

Historic Building Survey

Of

**CHURSTON MILL HOUSE, CHURSTON FERRERS,
NEAR BRIXHAM, DEVON.**

By R. W. Parker

For Mandy Ellis Voisey

**RICHARD PARKER
HISTORIC BUILDING RECORDING & INTERPRETATION**

11 Toronto Road, St James, Exeter, EX4 6LE.

E-Mail: rwpark@btopenworld.com

Tel: 07763 248241

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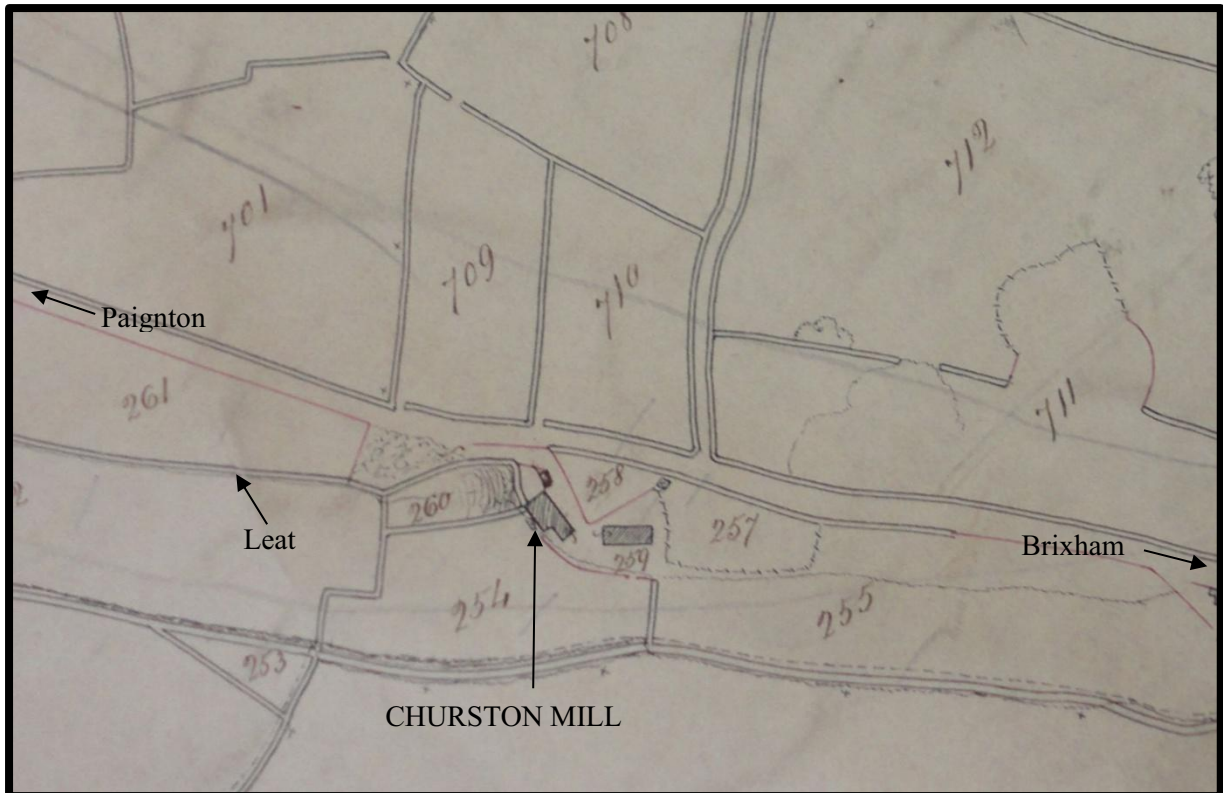


Fig. 1 Extract from the Churston Ferrers tithe map of 1839, showing the mill pond, mill and outbuildings lying south of the Brixham Road.

1. INTRODUCTION

Churston Mill House (SX90837 55499) is a Grade II Listed Building which stands on the south side of the A3022 from Paignton to Brixham, just west of its junction with Laywell Road and north-east of the grounds of Lupton House (Fig. 1). The building is occupied as a private house and is currently undergoing refurbishment.

This report was commissioned by the current owner of the property, Mandy Ellis Voisey, at the request of Torbay District Council. The report aims to clarify the probable development and significance of the historic building and help inform decisions about further works to the property. The archaeological works were carried out on the 6th of December 2012 by Richard Parker Historic Building Recording and Interpretation. The works included a rapid survey of the building, the production of a photographic record of the current condition of the property and limited documentary research.

2. GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The mill house lies just below the main Brixham Road on a steeply sloping hillside facing south west and is approached by a narrow driveway which descends along the north and eastern sides of high embankments retaining the long, oval mill pond, which lies on higher ground immediately to the north-west of the house. The leat serving this pond is no longer apparent on site due to heavy undergrowth. It is shown on the Churston Ferrers Tithe Map of 1839 only as a faint line running alongside a field boundary (Fig. 1). The tithe apportionment of 1840 lists the property as 'Churston Mill &c, (Lower), belonging to Sir John Buller Yard (*sic.*) Buller, Bart. and as tenanted by 'Parker'.

