

## John Bailey (1936–2008): timber-framed buildings expert

*Alan Crawley*

When John Bailey died on January 10th 2008, Bedfordshire lost the foremost authority on its medieval timber-framed buildings and I lost a very good friend. It was in the latter part of the 1970s that I first met John at a meeting of the Bedfordshire Archaeological Council. He had been a member for several years and was the assistant secretary when I first attended. We had nearly met a few years earlier, when we were both involved in the Bedford Archaeological Society's excavation at Clapham Manor House. I found out later that he was there on Sundays while I was there on Saturdays.

The course on timber-framed buildings that he ran at Elstow Craft Centre was where I really got to know him. If I remember correctly, the course went on for three years with just about the same people attending each year. It was an interesting selection of people, about half of whom lived in timber-framed houses and wanted to know more about them. This meant that we had easy access to study these buildings, and it also resulted in some extremely enjoyable and hospitable visits. John taught us all about Wealdens, Crucks, Dragon beams, Scarf joints, Wind braces and Clasp purlins with the use of slides and a good deal of humour. Everyone learnt a lot and had an enjoyable time doing it.

He had recently written and published *Timber-framed Buildings: A Study of medieval timber buildings in Bedfordshire and adjoining counties* (1979). I assisted him with distribution by selling them to shops.

John was a member of the Manshead Archaeological Society and participated in a number of their digs. When he became interested in researching timber-framed buildings he set up his own group. This was first called 'Dunstable Historic Buildings Research Group' (c. 1977) and by this time Maxine Miller was assisting him with the surveys. It later changed to become 'Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Cambridgeshire Historic Buildings Research Group' (c. 1980). It was around this time that I also started assisting in the surveys. I am not sure if the earlier group had more than two members, but by the time I came along and became a member there were just three of us.

I was never aware of any meetings, other than on site, or of any subscriptions.

His first survey to appear in the *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal (BAJ)* was of Calcutt Farm, a moated farmstead at Houghton Regis, in Volume 10, 1975. His superb drawings in this survey set a very high standard that he maintained in all his subsequent work. *BAJ* Volume 12, 1977 featured two of his surveys: Rowe's Cottage, a Wealden House at Little Barford; and Lower Roxhill Farm, Marston Moretaine.

John came to fame for his surveys of the timber-framed buildings of Elstow in the late 1970s when they were being restored by Chrystal & West, for Bedford Borough Council. This work was the main reason he became one of six finalists in the second BBC2 *Chronicle* Award, for which he received a finalist's prize of £500. It also led to his work at Elstow's being featuring in *Current Archaeology* in December 1978.

He contributed three articles in *BAJ* Volume 14, 1980: the first, a brief description of Ivy Farm, Stanbridge and Studham Hall Farm, Studham; secondly, a survey of two hall and cross-wing buildings, Sun House, Potton and Clawdershill Farm, Shillington; lastly, two buildings in Dunstable, numbers 7 and 9 West Street.

As soon as John entered a timber-framed building, any confusion or uncertainty was left far behind. It was quite incredible how quickly he orientated himself with his surroundings, while I was left far behind. He would walk about the building mentioning features, more or less talking to himself. When upstairs, he would be talking about the continuation of timbers from downstairs whilst I was not even sure which room was beneath which. It could be quite embarrassing because he would often be armed with a screwdriver, and would say 'I wonder if there are any shutter groves hiding there?', then start levering plaster away. I would hastily try to restrain him and put the fallen plaster in my pocket, hoping the gouges would go unnoticed.

Often, when we were invited to see a house, the owner would give us a tour of inspection, telling us all about the building, how it was all made from ship's timbers, *etc.* You can well imagine that it was very rare that owners knew much about their

building, although they thought they did. John, not being the most tactful person, would be quite direct in correcting their errors, which on one or two occasions led to some heated debates. I used to do my best to calm things down, but as the conversation continued John would do better than me. This was because the owner would soon recognise that John knew what he was talking about and that he (the owner) was starting to learn new things about his house.

Some buildings stand out in my memory a lot more than others, Fenlake Barns being the most memorable. We went there in the early 1980s before it was a hotel, when it was owned by Mr Smith, the boatman. The building had been used by him for many years to store boats and various tackle and was generally understood to be a 15th/16th-century tithe barn. It was an extremely cold winter's day on which we first viewed the interior, but we soon forgot that, at least for a time, because John quickly realised that the building was far older when he noticed the parallel rafter roof. It was also quite obvious that it was once aisled but the aisles had been removed, and the decoration on the aisle posts, among other things, indicated that it was originally an aisled hall, not a barn. The use of crucks to form bays at either end was also an interesting and unusual feature. Thus, from being considered as a run-of-the-mill late-medieval tithe barn, Fenlake Barns turned out to have been originally a rare early 13th-century aisled hall.

I suppose the next most exciting discovery for me was when Chris Whittaker of Bromhall Hall invited us to view his house, a fine stone building next to the River Ouse in Bromham. All we knew beforehand was Nikolaus Pevsner's very brief dismissal in his *Buildings of England* volume on *Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough* (1968): 'BROMHAM HALL. The large 14th-century doorway is probably not *in situ*. (There is also a kingpost roof inside)'. John's survey showed that it had originally been a timber-framed aisled hall with a crown post roof, dating from the early 14th century. The large stone doorway therefore probably was *in situ* and the building did not have a kingpost roof. The visit was also interesting for the fact that the interior of the house was about to be used to shoot scenes for the 1980s BBC TV version of Dickens' *Bleak House*, though not while we were there. John also discovered that Blackburn Hall, Thurleigh and The Old House, Ickwell Green were buildings of a much earlier date than had originally been thought.

John's last contribution to *Bedfordshire Archaeology* was 'The Development of the Medieval Buildings Adjoining the Abbey at Elstow' in Volume 24, 2001. This combined the work that he had done in the 1970s with some extra buildings that he had surveyed over the succeeding years.

During the 1980s and the 1990s I assisted John with many surveys, the majority of which have not been published. When I say 'assisted', I mean 'held the end of a tape' (feet and inches, no new-fangled metric for John) as a more accurate description of my contribution, although I did help with the photography as well. I obviously learnt a lot from John but there was only one occasion when I spotted a feature before him. While we were looking at the roof in St John House, the former St John's Hospital, in Bedford, I noticed from the rafters in the roof that there had originally been a smoke bay. My pointing this out to John before he had noticed it really pleased him, because he said that it proved he had taught me something over the years.

During July 2007, the whole of the ground floor of John's house in Moreton-in-Marsh flooded with several feet of water, and at the time of his death, the building had still not been made habitable. Many of his drawings are thought to have been in cupboards downstairs and were therefore ruined, but the position is still not clear as the insurance company removed the furniture into storage. John's daughter Jenny and I are doing our best to make sure as much of his work as possible is saved and can be given to the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service to keep it safe for the future. My wish is that his many hundreds of hours of work researching and recording Bedfordshire buildings should not be forgotten. His dedication to this task has been quite extraordinary.

In 1994, the Historic Buildings section of the Essex County Council Planning Department organised a conference at Cressing Temple on 'The Regional Variations in Timber-framed Buildings in England and Wales Down to 1550'. John presented a paper entitled 'The Development of Carpentry in Bedfordshire, 1200–1550' and, together with the other papers contributed at the conference, it was published by Essex County Council (Planning) in 1998. The Bedfordshire Archaeological Council decided that, because of the importance of this paper, it would be republished in this volume of *Bedfordshire Archaeology* dedicated to John's memory.