

Report for
**Holywell Cottage, Wellshead Lane, Harwell,
Oxfordshire**

Site Code: HAR-F

from

The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England

by

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Fig. 1. View of the house from the north-west (Photo: D. Clark)

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Oxbow Books

HAR-F: HOLYWELL COTTAGE, WELLSHEAD LANE, HARWELL,
OXFORDSHIRE

Grid reference: SU 4919 8890 Survey Date: 17 May 1990 By: D. Miles

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Reference: 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*.

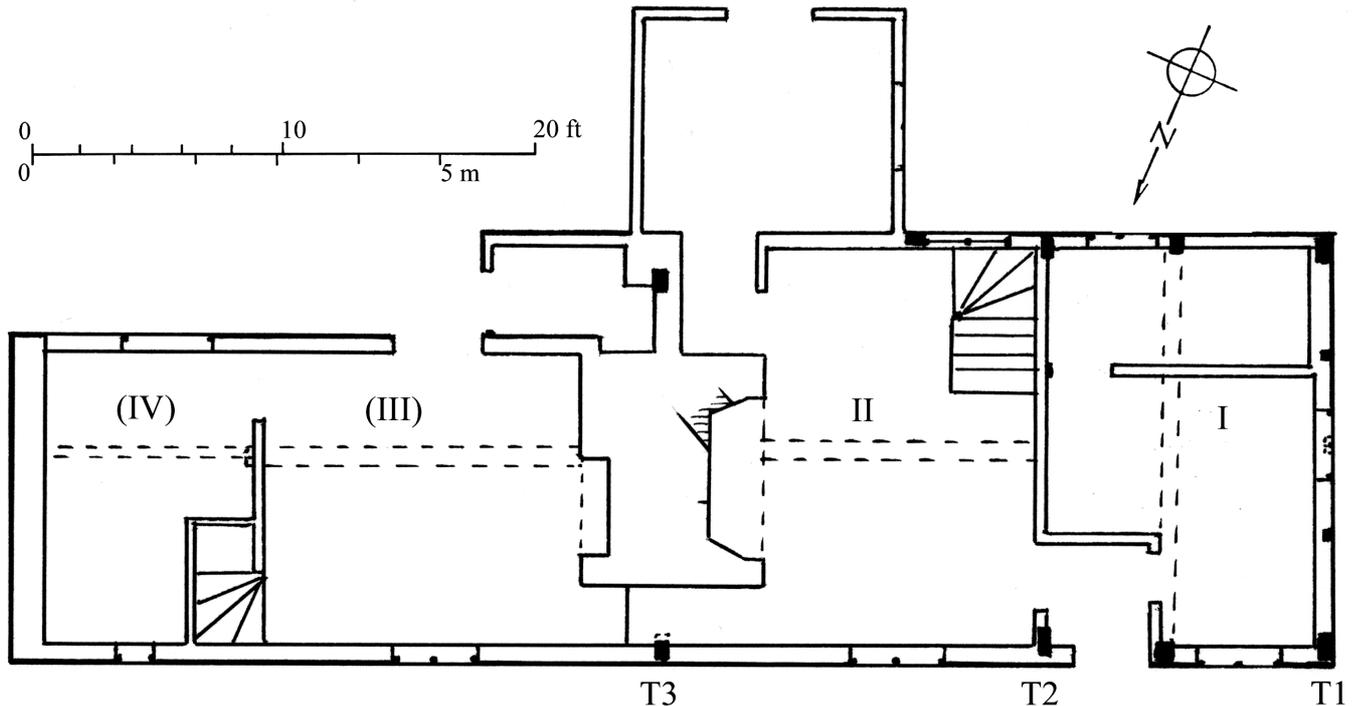


Fig. 2. Plan, showing truss and bay numbering.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

SUMMARY AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

CRUCK PHASES 1-2: Holywell Cottage is a cruck building now of four bays, aligned parallel to the road, roughly east-west. The sequence of building and alterations is complex and not altogether understood. It is likely that the first phase encompassed bays II and III and possibly IV. The weathered western face of truss T2 and the crude joints of the purlins there indicate that the original house ended here. Truss T2 has a 'W1' apex, with truncated blades and a king-post on the collar. There is evidence of smoke blackening in the roof space of bay II and on the eastern side of the cruck in bay III where some of the original roof survives in the outhouse. The weathering on T2 indicates that this phase must be at least 50 years earlier than phase 2, so a mid-fifteenth century date is indicated.

The house was subsequently enlarged by a cruck-built westward extension (bay I), which has a felling date of **Winter 1504/5**. Of this, only bay I now exists, although it was originally longer. The roof of this bay is also smoke-blackened.

PHASE 3: Sometime between the late sixteenth and the earlier seventeenth centuries, all the rooms were floored over and a central stack built, enclosing truss T3. This contained a bread oven to the rear of the stack which was later moved to the front (and is now truncated). A cross-gable was built front and back over bay II at about this time; the rear gable still possesses some pared plasterwork with a nine-pointed star above the gable window.