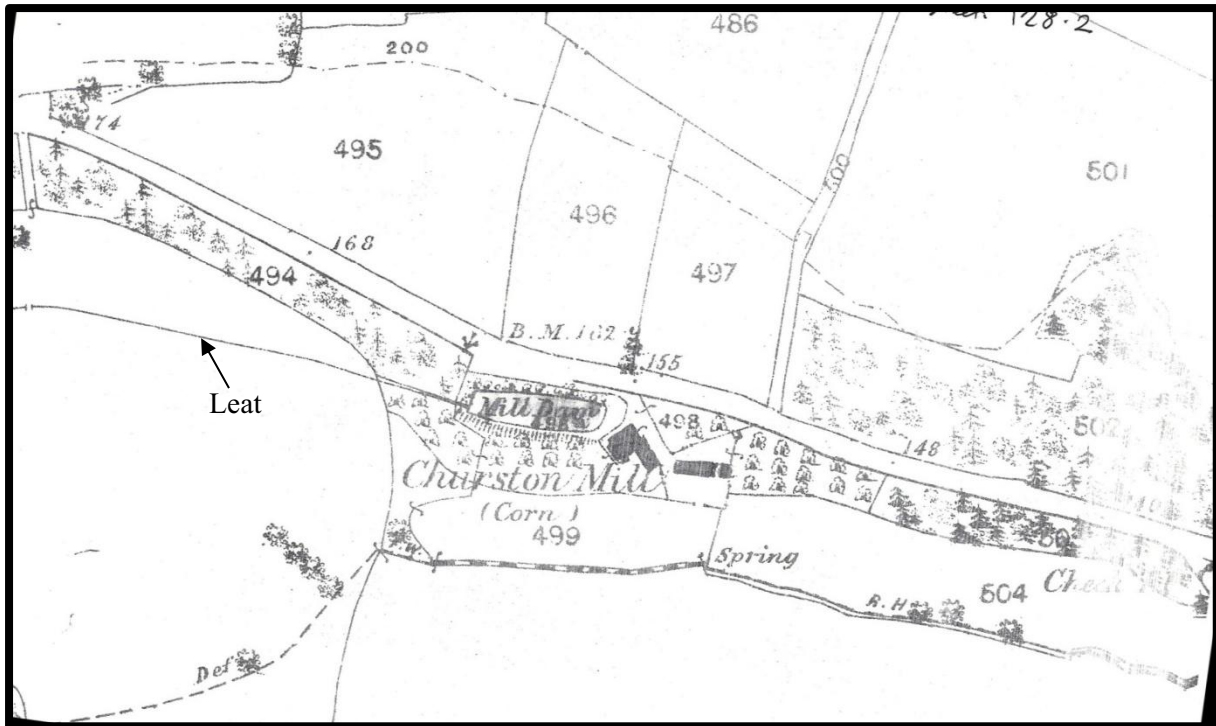


Fig. 2 Extract from the 1865 OS 1st-edition 1:2500 map sheet CXXVIII.2, showing the leat extending across the fields to the west of the mill pond and the footprint of the millhouse and outbuildings.

