

# A Timber-framed Building in Legrave

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## SUMMARY

*This paper provides a detailed description of No. 57, Compton Avenue, Legrave, in the ancient Parish of Luton, Bedfordshire. It originally comprised two thatched timber-framed, apparently single cell, cottages, under one roof, dating from the 18th century. Indeed, numismatic evidence suggests a date in the 1770s, or perhaps even later. Much of the timber framing, in particular the principal posts and roof trusses, were revised from an earlier building or buildings and the use of nails in the assembly of roof timbers is entirely consistent with a late date.*

*The central axial chimney served back-to-back fire-places, one heating each dwelling and comprising chamfered oak lintels resting on orange brick jambs in Flemish bond. No. 57 is illustrated on the Tithe Map of 1842, at which time it formed part of the estate of Sir Edmund Filmer.*

*Although listed as Grade II by the Department of the Environment, the property was condemned as being unfit for human habitation in 1982. Listed Building Consent for demolition followed a Local Inquiry held in 1983. However, Mr Clive Booth, the owner, generously agreed to present the building to the Chiltern Open Air Museum at Chalfont St. Giles, Buckinghamshire and work on its gutting, recording and dismantling was carried out in October, 1983 to March, 1984.*

## INTRODUCTION

A remarkable, indeed pleasing survival amidst the somewhat dull 20th century suburban sprawl of Legrave was the timber-framed and thatched No. 57, Compton Avenue.<sup>1</sup> It was situated on the south side of Compton Avenue, 70 yds (64 m) east of its junction with High Street and 450 yds (411.5 m) west of Legrave Railway Station (N.G.R. TL: 059238).

Alas, by 1979, the building had fallen into a state of disrepair and was subsequently listed as Grade II by the Department of the Environment.<sup>2</sup> The last occupant was evicted in 1982, when the Borough of Luton condemned the building as being unfit for human habitation. In spite of some local opposition,

an application for 'Listed Building Consent' for demolition was granted, following a 'Local Inquiry' held by the Department of the Environment in March, 1983. As it was clear that the building would not be preserved *in situ*, the Chiltern Open Air Museum approached the owner, Mr Clive Booth, proprietor of the Compton Garden Centre, with a view to removing it to Chalfont St Giles, Buckinghamshire. The building was generously donated to the Museum by Mr Booth and work on its gutting, recording and dismantling was carried out in October, 1983 to March, 1984.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE BUILDING (Plate A and Figs 1-7)

No. 57, Compton Avenue was a single-storeyed, thatch-roofed, three bay timber-framed building 36 ft 3 ins (11.049 m) long x 12 ft 1 in (3.683 m) wide and appears originally to have comprised two small dwellings/cottages (Fig 1).

The north gable end (Fig 2 A-B) comprised a reused cambered tie-beam resting on reused jowled principal posts with slightly curved tension braces, 3¼ ins (8.3 cm) thick, springing from the latter to the top of the end sill. The sill was tenoned to the principal posts and the widely spaced, roughly hewn studs, were tenoned to the soffit of the tie-beam and the top of the sill, but nailed to the braces. Principal posts A and B were tenoned to the tops of the side sills. Springing from the top of the tie-beam were two angle-struts, which were tenoned to the principal rafters, the latter of which were 5 ins (12.7 cm) wide.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, two upright studs extended from the tie-beam to the principal rafters and were bridged by a short collar. The side-purlins were nailed to the principal rafters, and a yoke which was nailed to the inner faces of the rafters, supported the ridge piece. The principal rafters were morticed and tenoned at the apex.

The south gable end (Fig 2; I-J) was identical to the north gable end, except that its roof truss was of lower king-and-queen-struts type.<sup>4</sup> The cambered collar clasped the side-purlins, and a yoke nailed to the inner faces of the principal rafters, supported the ridge piece.

