

# RECTORY COTTAGES, BLETCHLEY

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*Rectory Cottages, near the parish church at Bletchley, contains a rare secular example of a medieval hammer-beam roofed hall, probably built c.1475 by the de Grey family who were lords of the manor. Though well-known since 1913 it has never till now been recorded in detail.*

## *Description*

Rectory Cottages (SP 863336) are L-shaped in plan, the top of the L being at the West end, the angle at the South-East and the short end of the L to the North (see plan, Fig. 2).

At the W end lies the hammer-beamed hall which is the principal feature of interest (Pl. I). It is about 27 ft (8 m) long, 18 ft (5.34 m) wide and 25 ft (7.4 m) high to the apex of the roof. There is no sign of a passage; the marginally better-carved faces of the trusses face East. The principal members of the end trusses are tie beams which support queen struts and collar beams (Fig. 3c). Arch braces rise from the queen struts to the collar beams, and curved braces from the main posts to the tie beams. The two intermediate trusses are of true hammer beam construction. The hammer beams have curved braces from the main posts and support hammer posts which, together with arch braces, support the collar beams (Fig. 3a). The hammer beams have crudely carved heads on their inner ends (Pls II-IV) and one is known to have a dovetail tenon 14 in (355 mm) wide at its outer end: presumably the others are similar. There is some simple ornamental tracery in the spandrels of the hammer beams. Between the two hammer beams on the N side is a smaller hammer beam reaching out some 3 ft (910 mm) into the hall and bearing a lugubrious carved head (Pl. V and Fig. 3b), with a hammer post ostensibly supporting the lower of the moulded purlins above it. There is good evidence for the former existence of five more such hammers at the halfway position of each bay on both sides of the building (Fig. 3d).

The roof of the hall is open, having the rafters halved and coupled at their apices. There are two sets of purlins, trenched into the backs of the principal rafters. The purlins have curved weatherbraces below; most are original but there are two replacements.

The wall plate on the N side is original and has moulded cornice boards (Fig. 4g): that on the S has lost its cornice boards and, being found fractured behind the SW hammer beam in 1968, has had its W end replaced. The moulded wall posts had rotted at their lower ends and were reset onto a new pair of sill beams. There was no evidence of how they had originally been reared: we found no remains of earlier sill beams nor padstones, nor of any stone foundation under the hall. The hall framing had in its upper parts a number of large downward curved braces from the wall posts mortised into a middle rail.

The E end tie-beam truss (Fig. 3c) has a horizontal transom some 8 ft (2.4 m) from the ground and vertical studs 2 ft (600 mm) apart: it is of poor quality and seems to be a later insertion, perhaps as late as the eighteenth century. The W end tie beam truss has no infilling nor any sign that it ever had any. This truss is not parallel with the others, the bay being a foot (300 mm) shorter on the S side. There has been a door head cut into the tie beam, possibly to allow entry to an upper storey beyond: the gap was repaired in 1968. The W end wall appears to be modern—it does not match the truss. At the time of the restoration the training of an old pear tree indicated that there had been a con-

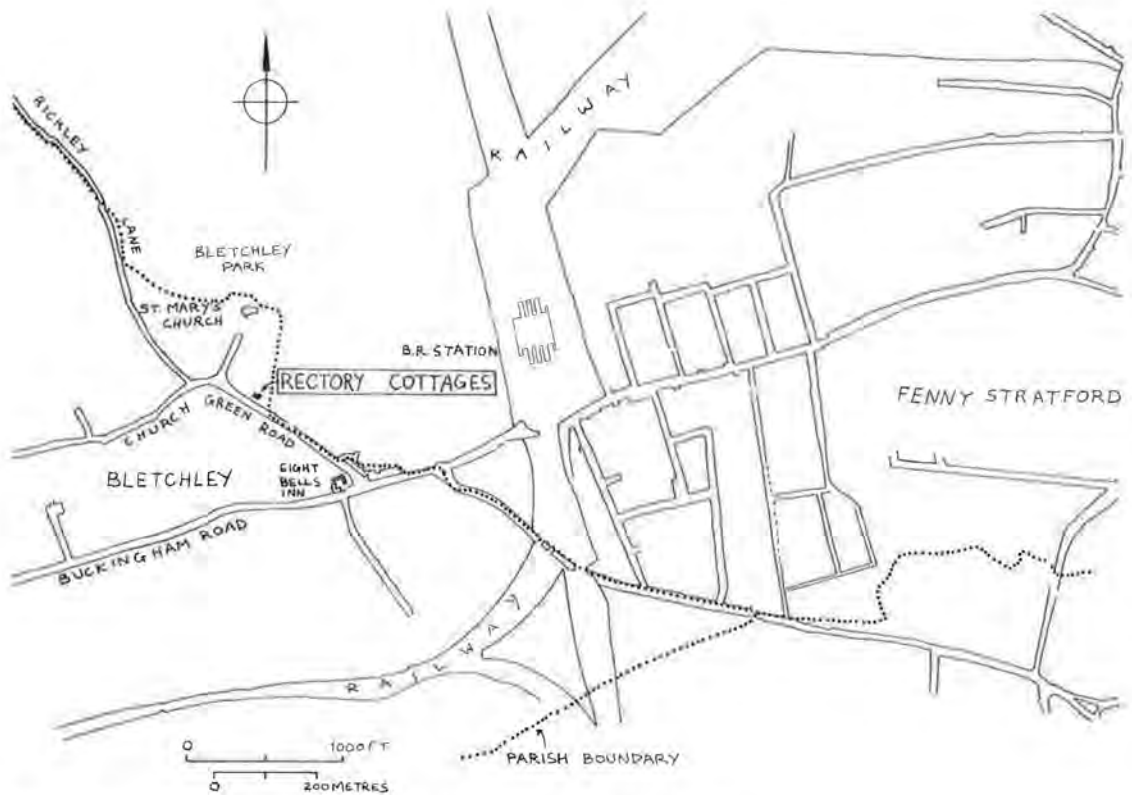


Fig. 1. Fenny Stratford and Bletchley: location of Rectory Cottages.

tinuation W on the S side, but excavation showed no sign of any foundation. The remains of the ends of two flimsy clasped purlins above the W end collar beam are presumably from this structure.