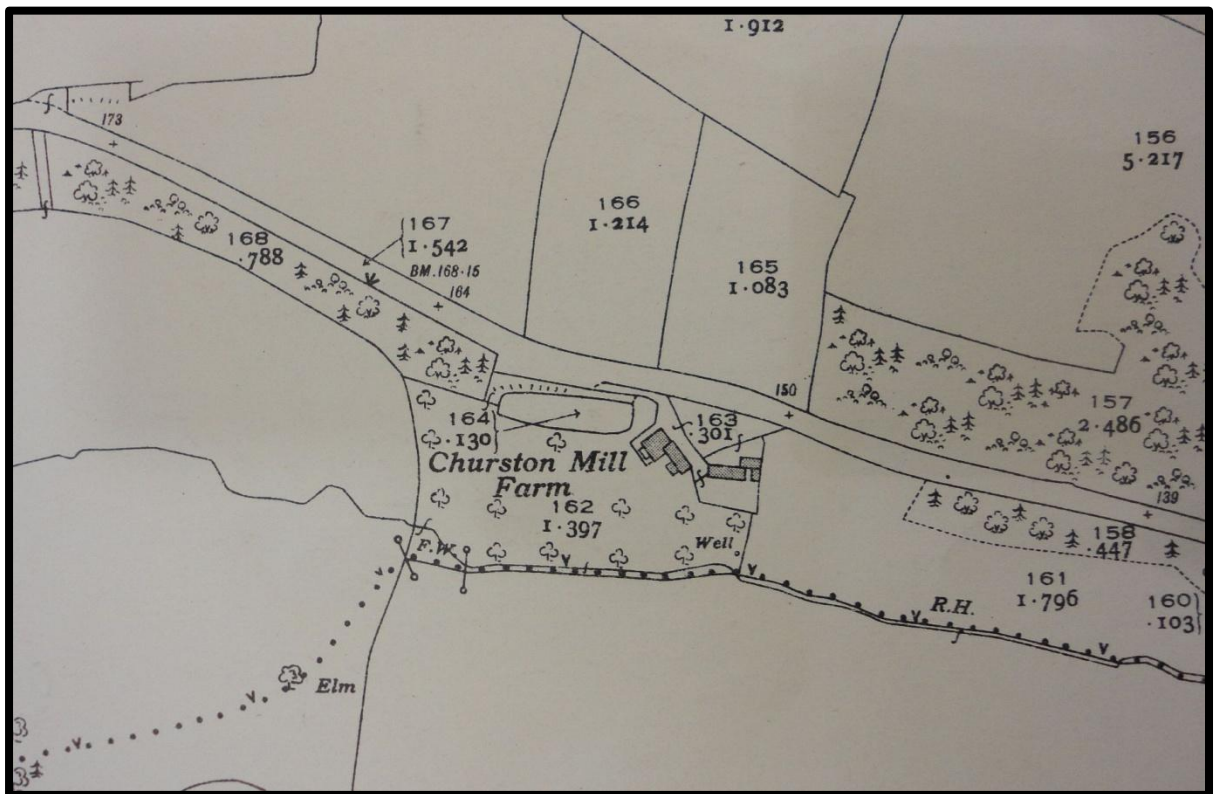


Fig. 3 Extract from the 1936 OS 2nd-edition 1:2500 map sheet CXXVIII.2, showing no leat and a new course for the stream south of the house.

On the OS 1st-edition 1:2500 map sheet CXXVIII.2, dating from 1865, the leat appears to run across open fields to the west of the house, some distance south of a long, narrow plantation against the road (Fig 2). However by 1936, the date of the Second-Edition OS map, it is either not shown or has been realigned along the boundary of the plantation (Fig. 3). The course of the stream west of the house appears also to have changed. The reason for these anomalies in the mapping is not known. None of the later maps show a continuation of the leat to the south-east of the mill house, and it is presumed that the tailrace and any bypass channels were culverted beneath the gardens and paddocks to the south and east of the house.

The main building is aligned north-west to south-east, with the mill forming a tall, square, structure at its northern end, under a hipped slate roof. The house lies to the east of the mill, extending south-east from its eastern corner. The house is a plain, two storey double-fronted building only one room deep, which has been extended to the north-west by a lower building masking the north-eastern wall of the mill. On the south-western side of the house a small lean-to extension and a later conservatory have recently been demolished and a large, flat-roofed extension is under construction. This side of the house was its rear elevation. All the buildings are constructed of local limestone and mudstone rubble, but there are some inclusions of brick and larger blocks of red stone. Much of the building has been snail-pointed and there was little opportunity for detailed examination of the mortar.

3. BUILDING SURVEY: THE MILL

The mill is constructed of a mixture of slaty-mudstone and limestone rubble (Fig. 4). The lower parts of the south-western wall, in the region of the wheel pit, are constructed of undressed and almost uncoursed rubble, rising to an offset at first-floor level. This walling terminates at the southern corner of the mill with a low chamfered buttress-like feature with large, red stone quoins. Similar rough rubble masonry is visible in the north-western wall of the mill. The upper parts of the mill, however, are constructed of larger, squared blocks of randomly-coursed snecked limestone, with large, grey limestone quoins, which appears to be of later date. It is assumed that the present building is a substantial reconstruction of an earlier building from which only the lower parts of the south-west and north-west walls (those areas either terraced into the hillside or facing the wheelpit) were retained.

The two openings above first-floor level in the south-eastern wall of the mill have been cut in, probably in the context of the domestic conversion of the building. The openings in the south-western wall have also been altered, but retain their original jambs. The upper part of the north-western wall of the mill is differentiated from the adjoining masonry of the north western extension of the house by a clear vertical break interrupted by occasional toothings, and it is clear that the extension butts against the mill. At a low level, however, the joint is more ragged, and this may be interpreted as suggesting that a low-level wall, or perhaps a building, continued to the north east at this point prior to the construction of the present extension. Unfortunately the map evidence is ambiguous here, however a small structure is shown on the tithe map (Fig. 1), lying to the north of the corner of the building, and it is presumed that this was a shed or outbuilding linked to the main building by a low wall.

The accommodation within the mill was arranged on three storeys: the lower storey served as the meal floor and contained the drives from the waterwheel to the stones. The middle floor was the stone floor, where grinding was performed, and the upper storey was a loft floor for storage. Some machinery survives. This is not affected by the current works, but it is necessary to describe the operation of the machinery in order to interpret the possible functions of the spaces within the building.