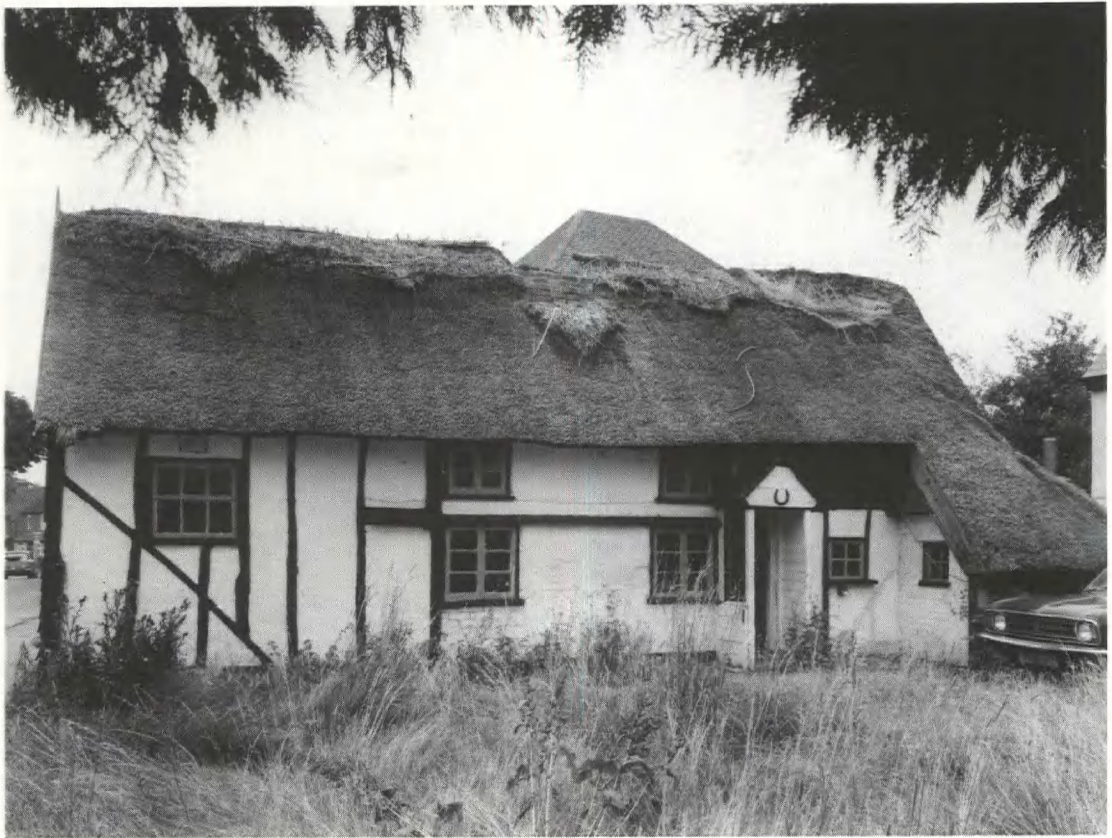


Plate A Leagrave: No. 57, Compton Avenue from the west, following the removal of the upper part of the chimney. October, 1983. By courtesy of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments

