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BEXWELL BARN, BEXWELL, NORFOLK
ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Olivia Horsfall Turner

ASSESSMENT

ENGLISH HERITAGE

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SUMMARY
Bexwell Barn is a building constructed of rubble, carstone, high-quality ashlar blocks, re-used medieval worked-stone features and brick of various periods. The fabric evidence is particularly complex and ambiguous, while archival sources are almost completely silent. The building has been interpreted either as the surviving 15th-century gatehouse of Bexwell Hall (Pevsner 1999; Emery 2000) or as 16th-century lodgings constructed from post-Dissolution spolia (Heywood, 1996). Given the limitations of the known sources, it is not possible to provide a definitive account of the building, but detailed fabric analysis and an investigation of archival and map evidence has resulted in a different interpretation to those proposed previously. A detailed interrogation of the fabric evidence and close consideration of archival materials suggests that the building was constructed for non-domestic purposes in the very late 18th or early 19th century, probably incorporating dismantled remains, and possibly standing remains, of the manor house of Bexwell Hall and possibly spolia from other sites.

CONTRIBUTORS
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INTRODUCTION

Bexwell Barn is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (NF262) and a building listed at Grade II (UID 221462). The building was investigated in May 2012 by Dr Olivia Horsfall Turner, Investigator, Heritage Protection, Assessment Team (East) at the request of Dr Will Fletcher, Inspector of Ancient Monuments, National Planning (East). This report has been prepared in order to elucidate the history and significance of the building and inform its ongoing management.

Bexwell Barn, located on the road between Downham Market and Crimplesham, is constructed of rubble, carstone, high-quality ashlar blocks, re-used medieval ashlar features and brick of various periods (Figure 1). The roof is 20th century and therefore offers no diagnostic information. The fabric evidence is particularly complex and ambiguous, while archival sources are almost completely silent. The building has been interpreted either as the surviving 15th-century gatehouse of Bexwell Hall,[1] or as 16th-century lodgings constructed from post-Dissolution spolia.[2] This report re-assesses the fabric, archival and map evidence. Given the limitations of the known sources, it is not possible to provide a definitive account of the building, but the investigation has resulted in a different interpretation to those proposed previously. It is suggested here that the building was constructed for non-domestic purposes in the very late 18th or early 19th century, probably incorporating dismantled remains, and possibly standing remains, of the manor house of Bexwell Hall and possibly spolia from other sites.

Figure 1. Bexwell Barn, Bexwell, Norfolk, east façade.

FABRIC ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

North face

The north face of the building is constructed of a combination of ashlar and rubble (including some carstone) and some brick, with ashlar quoining (Figure 2). Certain areas of brick are infill for blocked features, others may be repairs. There is one blocked window located on the right-hand side at upper level. The window is square-headed with an ashlar surround with curved chamfer, probably dating to the 15th century. It is infilled with bricks that are partially covered with render, making them difficult to date, but their mid-red colour and medium size suggest they are probably 19th century. A shadow on the left-hand side of the wall appears to indicate another blocked aperture. This is confirmed by infill visible on the internal face of the wall. The left-hand aperture may have had a matching stone surround to that on the right, but it is no longer extant. The wall has a plinth, again mostly of ashlar, but containing some carstone, which appears to run across the façade. The middle section, however, is actually infilled. Two chamfered ends are visible within the plinth, respecting an aperture in the middle of the north wall, and there is evidence of quoining in the wall above. This is consistent with two vertical straight-line joins expressed on the wall, indicating that there was once a reasonably wide aperture at least at ground-floor level in the north face.

Figure 2. North façade.

This is confirmed by interior evidence, which shows there were two different openings in the north wall (Figure 3). The first was at ground level – potentially a wide doorway providing access directly from the road – and the second at upper level – probably a window or opening for taking-in. Above the head of the lower aperture is a wooden beam which runs across the wall's entire face and appears to be an integral part of the wall construction, suggesting that the doorway was primary. Whether or not the upper aperture was primary is impossible to say, but its infill appears to be slightly rougher and higher in brick content than that of the infill of the lower aperture, suggesting that they may have been infilled in different phases.

Figure 3. North wall, interior, showing evidence of earlier openings.

At upper level, in front of the interior wall face, there is a large, unfinished, wooden tie-beam which has been inserted into the east and west walls, and which is partially supported on a corbel fixed into the infill of one of the blocked windows. Given that it runs across the upper aperture, it is likely that the beam was inserted after the aperture was blocked. From the internal face of the north wall, a change in the wall thickness suggests that its height has been raised by a few feet, although this is not expressed on the exterior. It may be that the wooden tie was inserted at or after the point when the wall was raised, in order to stabilise the structure. Externally, the north façade has been covered with render, now weathered. The current render was applied subsequent to the infill of the large aperture, though the façade may also have been rendered at an earlier stage.

West face

The west face is constructed of a combination of ashlar, stone rubble – including some carstone – and brick, with a number of ashlar windows and one ashlar door surround (Figure 4). There is also evidence of worked-stone fragments, as well as ashlar mullions and mouldings, used as walling material. At eaves level a break in the masonry and a change in building materials from the variety of materials outlined above to small carstone blocks suggest that the wall height has been raised at some point. This also appears to be expressed on the interior, though subsequent plastering makes it difficult to discern the change in materials.

Figure 4. West façade.

Figure 5. Blocked features on west façade.

Externally across the west façade there is weathered render that is visible both above and below the line where the wall height has been raised. The northern half of the western façade, to the left of the central door, features a centrally placed ashlar doorway, three ashlar windows, and evidence of what was probably a fourth ashlar window which has been removed (Figure 5). On stylistic grounds the windows and doorway date to the 15th century.

There is an ashlar plinth that runs across the bottom of this section of the western façade, and which respects the stone door surround. At upper level there is one two-light window (Figure 6) and one three-light window (Figure 7). Both have flat heads over shallow, cusped, trefoil-headed arches with simply carved spandrels. In the three-light window the heads of two of the arches are damaged and only one mullion survives. Neither window has surviving hood moulds, but scars indicate that they once did, and that the hood moulds have been cut back (map evidence discussed below suggests that this may have been carried out in connection with the addition of another structure that was once located along this stretch of the façade). Both upper-level windows are infilled with brick. The three-light window is filled with small bricks that may date to as early as the 16th century. At one point the infill had an arrow-slit for ventilation, although that too is now infilled with brick. The two-light window is blocked with larger bricks, some of a light salmon-pink colour, which may indicate that it was infilled at a different phase from the infilling of the three-light window. The infilling of the two upper-level windows is also expressed on the interior, suggesting that at some point, the windows were indeed open.