The waterwheel

The waterwheel does not survive, but the opening for the wheel shaft is still visible, at ground level in the south-western wall of the mill. This is a square opening with stone voussoirs, capable of taking a large timber shaft. The mill pond lies at a high level in relation to the mill building, which suggests that the mill wheel was either a high breast-shot or an over-shot wheel, possibly served by a wooden launder or pentrough extending from the pond over the top of the wheel, and controlled by sluices operated from the mill dam, which was approached by a series of narrow steps to the north west of the mill. These steps still survive. The end of the pentrough may have been arranged to reverse the flow of the water above the centre of the wheel, so that the wheel would have functioned as a 'pitchback wheel', with the water flowing backwards under the launder, down the western side of the wheel along a curved breastwork fitting closely against the floats, thus maximising the available power. The opening at first-floor level in the south-western wall of the mill building lies directly above the centre of the wheel and has been reduced in depth upon conversion to a window. It may originally have been a doorway giving access to the launder and allowing control of the water supply to the centre of the wheel. Unfortunately the wheel-pit has been backfilled level with the wheelshaft and, as the lower parts of the wheel-pit are buried, the form of the breastwork and the tailrace cannot be determined.

The meal floor

Within the mill house, on the meal floor, the pitwheel survives, now half buried, serving a two-step or spurwheel underdrive in a large Hurst frame rising the full height of the meal floor (Fig. 5). The meal floor of the mill was entered by three doorways: a single doorway in the south-eastern wall and two doorways in the north-eastern wall. One doorway gave onto the land behind the house. The other two doorways open into the area now occupied by the extension to the north of the house. One is blocked in stone, the other has recently been blocked. Both appear to be primary features and presumably served separate areas or structures to the north-east of the mill. These must have been destroyed or built over by the extension to the house. There is a wall scar between the two doorways which may represent the remains of a projecting structure, perhaps a porch or a lean-to shed. The other doorway may have opened directly from the meal floor to the driveway and could have been the main entrance to the mill. There is a further opening in the north-eastern wall of the mill, near the eastern corner. This is now converted into a cupboard within one of the ground floor rooms of the house, but its voussoirs are still visible within the mill, above the level of the stone floor, and it must have pierced the wall. It is assumed to represent an opening for a steep stairway or ladder connecting the ground floor of the house with the stone floor, presumably as a convenience for the miller, allowing access to the stones without having to go outdoors.

The stone floor

On the middle storey (the stone floor) the two millstones remain in position and a tall iron shaft rises to the ceiling to support a crown wheel powering a single secondary drive. The window in the south-eastern wall has been cut in, but the openings in the south-west and north-west walls, as mentioned above, appear to be primary. The present entrance to the mill may be the original doorway to the stone floor and, as mentioned above, there seems also to have been an opening to the launder over the wheel pit and a steep stairway or ladder opposite linking the stone floor and the house. There is no evidence of any point of access between the stone floor and the upper part of the extension to the north of the house, and it may perhaps be conjectured that any earlier buildings on the site of the extension were only a single storey high. The present spiral staircase linking the three storeys of the mill is a modern insertion, probably replacing ladders and hatchways between the floors, of which no evidence is now visible.



Fig. 4 Elevation of the mill from the site of the wheelpit, showing possible earlier masonry in the lower part of the wall and the raised level of the mill pond (left).



Fig. 5 View of the mill machinery on the meal floor showing the pitwheel and spurwheel underdrives providing power to two sets of stones.



Fig. 6 Elevation of the house, showing the main house, the north-western extension and the higher roof of the mill behind.



Fig. 7 Elevation of the house from the site of the tail race showing evidence of two phases of rear extension, the rebuilt chimney and the relationship of the lean-to roofs with the first-floor and staircase window openings.

The loft floor

The upper storey of the mill (the loft floor) would have contained grain bins, or perhaps hoppers, and a sack hoist powered by the secondary drive, but these areas have been converted for domestic use and the bins and machinery do not survive. This room was lit by a window in its south-western wall only. The present windows in the north-western and south-eastern walls are insertions and there is no visible evidence of other openings. The roof structure of the mill is supported by two scissor-braced trusses, with applied king-posts supporting the hip rafters. This roof is probably of 19th-century date.

4. BUILDING SURVEY: THE HOUSE

Exterior: main house

The house faces north-east, and has a polite, symmetrical façade of three bays, with a central doorway with a flat hood supported on plain stone blocks (Fig. 6). The ground-floor windows are wider than the first-floor windows, and may have been fitted originally with tripartite sashes. The present casements are modern. All the openings have flat arches of radiating stone voussoirs. The masonry is of sneaked randomly-coursed rubble resembling that of the upper parts of the mill and it is presumed that the two buildings are either contemporary or very close in date. At the south-eastern end of the building is a 19th-century brick chimney stack. One would expect a corresponding stack at the north-western end, but this is absent; the chimney instead rises against the rear wall of the house, in the angle between it and the mill. Unfortunately, this conceals any relationship between the mill and the house.

