

No.14 High Street, Dunster, Exmoor National Park: Rapid Building Appraisal

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Project Background

South West Archaeology Ltd. was approached by Stephen Beer (the Client) to undertake a rapid building assessment of no.14 High Street, Dunster, Exmoor National Park, to inform the proposed partial removal of an interior wall. The building was visited by E. Wapshott on the 26th April 2017, and a rapid appraisal of the building undertaken.

Historic Background

Dunster is an Anglo-Norman town built in the shadow of its castle; work undertaken as part of the Time Team Dig Village project would suggest the earliest part of the settlement is located along West Street to the south of the St George's Church; if correct, this would suggest the High Street forms part of a planned extension of the town during the 12th or 13th century. Work by SWARCH and others, including Dig Village, have identified an unusual concentration of 14th and 15th century buildings in the town. The survival of these structures reflects the declining fortunes of the town in the post-medieval period, which led to the conservation of existing buildings rather than the construction of new ones.

Prior to c.1873, nos. 12 and 14 High Street formed a single property known as the George Inn. A George Inn is among the earliest taverns documented for Dunster (in 1463), but it is more reliably documented from 1665. The documentary records for the George describe it as an 'old decayed dwelling or inn' in 1749, and 'ancient and decayed' in 1789 and this reflects a more general malaise. The number of taverns in the town declined over the course of the 18th century from c.20 to just nine by 1789, and another seven had ceased to trade by 1901. The George appears to have been partly or wholly owned by the Pyncombe Charity¹, but there are also references to John and Charles Leigh in the 18th century. There are records of repairs to the George in c.1800, but it is described as being in a bad state in 1815. One of its innkeepers, Elizabeth Wood, was declared bankrupt in 1859, and the George appears to have closed in 1871, and 'partly demolished' in 1873, when it was converted into two domestic dwellings. (This account is based on the draft VCH for Dunster and VCH Explore website, see reference below.)

Looking at the cartographic evidence, the 1775 sketch map of the town (figure 1) may show a long range to the rear of what became no.14; the tithe map shows this in outline (i.e. not roofed). Excavations undertaken by SWARCH in 2015 in the beer garden at the Luttrell Arms uncovered the remains of a building (kitchen) of similar proportions extending to the rear of that plot. The tithe map (figure 2) is more detailed, and a comparison of this map with the OS map of 1889 (figure 3) indicates demolition in c.1873 was limited to the buildings to the rear of the surviving structure. For no. 14, the losses include a small square building shown linked to the extant building by a narrow structure; it is possible this was a detached kitchen block linked by a covered gallery at first-floor level. For no. 12, the long range shown to the rear of the extant building probably had a service function, and perhaps included a stable.

Building Context

No. 14 is located on the eastern side of Dunster High Street towards its southern end. The extant structure is one room wide and two storeys in height. As discussed above, no.14 forms the northern half of a building that was divided into two parts in the 19th century, presumably c.1873 when the

¹ The Pyncombe Charity still exists. It was set up in the will of Miss Gertrude Pyncombe of Ploughill in Devon in 1730, to support 'small livings' and procure the Bounty of Queen Anne in those parishes where she held lands (Phelps 1839, 110). The charity now provides financial assistance to Anglican clergy and their families in the event of illness, accident or special circumstance (CofE 2017).

innkeeper was declared bankrupt; the two parts are divided by lathe and plaster partitions and flying freeholds. Nos. 12 and 14 are Listed as 17th century in date, but the survival of a cruck roof in no. 14 indicates it is much older. The roofline of no.12 is very similar but slightly lower, and while it is likely no.12 also has a cruck roof, it is possible no.14 has been raised or that no.12 was a later extension.

Nos. 12 and 14 appear to be very similar in form and plan to no. 6 High Street, with steep roof profiles and timber mullion windows, and again no. 6 is likely to be older than its Listing as 17th century. The Old Cottage is Listed as 16th century in date, but has a brick 18th/19th century facade, with shop front. No. 16 to the north has been remodelled in the 18th century and has blocked openings between it and No.14, with a surviving late medieval door (probably reset). The work undertaken as part of the Dunster *Dig Village* has revealed an unusual number of houses in Dunster are late medieval in date, and it is clear these properties are no different.

