

Notes on some old Derbyshire Cottages.

By PERCY CURREY, ESQ., ARCHITECT.



AMONG all the works that have been written on the architecture of the middle ages, very little attention has yet been given to the timber buildings which for so many centuries comprised the great majority of the smaller class of houses. Messrs. Turner and Parker's invaluable work on the domestic architecture of the middle ages illustrates many timber buildings, but gives no details of their construction and gradual development, and confines itself almost exclusively to the larger buildings, besides which it concludes with the fifteenth century, after which period the majority of the buildings of this class now in existence were erected. The fine timber houses of Cheshire and the West of England are often illustrated, but a well studied historical account of the development and characteristics of timber construction seems to me to be much wanted. For this reason I have thought that it might not be altogether uninteresting to the readers of the Derbyshire Archæological Society's *Journal*, if I were to give a few brief notes which I have made from time to time on some very primitive timber buildings of the humblest class in this county, and I am the more induced to do so by the fact that they are very rapidly disappearing to give place to the modern builder's six-roomed cottages, a great gain no doubt from a sanitarian's point of view, though one cannot help wishing that they might be spared to relieve the deadly monotony of pressed brick fronts and cast-iron palisades; if kept in repair they would probably long outlive their modern successors.

These old labourers' cottages might be said to have no features of architectural interest, but they display what was probably the earliest form of timber construction. In their erection, two massive pairs of rafters were first hewn out, usually selected with a slight curve near their lower end; these were either framed together at the top, or else framed into a short horizontal piece of timber, which formed a firm seat for the ridge beam; the rafters were then set up on the ground, or on a wooden or stone cill to form the two gable ends of the house to be built, and across them horizontal timbers of lighter scantling were notched and secured by oak pins, longitudinal timbers (ridge, purlins, and wall plates) being notched and pinned on to these, and stiffened by diagonal wind braces. The whole formed, with a minimum of labour, a very rigid and strong skeleton frame, whose durability and sound construction is attested by the number of centuries which some of them have stood. In the examples which I have been able to examine, the filling in of the gables and side-walls appears to have been made with light upright pieces of round timber let into the horizontal timbers, between which willow rods were interlaced in the manner of basket work, and the whole plastered with clay in which chopped grass was mixed to give it cohesion; but in almost all cases this filling in has been subsequently replaced by brick or stone. The roofs were formed of rough rafters and thatched, and the floors would probably be also formed of clay beaten down and trodden hard.

A very picturesque house of this class is still standing near the station at Little Eaton, but as it now forms one of a row of three houses, only one of the gable ends is visible. Another pair of these houses still stands on Morley Moor, close to the picturesque old Sacheverell Almshouses; they are now uninhabited, and rapidly falling to pieces. Each house appears to have originally consisted of a single room, about eighteen feet long by fourteen feet six inches wide, the walls being about seven feet high to the level of the wall plate. There is an upper floor at the level of the eaves, forming a chamber in the roof, but this is evidently a subsequent addition, as the joists rest on the brick filling in of the walls, and not on the wall plate, which indeed could scarcely

have carried them before the brickwork was inserted, the round holes in the timbers showing that the spaces were originally filled in with wattles and clay as described above.



RAFTER BUILT COTTAGES
MORLEY MOOR

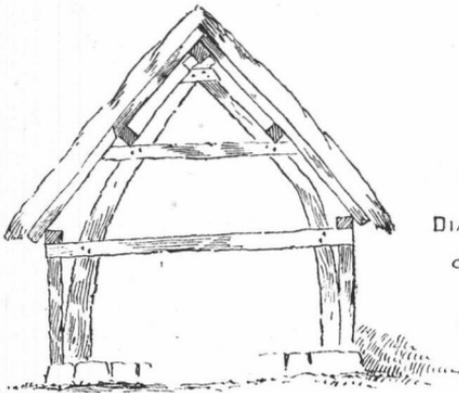


DIAGRAM OF GABLE END
OF COTTAGES AT
LITTLE EATON
(pulled down 1836)

P. H. Currey del.

There are one or two other examples which I have come across in Derbyshire which show the original construction, and the large number of houses which—though the rafters have been removed or covered up and the buildings enlarged—can still be seen, with a little observation, to have been first built in this form,

show that this must at one time have been the usual type of labourers' cottage in the country.

A house at Little Eaton being pulled down in 1896, disclosed a very perfect pair of cottages of this kind, and gave me an opportunity of examining their construction. An additional room having been added at each end, the original gables had become inner walls, and thus their original construction of wattles and clay had been preserved intact. Each house consisted of a single room, about fifteen feet by thirteen feet, and seven feet high to the wall plate; a door had been cut through the centre wall to throw the two houses into one, and a chamber floor had been added, as in those at Morley. At one end was a large open fireplace, with a projecting hood to carry off the smoke, also formed of wood and clay like the walls. Another cottage at Little Eaton, pulled down in 1897, also had the original rafters remaining in the partition wall; whilst an uninteresting looking cottage at Matlock Town, when pulled down, disclosed a very massive pair of rafters, bedded in the wall, which had evidently been rotted away at the bottom when the stone walls were built, and appeared to be of a great age.

In the Rev. J. C. Atkinson's delightfully interesting book entitled *Forty Years in a Moorland Parish*, mention is made of examples of this kind of buildings, to which he gives the appropriate name of 'Rafter-built houses,' existing in the Cleveland district, and the exact similarity of construction between these and the Derbyshire examples is rather remarkable. In the course of time these "rafter-built" houses were superseded by framed buildings, which required greater skill on the carpenter's part, as the framing of the walls had to bear the weight of the floors and roof instead of having merely to carry the feet of the small rafters, the timbers had therefore to be carefully mortised and tenoned together, and stiffened by diagonal braces; but in spite of their more careful construction, the frame-built buildings have in many cases, through the decay of the pins and tenons, become crippled and given way long before the

older rafter-built buildings, which were not dependent upon the fastenings for their stability.

The question will naturally be asked, What is the age of these cottages? but to this I find it most difficult to give an answer with any confidence. It is, I think, safe to assume that they are older than the seventeenth century frame-built houses, many of which are, or were until recently, standing in close proximity to them, for it would scarcely be likely that the rafter construction would be used for houses after the more roomy framed work was in common use, even for farm buildings; but how much older they may be, it seems hard to say. It seems to me probable, however, that this would be the ordinary form of construction for small buildings in the country during several centuries, though the great similarity of all the examples might be brought forward as an argument against this; the existence of a timber building at Matlock, where stone and lime are in such close proximity, seems to point to an early period.

In conclusion, I must ask to be excused for occupying the very valuable space of the *Journal* with these short and fragmentary notes, but the subject of them seems to me to deserve more consideration than they have yet received, as they serve to bring before our minds the actual conditions of the lives of our humbler forefathers, and they display a skill in construction, with very rough materials and tools, as great in its way as that which erected the splendid timber roofs of the Norfolk Churches, and similar triumphs of mediæval carpentry with which we are familiar.