The end gable is rendered and, as it contains a large chimney breast, is unlikely to contain any primary openings. The rear elevation of the house is less regular and has been compromised by modern additions. These included a lean-to extension, visible on the 1936 OS map, but absent on earlier maps and therefore probably of late 19th- or early 20th-century date. The roofline of this lean-to appears to have conflicted with and truncated one of the first-floor windows (Fig. 7). The wall scar of its north-western wall is still visible, together with traces of internal plastering, but all except its south-eastern wall was later demolished and replaced with a slightly larger lean-to structure which has in turn been demolished to make way for the flat-roofed extension now under construction. The roofline of the later lean-to is also still visible, extending a short distance to the north west of the earlier structure. The roof could not extend further because this would have fouled the lower parts of the staircase window. Access between the older house and the rear lean-to was by a large opening made in the rear wall, fitted with sliding glazed door. This is of late 20th-century date and it is not known whether or not it replaced a primary window or doorway.

To the north west of the 20th-century lean-to was a small conservatory approached by a doorway from the original central entrance hall of the building. This had a lower roof than the adjoining extension because of the staircase window lighting the half landing. This retains its original radiating voussoirs. The adjoining window to the former bathroom appears to have original jambs, but its sill has recently been lowered, perhaps because the original window had been partially blocked for the installation of a low-level cistern above a toilet within the bathroom which had been carved out of an original first-floor bedroom. The window does not seem to be an insertion, but it has square, rather than splayed jambs, and might have been inserted when the bathroom was carved out of the original bedroom. In this case the rear wall of the house must have been partially rebuilt at the same time, perhaps in the context of alterations to the adjoining chimney.

The large chimney breast rising alongside this window seems to have been constructed in several phases and clearly butts against the wall of the mill alongside. There is a possibility that the chimney was moved to this position from the north-western gable of the original house, perhaps when the house was extended. The clear vertical breaks near the top of the chimney are difficult to explain,

since they appear to imply the addition of an extra flue. It is possible that the original chimney contained only one flue and that a second was added in a later phase to heat the first-floor room, perhaps after the insertion of the bathroom, which may have necessitated the destruction or repositioning of an earlier fireplace and appropriate reconfiguring of the chimney flues.

Exterior: north-western extension

To the north west of the main body of the house is a two storey structure which clearly represents an extension. The masonry of the extension is very little different from that of the earlier buildings adjoining it, but the relationship to both the mill and the house is clear; this building is a later addition. It contained no heated rooms and seems to have been designed to augment the industrial, rather than the domestic accommodation. The extension has a lower roofline than the main house and a pair of large windows on the first floor. The ground floor seems originally to have had a doorway opposing one of the doors opening onto the meal floor of the mill and a window alongside this. The doorway presumably represented the main entrance to the mill. In the north-western wall is a further opening, now at ground level, which cannot really have functioned as a window and may have been some form of loading hatch.

Interior: main house

The interior of the house is very modest and without pretension. The main entrance doorway opens upon a narrow hallway with a dog-leg staircase rising against the rear wall over a corresponding doorway in the rear wall. The stair has a turned newel post in the form of an elongated baluster, and a closed string, stick balusters and a plain ramped handrail with 'bun' terminals above each newel (Fig. 8). These details suggest a date in the early-mid 19th century. There is no evidence that the stair is a replacement. It is lit by a window with splayed jambs on the half landing. On either side of the hallway are two large rooms, both entered by doorways with moulded architraves. The doors have been removed but have been retained for reinstatement after completion of the building works. The south-eastern room has no surviving primary features but the north-western room retains a 19th-century panelled cupboard infilling an earlier opening connecting the house and the mill. None of the original fireplaces survived and the present treatments of the embrasures are modern (Mrs Ellis Voisey *pers. comm.*). The ceilings have been stripped of their plaster to expose the joists, however it is clear from the evidence of lath nails that all the ceilings were originally plastered; indeed, unless they were designed to be ornamental, joists and structural timberwork would not have been exposed in a domestic building of this period.

The first-floor of the house originally had the same two-room plan, separated by the staircase and landings, but this had been compromised in the 20th century by the creation of a bathroom to the north west of the staircase, by carving a rectangular area out of the original north-western bedroom. The bathroom may have utilised an original rear window of the bedroom but, as noted above, this had square rather than splayed jambs and may have been inserted to light the bath room. This alteration may have necessitated the relocation of the fireplace and the reconfiguration of the chimney flues evident externally. The north-western bedroom, now reduced in size, was now approached by a short corridor from the landing, and its window was no longer centrally placed in relation to the room.

During the recent alterations a short flight of stairs has been made as a spur off the half landing beneath the stair window and the 20th-century bathroom has been removed. A new corridor has been provided along the south-eastern wall of the house. The north-western bedroom now opens off the corridor and the rooms at the north-west end of the house can be approached without having to pass through this room. The window of the former bathroom and the fireplace of the original bedroom



Fig. 8 View of the ground floor and main staircase.



Fig. 9 View of the 19th-century roof structure of the house.



Fig. 10 View of the doorways formerly communicating with the mill, showing the wall scar lying between them, suggestive of a structure abutting the mill and pre-dating the north-western extension.