Building Description

No. 14 is of two cell and staggered cross-passage plan, with a 19th century lean-to on the rear. The building exhibits architectural features of three main periods: medieval, 17th century and 19th century. The building, although Listed as of 17th century date, it has a cruck roof and is in fact medieval in date. The exact form of the roof is obscured on the first floor by heavy layers of plaster/plasterboard, but the broad shape of the crucks is visible. In the first floor bathroom to the rear of the building one of the crucks has been partially exposed and it appears that the upper part of the cruck is jointed into a principle that is set into the wall. Jointed crucks are common in the later medieval periods of the 15th and 16th century in this region. The 1463 documentary reference to the George (if indeed it was on the same site) provides a plausible *terminus ante quem*, although the scantling is noted as being a little slight.

Other surviving medieval details within the building include the two doorways on the ground floor. These have both been later altered and/or possibly moved; one leads from the entrance hallway to the kitchen in the lean-to, and the other is now incorporated into the stairs, leading to a cupboard. Two deep transverse ceiling beams with inside wide flat joists support the first floor; the beams are substantial with very deep chamfers and plain cut stops and have been hacked roughly for plaster at some point. This style of build was common in the medieval period but survived well into the 17th century. The beam within the entrance hall has a slot for a partition on its north side; this would have run tight to the entrance and formed an earlier original passage, probably lined by muntin planks, to the north of the partition.

The 17th century phase is represented by two windows in No.14. The large bay window on the ground floor is of fine construction, with ovolo-moulded jambs and mullions and set with leaded windows of c.1800. On the first floor there is a window with ovolo-moulded mullions, a surviving diamond-set iron glazing bar and older leadwork, and another small leaded casement of c.1800. It serves both the smaller bedroom in no. 14 and a room in the adjacent bedroom of no. 12, subdivided by a thin lathe and plaster partition wall. A heavy plank door, with studded ledging-bars and heavy strap hinges serves the same first floor bedroom; set in a heavy timber frame this may be a 17th or early 18th century door.

The 19th century phase is represented by the current lathe and plaster and/or brick partitions, all with deep plain skirting boards. Also, the lean-to on the rear, the wide lightweight plank panelled doors on the first floor, the panelled cupboards and the narrow timber stairs. It is probable the doorway through into the lean-to was forced through or moved at this date, as suggested by its position relative to the corridor and beam above. The exterior also appears to have been remodelled in the 19th century, with the tiled pentice being added to the front elevation. With the two exceptions noted above, the windows on the front and rear elevations are all similar in style and have rounded mouldings to the exterior lights, beaded on the interior face. These windows appear

to have been designed to mimic the earlier windows but are clearly inferior in quality, with elements cut and attached with nails rather than carved. The front door has stepped ovolo and cavetto mouldings to the sides, deep lambs-tongue stops, with bulbous horizontal rollmoulding above. However, there is no sign of the weathering suffered by the other historic doors along the street; the carving is too crisp and there is a stylistic contrast with the exuberant and flowing carving of the medieval door of no. 16. The depth of its doorframe and the inner face are too lightweight for medieval locks and latches; the hinges are modern replacements. It is possible the carved framing of the door is original but reset. The fireplace in the main room has a 19th century basket-arch shaped opening, forced into a much larger blocked hearth; the wood burner and tiles are more recent. The ground floor doors that serve both front rooms are probably early 20th century copies in a Victorian style. The small stone fireplace in the smaller front room probably dates to the 1960s/70s.

The Partition Wall

This wall divides the main ground floor room from the entrance hallway, and bisects the ground-floor bay window. The wall is of brick and where the plaster has been removed the bricks appear somewhat heterogeneous. The majority are pale pinkish-orange in colour and slightly smaller than standard bricks. Towards the centre of the wall there are some longer dark blueish-red bricks. In the window bay the bricks are much paler and of irregular size, with some sub-square pale orange pavers mixed in. This variation might reflect the relative availability of different bricks when the wall was built, or possibly a number of 19th century sub-phases (e.g. the door into the main ground-floor room may have moved position). All the brickwork is set in a mixture of pinkish-beige clay with lime mortar; the mortar is quite soft, dusty and very dry. The wall is coated with hard greyish lime plaster, with a second coat of hard, pink cement plaster on top, of later 20th or 21st century date.

The wall has deep plain unmoulded skirting boards and a doorway, set to the eastern side, with an ogee-stepped moulded doorframe, of fairly typical 19th century form. The wall truncates the bay window in the front elevation; a narrow nailed timber frame holds a fixed leaded eight-pane window set into the 17th century mullion of the bay window. The window, and the small beaded timber frame of mismatched wood which frames it, are also 19th century in date. The top of the wall runs across the joists at a point between the main transverse beams and is plastered up and around the joists; it is likely the brickwork stops below the joists and the gap filled with lathe and plaster. On the face of the wall within the main ground-floor room there is some clear scarring to the wall, indicating some sort of fitment, or possibly a partition wall enclosing the area round the bay window, has been removed.

