

Report for

Dell Cottage, Church Lane, Harwell, Oxfordshire

Site Code: HAR-A

from

The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England

by

Nat Alcock and Dan Miles



Fig. 1. View of the house from the east (Photo: D. Clark)

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Oxbow Books

HAR-A: DELL COTTAGE, CHURCH LANE, HARWELL, OXFORDSHIRE

Grid reference: SU 4920 8906

Survey Date: 6 June 1988

By: D. Miles

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References: Fletcher, J. M. (1961/2) 'Cruck cottage in Church Lane, Harwell', *Oxoniana*, 26/27, 207-214;

Currie, C. R. J. and Fletcher, J. M. (1972) 'Two early cruck houses in north Berkshire identified by radiocarbon', *Medieval Archaeol* 16, 136-42; Currie, C. R. J. 1987. 'Harwell houses to 1700: an interim gazetteer', in John Ashdown and Julian Munby (eds) (1987) *Vernacular Architecture Group Spring Conference 1987*.

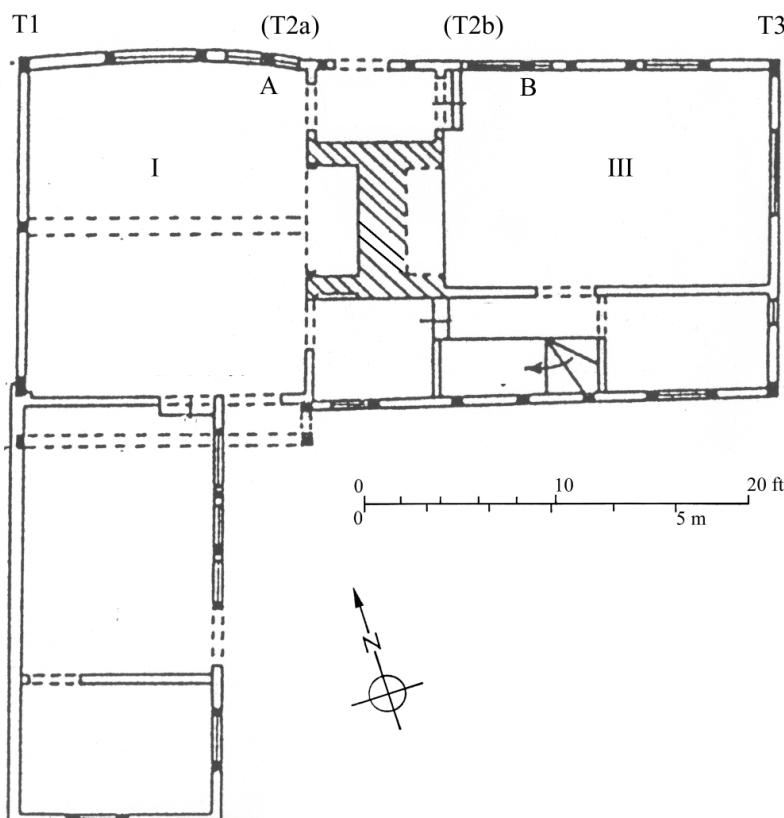


Fig. 2. Plan, showing truss and bay numbering (after Fletcher (1961/2)).

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

SUMMARY AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

PHASE 1: Dell Cottage was built as a cruck house of three or perhaps two bays, lying east-west along Church Lane. The western cruck is of good quality with well shaped blades. The eastern truss much more irregular and has been thought to be of the seventeenth century (Fletcher (1961/2)). However, the evidence discussed below suggests that the eastern end cruck is also primary; other cruck buildings have combine well-shaped and very irregular crucks.

The house was later reconstructed with two bays, with a central chimney and the cruck trusses retained only at the gable ends. It would seem plausible that a single central truss was replaced by the chimney. However, the bays would be almost 20ft long, at the upper limit of recorded bay lengths, and Fletcher proposed that two trusses had been removed; consistent with this, all the purlins were renewed. On this interpretation, the western and central bays probably provided a two-bay hall (suggested by the smoke blackening on the eastern face of the western cruck truss (T1), and on the end of the purlin of the phase 2 rear wing which projects into the original western bay (I). The eastern end was presumably a

chamber. Apart from one part of the southern extension, the whole of the building is thatched. A tree-ring date could not be obtained for the primary phase, but from the form of the trusses, a fifteenth-century date is suggested. The western cruck has been dated to 1425 ± 45 by radiocarbon methods (Currie and Fletcher (1972)), but this early radiocarbon date is not precise enough to be of use in the present study.