Figure 6. Blocked two-light window at upper level on west façade.

Figure 7. Blocked three-light window at upper level on west façade.

The extant lower-level apertures are a doorway (Figure 8) and a three-light window (Figure 9). In addition, an area of brick infill in the lower left-hand corner which corresponds to the sizes of the other three-light windows indicates that there was probably another three-light window in that location. The infill is of small light-salmon-pink bricks – different again from those of the upper-level windows and therefore suggestive of yet another phase of infilling. The infill is also visible on the interior, suggesting the former window aperture in that location was fully open at some point. Like the windows at the upper level, the extant ground-level window has a hood mould and flat head over shallow, cusped, trefoil-headed arches with simply carved spandrels. Only an indication of these details survives, however, as the arches and spandrels have been damaged and mostly lost. The door surround is a two-centred arch of ashlar blocks with chamfered edges on the inner face.

Figure 8. Infilled doorway on west façade.

Figure 9. Infilled window at ground level on west façade.

The doorway and lower-level window are both infilled with a mixture of stone rubble (including carstone), worked-stone blocks, and brick. The infill is neatly coursed, and in places the mortar is galetted with small carstone chips – a decorative finish suggesting it was intended to be visible. The relation between the infill and the damaged window suggests that the damage occurred at some point prior to the infilling. The infill is visible on the interior, which would suggest that this window and the doorway were open at some point, but the fact that the infill is of the same type and size of material that is used in the main wall face suggests the possibility that these apparent 'apertures' may have been blocked from the original date of construction. Furthermore, if the windows had been open, their position is so low that they would not have afforded interior light at a useful level (the original interior floor level does not appear to have been substantially altered even though the interior floor surface has been covered in concrete). This also suggests that the ashlar features are not in situ.

The central section of the west wall is dominated by a large wooden taking-in door which rises to almost the full height of the building (Figure 10). The large-scale jambs for the taking-in door are constructed of bricks which appear to be 19th century. The right-hand-side jamb is flush with the wall face at the top, but gradually projects to form a small buttress. It has brick quoining alternating with carstone and some ashlar. The left-hand-side jamb is entirely of brick and forms a more substantial buttress that rises up to about four-fifths of the height of the building. Above the taking-in door there is a wooden beam and several courses of brick containing a relieving arch. Given that the height of the taking-in door is the same as the original wall height, and that the brickwork above it rises to the same height as the increased wall height, it seems probable that the insertion of this doorway was the spur for the raising of the wall height.

Figure 10. Taking-in door, west façade.

To the left of the taking-in door are the most obvious pieces of worked stone – including mullions and mouldings – reused as walling material (Figure 11). Unlike the section of the west façade further to the north, there is no plinth to this central section of wall. At ground level there are two large stone mullions set vertically with a small wooden beam resting horizontally across the two. The beam appears to be set into the wall thickness and therefore to be primary, but this area of wall is one of the most disrupted of the whole building and its external appearance suggests it has been substantially rebuilt. Certainly, the wooden beam does not appear to date to earlier than the 19th century. The spaces between the mullions are infilled with brick of two types, suggesting two phases of infill, or a repair. It is unlikely that the 'window' was ever open – a window at this height would not offer interior light at a useful level, and indeed, there is no corresponding expression of either an aperture or infill on the interior.

Figure 11. Re-used mullions and worked stone in west façade.

Above the re-set mullions there is a straight-line join just to the right of the shallow buttress, which appears to relate to an infilled door aperture to its left, now partly hidden behind the buttress. This suggests that at some point there was access at upper level, and also implies that at some point there must have been an additional structure further to the west of the current building. Whether or not the doorway and access were original is unclear. To the right of the doorway scar, before the wall face steps forward, there is a timber beam that is embedded in the wall, probably indicative of another aperture. The head of that aperture is at roughly the same height as the blocked doorway to the left. The position of this aperture, which is now partially hidden by the re-entrant section of the west façade, also suggests that the latter is not primary, in its current position at least. The interior wall face of this section complicates rather than elucidates the interpretation of this area: not only are none of the apparent apertures expressed on the interior, but also, the interior wall face displays areas of consistent construction which are completely at odds with the fragmented external finish (Figure 12).

Figure 12. West wall, interior, where external features are not expressed internally.

The southernmost third of the west façade steps forward from the main building line, effectively forming a very shallow wing, and the main roof descends to meet the wing's eaves at a lower level (see Figure 4). Here too the wall height appears to have been raised, though the additional courses have been constructed in brick rather than carstone. The re-entrant section of wall is not coursed in with the wall to the left and there is a significant masonry break to its right, implying that this section of wall was added at some point. It has ashlar quoining but only up to two-thirds of the height of the wall, after which point it is brick, again suggesting that it is a later addition. To the right of the masonry break, quoins respecting the southernmost end of the west façade indicate the wing was once narrower. Like the central section of the west façade but unlike the northernmost part, there is no plinth to this section, though the walling is set on coursed bricks. Above the bricks are some very large, irregular chunks of carstone and a variety of smaller sizes of carstone blocks. There is evidence of only one small single-light window fenestrating the wing, located at an upper level at the southernmost end of the wall. To the far southern end of the wall is a cast-iron tie, evidently inserted to support that end of the structure. At the southern corner of the west façade there is an adjoining brick wall of medium height that runs east to west. A straight-line join on the south face of the wall indicates clearly that it is a later addition, probably erected in order to create the enclosed area which now exists to the west of the building.

Figure 13. West wall, wing, interior.

The interior evidence reveals that the wing is a particularly complex part of the building (Figure 13). Although its exterior wall face is of one phase (plus the raising of the wall height), the wall depth is of at least two phases. The interior wall of the wing does not have any clear indication that it has been raised, although this may be hidden under the surface plaster. The wing is divided into three spaces, two of which are accommodated within the wall thickness – one of these is partially visible through a hole in the wall at upper level, the other is partially visible through an aperture at ground level. Some of the space is therefore enclosed within the wall thickness and is not accessible. The central section, open to the main interior, has been identified as either a stairwell or a fireplace, while it has been suggested that the two encapsulated spaces to either side might have been garderobes.[3] Archaeologically, the evidence of garderobes is coherent: there is a drop in each location (Figure 14), as well as associated fenestration. The top of the right-hand chute (as seen from the interior) corresponds to the single-light window and at the top of the other chute there is internal evidence of an aperture, though it is blocked and not expressed externally. There are also infilled doorways at upper level next to each cubicle, suggesting access. A lower ground level at the foot of the chute that is open at the bottom indicates that there were pits below the garderobe chutes, though there is no visible evidence for external access.