Significance

The wall belongs to the third main phase of the building, the post 1873 remodelling when the former Inn was divided into two domestic dwellings. The layout of the rooms and many of the architectural detail – including most of the windows – were altered in this phase and despite the survival of certain structural timbers (i.e. beams and joists) much of its historic character is derived from this Victorian phase. This mimicry is in line with a general later 19th century trend in Dunster towards the picturesque, as the town became feted as a tourist attraction.

The wall is not significant in its own right and there are no historic details of any especial interest; the skirting and doorframe style can be seen throughout the building and is of no great quality. The value of the wall lies in its contribution to our understanding of the 19th century remodelling of the structure.

Impact Assessment

The client proposes to remove part of the brick wall between the bay window to the west and the door, in the process removing the most of the door frame. The eastern part of the wall beyond the

doorway, which encloses the stairs and understairs cupboard, would be retained. The removal of the wall would be undertaken to create a more practicable ground-floor space for use as an art gallery.

While the partition wall is of no great age or significance, it does play its part within the historic development of the structure, and in its own small way reflects a broader trend: the 18th and 19th century closure of public houses in Dunster and their demolition or conversion to other uses. The partition of this former inn into two domestic dwellings makes interpretation of its former use and function difficult to reconstruct, especially in the absence of accurate floor plans and without access to the interior of no. 12. The partition wall is arguably far less important than other historic elements, and, subject to suitable recording, its complete removal would not be unwarranted. Indeed, it could be seen as part of the restoration of an earlier space/building. However, leaving part of the wall intact would allow the sense of a corridor to be retained, and thus the contributory role of the wall to the 19th century phase would not be lost.

Recommendations and Observations

Preserving the skirting boards and doorframe on the surviving section of partition wall would retain a direct association with the other 19th century walls.

If the section of wall within the bay window (bracing the fixed leaded pane window and dividing the window seat) is not retained, then it is recommended that the small leaded window be reused within the context of this development in some capacity, e.g. installed in an opening made in the retained section of wall.

It is proposed that the floor be repaved in stone. We understand this will be laid on top of the existing concrete floor and thus archaeological monitoring will not be required.

References

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Somerset Heritage Centre

DD\L/1/29/24/17; DD\TB/42/1/5; DD\L/1/24/8/3; DD\L/1/30/29/28; DD\L/1M/10/35A/8



FIGURE 1: EXTRACT FROM THE 1775 MAP OF DUNSTER, SHOWING THE ADJOINING PROPERTIES OF NO.12 AND NO.14, WITH THE LANDOWNER/TENANT NOTED AS 'W. LEIGH' [SHC: DD\L/1M/10/35A/8]. THE OUTLINE OF THE CURRENT BUILDINGS IS SHOWN.



FIGURE 2: EXTRACT FROM THE DUNSTER TITHE MAP OF C.1840; THE GEORGE IS NUMBERED 12 ON THIS MAP.