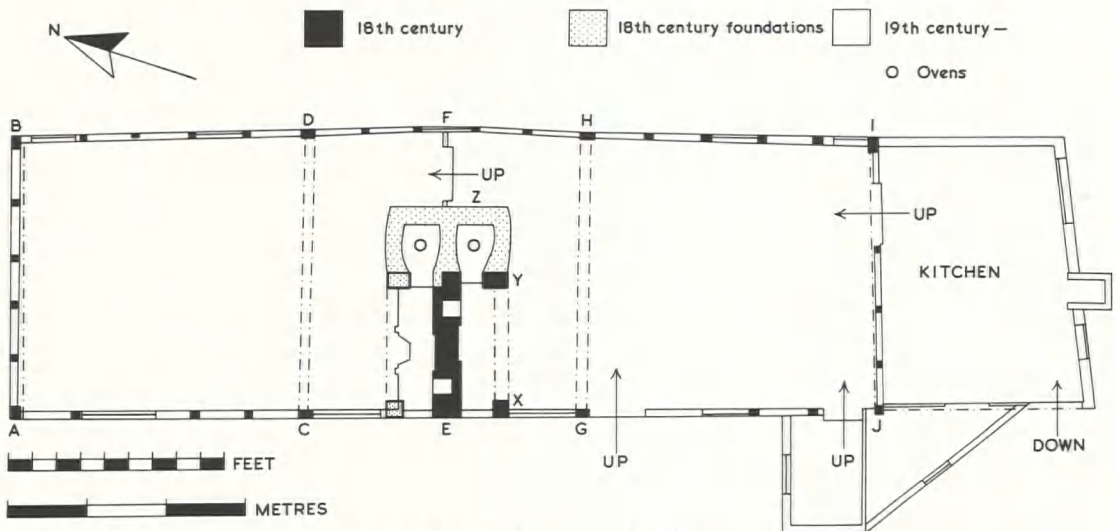


Fig 1 Leagrave: No. 57, Compton Avenue. Plan

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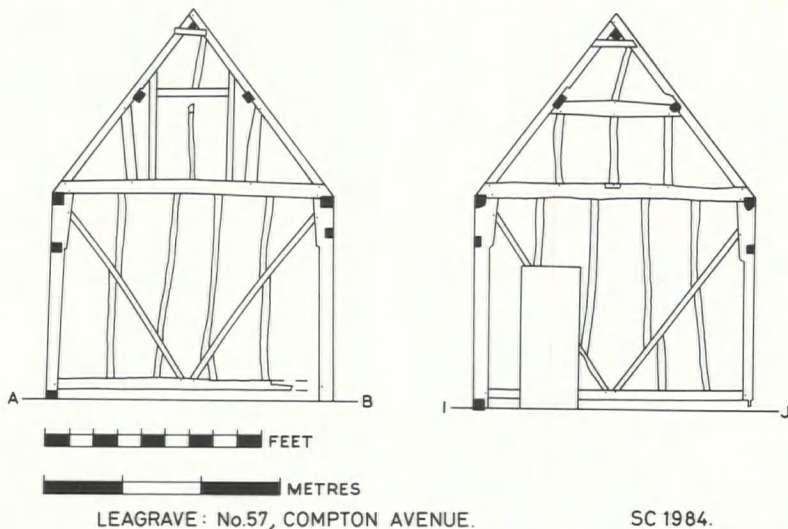


Fig 2 Legrave: No. 57, Compton Avenue. North gable end A-B and south gable end I-J

The tie-beam of truss C-D (Fig 3) had been removed, as had the angle-struts, which had been halved to the north faces of the common rafters. Again, the ridge piece was supported by a yoke nailed to the north face of the common rafters.

Truss E-F (Fig 3) comprised the partition dividing the two dwellings and included the chimney shaft, with back-to-back fireplaces. It lacked a tie-beam, being midway between trusses C-D and G-H. The partition comprised a series of flimsy studs and