East of the hall lies a small room nowadays used as a tea room and film projection room, which has been heavily rebuilt at some time: one of the ceiling joists is a reused passing brace—it has a diagonal trench—from an aisled hall or barn. North of this is a passage paved with local tiles formerly in the back room of the N wing. North of the passage is an outshut which contains the staircase; it is probable that an original staircase rose here, but the staircase removed in 1972 was apparently of this century or the last.

At the SE corner of the building is the 'front room' about 18 ft (5.34 m) by 15 ft (4.45 m). It

has a moulded ceiling joist (Fig. 4j) consistent with a date around 1500. The fireplace was once larger and had a wooden lintel which has been cut through when a smaller fireplace was inserted in 1723—if the date in the plaster over the fireplace is to be taken at face value. The stonework of the chimney is to be seen in the cupboard at the left side of the fire. Above the fireplace is the coving for the hearthstone of the fireplace upstairs. There are two windows, facing S and E; the latter has had its sill raised when the brick cladding was added to this part of the house. The window frames are Victorian; the leaded lights are modern reproductions in the style of those found in 1966. There was a door, possibly original, from this room to the S, which was blocked in 1972.

The central chimney, 10 ft by 8 ft (3 m × 2.4 m), built of poor chalky stone in its lower levels, lies in the middle of the E range. There is

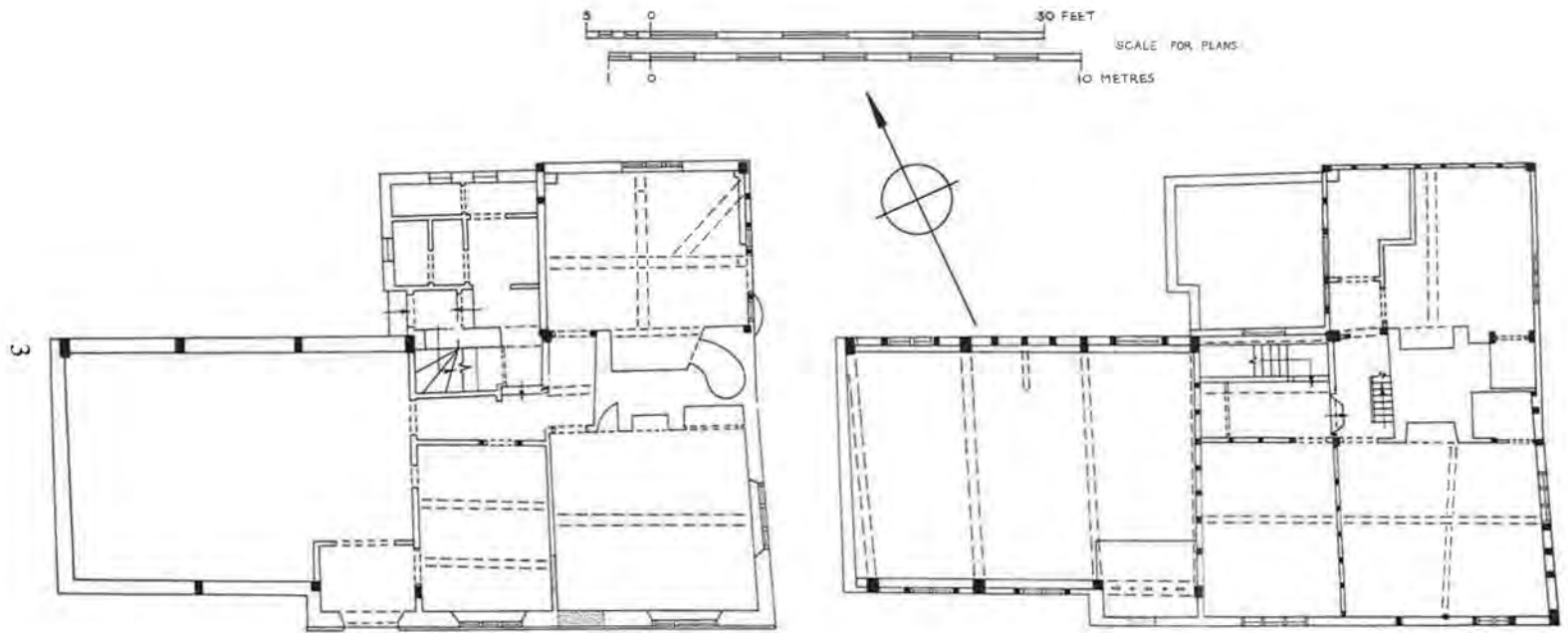


Fig. 2. Rectory Cottages, Bletchley: ground-floor plan (left), first-floor plan (right); hall to left.

