

Spital House Farm, Northallerton

Spital House Farm presents the appearance of a small Georgian farmhouse of two broad bays, with a rather lower single-bay 'cottage' added to the west end, but incorporates fabric of an earlier stone house in its end and rear elevations, which in turn re-uses medieval material from the medieval hospital which stood upon the site.



The front elevation of the main body of the house, facing south, is of old orange brick, laid in English Garden Wall Bond 1 & 5, with a pantile roof; the brick wall stands on a rough stone footing (as do all the brick internal walls). The elevation is of two storeys and two broad bays, with a boarded door under a flat-arched lintel set slightly left-of-

centre; the windows are 12-pane sashes with narrow moulded glazing bars, also under flat arches; they are now in poor condition; that on the ground floor right has been replaced by a 20th century small-paned casement. There is a stepped brick cornice at eaves level; there were end stacks, but these have fallen. To the right is the single-bay cottage, built in similar brick but in a rather less regular bond. This has a similar cornice at a lower level; the doorway, set hard up against the west end of the house, looks to be secondary, and has a slightly segmental-arched head in pink brick. The ground floor window is a 4-pane sash, with horns; the upper one, tucked directly beneath the eaves, has now lost both its carpentry and its lintel. At the west end the lower part of the south-west angle is formed by five cut sandstone blocks which oddly comprise the north jamb, chamfered to the west and rebated to the east, of a doorway, of 17th century or earlier character, that has been set north-south. This is a puzzling feature, but seems to be in situ as two pintels are still in position for the hanging of the door; nothing remains of the south jamb, and the present brick garden wall (later 19th or 20th century) is set on a line a little further to the east.

The end and rear elevations of the house have now been cleared of render, and shown to be of roughly-coursed stone, largely cobbles, although there are some courses and areas of larger cut blocks of yellowish sandstone, some showing a distinct diagonal tooling.

At the south-east corner the brickwork of the front returns onto the end wall as a series of alternating panels or pseudo-quoins except in the upper third of the angle where it extends further north in an irregular manner. Directly below the position of the end stack there is a disturbed area near the foot of the wall, where a projecting oven may have been cut away. Further north, in the end of the outshut, are a blocked doorway (its lower part infilled with stone, its upper in oldish brick) and, above it, a small window with a timber lintel and some brick in its jambs and sill.

The west end of the house is largely covered by the added cottage, but to the north this is a short length of wall, now largely whitewashed, containing a small Yorkshire sash window on the ground floor.

The north elevation of the house, the rear wall of the outshut, has several features of interest. The northern angle quoins are substantial squared blocks of sandstone; those at the north-east angle are laid in a fairly regular alternating manner, and incorporate at least one block with a cut-out corner re-used from some earlier context. On the north face of the north-western quoins are three large almost square blocks alternating with much smaller ones. Near the east end of the wall is a former doorway with a timber and some larger blocks in its jambs, now reduced to a window (with some brickwork in its west jamb); above is a disturbed area directly above which is more clearly visible on the internal wall face, as is a low window (also blocked), set directly above to light the upper room in the eastern part of the outshut. Beyond this is a roughly square stair window set at mid-height in the wall (above which the wall face has partly collapsed) and then, set a little lower, a casement window in an opening that has extended further to the west, this part now being infilled in old brick; in its original form this seems to have been a timber mullioned window of three light. Above and to the right is a low window to the western upper room, a Yorkshire sash with two panes set horizontally in each leaf, divided by a narrow moulded glazing bar.

The west elevation of the Cottage is in brick except for the lower 0.60m or so, which is made up of four or five courses of big cobbles. The north wall is whitewashed, having been covered until recently by an outshut, now demolished; its only feature is a boarded door at the east end.

The Interior

The House

The two principal ground floor rooms are the Living Room to the east and Sitting Room to the west, with a full-height brick cross-wall between them; the front door opening into a passage to the east of this, partitioned off from the Sitting Room by a thin wall that has now been removed; the passage leads to a lobby giving access to a corridor extends west to give access to the Cottage, the Kitchen in the western part of the outshut, and the Living Room; in the north wall of the Living Room are doorways onto the stair and the Bathroom, both within the outshut.

