

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

*Site Code: HAR-E-A*

*from*

The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England

**by**

Nat Alcock and Dan Miles



Fig. 1. Tibberton Cottage, Harwell, from the south (Photo: D. Clark)

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***Oxbow Books***

HAR-E: TIBBERTON COTTAGE, WELLSHEAD LANE, HARWELL,  
OXFORDSHIRE

The house was formerly called Bakers Cottage, and has also been referred to as Tiverton Cottage.

Grid reference: SU 4917 8887      Survey Date: 13 December 1989 and later      By: D. Miles

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References: C. R. J. Currie (1987) 'Harwell houses to 1700: an interim gazetteer', in John Ashdown and Julian Munby (eds) (1987) *Vernacular Architecture Group Spring Conference 1987*, 24; C. R. J. Currie (1992). 'Larger medieval houses in the Vale of the White Horse', *Oxoniensia*, 57, 81-244 (157-8); C. R. J. Currie and J. M. Fletcher (1972) 'Two early cruck houses in north Berkshire identified by radiocarbon', *Medieval Archaeology*, 16, 136-142.

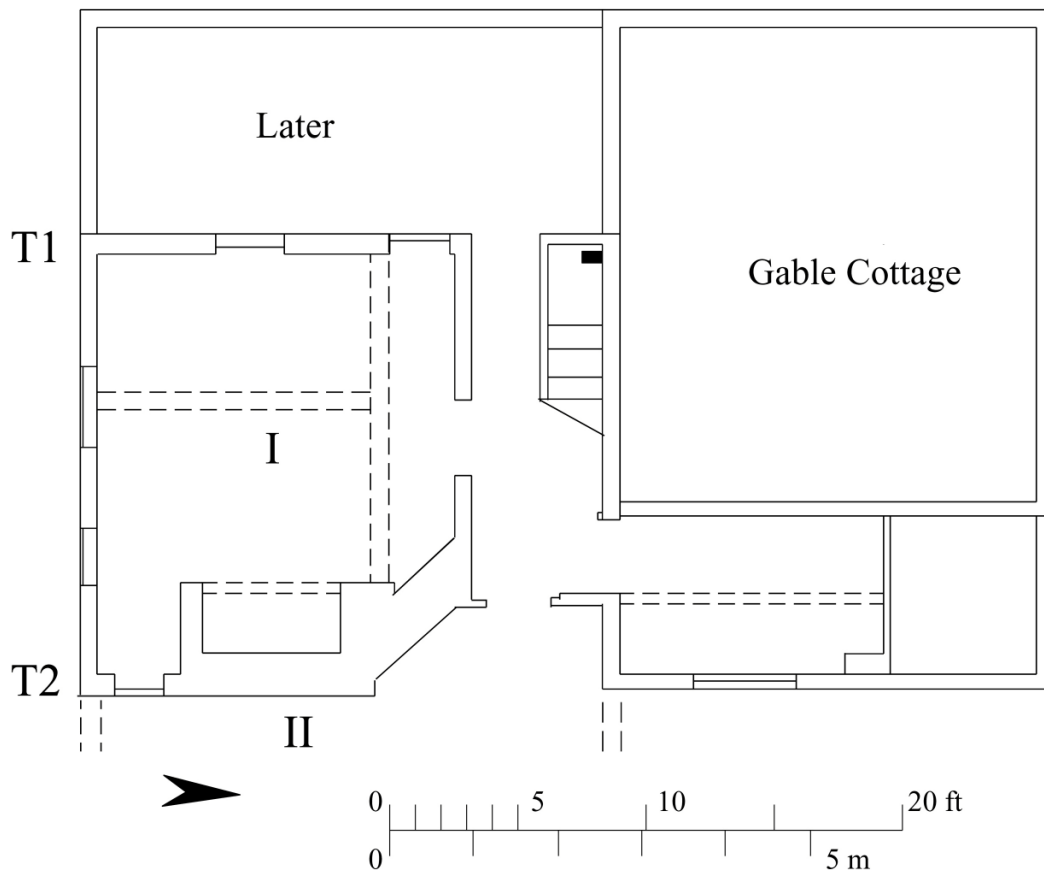


Fig. 2. Plan, showing truss and bay numbering (from survey by David Clarke, 2010); Gable Cottage is shown in outline only.

## ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY

### SUMMARY AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

PHASE 1: Tibberton Cottage contains one surviving bay of a wide two-bayed cruck hall. Only the end truss is reasonably complete; of the arch-braced open truss only a length of the collar is visible, and the remainder may well have been destroyed. Currie (1987) suggests from the slope of the ground that the hall range did not continue to the east beyond the inferred position of truss T3 at the eastern end of the hall. Thus, the hall was probably associated with a separate chamber near the site of the present Gable Cottage, a two-storeyed seventeenth-century house standing in front of Tibberton Cottage. Truss T2 has previously been described as a base cruck and as having only common rafters above the collar. However,

it lacks any of the aisled features typical of base crucks, and the exposure of the top of the collar fragment (or perhaps of a separate timber placed above it) shows that it carried an upper principal. Considering also the form of the end truss, the building is now regarded as a true cruck of 'F2' form (collar carrying upper principals). The primary structure has a felling date range of **1294-1324**.

