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Modern living in an historic environment

A Heritage Asset Survey of Miller's Barn, Spratton, Northamptonshire

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Summary

A much-altered group of barns originate in the 17th century, but have been extended in the 19th and extensively altered and large portions rebuilt in the modern period. They contain little of architectural merit, except for the fortuitous survival of a group of notable, but degrading early graffiti, comprising Apotropaic marks and a competently-drawn post-type windmill.

Introduction

A Heritage Asset Survey of Miller's Barns, Spratton was carried out on Friday 20 March 2015. The small group of agricultural buildings lies on the west side of the A5199 road between the villages of Church Brampton to the south and Spratton to the north (NGR: SP 7190 6850; Fig 1). The purpose of the work was to record the barns group as they stood prior to any potential alteration and determine, if possible, their origin and development and assess if they have any historical significance.

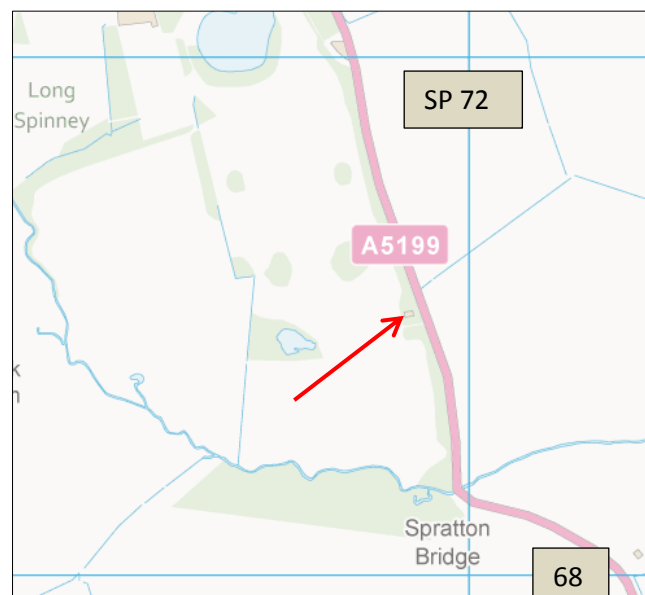


Fig 1: Barn Location (arrowed). Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown Copyright and database right 2015

The group of buildings currently comprises a single, long barn aligned north-south but which is the surviving configuration of what were originally two buildings, Barn A and Barn B (see below). Adjoining this range, on the south gable end of Barn B is a cart hovel. At the north-east corner of the site is a low cattle shelter with contemporary and adjoining stockyard walls, partly incomplete, but which would have formed and enclosed a stockyard.

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Historical background

Prior to Parliamentary inclosure in the 18th century, there were five large open fields within Spratton. Miller's Barn lay within Bridge Field. The orientation of the former ridge and furrow earthworks, remnants of the open field system of agriculture, are visible in the fields surrounding the barns on aerial photographs.

The open fields of Spratton were inclosed by an Act of Parliament of 1765. Although no Inclosure Map survives, it has been reconstructed by Michael Heaton (2009). At that time the barn lay within a small holding owned by Henry Miller. This comprised the field in which the barns lay and two to the south by the stream. In 1826, the same area of land was in the same family, owned by Bartlett Miller (Heaton 2009). By 1880 this small land holding had been amalgamated with the lands of Grange Farm.

There are no detailed early maps of the parish of Spratton. The earliest maps are those undertaken by the Ordnance Survey in the first part of the 19th century. The First Series map of 1834 shows a single small building in the approximate location of Miller's Barn. The late 19th century First Edition Ordnance Survey provides a much clearer depiction. At this date there are two buildings, the first an L-shaped building situated to the east and a building aligned north to south to the west. This building appears to extend further south as indicated by a dashed line; possibly indicating a cart hovel. A benchmark is indicated on the corner of the main building; these take a variety of forms, in this instance it is cut into the building's wall, and were used as surveying aids from around 1800 onwards.

By 1900, the building to the east had been entirely demolished and replaced by a further barn aligned north to south. The arrangement of the boundaries within and around the site had also been modified by this date. By 1970, the boundaries around the barns had been altered again to the present arrangement, although a south wall was present.