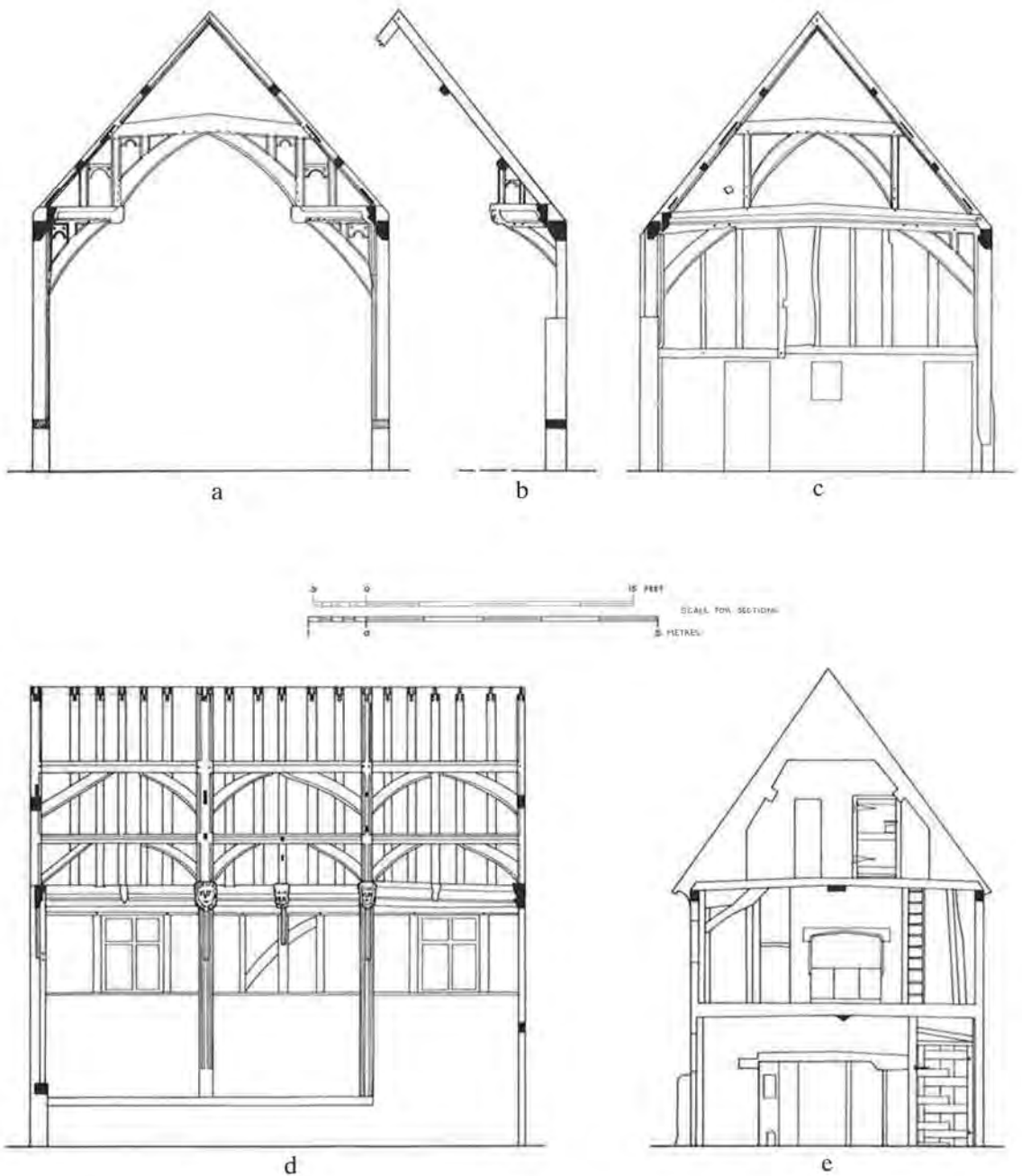


Fig. 3. Rectory Cottages, Bletchley: sections. (a) Hall, western hammer-beam truss, with cornice restored on S side. (b) Hall, intermediate hammer beam. (c) Hall, eastern truss, looking east, showing mortise for missing cornice. (d) Hall, long section, looking north. (e) Cross wing, looking south.

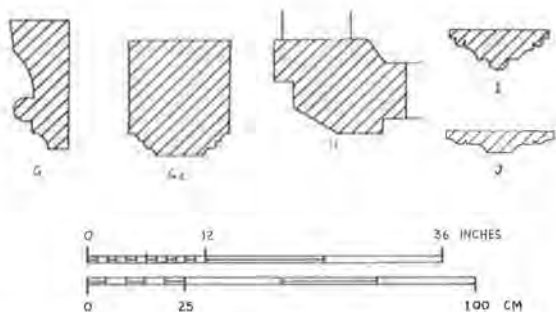


Fig. 4. Rectory Cottages, Bletchley: mouldings. (G) Cornice, hammer beams and tiebeams. These members are all on the same level, and the moulding is carried round the hall on all of them. (G2) Main posts, wall plates and principal rafters. (H) Corner post at SW corner of N room in cross wing. (I) Ceiling beams, N room of cross wing. (J) Ceiling beam, S room of cross wing.

a passage from front to rear of the wing past the W side of it; the N or 'back room' is entered from this passage through a doorway having a reused door on iron pintles. The N room, 15 ft by 12 ft (4.5m × 3.6 m), has a fireplace 8 ft wide by 3 ft deep (2.4 m × 910 mm), built of stone with brick repairs, and having a straight chimney with a mid feather. There is a horizontal iron bar to hang a kettle or cauldron; up the chimney are hooks for hanging hams. At the left side of the fireplace a brick insertion has been built, consisting of a circular bake-oven with the fire and flue for a washing-copper beneath it; the flue re-enters the chimney above the bake-oven, and the roundel for the exterior of the copper may be seen outside the back door. There are small windows on either side of the back door, and a further Victorian window with modern leaded lights looking N over the garden.