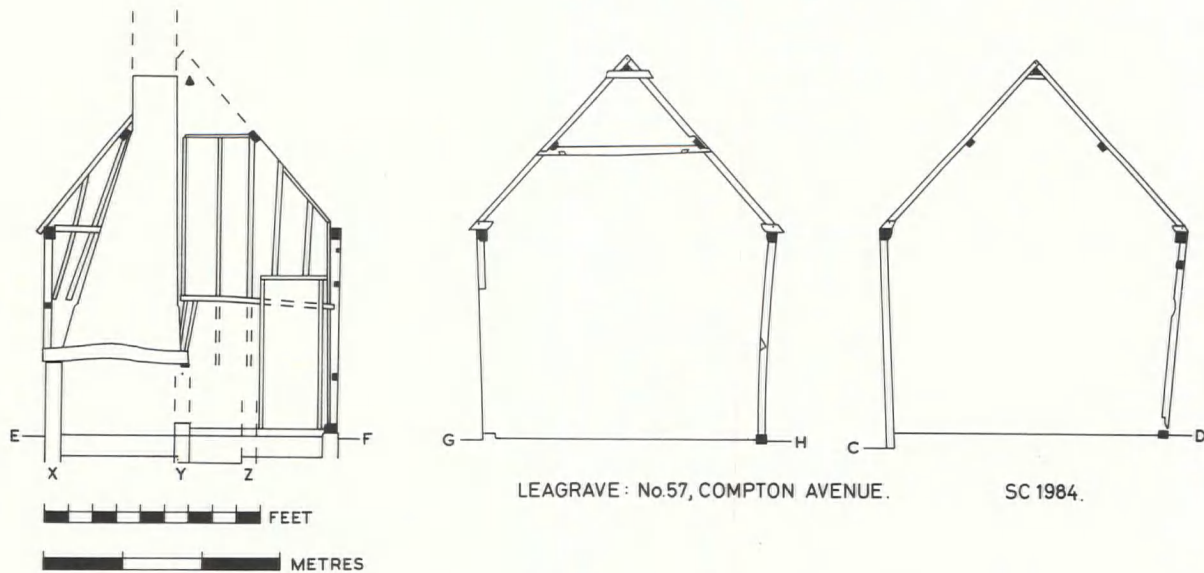
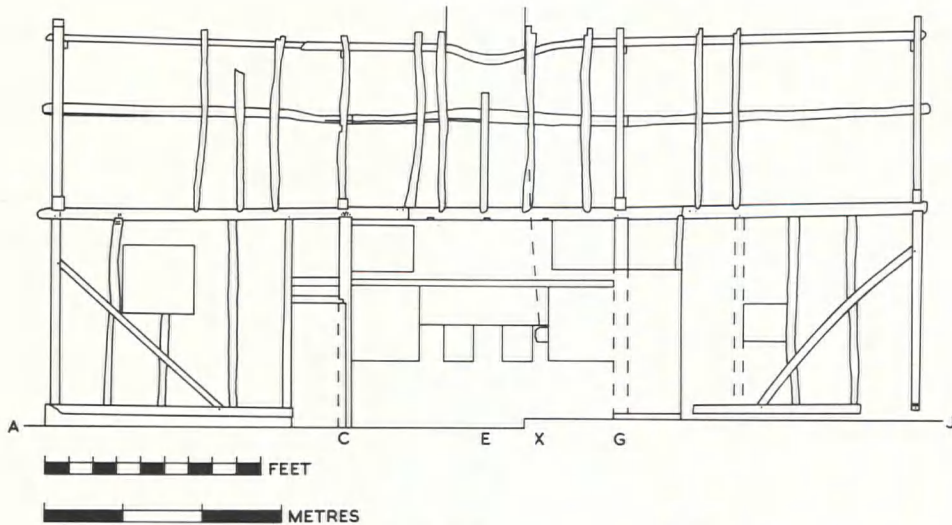


Fig 3 Legrave: No. 57, Compton Avenue. Partition between dwellings. Fireplace and chimney shaft E-F. Roof trusses C-D and G-H



LEAGRAVE: No.57, COMPTON AVENUE.

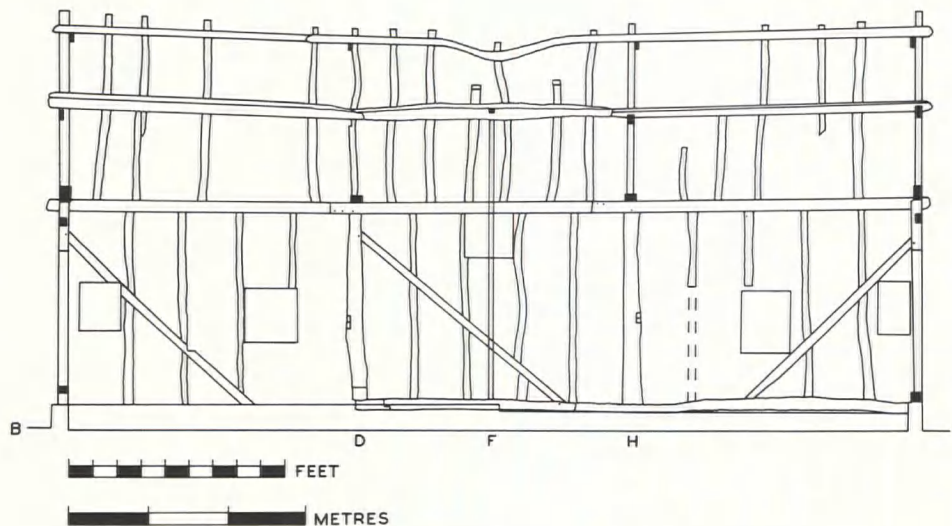
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Fig 4 Leagrave: No. 57, Compton Avenue, West elevation

horizontal members. Packed between the studs were orange and red bricks, placed on edge,<sup>5</sup> encased in nailed horizontal laths, in turn rendered in plaster reinforced with animal hair. It is noteworthy that this partition was inserted after the

application of laths and plaster to the inner faces of the rafters and studs of the east wall. A doorway was cut through the partition in c 1928,<sup>6</sup> when the dwellings were converted into one cottage.