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Fig 2: Ordnance Survey First Series, 1834

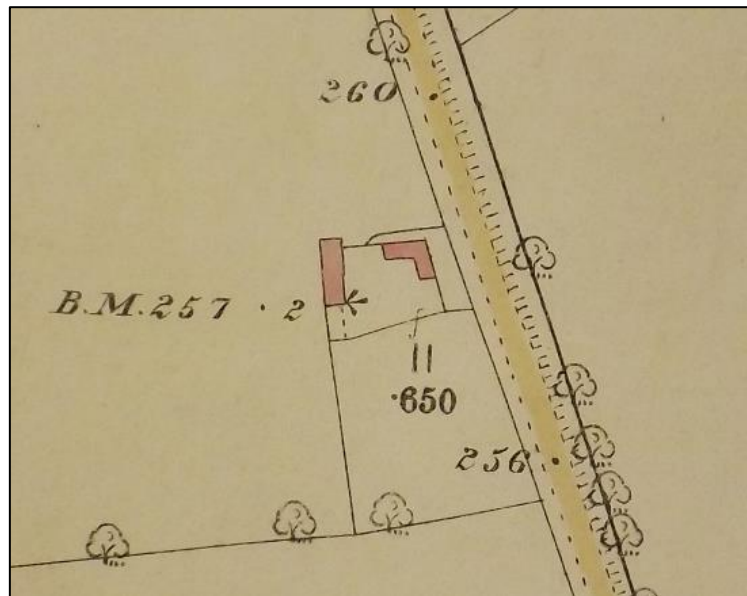


Fig 3: First Edition Ordnance Survey, 1885

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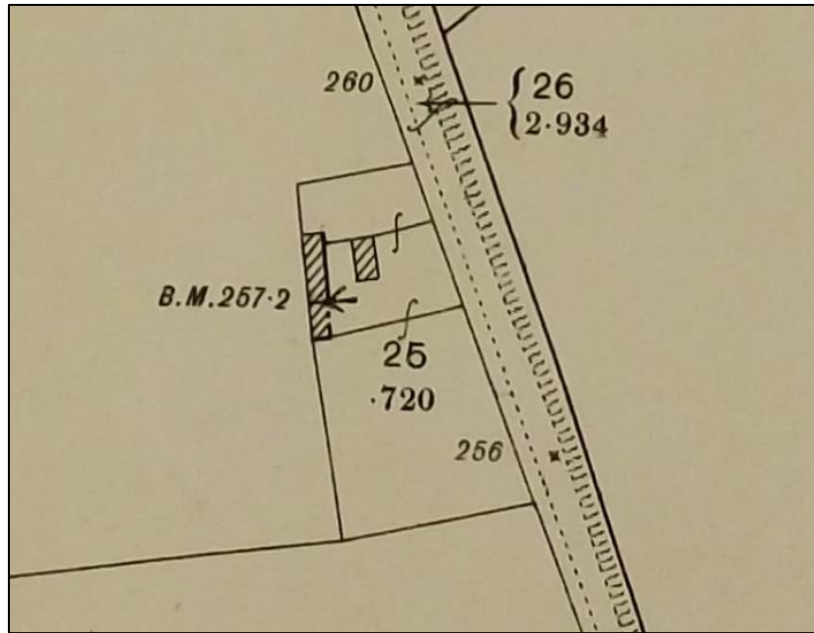


Fig 4: Second Edition Ordnance Survey, 1900

The surviving buildings

The buildings are aligned north-south and display the use of a number of materials, principally Northamptonshire Sand with Ironstone, the principal local building material. Brick has been used in a number of repairs and alterations, while cement blockwork has also been introduced where modern rebuilding has been extensive. Two areas of much older cob-walling survive on the inside, a once locally-favoured cheap building material, found as a survival in a number of villages in the district and sub-region (Seaborne 1964). The roofs are of modern corrugated metal sheeting (Figs 5 & 6).



