additions and improvements at the rear of the house; it might simply have replaced a failing cob wall.

The sockets at the eastern end of the north wall contain red perforated-brick packing. Some of these sockets may relate to the construction of the first lean-to extension in the 19th century, but were perhaps reused when the 20th century extension was built. The upper part of the central chimney was demolished at this time and the passage to the rear extension created. It is very unlikely that the original lean-to roof structure would have survived these alterations. The difference in the roofline of the older and newer parts of the building was very clearly visible, as the wall plate of the original roof in the eastern part of the house was discernible at a lower level than the eaves of the later section of the roof to the west.

Within the house there had been very little change to the interior of the building by this stage of the project. The interiors had merely been cleared of debris and the kitchen area gutted and unroofed. Re-inspection of the roof of the older part of the house showed a large ridge tree in the eastern part with square pegs thrust through it. This was very dirty and it was considered possible that it was might possibly be smoke-blackened.

2.2 Site visit: 16. November 2011

The site was visited on this occasion to observe the lifting of the flagstones in the ground-floor rooms and the removal of plaster on one of the internal partitions. The floors were being reduced to allow for damp proofing and possibly also for under-floor heating. Following the lifting of the flagstones, which were numbered and stored for reinstatement, two small trenches were dug in the western room; one approximately at the centre of the room and one at its north-western corner. The trench locations are shown in Fig. 9. Both trenches measured 1m x 0.5m and were dug through the make-up layers beneath the flagstones down to the surface of the natural shillet.

Trench 1,

This trench was dug at the centre of the room, and revealed the roughly-truncated natural shillet at a depth of 0.07m below the flagstones. The natural shillet had been crudely cut to a very uneven but basically level surface. Coal and other dirty material had been trodden deeply into this surface, but there was nothing to suggest the possibility of a hearth. No visible features cut the surface neither was there any trace of any earlier floor levels. The make-up layer for the flagstones consisted of very dirty mixed rubble and loose shillet fragments containing much coal, ash and clinker and small pieces of colour-washed lime plaster. No finds were recovered.

Trench 2

This trench was dug in the north-western corner of the room. The natural shillet appeared at the same depth as in the neighbouring trench and the only perceptible difference was that the make-up layer was of a darker colouration, possibly due to the ingress of damp from beneath the north wall.

Trench 3

This trench was dug in the north-eastern corner of the eastern room and measured 2m x 3.5m. Under the flagstones was a deep, make-up layer of mixed demolition material 0.06m deep, including many large, well-squared Delabole slates. Although these retained the impress of mortar they had not been pegged, but nailed into place, which suggests that they are unlikely to be earlier in date than the 18th or 19th centuries. It is possible that they had been imported from elsewhere to form a make-up layer for the flags, though they might, of course, have been derived from an earlier roof of this building pre-dating the thatch. Underlying this layer was a dirty layer of dark, silty shillet fragments, 0.005m deep, very loosely packed, overlying the natural bedrock. The bedrock had been crudely truncated to a level surface, but protruded in places in irregular outcrops. Cut into the surface of the bedrock was a shallow linear feature capped with large, flat slabs of stone, aligned diagonally from the centre of the room towards its north eastern corner (Fig. 9). There was no evidence of a cut for this feature in the loose material overlying the bedrock, and it is presumed that the feature is contemporary with this material. Lifting of the capstones revealed that the feature consisted of a shallow, dished channel cut into the bedrock and packed, indeed, almost filled with loose slabs of shale and shillet. The rest of the feature was choked with a dark, organic silty material.

This feature may be interpreted as a drain; probably constructed in an attempt to reduce dampness of the floor. The drain was capped with large slabs and then covered with loosely-packed shillet, before the layer of demolition material forming the make-up layer for the flagstones was laid over it. Although no dateable finds were recovered the large size of the slates may suggest that the Enlargement of the trench to establish the course of the drain showed that it turned at about 45° at the centre of the wall and continued under the front wall of the house. Clearance of the drain showed that, rather surprisingly, instead of draining southwards towards the front of the house and the valley bottom, it drained northwards towards the rear of the house. After the removal of the silty infill and slate fragments the water flowed freely to the north east. It may have drained into a well which was later revealed at the rear of the house, in the region of its north western corner. This well was recorded by the contractors and the architects but was not observed archaeologically due to considerations of cost.

2.3 Site visit: 7th. December 2011

The building had by this time been extensively stripped out and the floor levels in the ground-floor rooms reduced. The ceilings had been removed, revealing the first-floor joists and roof structures.