The tie-beam of truss G-H (Fig 3) had also been



LEAGRAVE: No.57, COMPTON AVENUE.

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Fig 5 Leagrave: No. 57, Compton Avenue. Longitudinal section showing east wall and roof

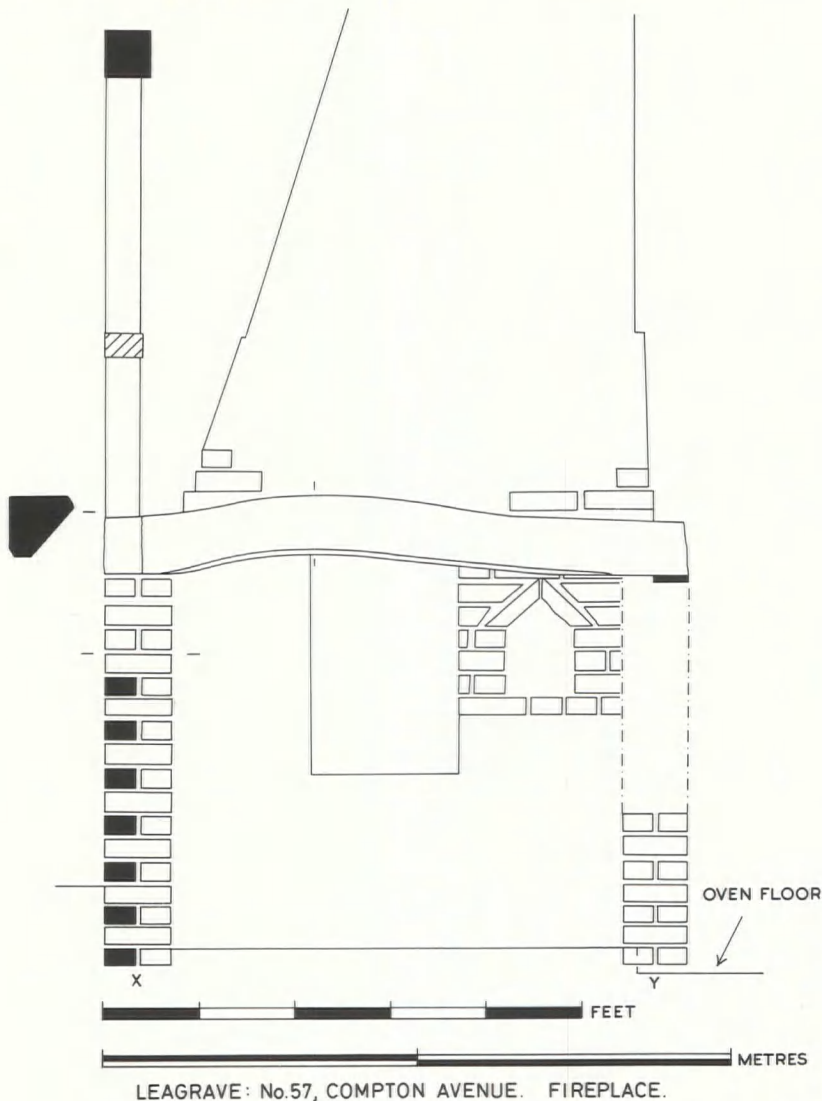


Fig 6 Legrave: No. 57, Compton Avenue. Fireplace detail X-Y

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removed, though the collar, which was dovetailed to the south faces of the common rafters and which clasped the side-purlins, had survived. On the south face of the collar were dovetail housings for angled queen-struts,<sup>7</sup> which were presumably tenoned to the top of the tie-beam. Again, a yoke supported the ridge piece.