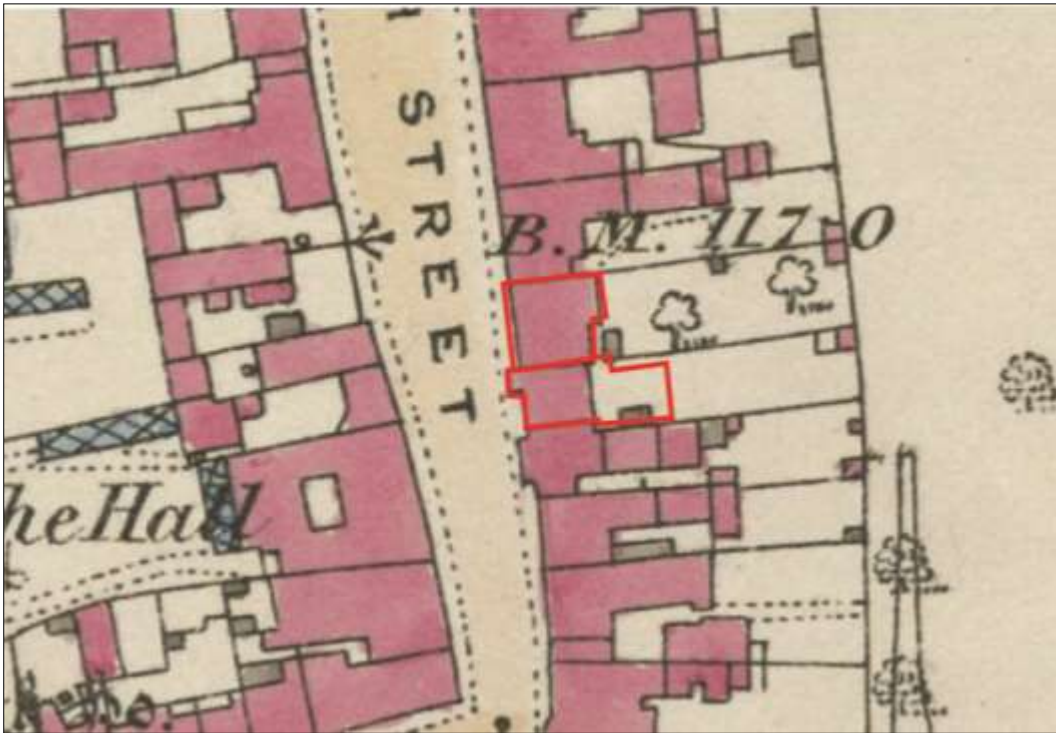


FIGURE 3: EXTRACT FROM THE 1ST EDITION OS 25" MAP OF 1889 (DHC).

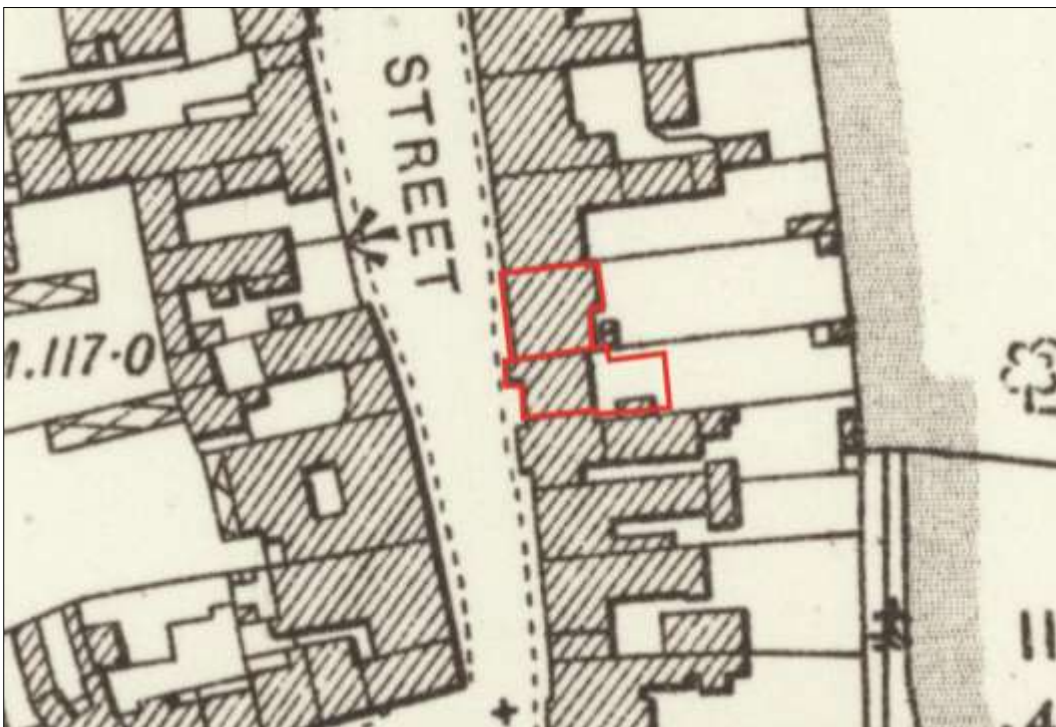


FIGURE 4: EXTRACT FROM THE 2ND EDITION OS 25" MAP OF 1902 (DHC).



FIGURE 5: THE WEST ELEVATION OF NO.14 (LEFT) AND NO.12 (RIGHT); VIEWED FROM THE WEST-NORTH-WEST.



FIGURE 6: THE INTERIOR DOWNSTAIRS ROOM AT NO. 14, VIEWED FROM THE SOUTH-EAST. THE SECTION OF WALL TO BE REMOVED IS INDICATED.