Figure 14. Probable garderobe chute in wall thickness of wing.

The possibility that the central area once housed a stair is much less convincing, however. Although the upper-level doorways indicate that at some point (in this part of the building at least) there was an interior first-floor level, and although the wing is the only obvious candidate for a stairwell location, there is no fabric evidence of how a stairwell might have been arranged within this space, nor any indication of how it was fenestrated. Furthermore, typologically it would not fit with the location of the garderobes. This means that the question of where an integrated staircase (if indeed there ever was one) could have been located within the building remains unanswered. Similarly, it seems unlikely that this was the site of a fireplace. The warmth of a fire would have been undesirable given the position of the garderobes, it is unlikely that there would have been a passage way (indicated by the two doorways) running immediately in front of the fire, there is no narrowing for a flue, and though there are some deposits that might indicate smoke-blackening on the upper left-hand interior, owing to the general state of wall finish and application of plaster they are not conclusive.

There are noticeable differences between the northern and southern parts of the west façade, namely that the former has heavy fenestration and a continuous ashlar plinth while the latter has neither. The precise relationship between the northern and southern parts of the west façade is difficult to establish because the provision of the taking-in door has created a complete break between the two sides, thereby disrupting any continuity that was originally in evidence. The taking-in door has also removed most of the evidence regarding the features of that central portion of the west façade, and the small surviving area to the left of the taking-in door appears externally to have been subjected to substantial alteration, making it difficult to interpret. What sort of fenestration or door apertures were originally provided in the area now occupied by the taking-in door therefore remains unknown. This is significant because the survival of that area, opposite the porch on the east façade, would have helped to clarify whether or not there was originally east-west access through the building, which has a bearing on its identification as a gatehouse.

South face

Figure 15. South façade.

The south face of the building is constructed of a combination of carstone rubble and brick, with ashlar quoining, and substantial use of ashlar on the left-hand side at ground level (Figure 15). The render on the south wall, though weathered, still covers and therefore obscures much of the underlying building material. There is no plinth, but along the base of the wall there are two courses of ashlar blocks in line with the wall face. On the left-hand side at eaves level disruption to the brick coursing indicates that the pitch of the gable on that side has been altered, necessitated by raising the west façade's wall height. There is no indication, however, from either external or internal evidence, that the height of the south wall has been raised, though evidence may be obscured by the interior plaster and exterior render.

There have been at least two apertures in the south wall. The first, at upper level, is indicated by a large area infilled with small, dark-red bricks that may date to as early as the 16th century. Straight-line joins indicate that in fact, the area has been infilled in two phases suggesting two subsequent sets of fenestration and/or a doorway for taking-in. In the centre of the brick infill a vertical 'arrow-slit' indicates that even after the aperture was closed, there was still ventilation, but that too has since been blocked. Internally this aperture is also clearly expressed where the original window and subsequent infillings have created an inset window embrasure (Figure 16). The second aperture, at ground level, is indicated by a large square area infilled with large light-salmon-pink bricks. The breadth of the aperture suggests that it was a doorway rather than a window, though it does not appear to have gone down to the ground: there may have been a ramp to facilitate access. This too appears to have had a central arrow-slit vent which is now blocked. A third area on the south wall – on the left-hand side at upper level – may also be the site of a former aperture. There, a section of larger, mid-red bricks and what appears at the edge of the render to be a straight-line join may indicate where a window has been filled in, but there is no indication of such on the interior.

Figure 16. South wall, interior, showing evidence of earlier aperture.

The fact that there are no finished edges or worked surrounds to the apertures suggests that they may have been insertions punched into the original fabric rather than primary features. They may, however, have taken the position of earlier fenestration. If they did not, then there is no indication of how the south wall was originally fenestrated, raising the question as to whether it was fenestrated at all, and contributing to the doubt that the building was ever domestic.

The most significant disruption to the south wall is at its eastern corner, where there is a straight-line join approximately two feet from the end of the wall. The render on the wall to the left of the break obscures the nature of the material underneath, but it appears to be carstone rubble without quoining. Beyond the break the wall is built of small, dark-red bricks which appear to date from the 16th century, with ashlar quoins that reach approximately halfway up the height of the wall. This suggests that there may have been a failure of the south wall at its eastern end and that the end of the wall had to be rebuilt using the brick and ashlar quoins that could be salvaged. This is corroborated by the evidence of the east wall, the southern end of which also implies that there was a partial collapse which was then repaired (Figure 17). The interior wall faces of the south and east walls, however, give no indication of such disruption, raising the question of whether the apparent phases are genuine or contrived.

Figure 17. South-east corner, implying partial collapse and rebuilding.

East face

The east face is constructed mostly of ashlar, features ashlar medieval window surrounds and has a substantial porch centred slightly to the north of the centre line of the main building (Figure 18).

Figure 18. East façade.

The southernmost third of the east face is constructed of small, red bricks with ashlar quoining at the south-east corner, and a brick plinth topped with an ashlar course. The bricks appear to date from the 16th century but have been reset, possibly in the 18th or 19th century. A few feet in from the south-east corner is a blocked doorway (Figure 19). The door aperture has no defined surround, but has a brick arched head. The infill is of carstone rubble and ashlar with a few courses of bricks at the top. The mortar in between the blocks of carstone and ashlar is studded with carstone galetting, in the same manner as the ground-level, blocked apertures on the west side of the building. The aperture is also expressed on the interior wall face, implying it was once a proper opening . On the interior wall face to either side of the aperture are two pilasters built of brick and finished with plaster. At mid-height these support a wooden beam that is coursed into the brick. From the appearance of the bricks and wood the arrangement appears to date from the late 18th or 19th century. Its original purpose is unclear but it may be related to the provision of a stair and access to an inserted floor at this end of the building. The inserted floor is indicated by a horizontal scar on the interior wall face of the south wall and the southernmost section of the east wall.

The northernmost two-thirds of the east face are constructed of finely worked and neatly coursed ashlar blocks and medieval stone windows, with some use of rubble and carstone for wall construction and some use of brick of various periods, predominantly for infill. The transition between the southern, brick-built section and the northern, ashlar part is abrupt. The brickwork simply abuts the ashlar and is not keyed in. Plaster masks this break on the interior wall face, if indeed it is expressed there.

At eaves level a horizontal break and a change in building materials from worked ashlar to small carstone blocks indicate that the wall height has been raised at some point. This appears to have been the case only towards the northernmost end of the façade and is also expressed on the interior in this area. The brick-built section of the east façade does not appear to have been heightened, suggesting that the putative collapse and rebuilding of that area took place after the wall height had been raised on the rest of the façade. One area, however, is an anomaly – the section of wall immediately to the right of the vertical break between the brick and ashlar sections. Here, the ashlar blocks appear to extend to the full height of the wall and the wall face has not been built up with carstone, implying that this section of wall was originally higher than that at the northern end. There are a few patches of very weathered render on the northernmost half of the façade, both below and above where the wall height has been raised.