The ceiling of the N or 'back room' has heavily moulded timbers (Fig. 4i) crossing the room in both axes, and a dragon beam leading to the NE corner. The flat plates under the outer ends of these timbers indicate that they were designed for a jettied building. The dragon beam does not meet the corner post properly, which it would have done had the post been original.

Upstairs in the cottage the rooms follow the pattern set below. Over the projection room is a

bedroom, backed on the N by the roof of the outshut containing the upper part of the staircase. Above the front room is a further front room showing more of the timber framed construction. At some time within the last century, the headroom here was unwisely increased by sawing out the tie beam, causing fracture of the purlins and failure of the roof above. There is now a modern tie beam with a triangular truss of reused timbers over it in the loft. There is a four-centred fire-place in the main chimney stack.

The upper chamber in the N block may originally have been open to the roof. There is a ceiling at eaves level with a ladder staircase into the resulting attic. There is a four-centred fire-place here too, now having an inserted Victorian coal fire basket, and a cupboard built into the chimney breast—perhaps once a wardrobe, now a larder.

The attic over the chamber has halved and coupled rafters. The attic door is of wide boards and exiguous iron straps with an original wooden doorpull and a wooden cased lock of c.1750.

The loft must at one time have been divided into garrets as there is a surviving door frame in the roof truss (Fig. 2). The door in question is rather less than four feet high (1.2 m) and it seems likely that the garrets were for children, servants or storage. There are no signs in the roof of there ever having been any dormer windows.

The roofs are tiled. The angles inside the rafters are: hall 77°, N block 72°, and SE roof 81°. These angles are rather larger than those commonly used locally for thatched buildings and it is our view that the building has probably been tiled since it was built.

The chimney stack is about 30 ft (8.9 m) high. It is of stone to eaves level, beyond which it has a cruciform stack in narrow brick with an ovolo moulding just above the ridge tiles. In order to stop water and birds entering, in 1973 the stack was capped, with airbricks for ventilation.



### *Discussion*

There is evidence in the existing building for five phases of construction and there is a possibility that there was once an earlier phase now demolished.

#### *Phase One*

This consists of the hall with its hammer beam roof and a bay in addition at each end, that to the E possibly of two storeys. The evidence for this bay is clear in the roof space—the absence of weathering on the E, face of the E truss, coupled with mortises for a purlin and brace extending to the E are conclusive. As this bay has been extensively rebuilt at some time, it may be that a fireplace for the hall stood here, if there ever was one: there is little sign of soot in the hall roof.

The form of the bay to the W is uncertain, but its existence is established by the fact that the W end truss is open. It has been postulated that there was formerly a heated hall at the W end of that now existing because: (a) it is unusual for a hall to be unheated, but here there is neither louvre nor certain evidence of a fireplace, nor is there a significant amount of soot staining; (b) the W end of the existing hall is distorted as if it had been crammed into a pre-existing confined space; (c) there is a reused passing brace in the ceiling of the parlour rebuilt in Phase Three.

If such a previous heated hall existed, it could readily have had service rooms in common with the existing hall. We refer to this proposed hall as 'Phase 0'.

The existing Phase One hall, with its interesting proportions—longer than the domestic hall of the period—and its carved heads on the hammer beams, must surely have had some purpose beyond the merely domestic. What this may have been is discussed on p. 10.

The carved heads are paralleled among secular hammer-beamed halls in England only by the Pilgrims' Hall at Winchester.

Phase One is securely dated by dendrochronology to 1475 + 9 years (see pp. 12–13).

#### *Phase Two*

This consists of the southern corner and the wing extending NE. It comprises two parts—the NE block which is gabled to N, and the SE block which is gabled to E. The W tie beam of the SE block at its N end has a plain square finish and shows no sign of weathering: it has always been protected by the NE Block. Either the two blocks are coeval or the SE block is later, but there are no signs of a structural partition and between the two is a common chimney stack. We saw no evidence during the restoration to suggest that the chimney was otherwise than of one build at ground floor level.

In the NE block the clear evidence of jettied construction is irreconcilable with the corner posts of the N gable and the studs to the E. On balance, because the dragon beam does not extend to the corner of the block, we think the corner posts are later. It may be that the jettied timbers were second-hand, or that an alteration was made during construction. We have no dendrochronological date for this part of the house.

The staircase for this range must have been in the NW corner of the N room, rising SW into what is now the bathroom; there was a staircase in this position until 1972. There is evidence for a window having been at the top of this staircase: there is still a window in the same place.

The shaped post (Fig. 4h) is weathered on its W side, as if it had stood just outside the NE corner of the former E bay of the medieval hall. Its shape may be accounted for by its having a recess for an exterior door cut into it, but this is problematical.

#### *Phase Three*

The E Bay of the medieval hall was removed, perhaps with the original fireplace (if there had been one), and a two storey block replacement was built, having a moulded plinth and a two-course brick band marking the upper floor. On the ground floor the brickwork was carried round the S and E of the SE block, probably against the face of the existing cladding. A doorway into the SE front room was most probably



Plate I. The hall, looking west.



Plate II. Head on north-western hammer beam.





Plate III. Head on south-western hammer beam (facing that in Plate II).



Plate IV. Head on north-eastern hammer beam.



Plate V. Head on intermediate hammer beam, north side of hall.



Plate VI. General view of Rectory Cottages from the south-west.

put in at this time; it was blocked in 1972. A old passing-brace was reused as a ceiling joist downstairs in the replacement block.

The upper part of the main chimney stack was rebuilt in narrow brick to allow the construction of first floor fireplaces to N and S; these are of plastered brick, and have four-centred heads. The chimney stack is cruciform and has a string course with an ovolo moulding, and first floor fireplaces. These characteristics point to a date in the mid to late seventeenth century.