Fig. 11 The shadow of a steep staircase or ladder, rising from the house to the first floor of the extension and with severely restricted head room.

have been preserved in the wall of the corridor, and also a 19th-century built-in cupboard, which might infill an earlier opening linking the house with the loft floor of the mill, corresponding with the presumed access to the stone floor, below.

The south-eastern room and landing had also been altered in the 20th century. A cupboard had been inserted at the head of the stairs, truncating the original balustrade and, very probably, blocking the original doorway to the south-eastern bedroom. This whole area has recently been opened up to form a large bedroom and en-suite bathroom. The ceilings have been removed to expose the roof trusses and the soffits of the rafters have been plastered. The room retains its original fitted cupboards flanking the site of the fireplace, but no other period features remain. The large window in the south-west wall of this room has suffered much alteration, presumably due to interference from the lean-to extensions below it. It is uncertain whether or not this was a primary opening. Unlike the openings in the north-eastern wall, this window appears to have had square, rather than splayed jambs: it may therefore have been a later insertion.

The roof of the house is supported by very handsome and well-made king-post trusses with diagonal braces (Fig. 9). The bases of the king posts are bolted through the tie beams, showing that the post is here understood as a tension rather than a compression member. This type of truss was in use from the late 18th to the 20th centuries and it is considered likely that the roof dates from the early-mid 19th century. Although of good quality, these trusses were not originally designed to be displayed.

Interior: north-western extension

The addition of the extension seems to have been made early in the life of the house and it is difficult to reconstruct the original layout of this area. The stone wall dividing the extension from the house is only 0.4m thick, as opposed to the 0.56 /0.60m thickness of the external walls of both the original house and the extension. The present stone wall is presumably a rebuilding or refacing of the end wall as an internal wall and all earlier features and openings are likely to have been lost or obscured by this intervention. It is considered likely that the symmetrical plan of the house demands a chimney in its original north-western wall, and that this may have been demolished and relocated to the rear wall of the house when the extension was constructed, hence the fact that the present chimney seems to butt against the upper storeys of the mill. Unfortunately there is no direct evidence of the demolition of this wall, and this interpretation must remain a conjecture.

The rooms within the north-western extension were unheated and probably related to the mill rather than the house, though the ground and first floors may have had different functions, since there was no direct communication with the mill on the first floor. At ground-floor level the doorway in the north eastern wall of the extension may have served as the entrance to the mill, corresponding with the original, earlier main entrance to the meal floor, in the north-west wall of that building, which remained in use, approached by a flight of steps from the new floor levels in the extension. The other doorway to the meal floor, which may have formerly opened into a lean-to shed (the wall scar of which remains), may have been blocked and abandoned after the construction of the extension (Fig. 10). The remaining area of the ground floor is served by an hatch in the north-west wall and may have served as a sack store, perhaps for milled flour delivered from the meal floor.

Communication between the extension and the house is difficult to reconstruct. There are two possible openings in the wall. One was, until recently, a doorway communicating with the kitchen in the extension. It is now blocked and plastered over as a recess visible within the ground-floor room of the house. A further opening lies to the south west, and this has been retained as an access point between the two rooms. This opening has a timber lintel which has been crudely cut away on the underside to a sloping profile. Unfortunately it is impossible to be certain whether or not this was an original feature of the lintel or a later modification. The clear shadow of a steeply-sloping stair or

ladder is visible against the mill wall immediately within this opening, on the extension side of the doorway (Fig. 11). This is so steep, and so close to the doorway, that even with the truncation of the lintel it would be necessary to duck as one ascended the steps. It is thus highly unlikely that this was an original arrangement or that it formed any part of the domestic accommodation. The ladder would also have precluded access between the house and the lower storey of the extension. The ladder had been replaced by a later staircase in more or less the same position, but with a shallower ascent. The ceiling structure in this area has been entirely renewed and there is no surviving evidence for the truncation of joists, trimmers or blocked voids in the ceiling.

The first floor now contains a large bedroom, with an en-suite bathroom adjoining. The bedroom was approached directly by the staircase or ladder from the ground floor and also by a doorway from the adjoining bedroom. The jambs of this latter doorway appear to have been patched up in brick, as though this doorway had been cut through an earlier wall. The door has now been blocked and the room connected to the new corridor running along the rear wall of the house, through an opening in the dividing wall between the rooms, hard against the south-western wall. This opening also has a timber lintel, but it is entirely featureless and its date is uncertain. As it would have opened directly onto the void of the stair well, this opening cannot have co-existed with the staircase or ladder unless the ladder was closed by a hatch or trapdoor allowing the alternatives of access to the first-floor rooms or the ground-floor rooms of the house. Neither of these options seems likely to have been part of the domestic arrangements of the original building. The opening thus seems to pre-date the ladder, and must have been blocked after the ladder was inserted. This may provide a context for the insertion of the other doorway.