Figure 19. Blocked doorway, east façade.

Immediately to the south of the porch there is evidence of four apertures which appear to have originated in different phases, and to have been infilled in different phases (Figure 20). At upper level there is a 15th-century traceried window – a flat-headed window over a single, cusped, cinquefoil-headed light with super-mullion and cusping (Figure 21). This is blocked with what appear to be 19th-century bricks. Immediately adjacent to the right, scars indicate there was once a square aperture that has been infilled with bricks of early appearance. An 'arrow-slit' has been retained for ventilation (see Figure 21). The window aperture is also expressed on the interior, though the 'arrow-slit' has been infilled. To the right again is a square area of render that indicates a former aperture, now blocked, though the render obscures the infill. On the interior wall face the aperture and infill are legible. Externally at a lower level there is a large square area that is infilled with small salmon-pink bricks. Within the infill is a small diamond-shaped area of secondary infill which probably indicates that at some point a pipe or flue was located there, and subsequently removed. On the interior, this section of brick infill features two square niches.

Figure 20. Blocked features, south façade.

Figure 21. Blocked window, at upper level on south façade.

In the middle of the east façade, positioned slightly to the north of the centre line of the building, is a single-storey porch terminating in a pair of substantial polygonal turrets (Figure 22). The sides of the porch and the polygonal piers are constructed in ashlar; the piers are topped with cones of composite material. The sides of the porch are not completely consistently coursed in with the main building, though the main building's plinth does continue onto the porch. The porch roof is 20th-century and offers no information about the original structure. Likewise the door between the two piers is 20th century and provides no information about any earlier door. The wall face immediately above the porch is constructed of small carstone blocks and brick. It corresponds to the level where the wall height has been raised further to the north, but the presence of brick (which is not otherwise a material used in the raising of the eastern wall) suggests that a feature has been infilled, or a repair made. The sides of the porch slope diagonally down towards the polygonal piers. Brick infill at eaves level indicates that this does not represent the original termination of the wall, suggesting that the porch was previously higher.

Figure 22. Porch, east façade.

Internally, the area above the doorway within the porch is constructed of rubble, but there is also a substantial amount of brick. The brick appears be infilling an aperture with a round head in the main building's wall above the interior entrance into the porch, though the location of the aperture is not suitable for a doorway at either lower or upper level. The sides of the porch on the interior comprise rubble, some ashlar blocks and some brick. On the southernmost interior side, the side of the porch forms a right-angle with the main building. On the northernmost side at an upper level the side of the porch is slightly angled and there is a straight-line join where it meets the main building. These features indicate that the construction and phasing around the porch area is less than coherent.

To the north of the porch, there are three medieval ashlar windows that date to the 15th century and evidence of a fourth window that has been removed. The upper-level windows are located very close to the top of what appears to have been the original wall height, below only a half-course of ashlar. At upper level to the left is a flat-headed window aperture that retains its hood mould and its stone surround but which has lost its sides and bottom sill and does not have any surviving mullions or tracery (Figure 23). It has been infilled with early bricks, leaving an 'arrow slit' for ventilation. This is also expressed on the interior wall face, though the infill also includes some rubble. At upper level to the right is a flat-headed two-light traceried window with hood mould (Figure 24). The tracery has been cut down and part of the supermullion is missing, so that the upper cusped arches spring directly from the top of the lower cusped arches (compare with the tracery of the single light on the east face). This window has also been infilled, but with 19th-century brick. This aperture and infilling are expressed on the interior, but the infilling is in what appear to be 18th-century bricks: distinctly different from those used on the exterior. At ground level on the left, scars indicate the location of what was probably a window that has been removed. Its former position has been infilled with ashlar and some carstone. It is also expressed on the interior. At ground level to the right is a three-light traceried window with hood mould (Figure 25). The tracery has cusped arches and simple hollow spandrels. It has been infilled with 19th-century brick. The aperture is expressed on the interior, but the infill is of ashlar blocks, rubble and carstone.

Although the east façade appears to be more coherent than the west façade, owing to the extensive use of uniform ashlar and the apparent logic of the centrally positioned porch, there are in fact numerous anomalies:

- The plinth to the south of the porch consists of smaller pieces of ashlar than the plinth to the north of the porch which is constructed of substantial and neat ashlar blocks.
- The porch is not properly coursed into the building, and the interior area of the porch shows evidence of considerable disruption.
- The wall height has been raised but has not been raised uniformly across the whole façade – to the south of the porch it appears always to have been higher.
- Some of the windows are not in their original form – the supermullions have been cut down.

Although the ashlar across much of the east façade is very neatly coursed, the fact that the porch is not properly coursed into the main building, the inconsistencies in the way that the porch adjoins the main building and the differences in the plinth between the north and south ends of the east wall suggest that the building material is not in situ. This is corroborated by the windows which, having been cut down in some cases, are spoliated from another building. The ashlar windows and doorway all appear to date from the 15th century and the likelihood is that they all come from the same site. This may or may not have been the source for the ashlar blocks.

Figure 23. Blocked window at upper level with surviving hood mould on east façade.

Figure 24. Blocked two-light traceried window with cut-down tracery at upper level on east façade.

Figure 25. Blocked three-light traceried window at ground level on east façade.

SECONDARY LITERATURE

Architectural historians have discussed Bexwell Barn, though not at any length. Pevsner recorded that it 'seems to be a late C15 gatehouse to the former manor of the Bexwells',[4] and Anthony Emery likewise asserted that the building was the surviving two-storied entrance range of the now-lost manor house of Bexwell. Emery described the range as having been erected in the 15th century as 'a most stylish and substantial residence'.[5]

Both Pevsner and Emery presumed that the building fabric was in situ. Stephen Heywood, in an unpublished report of 1996, pointed out that the ashlar blocks and windows are all re-used – an observation with which this investigation concurs, as detailed above.[6] Heywood also noted that there was no evidence other than the large opposing entrances to support the idea that the building was originally a gatehouse. The fabric analysis carried out in this investigation reinforces this fact. Although the porch has led to the identification of the building as a gatehouse, the porch's fabric is not properly coursed with the body of the building, and substantial areas of the west wall that might otherwise confirm the existence of a gateway have been lost. Furthermore, the polygonal turrets which face east do not relate to the position of the Hall and roads as indicated by Faden's map of c. 1790, which would imply an approach from the west or north. It therefore seems likely that even if the porch originated from Bexwell Hall or a putative gatehouse to the Hall, it is not in its original location; equally, it remains a possibility that the porch was brought in from another site.