Either during this phase or the next, the hall was relegated to use as a barn. Wheel-hub marks on the adjacent sides of the principal wallposts on the N side were visible before 1968. The three-bay arrangement with wagon doors to the middle bay suggests use as a threshing floor.

#### *Phase Four*

In the SE front room, the initials and date marked in the wet plaster over the fireplace indicate the period of some alterations. It may well have been at this time that the E bay of the existing hall was incorporated into the house, leaving the hall with two bays. Possibly at this time the brickwork was extended W along the S front of the hall, building the small extension now used as a draught lobby. Until 1968 there was a small unheated room here. The window head is slightly different from the heads of the two windows further E: the westernmost window is now the doorway into the draught lobby.

#### *Phase Five*

This probably took place in the early to mid nineteenth century when the house was divided into two cottages (hence its present name). Two iron fireplaces and an iron fire bracket to burn coal were installed: coal was not generally available here until the canal opened in 1800 and became common after the opening of the railway in 1838.

Williamson writing in 1923 records that the 'Barn originally had a Chestnut wood floor several inches thick. This however was rotten when the present rector took up the living and

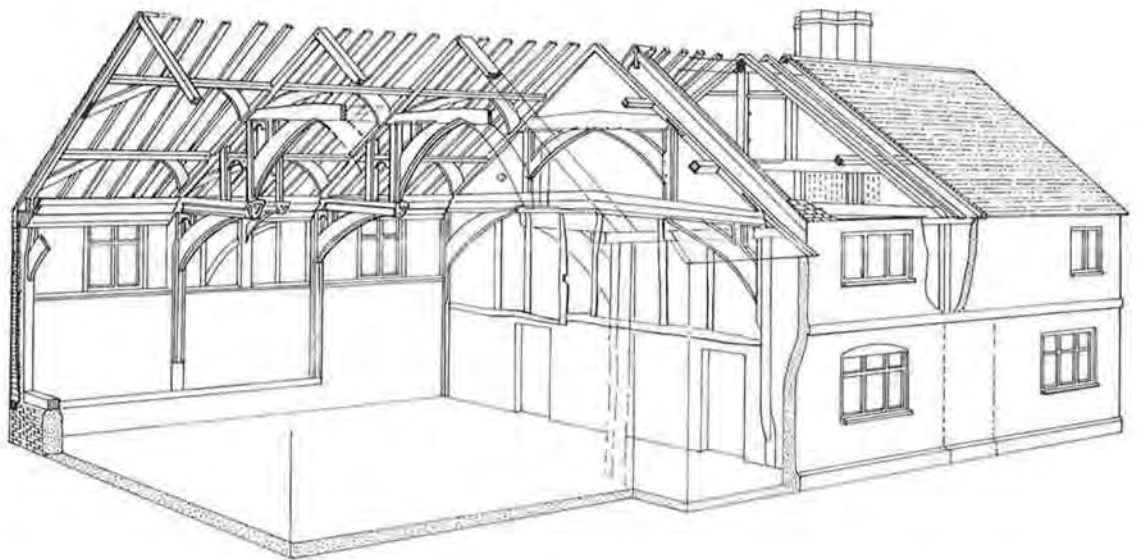
now has a floor composed of deal boards, raised as formerly, several inches above [the] surface level of ground.'<sup>1</sup>

#### *History*

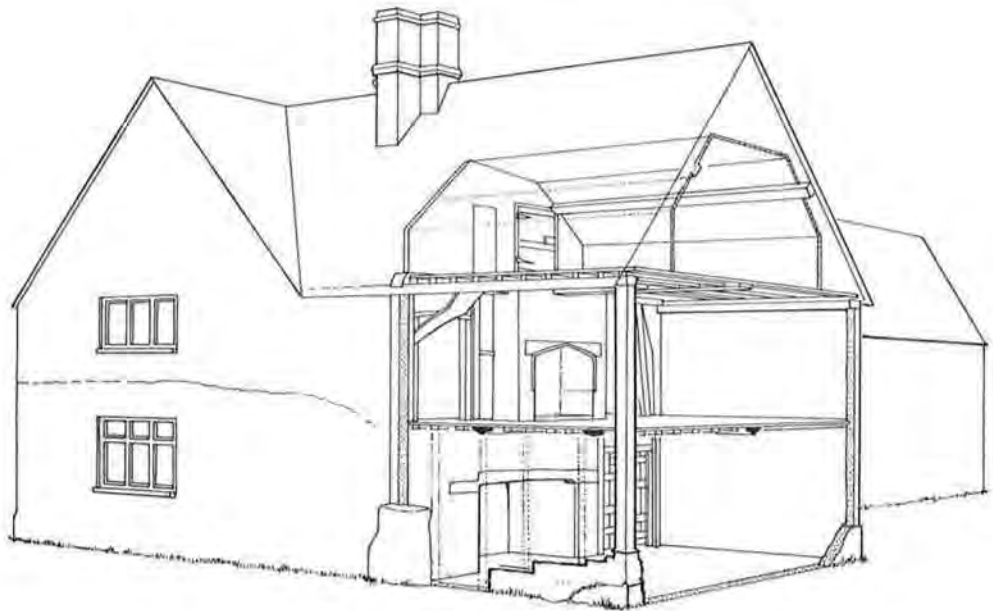
In examining the origins of Rectory Cottages, the first consideration is its location at the boundaries of the parishes of Bletchley and Fenny Stratford (Fig. 1). The latter parish was almost certainly carved out of Water Eaton in Norman times and is unusually long and narrow for the area. Its boundary at the Bletchley end is furthest from Fenny Stratford township, and most of the parish boundaries follow water-courses or old roadways. Thus, the boundary would be expected to run down Rickley Lane, Church Green Road and Buckingham Road, but in the middle there is a sudden aberration: the boundary leaves Rickley Lane eastwards, skirts behind the Elmers estate, round the E side of Bletchley churchyard, abuts Bletchley Park and rejoins Church Green Road just below the Cottages, thus giving Bletchley a small enclave on the east side of the logical road boundary. In this area lie Bletchley parish church and rectory, Elmers and Rectory Cottages.