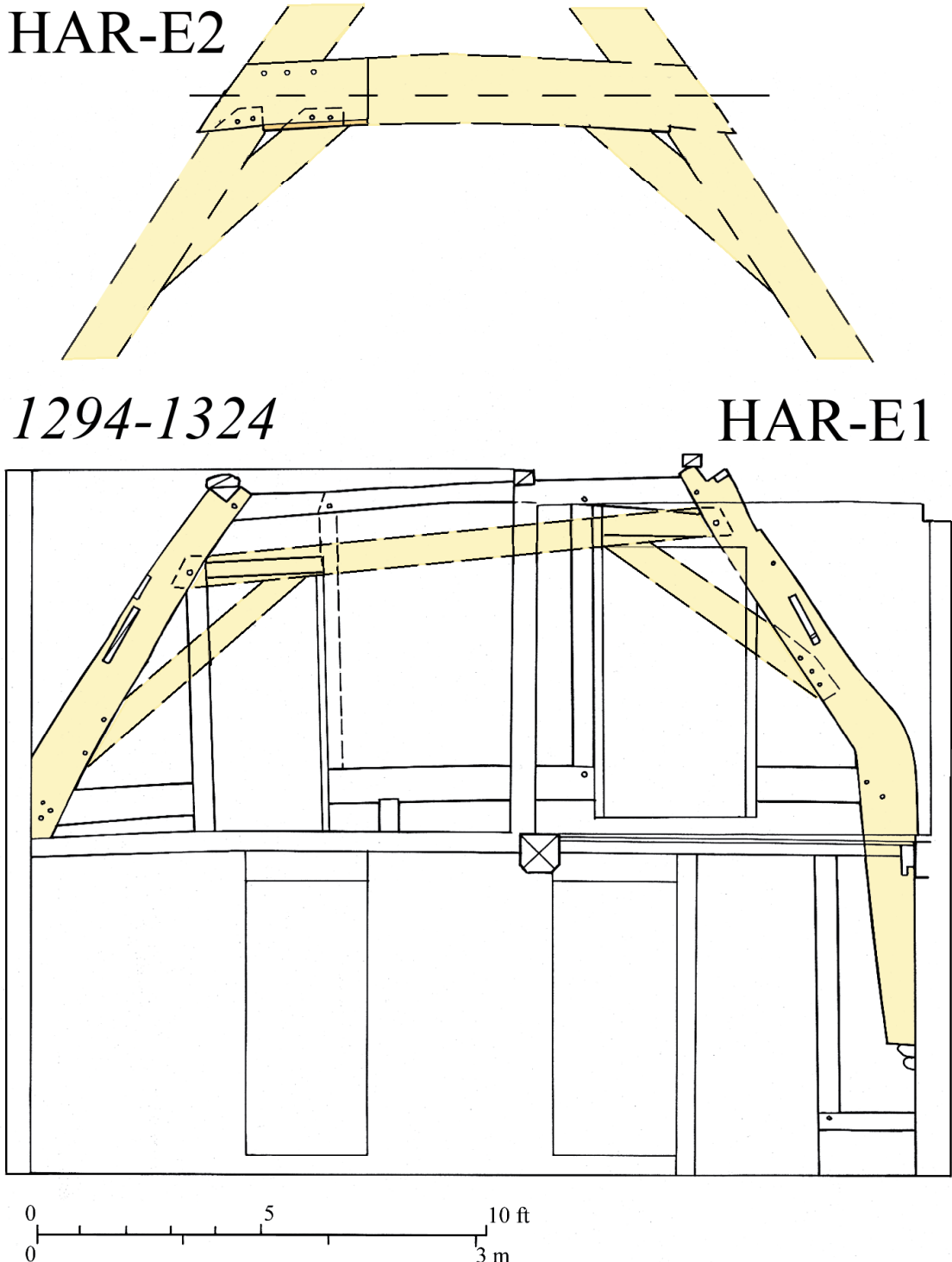


Fig. 3. Section of truss T1. Top: collar and reconstruction of Truss 2.

LATER PHASES: The hall was extended to the west, perhaps when Gable Cottage was built, replacing the inferred chamber. The house was later raised and cased in brick.