In the western ground-floor room the tiled dado and chimney piece had been removed from the lower part of the walls, revealing that the large fireplace and chimney breast in the western wall were constructed of red bricks, with a low, arched head to the opening (Fig. 10). The bricks might date from the early 19th century and it was assumed that the fireplace was integral with the stone walling. The opening was large enough to have housed a small kitchen range or hob grate. The fireplace in the first-floor room, above, appeared to be cut into the earlier walling and was faced up with red perforated bricks. This fireplace appears to have



Fig. 8 Trench 3, at the north-western corner of the western ground-floor room, showing the drain as originally exposed and before the removal of the capstones.

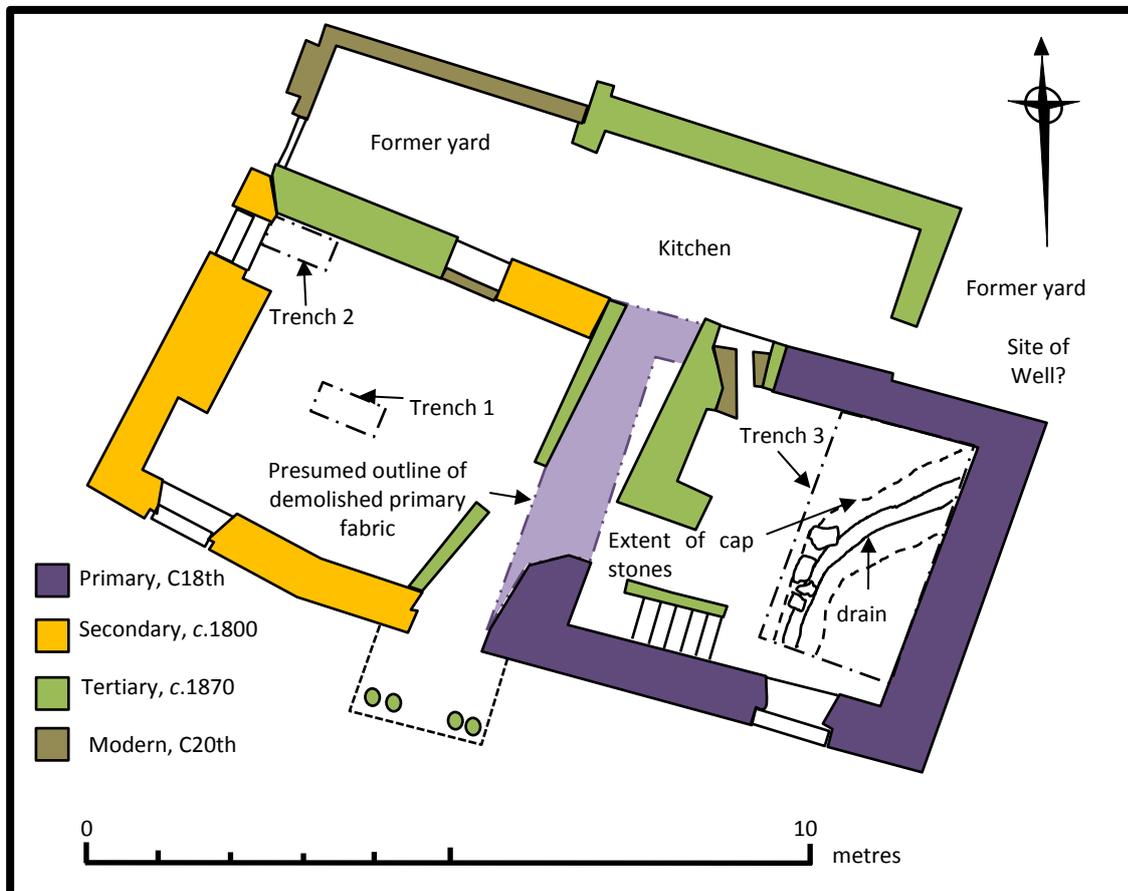


Fig. 9 Ground-floor plan showing revised suggested phasing and trench locations.



Fig. 10 Interior of the western room on the ground floor following stripping, showing the 19th-century fabric of the fireplace.



Fig. 11 Detail of the stone-nogged timber partition or spere within the western room, showing the vertical timbers and red bricks which gave the false impression of a doorway.

been introduced in the late 19th century, probably during improvements to the accommodation.