The clue to this lies in St Mary's Church, built before 1155: it stands on the E side of a plateau giving a commanding view across the Ouzel valley. Two small mounds once stood on the green in front of the church: when Browne Willis demolished them in 1711 he found only arrow heads from their use as archery butts. It has been plausibly suggested that these were burial mounds and that the church continued the use of an already sacred site. The rectory has the natural association with the church, found in most local villages, whilst the Elmers land contained the remains of house platforms of a shrunken village. These must have existed before the boundary with Fenny Stratford was settled, and makes the site of Rectory Cottages even more anomalous, for not only is it in the 'wrong' parish but is also on land which would seem naturally to be part of the rectorial estate of Bletchley. Since to the best of our knowledge it formed no part of the rectory, this suggests that its origins are manorial and that the lord of the manor retained the site when he gave the



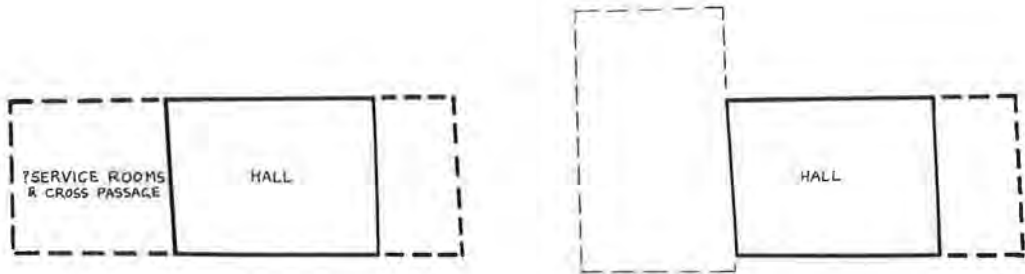


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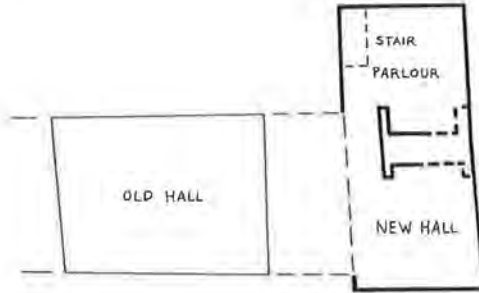
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Fig. 5. Rectory Cottages, Bletchley: perspective cut-away drawings. (a) From SW. (b) From NE.

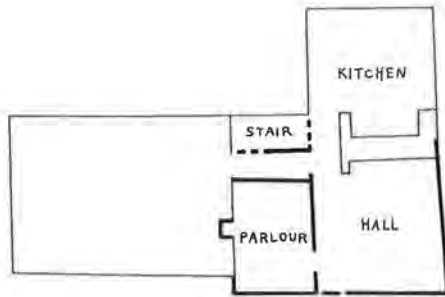


PHASE ONE

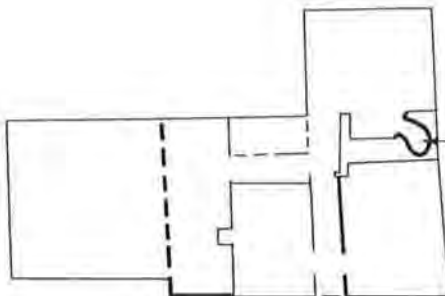
PHASE ONE (ASSUMING PRE-EXISTING BUILDING)



PHASE TWO



PHASE THREE



PHASE FOUR

Fig. 6. Rector Cottages, Bletchley: proposed development of plan.

rest of the land for ecclesiastical use. As the lord was not resident, was the house for his steward?

Bletchley was part of the manor of 'Etone' mentioned in Domesday, held by the Bishop of Coutances and granted to Walter Gifford after the bishop's rebellion in 1088: Walter granted the tithes of Bletchley to Newton Longville priory.<sup>2</sup> By 1204 the manor had passed to Roger de Caux<sup>3</sup> and thence to John de Grey before 1235.<sup>4</sup> In 1243 John de Grey was granted free warren over his demesne lands in Water Eaton and Bletchley,<sup>5</sup> implying that the two were by then distinct territories. They passed in due course to his grandson John who died in 1323,<sup>6</sup> at which time Bletchley was divided into two manors: West Bletchley, centred on Trees Square, was left to the younger son Roger, whilst Church Bletchley passed to the elder son Henry. The main seat of the de Grey family in North Buckinghamshire was at Water Hall in Fenny Stratford: they were involved in national politics and held other more important lands in England and in Wales. It is doubtful if they can have had a settled life here until 1396<sup>7</sup> when Richard Grey succeeded to the estate. He was only three years old when his father died, and was presumably brought up by his mother Elizabeth. He fought in the French wars but returned to Water Hall, where he died in 1442,<sup>8</sup> and was buried in Bletchley church. He died heavily in debt and the property had been mortgaged.<sup>9</sup> His heir was his son Reynold who married well: his wife was Iacina the daughter of Owain Tudor and Katherine de Valois, the widow of Henry V. In 1446 Reynold entered into an agreement with his mother and her second husband to grant them a life interest in his manor of Bletchley in exchange for interests in their lands.<sup>10</sup> After the sale of other lands in 1448<sup>11</sup> he discharged these life interests<sup>12</sup> and by 1454 his manors were free of debt. In that year Reynold settled the entire estate on himself and Iacina and after their deaths to their children in tail.<sup>13</sup> It is against this background that the erection of the hammer-beam roof in Rectory Cottages took place about 1475.