At first floor level, a landing in the central portion of the outshut serves the two large bedrooms in the main body of the house and the two smaller ones in the outshut. Until recently the only access to the bedroom in the Cottage was a winder stair in the north-west angle of its living room.

The Sitting Room is ceiled by north-south upright-section joists of no great age, at their north ends resting directly on top of the slightly more substantial and presumably older joists that span the corridor. At their north ends these carry an east-west plate which in turn supports the first floor brick wall between the main body and outshut bedrooms, which oddly is twice the thickness of that below. The Living Room was heated by a diagonally-set fireplace, now removed, in its north-west corner; a peculiar sooted diagonal line in the wall behind suggests that this was not the original arrangement. At the south end of the west wall is a bricked-up doorway, now forming a recess towards the Cottage; brickwork both in its jambs and in those of the present doorway into the Cottage, from the corridor, suggests that both are secondary to the earlier stone end wall.

The Living Room has heavy square-section joists set east-west, which look of quite early (17th century?) character; at their east ends they rest not on but a little above a heavy

bressumer that spans the whole width of the room, with a run-out chamfer spanning the hearth, which has a brick spur wall dividing it from a square compartment on the north which until recently was completely sealed off with brickwork. The rear face of the bressumer shows both an old stopped chamfer and a series of cuts, perhaps for joists, implying that it has been re-used, apparently at least twice.

Within the hearth a projecting chimney breast contained a fireplace, with a deep cupboard on either side. Chimney breast and cupboards have now been removed, exposing the stone rear wall of a larger hearth into which various features have been cut, not all easy to interpret. Two irregular plastered recesses represent the backs of the former cupboards, with a lower and wider recess between them that may relate to some sort of oven, although to the left of this a small blocked opening with a flat arched brick head looks like the remains of a bread oven, which the external evidence would also point towards.

The square structure on the north of the hearth may have originated as a copper or set-pot. The lower part of its front wall is of big sandstone blocks, much cut-about, and seems to have had a central stoke-hole. Brickwork above this has now been removed, exposing the plastered interior of the compartment which has various cuts in its walls (one for a flue rising to the chimney above) and a blocked round-headed arch on the north, roughly cut through brickwork (although with one large stone on the north face), also visible from the bathroom in the outshut.

Entering the bathroom (the room in the east end of the outshut), the blocked doorways on east and north are clearly visible; above the east jamb of the latter, and c 10 cm to the west, is a vertical straight joint rising to a timber lintel just below the ceiling, evidence of a window or overlight directly above the door.

The south wall of the kitchen (the room in the west end of the outshut) shows several features of interest. A little to the west of the doorway is a straight joint rising the full height of the wall, with plaster on the return; this seems to form the east side of a blocked opening c 0.90 m wide. The eastern section of wall is of narrow bricks, and the western section of broader ones, although the infill of the opening, which stratigraphically must be later than both, is of narrow ones again.

The dog-leg stair, opening from the Living Room, has a balustrade to its upper flight (returned eastward along the landing) that has plain stick balusters and a square section handrail with a beading on its lower angle, along with plain rectangular newels.

The stairhead lobby has its floor at the level of those of the two main bedrooms, with the smaller rooms within the outshut each one step down.

The main western bedroom has an inserted brick stack and simple fireplace set north-of-centre in its west wall, with a bricked-up doorway to the south. To the north of the stack a new opening has been made through the wall, from the fabric of which several re-used medieval architectural fragments have been retrieved, including a block with a roll moulding which is probably of 12th or early 13th century date. The brick east wall of the room is continued to the full height of the roof (thus obviating the need for a central truss); at attic level is a small secondary opening. The section of roof over the room has a central truss with a heavy cambered tie-beam (almost certainly re-used); both principals are re-used pieces as well, having older mortices in their soffits just below the apex. The roof has no ridge (the rafter pairs are jointed together at the apex), and there is now a single level of purlin on each roof slope; the northern principal has cuts for two earlier purlins, one just below the present one and one just

below the present apex. Some of the rafters have mortices or cuts indicating previous use, but not enough to establish a regular pattern.

The main eastern bedroom had a boldly-projecting chimney breast, with a cupboard on each side, but this has now been removed. The truss above is very similar to that over the western room, except that the tie-beam is a simple straight timber, although again with pegholes indicating some previous use.