As for the timber framing below roof level, it should be mentioned that only the principal posts at the gable ends were jowled and these were reused from an earlier structure. Straight and slightly

curved tension braces 2½-3 ins (6.4-7.6 cm) thick sprang from the principal posts to the tops of the sills and the roughly hewn studs were widely spaced, four to a bay (Figs 4-5). The wall-plates had secret bridled scarf joints (Fig 7), one of which, of the east wall-plate, was inverted, whilst the side-purlins and ridge piece had simple splayed scarfs nailed together. The entire timber frame rested on orange and red brick foundations 8½ ins (21.6 cm) wide.<sup>8</sup>

Only the north and south gable ends were clad in weather-boarding and nailed to the inner faces of

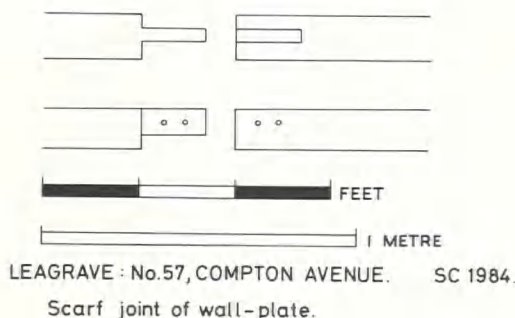


Fig 7 Legrave: No. 57, Compton Avenue. Secret bridled scarf joint of the west wall-plate

the boards were vertical laths. These laths were in turn concealed beneath puddled chalk-and-earth with pebbles packed between the timbers and encased within nailed horizontal laths, to which was applied plaster, reinforced with animal hair. Identical infilling was present in the east wall, except that the exterior comprised nailed horizontal laths rendered in plaster. Some repair work below the tension brace between principal posts B and D, comprised merely a mixture of clay with pebbles, resembling cob. The original infilling of the west wall had been replaced with whitewashed orange and red brick nogging. However, the lower part of the west wall of the central bay, between principal posts C and G, was of orange bricks in Flemish and stretcher bonds,<sup>9</sup> contemporary with the original back-to-back fireplaces.

The fireplace of the southernmost cottage (Figs 1, 3 and 6: X-Y) had survived largely intact, comprising a chamfered, cambered oak lintel 6 ft 1½ ins (1.867 m) long x 7½ ins (19.1 cm) resting on orange brick jambs 8½ ins (21.6 cm) wide and 3 ft 11 ins (1.94 m) high. Piercing the back/central wall was a triangular-arched niche 1 ft ½ in (31.8 cm) high x 8¾ ins (22.2 cm) wide x 9¼ ins (23.5 cm) deep. The upper part of jamb Y had been removed during the early part of the present century. Alas, the fireplace of the northernmost cottage had been destroyed in c 1928, with only the foundations, chimney shaft and back/central wall surviving, the latter of which was pierced by yet another triangular-arched brick niche. A smaller fireplace was created in c 1928, with the reuse of a Victorian wrought-iron fire-back and surround. Following the dismantling of the timber frame, archaeological excavations disclosed the orange brick foundations of two identical ovens, at the east ends of the fireplaces (Fig 1:O). They were served by flues, piercing the east jambs of the

fireplaces and their floors were 3½ ins (8.9 cm) lower than the fireplace floors.

Piercing the brickwork of the west wall were two contemporary ventilation holes (presumably originally with grills) 1 ft 6 ins (4.57 cm) high x 1 ft 3 ins (38.1 cm) wide. Presumably the tops of these holes were originally surmounted by a timber plate, above which were three studs, which were tenoned to the wall-plate. The studs and plate were replaced during the 19th century by thick reddish-brown bricks in stretcher bond<sup>10</sup> and a longer timber plate, the latter at a higher level. It is clear that the windows abutted against the faces of the fireplace lintels and that the original doorways abutted the principal posts C and G.

At a depth of 11 ins (27.9 cm) below the raised, c 1928 floor (floorboards on joists) were found orange and red paving bricks, possibly the original flooring.<sup>11</sup> A farthing of George III, of the 1770s, was found embedded in mortar beneath a paving brick, inside the south end of the building, close to principal post J. The paving bricks in this area appeared to be contemporary with the brick foundations of the south gable end, however, it is stressed that foundations of timber-framed buildings were frequently repaired or replaced, the original sills being left in position.

Adjoining the southernmost cottage on its south side, was a 19th century timber-framed kitchen with thatched roof. First floor bedrooms had been inserted in both cottages by c 1912,<sup>12</sup> hence the presence of dormers in the east slope of the thatched roof. However, they were removed in c 1928, when the dwellings were converted into one cottage.

#### DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE<sup>13</sup>

The earliest large scale detailed map, preserved in

the Bedford County Record Office, which shows No. 57, Compton Avenue, its associated boundaries and the remainder of the Leagrave settlement, is the Tithe Map of 1842.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, no enclosure map or award exists for Luton, the parish in which Leagrave lay.

On the Tithe Map, No. 57 is included with other buildings in a plot numbered 34 and described in the award as merely 'Cottages and Gardens' occupied by 'Joseph Thomas and others' all on 2r. 24p. of land owned by Sir Edmund Filmer, Bart. The latter was the chief landowner in Leagrave hamlet (*i.e.* township) in 1842.

Filmer's property in Leagrave, the adjoining hamlet of Limbury and the parishes of Toddington and Caddington is also detailed in a volume in the County Record Office, which contains a series of maps and schedules.<sup>15</sup> Though undated, this survey can be shown to have been prepared sometime between 1834, when Sir Edmund succeeded to the estate, and 1842. No 57, together with a building just to the south, is shown on a plot numbered 92, which is listed in the schedule as follows:

Occupier	Description
Richard Pigott	Cottage and Garden 1r.4p.
John Steff (This name crossed out in pencil and replaced by name Joseph Thomas)	Cottage and Garden
John James	Cottage and Garden
Thomas Bosworth	Cottage and Garden

It is not possible to identify who of these agricultural labourers lived in which building, but it is clear that both buildings were subdivided into tenements to accommodate the four households, a very common situation at this date.

The four original occupiers names given above also occur together in a parish rate book for 1833,<sup>16</sup> when these cottage properties were each assessed at 10/- with a rate of 6d payable. At this date the Rev Sir John Filmer, Bart., uncle of Sir Edmund, owned the property. None of the other parish rate books for the earlier 19th century include these particular cottages, presumably they were not of sufficient value to be assessed. These buildings also cannot be positively identified in the land tax assessments for 1797-1832, though there is an outside chance that they may be included as part of a series of entries for Richard Piggot (*sic*), from 1805-1832, preceded by John Gobby from 1797-1804.<sup>17</sup>

## THE COINS

Four coins were recovered during the excavation.

Floor to east of the ovens.

1. Charles II. 1660-1685. Milled copper farthing. Obv. CAROLVS.A.CAROLO. Head of Charles II left. Rev. BRITAN NIA. Figure of Britannia. 1672-75 or 1679. Seaby 2659.<sup>18</sup>
2. George II. 1727-1760. Milled copper halfpenny. Obv. GEORGIVS. II. REX. Head of George II left. Rev. BRITAN NIA. Figure of Britannia. 174? Date unclear. Seaby 2948/2949.

Below floor level, between east wall and northernmost oven.

3. Illegible copper halfpenny. 18th century. Obv. Illegible. Rev. Part of Britannia's shield visible.

Set in mortar under paving brick of floor near south gable end.

4. George III. 1760-1820. Milled copper farthing. Obv. GEORGIVS III REX. Head of George III right. Rev. BRITAN NIA. Figure of Britannia. 1771 or 1773-75. Date unclear. Seaby 3030.

This coin is thought to have been in mint condition when deposited in the mortar, the latter of which had corroded the date.

## CONCLUSIONS

This building appears originally to have comprised two single cell dwellings under one roof, which were heated from a central axial chimney. Careful examination of the timber frame provided no evidence of the existence of original first floors, though as mentioned above, first floor bedrooms existed by c 1912,<sup>19</sup> but were subsequently removed in c 1928, when the building was converted into one dwelling. Presumably secondary timber frames were erected within the building to support binding beams and joists? We are told that narrow staircases existed between the ovens and east wall. None of the surviving windows appeared to be earlier than the 19th-20th centuries and it is doubtful whether any windows originally pierced the east wall.

Abundant reuse of timber, in some cases entire posts and tie-beams, the use of nails in the assembly of roof timbers, taken in conjunction with a contemporary chimney and fireplaces built of orange bricks

(8½ x 4 x 4¼ ins x 2⅝ ins/21.6 x 10.2-10.5 x 6.7 cm) in Flemish bond, indicates a date in the 18th century. Moreover, if the paving bricks and brick foundations of the south gable end were contemporary with the timber frame, the George III farthing mentioned above, would place the date of the building in the 1770s or later.