There was no other large landowner in the parish at the time, and the land was not part of the rectory, so it is our view that the traditional

ascription of Rectory Cottages to the Grey family may safely be accepted. The Grey family continued to hold Bletchley into the seventeenth century. It seems that we may now abandon the suggestion<sup>14</sup> that the building was once part of Water Hall, as there is no architectural evidence that the hall has ever been moved.

It has been suggested that the Cottages may have been used as a hunting lodge by the Greys. Certainly a park is on record as early as 1308:<sup>15</sup> William Lord Grey bought Whaddon in 1552 and was later Keeper of Whaddon Chase to Queen Elizabeth;<sup>16</sup> his son Arthur Grey enclosed the land at the rear of Rectory Cottages in 1563 and built a keeper's house for his deer park.<sup>17</sup> Presumably at any time between these dates the Greys may have needed a hunting lodge nearby, but we found no architectural evidence to support the theory. The position of the building is in favour of a manorial function; its indifferent quality and its propinquity to Water Hall are against it having been the residence of a magnate, and its proportions and the fact that it was unheated are against it having been domestic at less than manorial level. It has been plausibly suggested that it may have held the manorial court: this is also compatible with the steward having lived here.

Whatever its origins, there is clear documentary evidence for a building on the site prior to 1635.<sup>18</sup> On 10 April of that year a terrier of the rectory of Bletchley was prepared by the rector and churchwardens. It begins with the rectory, and the boundaries are described in detail, starting on the west where they abutted 'ye churchyard and part of the Green' and continued along the south where it adjoined 'ye pigtle and tenement being the land of Mr Thomas Sparke now in the tenure of Widdow Parkins'. This was the rear fence of Rectory Cottages and Mr Sparke was also the rector: it is clear from this document that this building did not belong to the church but was owned or leased by Thomas Sparke in his private capacity. There are no other seventeenth-century terriers but on 11 October 1707 the same boundary was said to adjoin 'the orchard of Thomas Stevens Yeoman'.<sup>19</sup>

During the next few years it seems that the property was downgraded, for the next terrier dated 16 October 1724 shows that the house had been divided and was shared between John Turpin, William King and John Emerson.<sup>20</sup> It is unclear whether the building had been altered to accommodate the multiple occupancy but evidently it was no longer suitable for a yeoman.

In 1765 the rector, the Revd Mr William Cole, drew a sketch of the rectory grounds with a written description. The plan contents itself with the words 'William Woods Orchard' in the top left hand corner<sup>21</sup> but the text is more revealing. 'On the N side of the Garden is a fence of Oak Pales which I put up new, the old ones being gone to Decay: but before them is planted a Hedge Row of Filberts which [I] planted there to screen the Garden from the 2 or 3 Houses on the other side of the Orchard: these Filberts I had from Mr Rigby of Cosgrove in Northamptonshire'.<sup>22</sup> Immediately to the north of this he built a brick wall twelve or fourteen feet long 'joyning to the Wall of the Necessary House to enclose that part of the Garden from 2 or 3 Cottages & Orchard contiguous to it'. To complete the unneighbourliness there was also a Dove House and Hog Sty adjacent.

Other records are available: the Manor Court Book contains a schedule of the copyhold on 10 May 1806 and from this it appears that John and Thomas Billington had been admitted to this messuage and 32 acres 1 rood of land as copyhold tenants of the Manors of Bletchley, Fenny Stratford and Water Eaton, on 2 December 1762.<sup>23</sup> No copy of this admission is extant so it is impossible to indicate all this land: certainly little was attached to the Cottages. A portion seems to have been spread around the common fields of Bletchley whilst the rest were in enclosures at Fenny Stratford. The two brothers were only small landowners in Bletchley though they owned and farmed over 200 acres at Woughton. Nevertheless they or their tenants at Rectory Cottages were not averse from adding a little more, for on 5 July 1810 it was found and presented by the homage of the manorial court 'that there was an incroachment in front of the house of Thomas Billington upon the Cottage Green at Bletchley and also a small

angular piece next the barn of the said Thomas Billington which are ordered to be removed'.

No mention is made of John. He had died in 1806 and the property had passed to Thomas as surviving tenant in common. In 1810 the Bletchley Enclosure Act was passed and the award was made three years later.<sup>24</sup> This only marginally affected Rectory Cottages which gained 50 pole of land taken from the village green—probably the land given up after the incroachment earlier. A major change was due to the need to rid the land of tithes. Larger landowners did this by giving land to the rector to form his glebe, but this was not possible for smallholders. Thomas Billington was ordered to pay £76 10s 1d to redeem his tithes and to pay his share of the costs of the fencing etc.: as a large landowner he could have raised the money from his own resources but he decided to borrow instead. He did this by a mortgage on 29 September 1812,<sup>25</sup> when he borrowed £82 from John Williams, a grazier of Willen. The deed, which had the written consent of the Enclosure Commissioners, still exists, as does a solicitor's draft. Both describe the property as a 'homestead garden orchard & ancient inclosure in Bletchley aforesaid now or late in the several occupations of the said Thomas Billington and [ ] Hogg containing by admeasurement two roods seventeen perches bounded by allotments [belonging] to the said Thomas Billington and the Rector respectively the rectory homestead and an old inclosure of the late Thomas Harrison'. With this went two allotments adjoining the homestead containing 29 perches between the house and the road and a further 21 perches being 'part of an old inclosed orchard late Edward Cooke's bounded by an allotment [belonging] to the Rector the Rectory homestead and the said orchard belonging to the said Thomas Billington'.