The western outshut bedroom has a floor of old broad boards set east-west (which, rather puzzlingly, are laid on a lower level of narrower boards). The west end wall is largely of tooled ashlar blocks, which are clearly re-used medieval material.

The eastern outshut bedroom has some brickwork in the internal jambs of the small window at the east end; the blocked window in the low north wall shows as a recess close to the west end of the wall.

The Cottage

(although the interiors of the two parts of the building are described separately, they seems to have been integrated together in at least the latest phase of the use of the property)

The ground floor room of the Cottage has had a large hearth set against its west wall (now removed); the room is spanned by an east-west beam, set a little north-of-centre, the west end of which carried by the brick spur wall that formed the north side of the hearth; the beam, as well as the upright-section north-south joists, has neat run-out stops. North of the hearth was a tight winder stair to the upper room, now removed. The west wall, behind both hearth and stair, has a projecting cobble plinth, only absent in the recess to the south of the hearth. A recess opposite, at the south end of the east wall, was formerly a doorway into the Sitting Room in the main body of the house.

The Cottage bedroom had a short partition at the head of the stair, and a fireplace on the west (now removed).

Discussion

Although its external impression is of a small 18th century house of a type familiar throughout the Vale of York (and Tees Valley) the property appears to represent the remodelling of a sub-medieval vernacular house. It is not easy to make a definitive reconstruction of the building history as the combination of brick and rubble need not necessarily mean different building phases; brick as the prestigious material might well be used in the front elevation of a building whilst the more-readily available stone would be used for other walls, especially if it could be concealed by render. However, the massive hearth in the east gable end, the mullioned window in the north wall, and the evident multiple phases of brickwork in the internal walls seem to point to the piecemeal remodelling of an older structure. This older fabric does not preserve any real indicants of its age, although the fact that its fabric clearly re-uses much earlier material suggests that it is post-medieval, built after the mid-16th century when the abandoned buildings of the hospital would provide a ready quarry for materials.

The position of the gable-end fireplace, south-of-centre as regards the rubble outer walls of the building, seems to imply that the present layout of principal rooms with an outshut to the north perpetuates an earlier one, in turn reflecting a medieval single-aisled ground

plan. In parts of Yorkshire early post-medieval houses with a timber arcade to a rear outshut are a relatively common vernacular form. If the brick internal walls replicate earlier timber-framed partitions, then the brick south wall may replace a timber façade – or perhaps the house was simply upgraded with fashionable brick replacing a stone wall. Some of the re-used timbers in the roof may come from removed partitions; the present roof structure, an interesting ‘lowland’ one in that it lacks a ridge, need not necessarily pre-date the 18th century remodelling.

The Cottage can only be a few years late than the main house, and it too re-uses older material in the odd cobble plinth to its west end and the strange jamb of a lost doorway – which could even be of medieval date – that must relate to some structure unrelated to the present building.



Retrieved worked stones, with roll-moulded block top left

The present orientation of the building does not align with the substantial and extensive earthworks of the hospital scattered across a series of enclosures within the precinct, suggesting that the present building owes nothing to what was on the site before the dissolution. The earthworks of a substantial hospital building lie to the east, but not in line with the standing structure. The re-used material clearly comes from the medieval hospital on the site, which documentary evidence shows had an extensive complex of buildings. The stone with the roll moulding is particularly interesting, indicating that there was a high-status Romanesque or early Gothic building with ashlar dressings erected soon after the foundation of the hospital c1200; it now seems likely that the founder was Philip de Poitou, Bishop of Durham 1197-1208, rather than his predecessor Hugh de Pudsey (1154-1194). The list of buildings given in a series of 13th century documents, and those implied by service people there such as bakers etc suggests that there was a large collection of structures akin to a small monastic establishment set within separate courts each with their own function, as implied by the earthworks on the site. Indeed when the hospital was surrendered on 19 May 1540, the warden and his confraters met in the chapter house; either this or a chapel (perhaps attached to the east end of an infirmary hall) might have provided the roll-moulded stone.

Peter Ryder (with comments from Dr Steve Moorhouse) August 2008