LATER PHASES: Probably during the late eighteenth century bays III and IV were radically rebuilt, being reduced in width by four feet at the rear (apart from a small section surviving in an outhouse adjacent to truss T3). A wall painting dated to 1729 survives on the central chimney-breast.

STRUCTURAL FEATURES

PHASE 1: BAYS II & III. Only bay II survives reasonably intact, bay III having been almost completely rebuilt. The crucks of truss T2 are boxed heart, measuring about 6 by 12in, and the front cruck is of elm. The collar is tenoned into the blades which terminate about 8in higher up. The king-post above the collar is reused, apparently in the first phase as the ridge terminates just beyond it. A possible tiebeam is con-

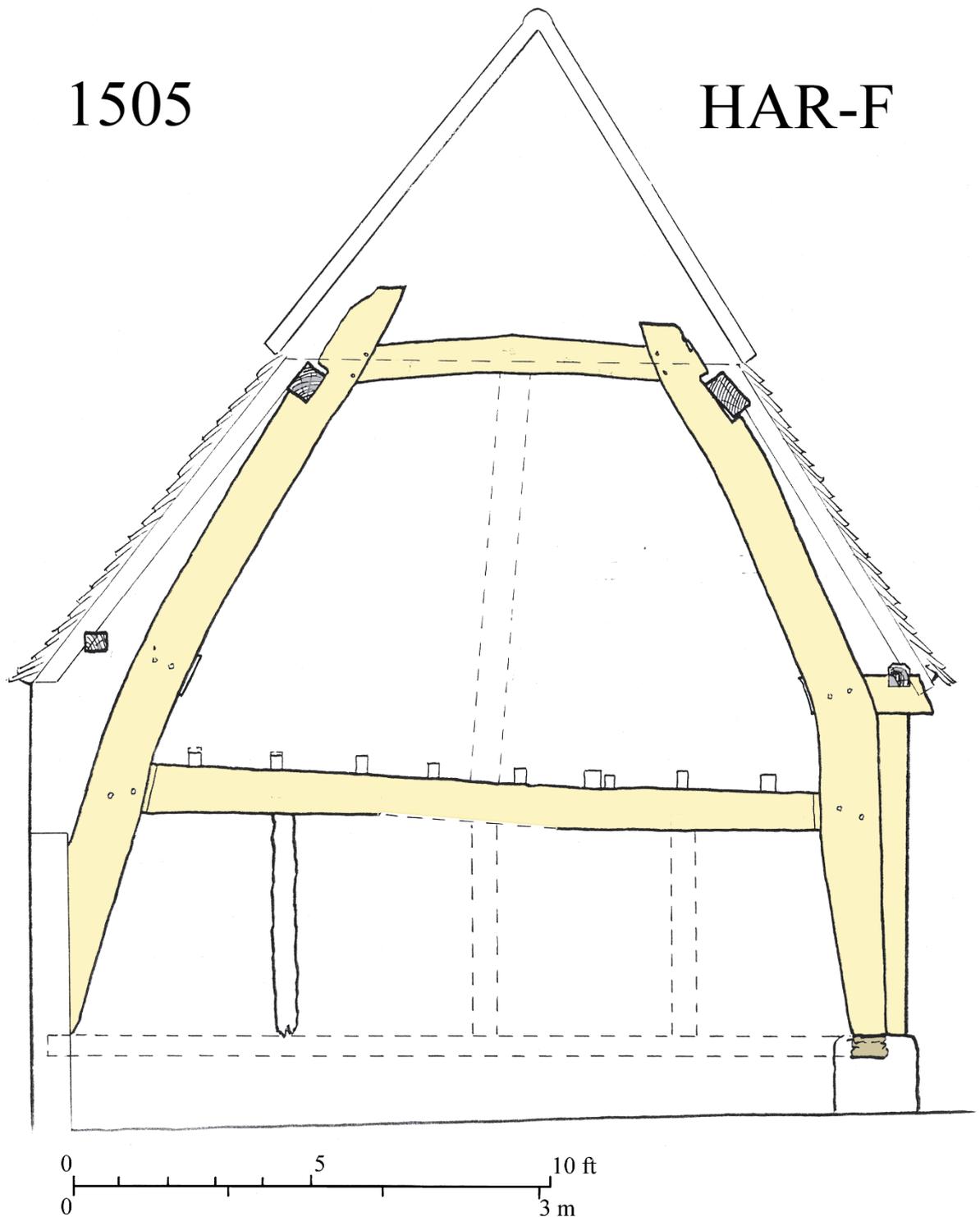


Fig. 3. Section of truss T1.

cealed by later plaster. The purlins are carried on the backs of the crucks. The western sides of the blades are weathered, indicating that the house ended here. The last pair of rafters have housings for a yoke which has disappeared.

Truss T3 is more fragmentary and is mainly encased within the later chimney stack. The top of the rear blade is however visible from the small outhouse and it would appear that the top had been extended, the scarfed end of the lower part still intact just above the collar. The crucks are of similar scantling to those in T2. Between the collar and the tiebeam there are signs of a doorway having been cut through most of the blade. This probably gave access to bay III from the staircase on the other side of the truss.