As noted above the first-floor room in the extension had no direct connection with the mill. It may thus have formed an ante room, closet or storage room off the north-eastern bedroom, or perhaps a dormitory for labourers or servants connected with the mill or the farm. It is probable that the ladder or stair was added later on, to separate this room from the accommodation set aside for the miller's family and increase privacy in the main bedrooms. In a later phase of development, perhaps because of the constricted nature of these secondary access arrangements, the second doorway in the centre of the wall was made to replace the original doorway, and the earlier doorway was blocked. The ladder was also replaced, resulting in a room with two points of access and a puzzle for the archaeologist.

The roof of the extension is probably also of 19th-century date, supported by tie-beam trusses with improvised king-posts consisting of planks nailed to the face of the trusses between the tie beam and the apex.

5. CONCLUSION

Churston Mill and Mill house are clearly estate buildings relating to the nearby Lupton Estate, belonging in the early 19th-century to Sir John Buller Yarde Buller and let by him to tenants. Fig 12 presents a phased interpretation of the historic development of the building.

The mill and the house seem to have been rebuilt in around 1830-40, in a severe style typical of the period, of sneaked rubble with grey stone dressings. Remnants of earlier buildings may survive in the area of the wheel pit and those parts of the building terraced into the mill dam, and these seem to have been of random rubble with red stone dressings.

The mill is a typical three-storey watermill with separate floors for different processes, the grain being hoisted into the loft for storage, then proceeding down through the building, past the stones, before collection from the level of the meal floor. Conversion of the building by previous owners has preserved large parts of the machinery, and much more information about these, including details of the form of the waterwheel and wheelpit, the tailrace and bypass channels is probably preserved below ground.

The house is an attractive but unremarkable building for the period, with a very simple double-fronted plan of two rooms on each floor, typical of labourers' cottages and small agricultural dwellings. It was extended to the north-west soon afterwards, possibly to improve the accommodation, which must always have been limited, by the addition of some form of ancillary accommodation connected both with the house and the mill. Communication between the house and the north-western extension seems never to have been satisfactory, for it was revised on several occasions, each time by the creation of doorways communicating directly between rooms. The original plan of the house was further compromised in the late 19th- or early 20th century by the addition of a bathroom, which disturbed the original pattern of the first floor but introduced a very necessary facility. This same observation might be applied to the corridor recently inserted within the first floor area, which, for the first time, allows independent access from the main staircase to all the bedrooms.

The house was further extended in the late 19th century or early 20th century by the addition of a lean-to extension against the rear wall. This appears to have compromised one of the first-floor windows, though it is not clear whether or not this window was a primary feature. A southern aspect has not always been considered healthy or desirable, and there may originally have been no windows other than the stair window in this elevation, which overlooked a small area forming part of the 'Mill yard and waste' depicted on the tithe map and lying alongside the tailrace of the mill. The tail race appears to have been culverted by the 1860s, before the construction of the extension. The lean-to was later demolished and replaced with a late 20th-century lean-to with a slightly larger footprint, and subsequently extended to provide a garden room or conservatory. The present, flat-roofed extension in the modern style is thus only the latest in a series of late rear extensions to the house, and at least has the benefit of a low roofline which does not conflict with the rear windows of the either the bedrooms or the staircase.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was commissioned by Mrs M. Ellis Voisey and undertaken by Richard Parker on the advice of Hal Bishop, Senior Archaeology and Historic Environment Officer of Torbay District Council. Mr Parker is grateful to Mrs Ellis Voisey, her family and her building contractors, for assistance on site and for hospitality during the recording works. Mr Parker is also grateful to Andrew Passmore of AC Archaeology.

SOURCES CONSULTED










DRO Devon Record Office (now Devon Heritage Centre)

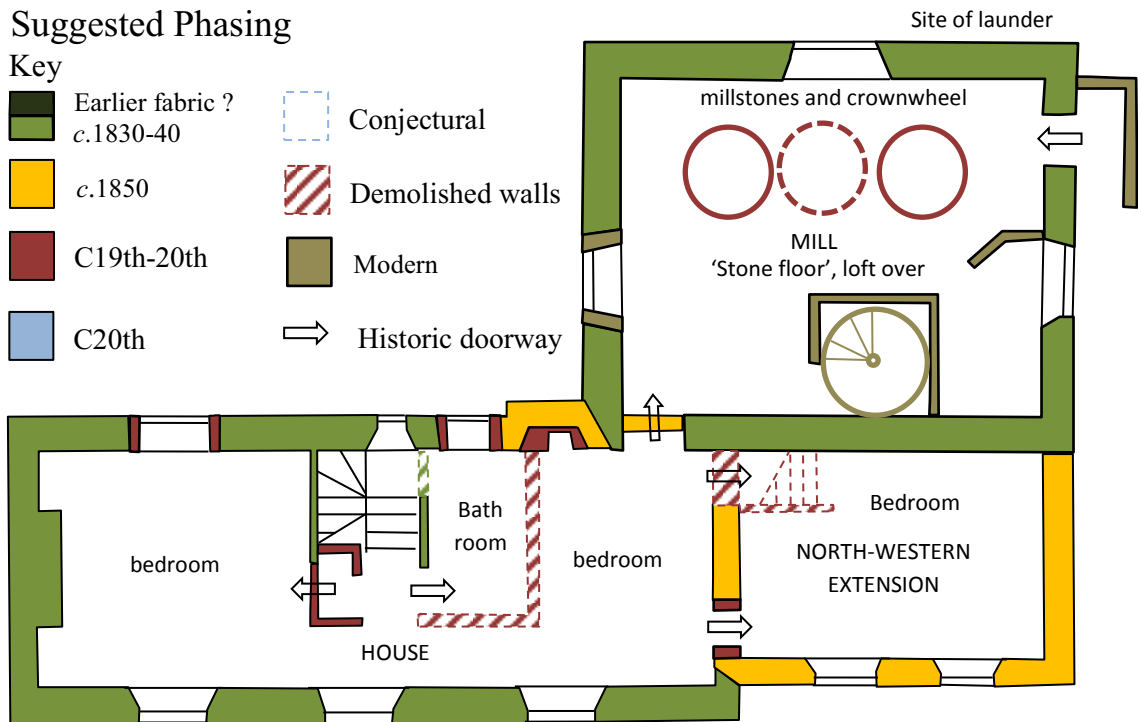
Tithe Map of Churston Ferrers (1839) and Apportionment (1840).