The picturesque brick decorations of the western chimney stack are also suggestive of modifications to the house at that time. The ceiling of this room was supported by deep plank joists running across the building from north to south, braced by short full-depth struts or trimmers between the joists. This form of construction could not be closely dated but is unlikely to pre-date the late 18th or early 19th century.

The construction of the spere or partition forming the northern part of the entrance passage was also exposed during these alterations, prior to removal (Fig. 11). This had been partially stripped during the previous survey, revealing two vertical studs and red brick blocking which appeared to suggest the presence of a blocked doorway in this part of the wall. Following stripping of the whole partition, the red bricks were found simply to be an anomaly; there was no blocked doorway in the wall. The partition may be dated to the late 19th century. It has since been entirely removed.

The opening in the north wall of the room seems to have originated as a small window (Fig 13). The eastern part of the wall is partially of cob, standing over stone footings rising to a height of about 1.25m. The western part of the wall, to the west of the window opening, appears to have been rebuilt in stone in the late 19th century. The window has been cut down through the stone masonry of the lower part of the wall to form a doorway and has now enlarged to form a wider opening.

The eastern room had also been stripped of most of its plasterwork, and the rear wall of the fireplace demolished to form an opening between the eastern and western rooms (Fig. 14). The rear wall of the fireplace was largely constructed of stone rubble but also incorporated much perforated red brick. This appeared to confirm that the chimney was of late 19th-century construction. It was probably constructed to replace an earlier chimney in the west wall of the original house, which may have been removed when the original west wall was demolished, perhaps to create the passage was linking the entrance doorway in the south wall with the 19th-century rear lean- to. No evidence of an earlier chimney remained, but the absence of any form of fireplace from the other walls of the room, strongly suggests the possibility that this feature was accommodated in the west wall. The excavations of the floor in this room, described above, revealed no evidence of a central hearth or any form of open fireplace and the room may therefore be presumed to have been either unheated or served by a chimney.

The first-floor rooms had also been stripped out (Fig 15) and most of the internal partitions had been removed. The partitions dividing the passage from the western room and eastern rooms were of modern construction, installed following the demolition of the central chimney stack rising through the building.

Examination of the exposed roof timbers showed that the truss over the centre of the older section of the building was a 19th-century insertion, perhaps added in place of an earlier roof truss when the 19th-century chimney was inserted at the centre of the building. It is of clean, well-squared softwood, unlike the older roof timbers, which are generally unsquared and very crude. The purlins, which appear earlier than the truss, are diagonally scarfed across the back of the principals, which argues that there must have been an earlier truss in this position. The most likely explanation is that that the original roof truss had failed, and that the roof timbers were propped up while the truss was removed and replaced. Unfortunately the timbers are almost undatable. There is no trace of smoke-blackening, the evidence for this observed on the earlier visit proved to be discolouration due to damp penetration.

2.4 Watching brief on the groundworks: 7th-11th October 2011

The ground works for the new driveway and parking areas were monitored by Marc Steinmetzer in October 2011. The initial visit on the 7th of October proving abortive, two further visits were made on the 10th and 11th of October. The ground was excavated by the contractors to a considerable depth, of 1.8m in places, revealing one small area of shale bedrock. The rest of the site was deeply buried by overlying colluvial deposits. Because of the topography of the site, all the excavations monitored during the watching brief stayed within colluvial deposits. No archaeology was exposed and no finds recovered. Further site visits to monitor a proposed drainage/cess pit and a large garage block were anticipated, but these visits were never commissioned. In view of the negative results from the watching brief it is considered that these works are unlikely to have exposed significant archaeology. The following section (Fig. 12) illustrates the character of the deposits.