The purlins between the two trusses are 9 by 6in in section and are of elm, the rear one continuing beyond truss 3 into bay III by 2½ft. The surviving rafters in the out house measure 4 by 2-3in and are fixed to a length of wall plate along the rear wall.

PHASE 2: BAY I: This now consists of only bay I and cruck truss T1 which forms the half-hipped western end of the cottage. The truss is similar to T2 though lacking a king-post (now a type 'V' apex, formerly type 'W'). The crucks are boxed heart, yet have been trimmed surprisingly thin, only 4½in thick by 12in wide. The tiebeam of elm measures 6 by 12in diminishing to 9in at the rear; it has fragments of three studs below it. The underside of the collar contains a large central unpegged mortice for a 7in stud, and another smaller (4in) mortice also without a peg set 5½in to the right of the first. A series of stave holes seem to relate to the larger rather than the smaller mortice. Which, if any, of the lower studs are primary is uncertain.

The purlins are both of elm and measure 11 x 5½in; at T2, they are lodged above the bay II purlins. The 5in square wall plates are of elm, and still survive although the front infill panels have been replaced in brick. The plates are supported by elm cruck spurs; the rear spur rests on the surviving cruck stud which stands close to the back of the blade and extends down to the sill. The south plate protrudes approx. 6in beyond the cruck stud and a stave hole is evident in this projection. This indicates the former presence of another bay. Internally, the floor in bay I is supported on a 9in by 9in transverse beam roughly chamfered, with joists measuring 3½ by 4in.

The roof of bay I is half-hipped. The ridge was supported by a yoke at the hip end although this has since slipped away leaving the ridge hanging from the rafters. At the other end it is supported on the western end of the ridge from bay II. The roof timbers in this bay are all heavily smoke blackened.

PHASE 3: BAYS III AND IV: These two bays have been almost totally reconstructed and the features generally date from this phase. The inserted floor in Bay III is carried on of an 8 by 9in axial beam which protrudes into bay IV for a few feet. The axial beam in bay IV is somewhat smaller and is supported by the beam from bay III. The joists in this bay measure about 4 by 3in and are halved former rails or wallplates, as they show divided stave holes on the surface. The two axial beams are central to the original rather than the present width of the bay. The tiebeam of truss T4 appears to be reused. At the western end of bay III next to the chimney stack, the collar is formed from a halved cruck tiebeam, again showing stave holes in section (at 13in centres), and a similar timber (again probably a tiebeam, though not the other half of the first timber) is reused as the collar of the truss between bays III and IV.

The large central chimney stack was probably built around 1600, judging from the size of the bricks (4½ x 2-2½ x 9in). In bay II the bread oven appears initially to have been on the right hand side, however this was later blocked up (with 4-4¼ x 2½ x 8¾in bricks indicating an eighteenth century date) and the oven reconstructed in the left hand fireplace cheek.

This upstairs room retains an early cupboard in the chimney stack and a door to the rear which probably led to a now vanished staircase over the original bread oven. The upstairs chimney-breast is decorated with a wall-painting showing a vase of roses (Fig. 4). The inscription on the vase reads: W 1729 W / Painter / RW.



Fig. 4. Wall-painting in bay II.

DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

The house was freehold in 1804 (Currie, 1987). The topography strongly suggests that the site originally formed part of Tibberton Cottage (HAR-E, q.v.).

DENDROCHRONOLOGY

For dendrochronology abbreviations see page facing Introduction.

Sampling Comments: Eight samples were taken through coring by Robert Howard on 17 May 1990. A sample taken in 1994 by D Miles during repair work to truss 1 matched with two previously taken samples and was successfully dated.

TREE-RING SAMPLE RECORD AND SUMMARY OF DATING

Sample Code	Sample Location	Total Rings	Sapwood Rings	FMR Date	LHR Date	LMR Date	Date Cat
HAR-F01	Front (N) cruck blade truss 3	44	04	—	—	—	—
HAR-F02	Front cruck blade truss 2	16 elm	—	—	—	—	—
HAR-F03	Tiebeam reset collar beyond truss 3	22 NM	12	—	—	—	—
HAR-F04	Rear cruck blade truss 1	48	—	1421	1471	1471	—
HAR-F05	Front cruck blade truss 1	40	HS	1434	1473	1473	—
HAR-F06	Rear cruck blade truss 2	48 elm	18C	—	—	—	—
HAR-F07	Collar truss 2	38 NM	14	—	—	—	—
HAR-F08	Ridge bay II	39 NM	9	—	—	—	—
HAR-F09a	Rear cruck blade truss 1	90	20C	1415	1484	1504	—
HAR-F09b	Rear cruck blade truss 1	75	HS	1410	1484	1484	—
HAR-F09	mean of F09a-b	95	20C	1410	1484	1504	—

Site sequence: HAR-F (including samples 4, 5,9) dated 1410-1504 with $t = 5.71$. BURFRD5 (Burford, Oxon); 5.21, SHAW1 (Shaw House, Newbury); 5.13, HILLSIDE (East Hendred); 5.06, NUFF (Nuffield Oxon); 4.6, DID-B.

Felling date **Winter 1504/5** (sample 9 has a complete ring for 1504).