CHURSTON FERRERS: CHURSTON MILL 2012

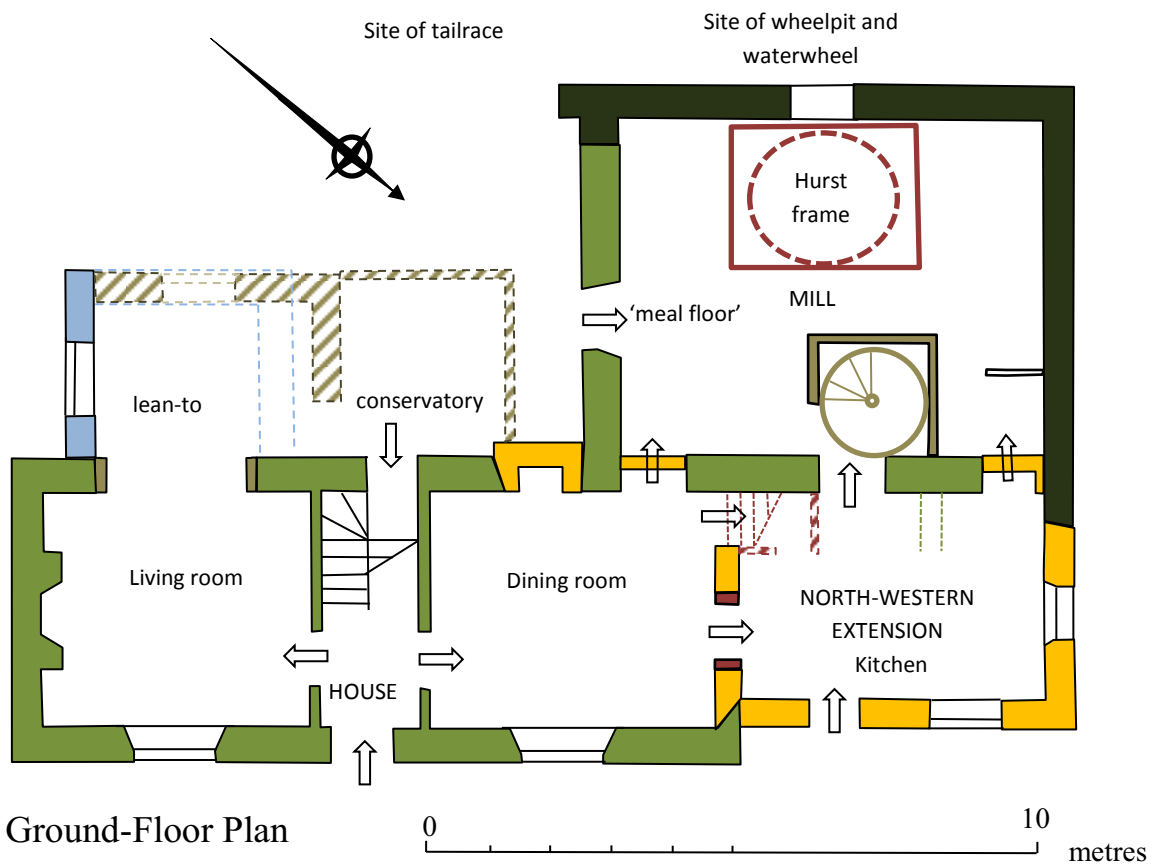
Suggested Phasing

Key

	Earlier fabric ?		Conjectural
	c.1830-40		Demolished walls
	c.1850		Modern
	C19th-20th		Historic doorway
	C20th		



First-Floor Plan



Ground-Floor Plan

Fig. 12 Phased plans showing conjectural phasing. Based upon drawings by Mark Ledgard of Smithsgore Chartered Surveyors.