It is perhaps worth stressing that but for the removal of No. 57, Compton Avenue to the Chiltern Open Air Museum, it is doubtful whether such a late and lowly timber-framed structure would have received such lavish detailed recording. At the time of writing, in February, 1986, the timbers lay in store at the Chiltern Open Air Museum, Chalfont St Giles, awaiting the funds and resources necessary to enable their re-erection.

A mere handful of timber-framed buildings now survives in the Borough of Luton and the task of recording their historic architectural elements is of the utmost importance and urgency. Hopefully, some, unlike No. 57, Compton Avenue, will be allowed to survive *in situ* for posterity.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thanks are due to Mr Clive A. Booth of the Compton Garden Centre, not only for generously donating the building to the Chiltern Open Air Museum, but also for affording every facility for its gutting and recording. His kind hospitality is much appreciated. Mr Ron Jones, the resident of No. 61, Compton Avenue, is thanked for keeping an eagle eye on the building during weekdays.

A special debt of thanks must go to the following people who helped with the gutting and recording work: Mr John Hyde Trutch, Mr Ron Grace, Mr Kevin Bailey, Mr George Robinson, Mr John Bishop, Mr and Mrs Philip Buller, Mr John Broadbent and lastly, members of the Marsh Farm Scout Venture Unit, Leagrave. Dismantling of the building was supervised by Mr John Hyde Trutch.

Mr K.A. Howes of the British Museum is thanked for cleaning the coins. Mr David Baker, MA, FSA, Conservation Officer of

Bedfordshire County Council, is thanked not only for his moral support, but for permitting me to use the notes on the maps and documents relating to the building, compiled by his colleague Mr S.R. Coleman.

Last but not least, thanks must go to Mr J.T. Smith, MA, FSA, Principal Investigator of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, both for his helpful comments on my records of the building and for arranging detailed photographic coverage.

#### NOTES

- 1 H. White, ed., *Luton Past and Present* (Luton, 1977), p. 88, which exclaims "Extant thatched cottage, probably seventeenth century, in Compton Avenue, Leagrave."
- 2 *Borough of Luton: Building Preservation in Luton: Recommendations for a new list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest* (April, 1979), p. 84.
- 3 R.A. Cordingley, 'British Historical Roof-types and their Members: A Classification', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, N.S., Vol. 9 (1961), p. 99.
- 4 Cordingley, *op. cit.* in note 3, p. 91, Type Vd (4c), but with ridge piece.
- 5 Bricks measuring 8½-8⅝ ins x 4 ins x 2½ ins (21.6-21.9 x 10.2 x 6.4 cm).
- 6 J. Hyde Trutch, '57, Compton Avenue, Leagrave: A Recent Acquisition', *Chiltern Open Air Museum, Friends' Newsletter*, No. 18 (July, 1984), p. 4.
- 7 Cordingley, *op. cit.* in note 3, p. 86, Type IIi, but angled queen-struts and with ridge piece.
- 8 Bricks measuring 8½ ins x 4-4¼ ins x 2⅝ ins (21.6 x 10.2-10.5 x 6.7 cm).
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Bricks measuring 9 ins x 4¼ ins x 2¾ ins (22.9 x 10.5 x 7.0 cm).
- 11 Paving bricks measuring 8¼ ins x 3¾-4¼ ins x 1⅞-2⅞ ins (20.9 x 9.5-10.5 cm x 4.8-5.4 cm).
- 12 Hyde Trutch, *op. cit.* in note 6, pp. 3-4.
- 13 Notes kindly provided by Mr S.R. Coleman of the Planning Department of Bedfordshire County Council.
- 14 Bedford CRO MAT 30/1.
- 15 *Survey of Estates of Sir Edmund Filmer, Bart* (CRO BH UNCAT, Bundle 323).
- 16 Bedford CRO P85/11/10.
- 17 Bedford CRO Q.D.L. Leagrave.
- 18 H.A. Seaby, *Standard Catalogue of British Coins: 1. England and United Kingdom* (London, 1964).
- 19 Hyde Trutch, *op. cit.* in note 6, pp. 1-4.

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