FIGURE 7 (LEFT): THE CORRIDOR VIEWED FROM WEST ENTRANCE.

FIGURE 8 (RIGHT): THE CORRIDOR VIEWED FROM THE EAST.



FIGURE 9 (LEFT): DETAIL OF THE PARTITIONED BAY WINDOW.

FIGURE 10 (RIGHT): THE EASTERN END OF THE CORRIDOR, VIEWED FROM THE WEST.

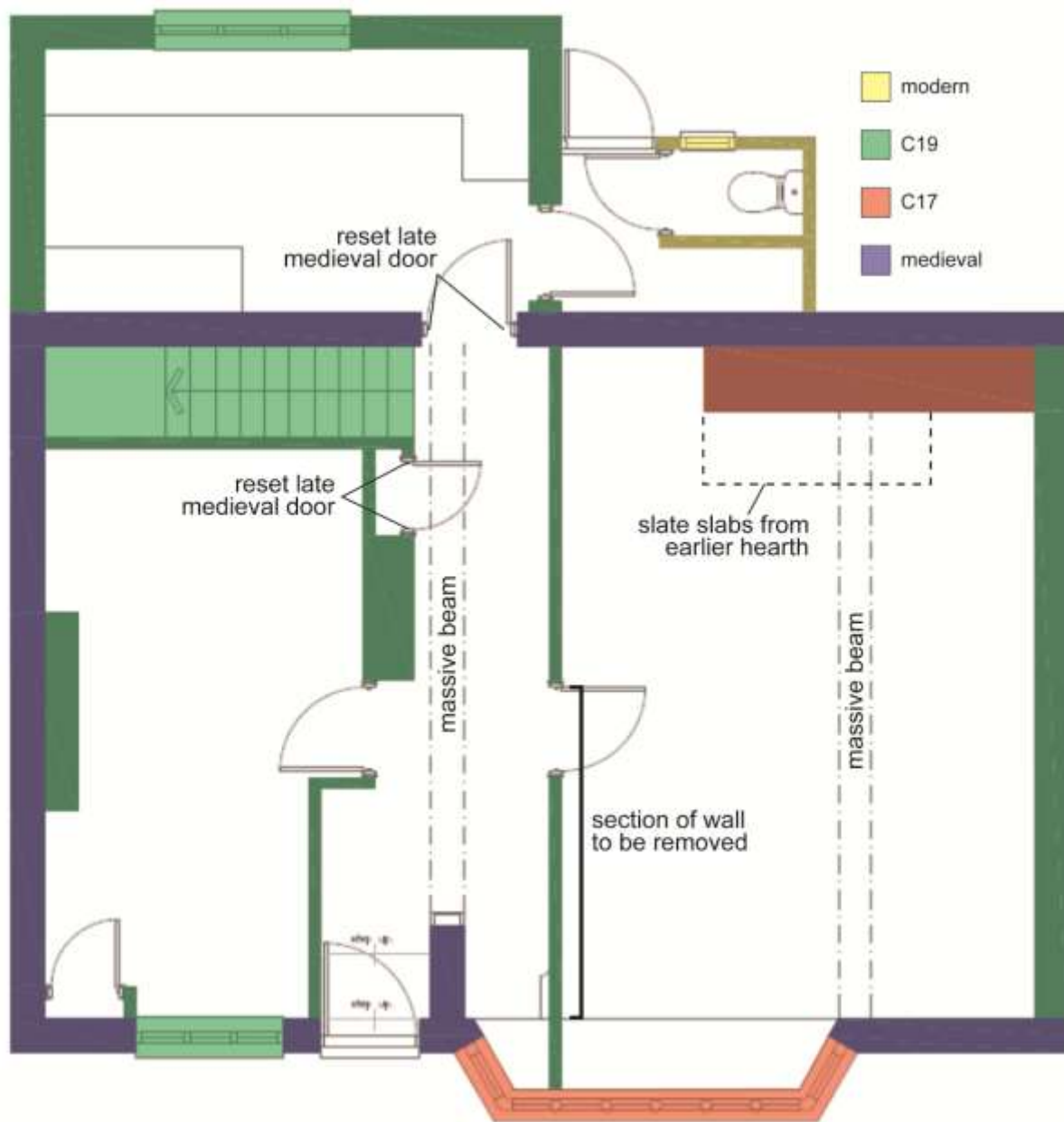


FIGURE 11: PROVISIONAL PHASING OF NO. 14 (BASED ON SCHEMATIC ARCHITECT'S PLANS).