Fig 5: The barn, viewed from the south-east



Fig 6: The barn viewed from the south-west

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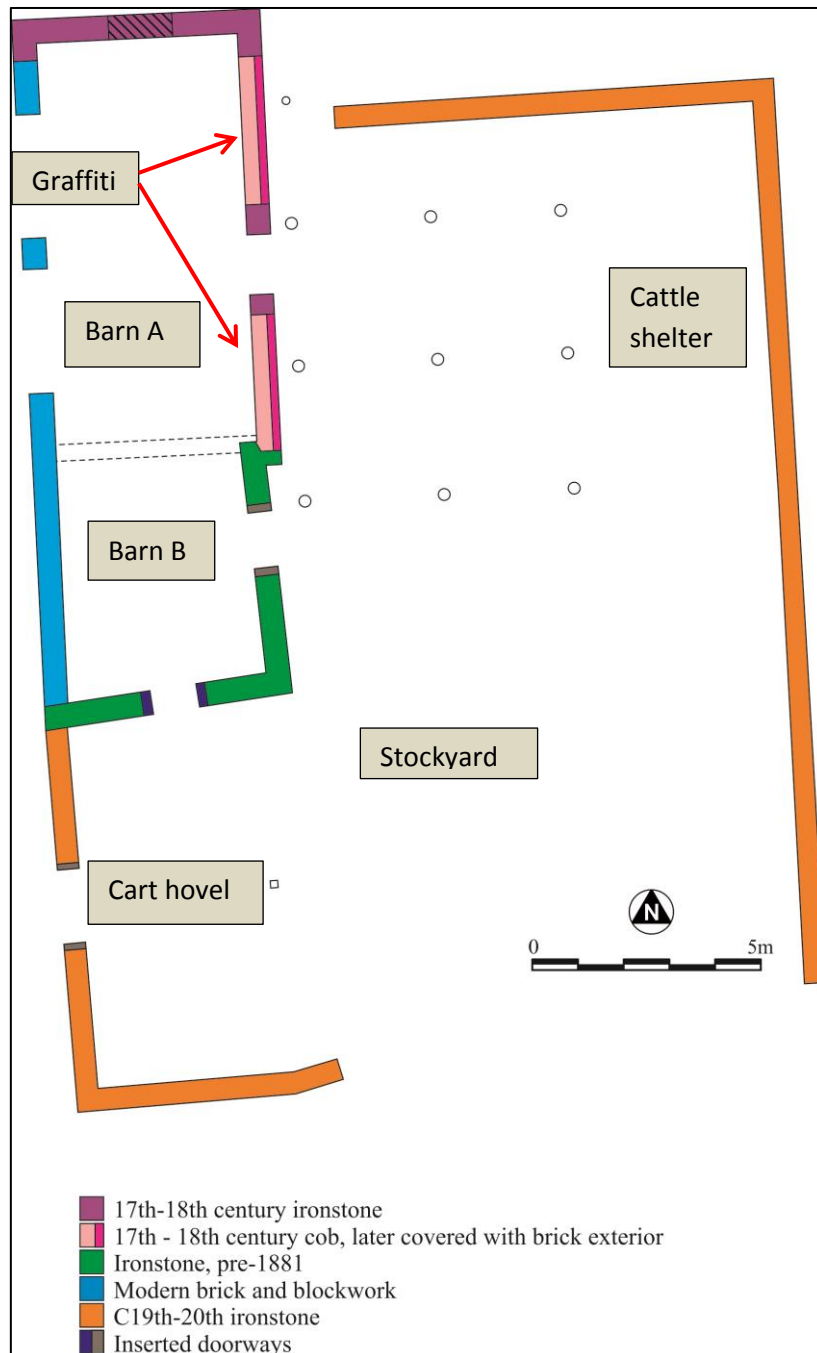


Fig 7: The barns phased, and where possible, dated

Barn A

The northernmost of the main barn range, this double-height building has undergone significant changes, probably through decay, almost to the point of collapse. The north gable end survives in a largely un-altered state and is built principally of roughly-coursed Northampton Sand Ironstone bonded in lime mortar with well-dressed ashlar quoins at the north-west and north-east corners. High in the north gable can be seen the faint outlines of a blocked window, currently infilled with the same material from which the wall is constructed; this window was most likely for light and ventilation since it appears to be both too high and small to have served as a hayloft door. Also, there is no surviving evidence that this barn was floored, a prerequisite of a hayloft.

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The roof of this barn is a modern replacement comprising a single central A-frame truss with raking struts which appears to be of pine. There are two purlins on each side and a ridge plank; the roof covering is corrugated sheeting. The majority of the barn floor is simply compacted earth although at the north end an area of large stone slabs suggests that at one time the whole floor may have been similar.