Heywood suggested that, on the basis of the high quality of the ashlar, the re-use of the stone probably dated to shortly after the Dissolution of the monasteries and that the material might have come from the abbey of West Dereham, located nearby. He posited that the building was an high-status lodging for a senior estate official. There are two important points that argue against this interpretation. The first is that there is no evidence that the building was ever domestic. The impractical height of the fenestration, the possibility that the lower-level doorway and windows might always have been closed, the lack of clarity about staircase provision and flooring in, the absence of heating provision in the part that is fenestrated, and the absence of fenestration in the part that may have been heated, all cast doubt on whether it was ever used for residential purposes at all. In fact, the points listed above as well as the evidence in the north wall plinth of a wide central opening suggests a primary non-domestic, agricultural use. The second is that documentary and map evidence suggests that the Barn was not erected until the late 18th or even early 19th century.

DOCUMENTARY AND MAP EVIDENCE

Given the distinctive appearance of the building, which is precisely the type of structure that would have attracted attention from county historians and travellers, it is notable that it has not been possible to find any mention of the building at all in published antiquarian accounts from either the 17th, 18th or 19th centuries. It remains possible that manuscript sources might contain some references, but such investigation has been beyond the remit of this research, and the proposition presented below that the building was actually only erected in the very late 18th or early 19th century helps to explain why earlier references are not forthcoming.

No specific references to the Barn have been uncovered by investigation into records pertaining to Bexwell held in the Norfolk Record Office (NRO). Although the Barn was not on glebe land, the glebe terriers were examined for any references to the building, but none were found. The manorial records are extensive but no references to maps appear in the NRO catalogue and given the limited time resources allocated to this case, it was not viable to investigate the manorial records further. Papers relating to owners of the property in the late 18th and early 19th centuries have been examined, in particular the documents in the Fellowes of Shotesham Collection. As this collection contains over 1000 items, it was not possible to investigate the archive comprehensively, but the detailed handlist was consulted and items of potential interest were examined. It may be that other documents in the collection would reveal further information.

A combination of published and manuscript sources does allow a basic timeline for the property to be drawn up (see Appendix 1). The manor of Bexwell was divided into two from medieval times, and the descent of the two moieties is charted in Francis Blomefield's *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk* (1805).[7] One moiety was vested in the Bekeswell family. The earliest recorded occupier was a William de Bekeswell at the time of Henry I. This moiety devolved through the Bekeswell family until the mid-17th century. Henry Bekeswell, who died in 1654 and whose tomb is in Bexwell church, left the property to his daughter Frances who married Robert Aprice of Walsingly in Huntingdonshire. The property was then conveyed by him to Sir John Holland of Quidenham Hall in Norfolk.

The second part of the moiety was recorded in the reign of Henry VII as the property of Edward Batchcroft. His son, William Batchcroft, died in 1507, and left 13s 4d for the repair of Bexwell church steeple, underlining the relationship between that family and the village. The Batchcrofts continued to own the property until the death of Francis Batchcroft in 1658 (whose tomb is in Bexwell church), when his sister and co-heirs sold the property to Sir John Holland, thereby uniting the two moieties.

Both properties were then conveyed to John Holt of Redgrave Hall in Suffolk by an Act of Parliament passed in 1713. Documents in the NRO relate to the sale of freehold land in Bexwell by Thomas Holt to Robert Fellowes I (1742–1829) in 1799.[8] In 1815, on the occasion of his son's marriage, Robert Fellowes I settled the Bexwell property on his son, Robert Fellowes II (1779–1869).[9] In 1840 Robert Fellowes II then sold the Bexwell estate to Edward Roger Pratt Esq. of nearby Ryston Hall,[10] who proceeded to sell off lots to a number of purchasers; the land on which the Barn stood was sold to a Mrs Elizabeth Doyle.[11]

The earliest known map evidence for Bexwell is provided by William Faden's *Map of Norfolk* which was surveyed between 1790 and 1794 and published in 1797. The map shows the settlement of Bexwell with 'Hall' and 'Parsonage' indicated in text and the church represented by a cross (Figure 26). Three buildings appear next to the legend 'Hall': a U-plan building close to the main road from Downham Market to Crimplesham, and two further rectangular-plan buildings to the east. Even though the map is not at a large scale and represents buildings schematically (the U-plan appears to be the generic indication for a hall, rather than documentation of an actual plan), there is no building on Faden's map that corresponds to the current Barn. Equally, the map is unequivocal that there was still a hall there at that time, whereas later maps and current fabric evidence give no indication of the location of a manor house. Unlike other country houses, Bexwell Hall on Faden's map is not accompanied by any owners' or resident's names, nor is there a park or garden indicated around it as there is with most other substantial residential properties, for example, at Ryston (Ruston) Hall owned by Richard Pratt Esq.. This suggests that Bexwell Hall was either unoccupied or tenanted c. 1790. By this time, the Hall may well have been in disrepair, or already in use for non-domestic purposes.