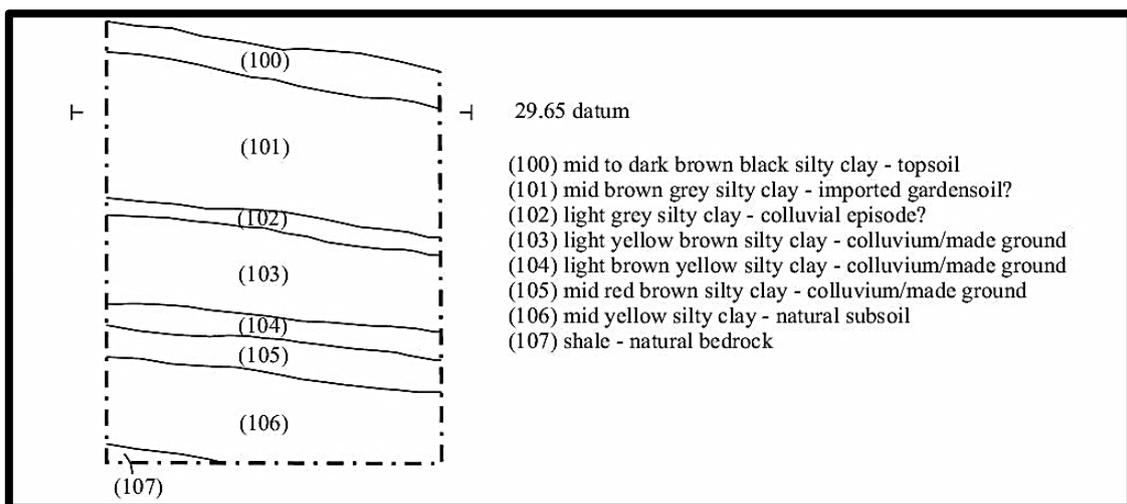


Fig. 12 Section 1, showing the character of the deposits observed in the watching brief. The location of this section is shown in Fig. 4 (M. Steinmetzer).

3. CONCLUSION

The recent building survey and watching brief at Old Maids' Cottage have modified the conclusions of the earlier report only slightly; demonstrating that the phasing of the rear wall was more complex than had previously been thought and that the blocked doorway presumed to exist in the spere or partition defining the passage was a phantom. Nevertheless, the recording works have to a large extent confirmed the basic conclusions of the earlier building survey.

The building does appear to have been constructed in two main phases, beginning with a very modest cottage of one room only, or perhaps of one ground-floor and one upper room. At some time before the tithing survey was made in 1840 the house was extended to the west by the addition of a substantial wing, on a slightly different alignment. This was at least partly of cob, since parts of the rear wall in this material still survived at the time of the recent recording. It is probable that this western extension was of two storeys from the beginning, for its eaves and ridge were at a slightly higher level than that of the earlier building. The resulting hump-backed profile of the roofline was visually very appealing and no doubt assisted with the later re-invention of the house as an 'icon' among English cottages equal in standing with Anne Hathaway's Cottage, Shakespeare's Birthplace and the Old Post Office at Tintagel.



Fig. 13 View of the opening in the north wall of the western room prior to enlargement, showing the stone and cob fabric of the wall suggesting a phase of rebuilding.



Fig. 14 View of the fireplace in the eastern room during the demolition of its rear wall to create a new opening. The fireplace probably dates from the late 19th century and may replace an earlier fireplace in the west wall of the original house.



Fig. 15 View of the first-floor rooms following stripping out.



Fig. 16 View of the groundworks in October 2011, looking west (Photo by M. Steinmetzer).



Fig. 17 Section 1, looking east, showing the deposit sequence and depth of colluvium/made ground. 1m scale (Photo by M. Steinmetzer).

The picturesque elements of the house appear to have been emphasised in a major remodelling in c.1870, when barge-boarded gables, leaded lights and the rustic porch were added. This remodelling was not only romantic, but also practical, since a large rear lean-to extension seems to have been constructed to provide service rooms. This was approached by a narrow passage which crossed the building on the site of its original west wall. The original chimney stack and a staircase may have been replaced at this stage, and a new chimney constructed eastwards of its original position. The new fabric contained a great deal of red, perforated or extruded brick, which being manufactured from the mid 19th century onwards, provides good dating evidence for these parts of the structure.

The building had reached the zenith of its popular appeal in the 20th century, but subsequent changes were not kind to it. In the 1970s the building was re-thatched, on the front face of the roof only, and the kink in the roofline was removed. At the same time the large central chimney stack was removed above first-floor level and a new passage was driven through the rear wall. These alterations were made in the context of the addition of a large concrete block extension at the rear of the house, now demolished and replaced with a still larger building. The decline of the north Devon tourist industry in the late 20th century may be felt to be reflected in the fortunes of the cottage, which had fallen into a parlous state of repair by 2009. It has now been fully repaired and restored as a holiday cottage, with a bright modern interior which would no doubt have greatly astonished the Three Old Maids of Lee.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SOURCES CONSULTED

Unpublished sources

Devon Record Office

Ilfracombe Tithe Apportionment (1839) & Tithe Map (1840)

Published sources

OS 2nd-edition 1:2500 map sheet Devonshire IV.3, surveyed in 1902 and published in 1904.

Parker R.W. & Collings A.G. 2009 *Archaeological Building Survey of Old Maids' Cottage, Lee, Ilfracombe, Devon*. Exeter Archaeology Report No. **09.132**.

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