Almost the entire length of the west side has been re-built in recent decades, equally in ironstone and in red brick on the exterior, but with cement blockwork on the inside (Figs 8 & 9). It is not clear if the present layout copies an original configuration though this appears to be unlikely since it does not conform to a layout expected of a field barn. The present configuration of two wide and high openings separated by a central brick pier appears to be more likely a response to modern farm machinery which requires bigger entrances than historic farm equipment.



Fig 8: Barn A/B; modern west wall exterior



Fig 9: Barn A/B; modern west wall to right

The southern end of this phase of the barn is now entirely missing but its former presence can be determined by scars in the east and west walls. It must therefore have been removed subsequent to the modern rebuilding of the west wall. The vertical scar on the east wall suggests that the lost south wall may have been built at least partly of cob (Fig 11). Close inspection of the scar shows that it was of standard format i.e. coarse clayey material with both large and small natural inclusions indicating it was material simply dug from the ground, almost certainly on-site. Mixed with this soil is a relatively high proportion of chopped straw which acts as a binding structure and helped to avoid undue shrinkage. It was possibly also mixed with dung. It is a material quite widely used and surviving in this part of Northamptonshire, its local significance recognised in vernacular architectural studies as far back as 1964, and noted at that time in 29 Northamptonshire villages, including Spratton (Seaborne 1964, 228).

The east wall of Barn A retains two large panels of cob construction flanking a roughly central doorway (Figs 10 & 11). The cob is only visible internally, externally the east wall is partly nineteenth century red brick and partly ironstone with sections below the eaves over-rendered. Each jamb of the doorway is formed of ironstone and the lintel formed of three pieces of timber, almost certainly oak. There is no evidence for either doorframe or hinges. The north-east end of this wall where it joins the north gable wall is also ironstone.

Both of the cob sections of walling retain on the internal surface large areas of surface lime plaster added partly to provide a smooth surface but primarily to form a protective skin to the soft and friable cob.

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Fig 10: Left (north) cob panel in east wall



Fig 11: Right (south) cob panel in east wall

A variety of shallowly-inscribed graffiti is present on the plaster surfaces on both panels flanking the doorway; most comprises single letters or groups of letters. These may simply be a person's initials but some have a form which is distinctively 17th-century (Fig 12). Elsewhere a series of short, parallel lines are most likely tally marks used during the counting of produce.



Fig 12: A group of letters with a characteristic 17th-century style of letter 'A'

To the north of the central doorway a double concentric circle (222mm, 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches and 268mm, 10 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches in diameter) are *Apotropaic marks* (Hall 2005,150; Steane and Ayres 2013,394-7). These ritual marks, often situated close to doorways, windows and fireplaces were inscribed in order to protect a building from evil spirits, witches or animal familiars. They are also sometimes called 'witch-marks'. This fear of the occult was at its height during the seventeenth century (James I was a particular believer) although such marks are found in later buildings as well. A single circle is inscribed to the south of the doorway (200mm, 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches in diameter) which suggests that these circles were indeed added here for just such a purpose.



Fig 13: The more detailed of the two apotropaic 'witch-marks', the concentric circles

Towards the southern side and at the lower edge of the southern plaster panel is a crudely drawn image of a post-mill (Fig 14). Post-mills are the original forerunner of the tower-windmill which can still be seen across eastern England in particular, although most often now as sail-less towers. They were introduced into England in the 13th-14th centuries, and were often the product of entrepreneurial people who objected to the monopoly exerted by the existing hierarchy through monopolies of the feudally-controlled water-mills and their stranglehold on the rights to mill corn and with them the milling tolls. Thus many were unofficial and short-lived. The buried cross-trees of a medieval example were excavated at Warmington, Northants in 1995 (Chapman 1997).



Fig 14 Post-mill graffiti (190mm from base to apex)



Fig 15: The mill, outlined

There are numerous contemporary depictions of post-mills, but most are in more permanent media, such as painting or ink (Figs 16-17 for examples).