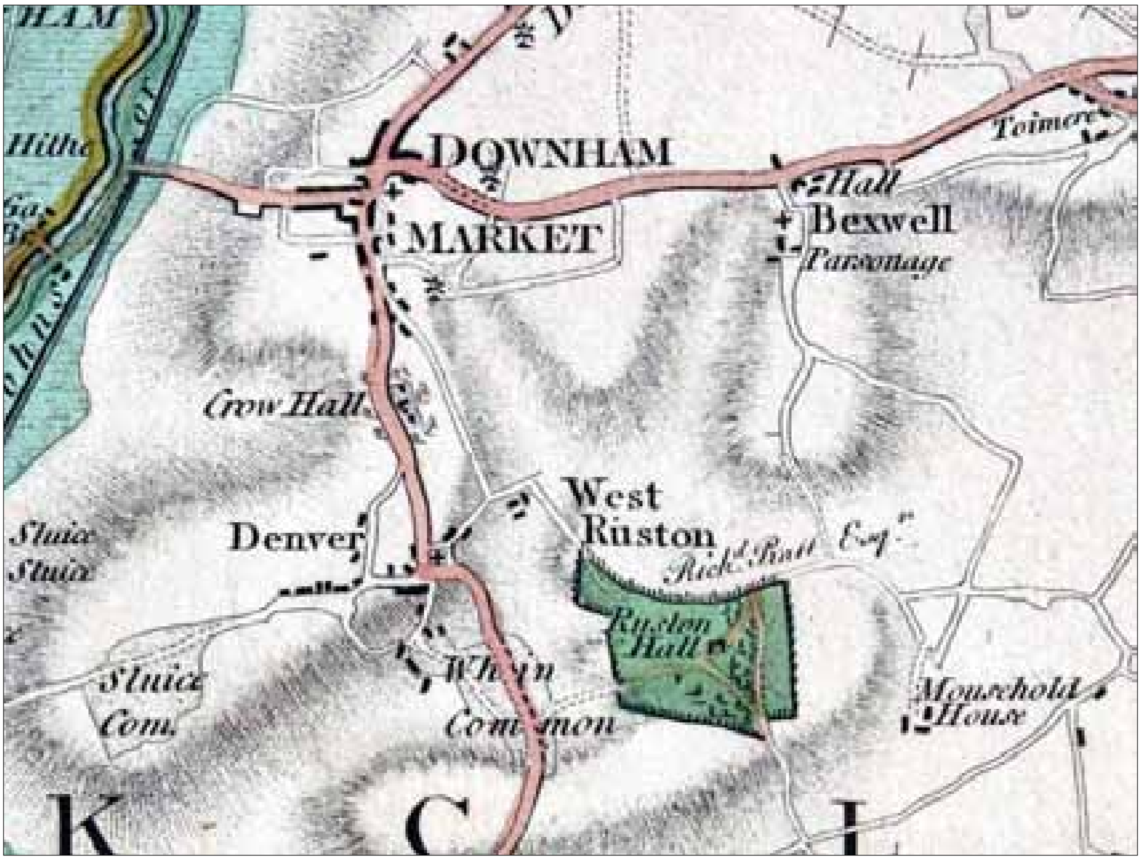


Figure 26. Bexwell, as depicted on William Faden's Map of Norfolk, surveyed in 1790–1794 and published in 1797 (Courtesy Warwick Leadley Gallery, London).

The Hall itself is not mentioned in Blomefield's 1805 account. In cases where there was a substantial house or notable building, he generally did make some reference to them, suggesting that at Bexwell the manor house was no longer extant by that time. This implies that at some point between Faden's survey of the area (1790–1794) when the Hall was indicated and Blomefield's publication (1805) in which it did not appear, the Hall was demolished.

When exactly the demolition might have taken place is difficult to pinpoint. A document of April 1799 giving the particulars of the estate of Thomas Holt Esq. in the parish of Bexwell suggests that by that date there was no longer a building still identified as the manor house.[12] The estate at that time apparently consisted of 'the following Farms – In the occupation of Mr James Drew a good dwelling house and other necessary Buildings in good repair…In the occupation of Mrs Robins a conven[ient dwelling house and other necessary Buildings in good repair…In the occupation of Mr W[illia]m Wright…a good dwelling house and other convenient buildings also several Cottages in good repair…'. There is no mention either of a hall or former hall, though it is possible that it might have been referred to as one of the dwelling houses, or even one of the outbuildings. All one can deduce is that by 1799 the house might have been in either domestic or non-domestic use, or already have been taken down. Equally, there is no clear indication of whether or not the Barn had been built by this date. It is possible that it might have been one of the 'necessary Buildings', or it might not yet have existed.

Similarly, a fire insurance document of 1801, just after the transfer of the Bexwell estate from Thomas Holt to Robert Fellowes I, fails to offer conclusive evidence. The policy taken out by Robert Fellowes for a farm and outbuildings in 'Baxwell' (incorrectly spelt in the original document and furthermore incorrectly catalogued in the NRO handlist as 'Bunwell') lists two dwelling houses and a number of barns, stables and outbuildings.[13] Whether or not these included the Hall, its remains, or the Barn is unclear.

A plan of Bexwell surveyed in 1832 by J G Lenny is the first known map depicting a building that recognisably corresponds to the current footprint of the Barn (Figure 27).[14] The key to the map indicates that at this time the Barn and the surrounding land and buildings were part of a parcel of land called 'Hall Farm' which consisted of 'Farm House, Outbuildings, Yards, Gardens, Pleasure Grounds, and the Hill'.[15] This indicates that by 1832 at the latest, Bexwell Barn had been constructed.

The Barn also appears on the Tithe Map of 1838, surveyed by Lenny and Croft (Figure 28).[16] Coloured in black, it is shown as non-residential. It appears as an L-plan building, with the foot of the L to the north-west and a smaller projection to the east. The latter is not located in the middle of the façade, but probably represents the porch. The building is shown forming the east side of a rectangular enclosure subdivided down the centre. A discrepancy between the 1838 map and the building as it is today is that the map does not show a shallow wing to the southern end of the west façade – it may be that it was deemed too small to record. In addition, the map shows that at the northern end of the west façade there was a substantial wing that projected out beyond the wall line that now exists. This suggests that there was an additional structure against the west façade, which corresponds to the scars on the front of the building, as discussed above.

Figure 27. Detail of plan of Bexwell, 1832, surveyed by J G Lenny (NRO PRA 367, 379x6) (Courtesy Norfolk Record Office).