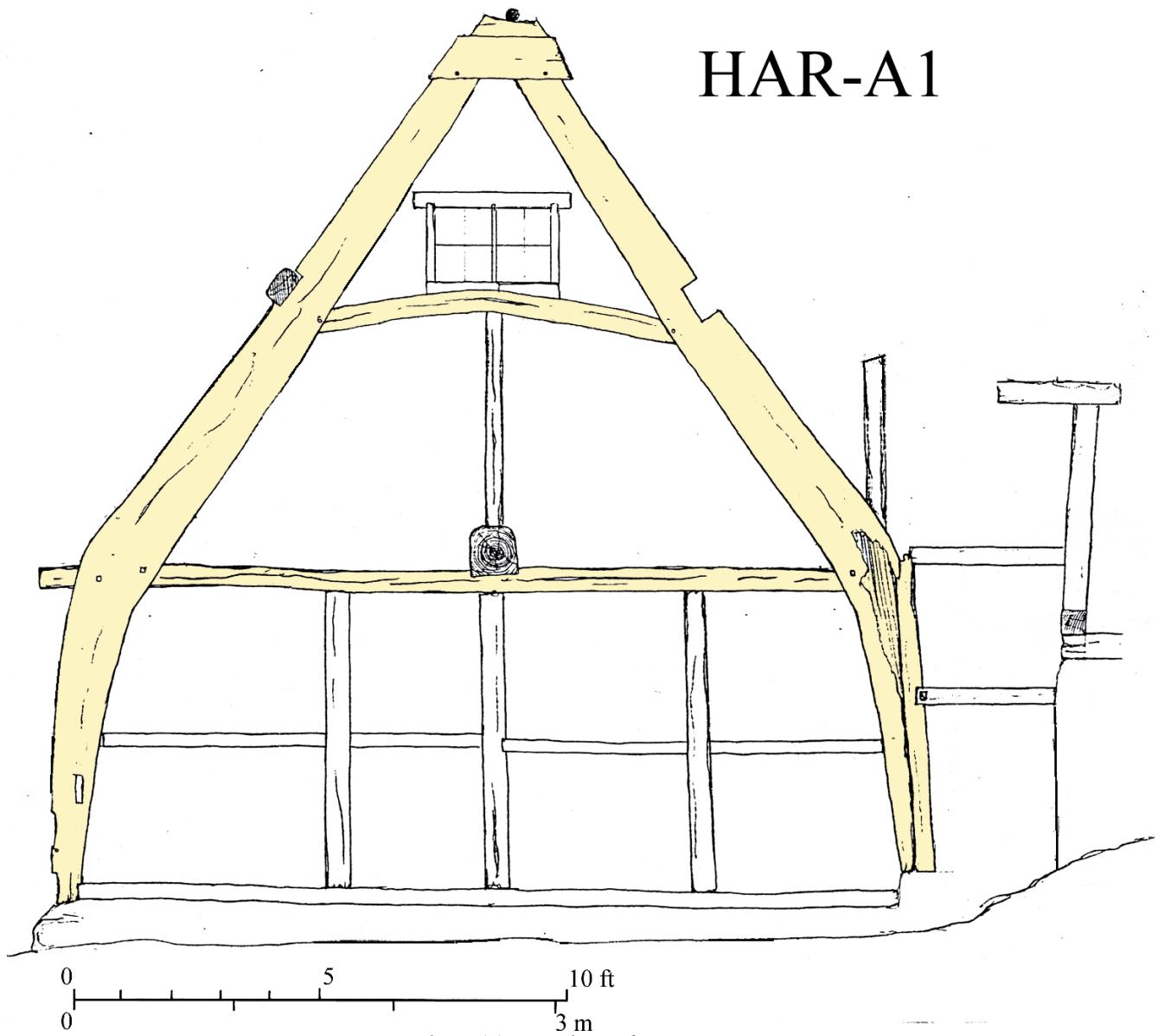


Fig. 3(a). Section of truss T1.

PHASE 2: In the later fifteenth century, a two-storey rear wing of one and a half bays was added to the south, before bay I was floored. The southern bay of this wing has since been reconstructed as single-storey only. The ridge of this wing rested on a 2ft post supported on the ridge of the western cruck bay.