Thomas Billington died at Woughton on 22nd August 1815.<sup>26</sup> He had made a will<sup>27</sup> seven days earlier and left substantial legacies to his daughters. To pay these, his executors sold Rectory Cottages, finding a ready buyer in Philip Duncombe Pauncefort Duncombe, the lord of the manor, who bought the premises on 30 August 1817<sup>28</sup> and redeemed the mortgage

on the same date. Rectory Cottages passed to his son Philip in 1849 and in 1861 Philip Duncombe and the rector of Bletchley agreed to exchange Rectory Cottages for a small field adjoining the Newfoundout and the Oxford branch railway. This was approved by the bishop and Joseph Bennitt the patron of the living and confirmed by the Tithe Commissioners on 27 June 1861.<sup>29</sup> The rector William Rawson was granted the 'House Barn Out-buildings with garden and orchard adjoining the Rectory premises now occupied by the said Rector or his undertenants containing 3 roods 27 perches'. William Rawson was succeeded by William Bennitt as rector the same year, and he was followed by his nephew Frederick Wilmot Bennitt in 1906.

In 1913 the building was examined by the RCHM,<sup>30</sup> and shortly afterwards it was noted by the compilers of the VCH. The Revd Mr F. W. Bennitt and Dr William Bradbrook seem to have been the first local people to have remarked on its merit: Bennitt wrote a short article for *Records of Bucks* in 1921<sup>31</sup> and followed this by a chapter in his history of Bletchley in 1932.<sup>14</sup>

In 1964 the rector's last tenant left the Cottages and the Bletchley Urban District Council placed a closure order on it, declaring it unfit for habitation. Previous experience with the UDC had shown this would soon lead to demolition: 'this place wants a bloody bulldozer through it,' declared one leading councillor. The case for repair was argued by the Bletchley Archaeological & Historical Society, and a scheme for restoration was begun. A Trust was set up and the first trustees were Sir Frank Markham, a former President of the Museums Association and for many years Member of Parliament for the division; Mr Ken Embleton, a local solicitor and Clerk to the Justices; Mr Ken Fuller the local accountant; Mr Bernard Kettle the local optician and chairman of the BAHS, and Mr Bert Weatherhead who owned a chain of television shops. The architect recommended by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was Mrs Janet Locke who produced a most workable and conservative restoration proposal. Funds were raised from a public

appeal and from grants made by the Pilgrim Trust, the Bucks County Council, the Historic Buildings Council for England and the UDC.

The roof was repaired in 1968-9 and the hall reclad. New foundations, a damp-proof course and new sill beams were inserted under the structure, but unhappily the £7,000 raised proved insufficient in a period of rapid inflation, so the building was secured and left among the brambles for three years. The problem was solved by the arrival on the scene of the new Milton Keynes Development Corporation who offered £5,000 if the UDC would do the same, and after intensive political discussion this was agreed. From that time onwards, the helpfulness of the UDC knew no bounds. They agreed to maintain the grounds, to lay access paths in decent York stone flags which were redundant elsewhere, and gave us 80 chairs. 'There', said the same councillor, 'I told you it would be all right, all along!'

The Cottages were reopened for their new purpose in March 1973 by Sir Frank Markham and since that time they have been in constant use as a village hall. The Hall holds 60 people comfortably, and the two smaller rooms hold 20 and 25, so it is possible to have three meetings at a time, and there are between 400 and 500 meetings a year. The upper part of the house has been made into a comfortable if rather archaic apartment: wattle and daub walls are not as warm as modern ones. The income from the rents is sufficient to keep up the building and to whitewash it in traditional style triennially. Since the Trust purchased the freehold from the rector in 1978 the future seems reasonably assured, so long as there is a group of local enthusiasts who will undertake the day to day management.

### *Dendrochronology*

by Martin Bridge, PhD

Three samples of the oak timbers were taken for analysis. These were an end grain slice from a previously truncated intermediate hammer and two cores from the main posts of different trusses.<sup>32</sup>



The samples were prepared and measured using standard techniques. The intermediate hammer yielded a 139 year ring-width sequence which included the first sapwood ring. The remaining sapwood was present but could not be measured because of its partial destruction by insects. There were 30 sapwood rings. The two cores gave series of 97 and 70 ring-widths respectively. The three series cross-matched visually and the positions of overlap were tested for their statistical agreement using program CROS, developed at Queen's University, Belfast.

The following results were obtained: BLE02 (core, 97 years) v. BLE01 (intermediate hammer, 139 years): 't'=4.00 at 130 years overlap.) BLE03 (core, 70 years) v. BLE01: 't'=4.95 at 141 years overlap. BLE03 v. BLE02: 't'=4.79 at 108 years of overlap.

The three series were therefore combined into a single site chronology of 141 years which was compared with reference material from various places and periods. Good visual and statistical agreement was found between the site chronology and two other chronologies at the position corresponding to the first sapwood ring having been formed in AD 1446. At that time these were the only two chronologies available from England which entirely spanned the fourteenth century and hence gave a long period of overlap.

A few years later, more independent data sets became available which covered this period.

Nottingham University dendrochronology unit produced data from the East Midlands, and Dr F. Guibal of the City of London Polytechnic provided data from Brittany. These confirmed the dating of the site chronology to the period AD 1306-1446.

Allowing for the counted but unmeasurable sapwood, the trees used in the structure of Rectory Cottages must have been felled in or soon after AD 1475. The literature tells us that timber was used soon after felling in those times, so the date of construction is also of this period.<sup>33</sup>

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