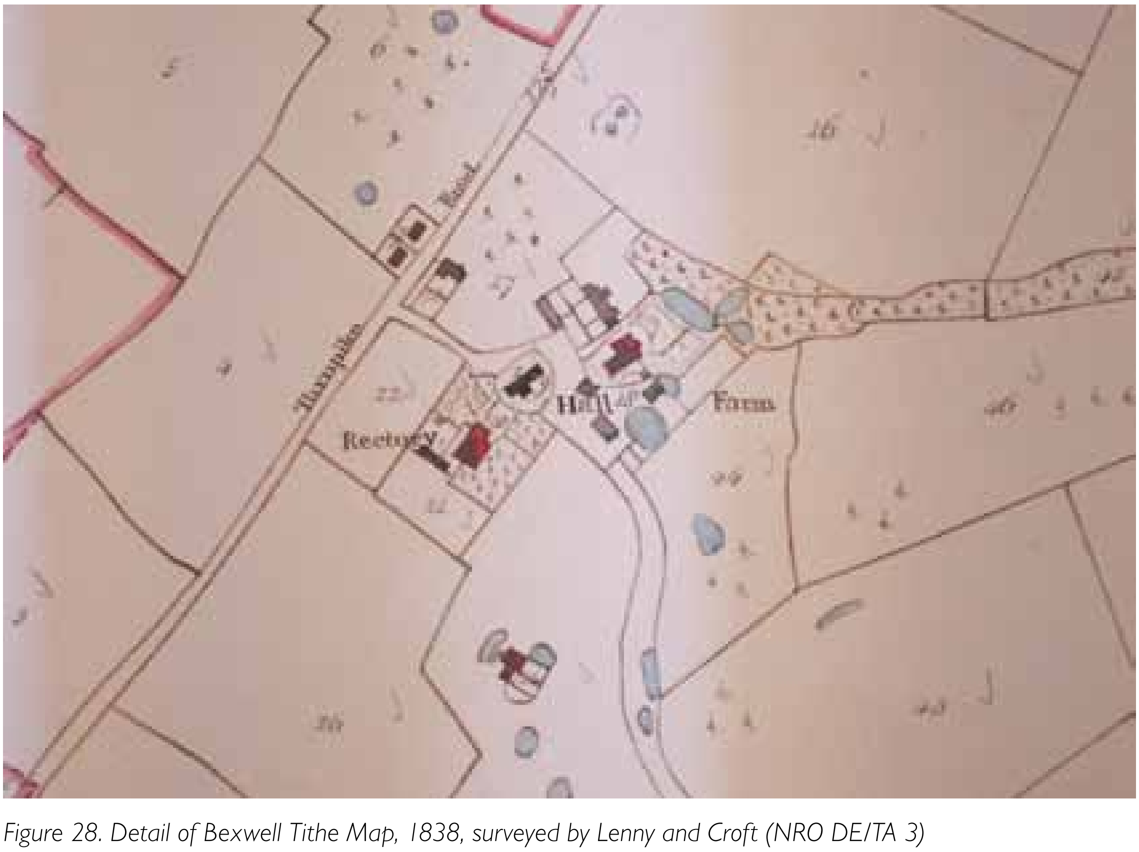


Figure 28. Detail of Bexwell Tithe Map, 1838, surveyed by Lenny and Croft (NRO DE/TA 3) (Courtesy Norfolk Record Office).

Figure 29. Detail of map for 1840 sale of Bexwell Estate (NRO PRA 369, 379x6). (Courtesy Norfolk Record Office).

Later maps show subtle changes in the Barn and its ancillary buildings. The map for the 1840 sale is based on the Tithe Map and essentially shows the same information (Figure 29).[17] In addition to the Barn itself, however, it indicates two further long buildings to the west of the Barn, running east-west, which were probably used for storage or stabling. In the 1887 OS map, the representation of the Barn corresponds closely to that of 1840. For the first time, however, the shallow wing is also shown. This probably indicates greater accuracy in the survey rather than implying that the wing was an addition, particularly as it seems likely that the wing in fact contains the only in situ fabric from the former manor house. In the 1887 OS map, the two long buildings to the west are still in evidence and in addition, there is another small square building shown adjoining the south façade. It is possible that this was associated with the now-infilled, ground-floor aperture in the south wall. By the time of the 1928 OS map, both the shallow wing and the projection at the northern end of the west façade are shown, but the westernmost of the two long buildings had been demolished, and the possible addition to the south had been removed. By 1958–59 the OS map shows that the lane leading in to the village had been widened and the space in front of the Barn had been reduced. The attached buildings to the west had completely disappeared by the time of the 1982 OS map, which also shows that the Bexwell Road had been widened so that the north front of the Barn ran along the boundary of the property, as it does now.

A date of construction for the Barn cannot be pinpointed exactly, but map and documentary evidence suggests it probably dates to the late 18th or early 19th century Given the eventual disappearance of the Hall and the ultimate appearance of the Barn, it may well be significant that the Hall is shown on Faden's map in a location that corresponds closely to the current position of the Barn. Indeed, it seems very likely that the Barn includes materials and features from the dismantled fabric of Bexwell Hall. Both the stone windows and the early bricks used extensively in the Barn may well come from the former manor house. It is not certain that any standing in-situ walls were incorporated into the present structure, but it is certainly possible and might account for some of the Barn's more eccentric features, particularly the area around the garderobes. Whether or not the porch itself derives from Bexwell Hall or a putative gatehouse to it is impossible to establish in the absence of further evidence, but even if it does, it is unlikely that it is in situ. It is highly likely that Bexwell Hall was dismantled soon after 1790, as it is marked on Faden's map which was surveyed between 1790 and 1794, but it not mentioned by Blomefield whose Essay was published in 1805. Whether or not much time elapsed between the Hall being taken down and the Barn being erected it is impossible to say given the available evidence. Certainly by 1832 at the latest the Barn had been constructed, when it appeared on the map surveyed by J G Lenny.

There are no known topographical views of Bexwell Hall but c. 1800 John Adey Repton published an engraving of an elaborate pair of Tudor chimneys entitled 'Bexhill near Downham Market', which may be a misnomer for 'Bexwell'.[18] Repton did not specify that they were from the Hall itself, but they are almost identical to the later 19th-century stacks on the present Parsonage, suggesting that the unusual Tudor design may have been copied when the present Parsonage was rebuilt. In fact, it is tempting to speculate that John Adey Repton's drawing of the stack from 'Bexhill' was produced at the time that the manor house was being demolished.

This chronology means that there are a number of possible candidates for the construction of the Barn: Thomas Holt (d. 1799), Squire of Redgrave Hall, Suffolk, whose family owned the estate from 1713 to 1799; Robert Fellowes I (1742–1829), who owned the estate from 1799 to 1815; or Robert Fellowes II (1779–1869) who owned the estate from 1815 until 1840. If it was undertaken by Holt, then it was constructed right at the end of his ownership of the property, shortly before he died. On balance, it seems more likely that it was erected by the incoming Fellowes family. All three of the owners tenanted out the Bexwell estate. This raises the possibility that the Barn might have been built by one of the tenants but this seems improbable: the 1799 estate particulars show that the leases were short-term, making it unlikely that the tenants would undertake such a large project, particularly when the particulars demonstrate they were already well provided for with barns and outbuildings.[19]

If it was erected under the ownership of the Fellowes, as seems likely, their identity and architectural interests are of some import. They were descended from the Fellowes family of Worcestershire, a branch of which had settled in Norfolk when William Fellowes (1705–1775) acquired Shotesham Park in 1731. Robert Fellowes the elder employed Sir John Soane to build the house at Shotesham in 1784. The likely window of construction for the Barn falls across the ownership of the two Robert Fellowes. Given the family had a more than passing interest in architecture, it is not surprising that either father or son might choose to take the remaining fabric of Bexwell Hall and fashion it into another building. As discussed above, it seems unlikely that the Barn originally had a domestic function. The fabric evidence suggests that it was designed for agricultural use with apertures for access, taking-in and ventilation. Some of the apertures may have been inserted and later blocked in numerous phases, suggesting various specific uses in the years after its construction. The likelihood that it was created not only as a useful building but also as a means of preserving and displaying reused architectural fragments helps to explain the often contradictory fabric evidence. Some of the apparent 'phasing' may not be phasing at all, and the building may have been intentionally constructed to give the impression of being a palimpsest.