PHASE 3: Probably contemporary with the insertion of the axial beam, dated to 1521-46, the internal cruck truss/trusses were removed, and the roof structure rebuilt. The present roof structure has smaller scantling purlins in bay I than the original ones, and the windbraces from truss T1 were removed, rather than being connected to the present purlins. The northern purlin carries some smoke blackening which may indicate that the reconstruction of the roof slightly predated the insertion of the floor. Fletcher (1961/2) suggested that the reconstruction only included the western 2/3rds of the cruck range, and that the eastern truss was a new addition. It is considered much more likely that the house was reconstructed radically between 1521-46, with the internal truss(es) being removed, the front and rear walls rebuilt, and the hall floored over, with the insertion of the predecessor of the central chimney stack. At this stage, the house had a lobby-entry plan.

LATER PHASES: The house was later divided into two labourers cottages, each with its separate staircase and fireplace. Fletcher (1961/2) suggested this may have happened in 1742, the date inscribed on the chimney stack, although it seems more likely that this date relates to the reconstruction of an earlier stack, and that the division into cottages took place later.

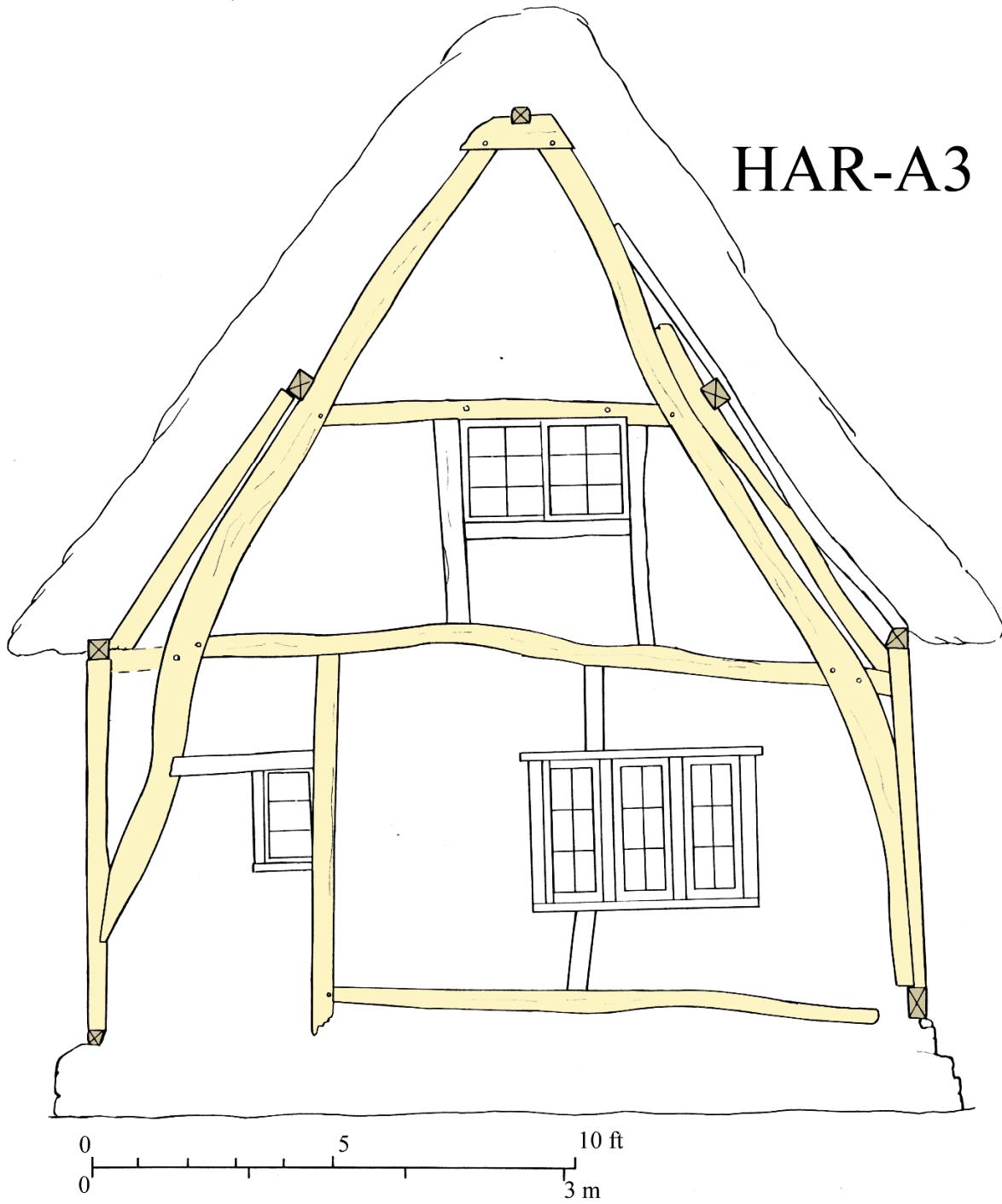


Fig. 3(b). Section of truss T3.