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Fig 16: 15th century wall painting of a post-mill in St Mary Magdalene Church, Wyken, Coventry

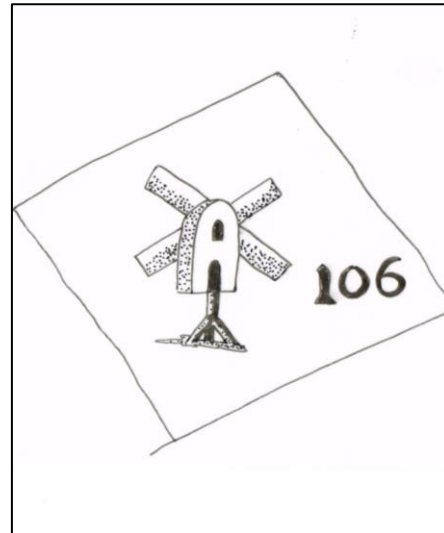


Fig 17: Post mill redrawn from 1774 Inclosure map of Foleshill, Warwickshire

The above examples are shown with earth-fast posts and raking struts, with the medieval antecedents of having cross-trees buried in a mound. However, the propensity for such timbers to rot led later examples in the 16th-17th centuries to be built with their foundations of brick and stone above-ground, their cross-trees firmly anchored in solid blocks, such as seems to be depicted in the Spratton example; they were sometimes given enclosing skirts to further steady them in the wind, as at Brill, Buckinghamshire. There are notable surviving examples of this later form, seen below, both in painted and conserved examples at Bruges (Flanders).



Fig 18: Example in 17th-century Flemish painting



Fig 19: Conserved example at Bruges

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Barn B

Abutting the south end of Barn A and internally incorporated into it, this section of the range is clearly a secondary addition to the northern barn (Fig 7). Its north wall would originally have been the now-lost south wall of Barn A. It, like Barn A, is of double-height.



Fig 20: Barn B interior, looking south, through the lost North wall. Note the former Hayloft floor level (dashed).

The west wall, like the west wall of Barn A is almost entirely rebuilt; the inner wall surface is of breeze block while the outer is of ironstone laid above a plastic damp-proof membrane below which the wall is of red brick. Such materials indicate a re-build within the last twenty or so years. The south gable wall is entirely ironstone and has had a modern doorway inserted centrally using hard, Portland-type cement rather than lime mortar. On the outer side of this gable is a graffiti-cut stone with initials and a date of 1881 (Fig 21). The stone is at the perfect height for cutting and so it is likely that this marking is original and not on a re-used stone, strongly suggesting that Barn B dates before 1881. Above this in the gable is a blocked window, the exterior fully infilled, the interior only partly so revealing that the internal jambs were splayed. There is a timber, probably oak lintel. This opening appears to have acted as a hayloft door since this end of the barn was floored, at least in part as the filled sockets of joists can be seen along the south gable wall, their northern ends presumably rested on a horizontal beam set in the east and west walls.

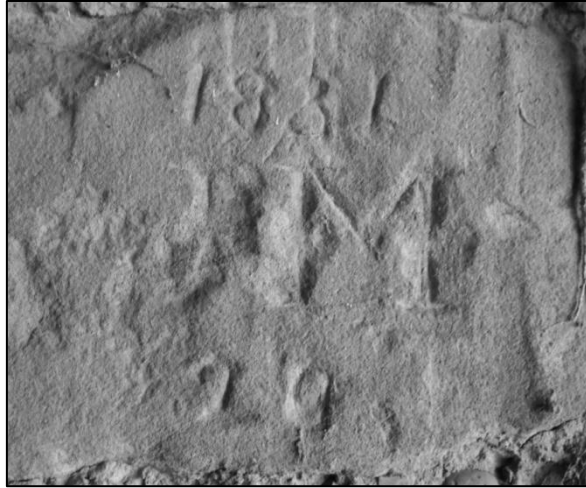


Fig 21: Dated Graffiti; R(?)M 1881

The east external wall is constructed of dressed, coursed ironstone with some red brick repairs, internally it is entirely of ironstone. There is an original, if repaired doorway situated roughly centrally on this side. There are no other features; the roof frame and covering is of the same, modern construction as recorded in Barn A and the floor is entirely of compacted earth.