It is also worth noting that the creation of a barn that does not look like a barn is not without precedent in the area. At Godwick, roughly 25 miles from Bexwell, is Godwick Manor and its barn, both constructed in the late 16th century. The barn is notable for its design in which blind pedimented windows on both floors give it the articulation of a high-status domestic range, thereby concealing its agricultural function. Although the execution of the work at Bexwell is much less refined, it is possible that the creation of a barn masquerading as a house owes some inspiration to Godwick.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In previous interpretations Bexwell Barn has been presented as a 15th-century gatehouse, or 16th-century lodgings, but close fabric analysis has revealed numerous features that cast into doubt the building's coherence and its consequent typological identification.[20] It appears from map evidence that the Barn is positioned on roughly the same site as Bexwell Hall. It may have incorporated some of the Hall's standing remains and probably contains spolia from the Hall's dismantled remains. It may also incorporate elements brought in from other sites. It seems likely that Bexwell Hall was taken down after 1790 and before 1805 and that the Barn was built soon thereafter, probably c. 1800. Fabric evidence fails to indicate that the Barn ever had a domestic use, and suggests that it probably had an agricultural purpose from the start. The re-use of the fabric from the Hall was doubtless practical but given the interests of the probable owner at the time, whether Robert Fellowes the elder or younger, was also likely to have been historically minded.

If further research were to be carried out, continued investigation into the records of the NRO might yield information. It would also be desirable to carry out investigation of Bexwell Hall Farmhouse (UID 221474), identified in the listing description as a late-16th-century farmhouse, refaced in the mid-18th century, remodelled in the 19th century and incorporating reused beams, again reputedly from West Dereham Abbey. It is possible that at least parts of Bexwell Hall Farmhouse might also come from Bexwell Hall, which might in turn shed further light on the genesis of Bexwell Barn.

APPENDIX 1

SUMMARY TIMELINE FOR OWNERS OF BEXWELL UP TO 1840 AND OTHER SIGNIFICANT SOURCE DATES

William de Bekeswell (in time of Henry 1)

William de Bekswell (12th year of Henry II)

First Moiety

William de Bexwell (41st year of Henry III)

William de Bekeswell (49th year of Henry III) with Peter de Bekeswell as heir

William de Bekeswell (3rd year of Edward I)

John de Bexwell (9th year of Edward II)

Richard Bexwell (5th year of Henry VIII)

John Bexwell (1st year of Edward VI)

Frances Bexwell – 1577

Henry Bexwell – d. 1654 – left estate to daughter, Frances, who married Robert Aprice of Washingly in Huntingdonshire.

Conveyed estate to Sir John Holland of Quidenham, Norfolk

1713 conveyed by Act of Parliament to John Holt Esq. of Redgrave, Suffolk

Second Moiety

Hermerus de Bexwell (4th year of John)

Richard de Almany (time of Henry III)

Stephen de Bekeswell (6th of Edward 1)

Henry de Dene (9th of Edward II)

Hugh Catchare of Bekeswell (3rd of Edward III)

John de Bexwell & Henry de Deen (20th of Edward III)

Edward Batchcroft in time of Henry VII

William Bachecroft – d. 1507

Richard Bachecroft – d. June 27 1549

Thomas Bachecroft – 1572

Richard Bachecroft – 1642

Francis Bachecroft – d. 1658 – estate sold by his sister and co-heirs to Sir John Holland

1713 conveyed by Act of Parliament to John Holt Esq. of Redgrave, Suffolk

1797 Faden's Map of Norfolk (surveyed 1790 to 1794) is published and Bexwell Hall is still marked.

1799 Thomas Holt sold freehold land in Bexwell to Robert Fellowes (1742–1829)

c. 1800 John Adey Repton published illustration of chimneys at 'Bexhill, near Downham Market'

1805 Francis Blomefield's *An Essay towards a Topographical History of Norfolk* is published, and does not mention the fabric survival of Bexwell Hall

1815 Robert Fellowes I settled property on his son, Robert Fellowes II (1779–1869)

1832 First known map source that indicates building recognisable as Barn

1838 Tithe Map indicates Barn as non-residential

1840 Robert Fellowes II sold Bexwell estate to Edward Roger Pratt of Ryston Hall

1840 Edward Roger Pratt sold plot with Barn to Mrs Elizabeth Doyle

ENDNOTES

1. N. Pevsner & B. Wilson, *Norfolk: 2, North-West and South*, rev. edn, New Haven and London, 1999, 205; A. Emery, *Greater Medieval Houses of England and Wales: Vol. II, East Anglia, Central England and Wales*, Cambridge, 2000, 85.

2. S. Heywood, 'Bexwell Lodgings, Ryston', unpublished report, 1996.

3. Pevsner, *op. cit.*, 205, and Emery, *op. cit.*, 85, suggested a stairwell, while Heywood, *op. cit.*, unpaginated, suggested a fireplace flanked by garderobes.

4. Pevsner, *op. cit.*, 205.

5. Emery, *op. cit.*, 85.

6. Heywood, *op. cit.*, unpaginated.

7. Francis Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of Norfolk* (1805), vol. VII, 303–310.

8. Norfolk Record Office (NRO), FEL 2, 546x2.

9. NRO, FEL 330, 551x7.

10. NRO, PRA 47/32.

11. NRO, PRA 369, 379x6.

12. NRO, FEL 471, 552x8.

13. NRO, FEL 720, 555x1.

14. NRO, PRA 367, 379x6.

15. *Ibid.*

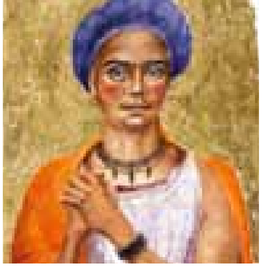
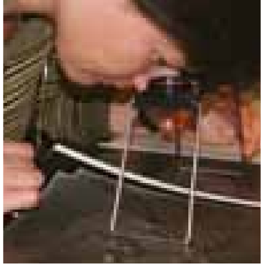
16. NRO, DE/TA 3.

17. NRO, PRA 369, 379x6.

18. Reproduced in G. Carter, P. Goode and K. Laurie, *Humphry Repton: Landscape Gardener, 1752–1818*, London, 1982, plate 72.

19. NRO, FEL 471, 552x8.

20. Pevsner and Emery both posited that it was a 15th-century gatehouse, while Heywood suggested it was 16th-century lodgings.

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