STRUCTURAL FEATURES

PHASE 1: The cruck truss at T1 has well-shaped elbowed crucks with a saddle apex (type 'C'). The backs of the blades are trenched for purlins, since replaced, and the eastern face has wind-brace mortices. The collar is tenoned, but the tiebeam is halved into the eastern face of the cruck blades. A stone underneath the northern cruck foot may be an original padstone. The infilling studwork to this truss seem to be secondary, and no peg holes give any clues as to the original arrangement.

The eastern cruck truss (T3) is of a much more spindly character than T1. Notably, the rear blade does not reach the ground, but is birdsmouthed into the cruck stud. The back cruck is of elm while the

front is of oak. This does not necessarily mean that they are of separate phases (cf. Mill Farm, Mapledurham, MDM-A). The cruck blades have the same saddle apex as T1, and the tiebeam and collar are jointed as in T1. The inner face of the rear cruck blade is morticed for a wind-brace which corresponds to a halving in the purlin above. The wall plate is carried on the extended end of the tiebeam and is further restrained by a stub-tie which overlays the wall plate; it is notched into the inside of the blade with a half-lap dovetail joint. On the front, the cruck stud continues past the end of the tiebeam to support the wall plate. The front purlin has been reset, as the halving for the wind-brace is on the outer side; it is trenched into the back of the packing piece, although the rear purlin is set directly on the cruck blade, only propped by the packing piece. The infill framing of this truss again appears to be secondary.

Fletcher (1961/2) identified the remnant of an oak sill beam (at A on Fig. 2), about a third of the way along from the western truss, as the position of one removed truss. The foundations change in level and material at B, another third of the way along. This was identified as the position of the second removed truss, with the further bay reconstructed. However, this equal division into thirds makes it unlikely that the house had its original bay structure almost entirely demolished, only to add a third bay of exactly the same length of those which had only just been removed.

PHASE 2: The surviving truss of the added rear wing has flush-clasped purlins, a clasped ridge piece and a mortice for a downward wall brace. It does not have struts between the tiebeam and the collar (Currie, 1987).

PHASE 3: The inserted axial beam in bay I measures 11½ x 12½ in and is chamfered with cyma stops.

DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

This was part of a composite copyhold holding in 1804, and its earlier descent cannot be traced. Martha Thomas, owner of this cottage and two other houses, had little field land and the house may therefore have originated as a cottage. (See Chapter 5).

DENDROCHRONOLOGY

For dendrochronology abbreviations see page facing Introduction.

Sampling Comments: Ten samples were taken through coring by Robert Howard on 6 June 1988. Of these nine were from the crucks and associated roof framing, and the tenth (HAR-A07) from the axial beam, and only this beam dated. Of the other nine samples, four were from elm timbers and another four had less than 45 rings. The remaining sample of 63 rings did not produce any dating match.

Note: The truss numbering has been amended from the original report.

TREE-RING SAMPLE RECORD AND SUMMARY OF DATING

Sample		Total Rings	Sapwood Rings	FMR Date	LHR Date	LMR Date	Date Cat
Code	Sample Location						
HAR-A01	Cruck blade N-E corner, truss T3	21 NM	—	—	—	—	—
HAR-A02	Cruck blade S-E corner, truss T3	Not oak	—	—	—	—	—
HAR-A03	Cruck blade N-W corner, truss T1	44	—	—	—	—	—
HAR-A04	Cruck blade S-W corner, truss T1	63	19	—	—	—	—
HAR-A05	Purlin to south, bay III	Not oak	—	—	—	—	—
HAR-A06	Purlin to north, bay III	Not oak	—	—	—	—	—
HAR-A07	Axial beam, bay I (inserted)	90	01	1420	1508	1509	1
HAR-A08	Tiebeam truss T1	26 NM	—	—	—	—	—
HAR-A09	Tiebeam truss T3	24 NM	—	—	—	—	—
HAR-A10	Wall plate rear bay III	Not oak	—	—	—	—	—

Sample 7 dated 1420–1509 with *t*-values of 6.8(MCI0), 5.4(OXFORD).

95% felling date range: **1517–49** (revised from 1523–1558, VA22.91).