Cart hovel

Joined to the south end of Barn B this simple, single storey open-sided shelter comprises only two walls located on the west and south sides (Fig 22). The north side is formed by the south wall of Barn B whilst the east side is, and always was, open with the eaves supported on a single timber post set on a concrete base. There is a clear butt joint where the west wall is joined to the south end of Barn B and it is constructed of roughly-coursed ironstone both internally and externally. There is a modern, inserted doorway in the west wall, the jambs re-built in the same way as that described in the south end of Barn B. There is a single, centrally placed truss situated directly above the post on the east side; like the trusses in Barns A and B it is not original. There is a single purlin on either side with a ridge plank; the covering is corrugated iron sheeting. There is no evidence of hayracks or mangers along the west wall suggesting that this was a simple shelter although it could also have served as a cart hovel, its open side facing east making it ideally oriented for this purpose.



Fig 22: Cart hovel, interior, looking north

Cattle Shelter

This is a simple construction created in the north and east angle of the stock-yard by simply slightly raising the east side slightly towards the north end of the east wall and adding a gable end above the east end of the north wall (Fig 23). The whole is constructed of roughly coursed ironstone with some red brick repairs, except for the south gable which is of flimsy timber studs covered with corrugated sheeting. The west side was open and supported on timber posts, their bases now set in concrete. Like elsewhere the roof covering is of corrugated metal sheeting.



Fig 23: Cattle shelter, looking east from Barn A

Along the east side is evidence for a hay-rack along the whole length of this wall but only scant parts survive. There are no indications of a manger. Such a simple provision suggests that this shelter provided basic fodder only and might indicate that cattle were not kept here all year round but some

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food supplement in the form of hay provided at the start and ends of the year when field grass was less plentiful. The shelter has an earth floor.

At a later date the area between the cattle shelter and Barn A was covered by the simple placing of cut-down telegraph poles to form a larger covered area. This appears to be a modern construction and the corrugated metal sheet roof has a single slope to the north, the sheets supported on a variety of re-used timber rails nailed to the posts.

The Stock Yard

To the south and east of the barns are low ironstone walls indicating that at one time this area acted as a stock yard for the cattle sheltered here although it does not now provide a completely enclosed circuit wall and may never have done so. Often such yards were partly walled and partly enclosed by timber post and rail fences with gates, or even subdivided.

Conclusions

This field barn is architecturally typical, providing a variety of shelter and storage within an open-field situation away from a farm homestead. As such they are unremarkable both in the quality of construction and the fact that they have undergone multiple changes during their lifetimes as changes in farming needs arose. The use of local ironstone as well as cob is notable as a local characteristic in this part of the county. All buildings have lost their original roof structures and coverings.

They would have provided a variety of uses both for storage of animal fodder and for the animals themselves. A clear sequence of development can be observed within the construction of the walls with Barn A being the earliest surviving structure, Barn B added to its southern end with the hovel later added to the south end of that. It is assumed, but cannot be proved since there is no physical link indicating absolute chronology, that the cattle shelter and stockyard walls were added at the same time. The most modern addition, during the twentieth-century was the covering of the area between the cattle shelter and Barn A using cut-down telegraph poles.

The earliest barn is traced on maps back to at least 1834. There has clearly been much modern (twentieth-century) repair and alteration. The family name associated with the land and barn: Miller, is perhaps coincidental. Graffiti with lettering does include mainly 'M' as a surname letter, so as likely as not it may originate with the owners; however, graffiti notwithstanding, it would be entirely speculative to suggest that the family may have begun life in their occupation of this land as millers.

The internal plastered surfaces on the two surviving sections of cob walling retain a variety of notable graffiti, the majority of which suggests a seventeenth-century date for the original construction of Barn A. The reasons for this assertion are that the types of inscribed circles, called witch- or Apotropaic marks are most commonly found during the seventeenth century and are widely known and dated elsewhere. The style of lettering on some of the graffiti is also distinctive of lettering of the same date and the inclusion of the picture of the post-mill is most unusual and suggests detailed observation of an early structure nearby, if only rudimentary artistic ability. It is therefore likely that the northern barn (Barn A) dates in part to the seventeenth- or perhaps the

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early eighteenth-century. The only part which survives from this period is the north gable wall and the east wall, although both include later alteration and repair. The west wall has been entirely rebuilt and the south wall totally removed.

The barns themselves retain very little historic character and cannot be said to have any architectural significance. However, the happenstance survival of the early graffiti is of note and may be considered worthy of preservation, and potentially of display, whether wholly or in part, in any re-building or conversion proposals. It is unlikely that, if the buildings continue as entirely redundant barns, the graffiti will survive much longer.

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