**STRUCTURAL FEATURES**

CRUCK TRUSSES: A reconstruction of the western truss (T1, Fig. 3) has previously been presented including a tiebeam, a doubled collar and two sets of purlins (Currie and Fletcher, 1972), and it has been

described as half-hipped (apex type V). However, recent re-examination strongly suggests that only the two cruck blades are *in situ* from the original structure. The left (south) blade has sunk considerably, so that the line of the original collar is substantially inclined. The cruck blades are 6in thick, and the upper collar is 5½in thick. At the foot of the cruck a large 1¾in diameter hole was noted on the northern blade two feet above the bottom of the cruck. Here the cruck rests on two stones. Mortices in the cruck blades provide evidence for the original collar with its braces, which the evidence from truss T2 suggests were straight and very steep. A shallow trench on the northern blade, roughly level with the original collar, may have held one of the original purlins. The multiplicity of pegholes at the end of the present tiebeam suggests that the original one was at about the same height. The original wall plate probably does not survive, although the elm rail at ceiling level may represent a later replacement.

After most of the settlement had occurred, both the collar and the tiebeam were replaced, with two studs pegged between them; the tiebeam has been severed in two places for later doorways, presumably when the west end bay was added. The crucks now terminate just above the upper collar where they have been substantially reduced for the later purlin housing, giving it a half-hipped form (apex V), although originally the blades may have been longer; the visible windbrace mortices relate to the replacement purlins. No peg holes were noted on the upper side of the upper collar that might have held the rafters of a half hip.

Of the eastern truss (T2, Fig. 3, top), only a 4ft length of collar is visible, although more may be concealed behind plaster in the adjacent room. This measures 8½in thick by 10in high, with the soffit chamfered; it is possibly composed of two pieces of timber, their junction concealed by the present ceiling. It has a mortice beneath it for the cruck blade, and a second mortice with two pegs for what must have been a very short straight brace, as shown in the suggested reconstruction. Pegs for a large mortice in the top of the collar must relate to upper principals (now removed), indicating that it was a cruck of type F2, with upper principals. The possibility cannot be excluded that it also had a central king strut (apex F3). A | assembly mark 2in high is chiselled on the west side of the collar. It has some indication of soot encrustation under the paintwork. The centre-to-centre spacing between trusses T1 and T2 is 14ft.

#### **DOCUMENTARY HISTORY**

The house was freehold in 1804 (Currie, 1987), a house and garden owned by Arthur Mascall, including the present Gable cottage (plot 61 on the enclosure award). The adjoining Holywell Cottage (HAR-F) was built on a small triangular plot (no. 60) which had clearly been carved out of Tibberton Cottage's curtilage.

#### **DENDROCHRONOLOGY AND RADIOCARBON DATING**

For dendrochronology abbreviations see page facing Introduction.

*Sampling Comments:* Five samples were obtained through coring by Robert Howard on 13 December 1989. Both cruck blades from truss T1 as well as the tiebeam and collar were sampled. The collar from truss T2 was also sampled and it matched the samples from the T1 cruck blades. This sequence was dated with a last measured ring date of 1283. The three samples all had the heartwood/sapwood boundary within a few years of each other proving that both trusses are coeval. The two undated samples were originally thought to be primary, but are now considered to be from the reconstruction phase.

A previous tree-ring analysis by John Fletcher was published in *Vernacular Architecture* 14 (1983), 62. A section sawn off the truncated cruck blade (presumably the south blade as it has the same first ring date as sample HAR-E02), produced a sequence spanning 1189-1262; it had no sapwood or heartwood/sapwood boundary, Fletcher gave an earliest felling date of 1282. He also suggested a likely felling date range of 1285-1295 but without stating how this was calculated. Radiocarbon analysis was also carried out for John Fletcher by R Berger of UCLA. Again a section of cruck blade was used (probably part of the same sample), although the relationship of the sample to the heartwood/sapwood boundary is not given. After revision, a date of 1275±50 was obtained (Currie & Fletcher, 1972).

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-E01	Tiebeam truss T1	81	10	—	—	—	—
HAR-E02	Rear (S) cruck blade truss T1	91	HS	1189	1279	1279	5
HAR-E03	Front (N) cruck blade truss T1	84	HS	1195	1278	1278	5
HAR-E04	Collar truss T1	55	16	—	—	—	—
HAR-E05	Collar truss T2	95	HS	1189	1283	1283	5
Average date of last heartwood ring						1280	

Site sequence (composed of samples 2, 3, 5) 95 rings long matched at 1189–1283 with *t*-values: 3.5 (OXFORD), 3.5 (E.MID), 3.0 (S.ENG), 5.7 (DHR-CFL), 3.9 (DHR-QHC2), 4.3 (READING), 4.1 (DROITWICH), 3.3 (SLOUGH), 3.1 (DUNSTABLE). An alternative match with lower *t*-values dating this sequence to 1369–1463 has been disregarded.

Estimated 95% felling date range: 1289-1321 (previously 1293–1318). The OxCal refined felling date range (sample 5) is ***1294-1324***, which is considered the most reliable figure. For plotting and statistical purposes, this house has been treated as dating from the thirteenth rather than the fourteenth century.