

Historic Analysis of the Coach House at Whitley House, Four Ash Hill, Baythorne End, Birdbrook, Halstead, Essex.

Map Ref: TL 7214 4147

Introduction.

This analysis of the surviving coach house building at Whitley House forms part of the planning conditions specified under planning application 10/00608/FUL to convert the building to ancillary residential use submitted to Braintree District Council in May 2010. The brief for this recording was specified by the Historic Environment Management Team (HEM) at Essex County Council and is referenced under site code: BKWH10. The coach House is listed in its own right under LBS No. 114075 and with the HER under HER 29446. The basis of this report will be from the existing architect's plans and additional drawings as necessary to explain the remaining detail within the building along with an inspection of existing cartographic and any other details lodged with the Essex Record Office.

Site History.

The site, on earlier maps called Whitleys, contains the remains of a moat on which the earlier buildings of Whitley Hall were situated. The Royal Commission Inspectors Report of 1914 only refers to the surviving moat on the site with a pond and variations in surface suggesting the former presence of a house. The last buildings within this area were demolished in the nineteenth century. Other surviving farm buildings that exist to the south of the site have previously been divided away and converted to other uses. No access or study of these buildings was made as part of this report. The existing house of Whitley Hall is a 1950's building with a part surviving earlier building attached to the north. This earlier building is shown on the 1897 and 1922 ordnance Survey maps and had a line of buildings, all nineteenth century, linking it to the Coach House. The building is situated at one corner of the original moated area and could possibly be a remnant from an entrance building to the moated area. From the maps the long linking building was open fronted and possibly stems from the Coach House being brought into normal farm use and enabling the area to be formed into yards and provide shelter cover for animals. The only surviving part is the rear wall now forming the division from the existing house area to the earlier moated area. A scar in the brickwork of the coach house shows the size and projection of this gable roofed building.

The site possessed, in the eighteenth century, many landscaping and garden features now sadly lost. This has been researched by Michael Leach and published under 'Another Lost Essex Garden' in the proceedings of the Essex Gardens Trust. A copy has been included with this report.

Thomas Walford who possibly developed all of the area lived from 1752-1833 and has proved to previous researchers an elusive character. The family are noted in various wills and owned land in Essex and Cambridgeshire. Chapman & André in

1777 show the estate with a house within the moated area but no clear designation of the moat. It shows some other features possibly referred to in the descriptions of the garden at Whitleys. What cannot be recognised from this map is the farmyard and entrance detail but one can deduce that the southern blocks on the map refer to the farmyard and suggesting that no coach house existed then. By the time of the Tithe Award map of 1835, the site now owned by a Thomas Selby and rented to a Henry Sharp who also owned other buildings in Birdbrook including the Swan Inn shows the coach house parallel to the road. The small building at the entrance to the moated area is shown as is a house block on the moated area. By the surveys of the second half of the nineteenth century the site had changed considerably as had the surrounding landscape with the coming of the Colne Valley Railway cutting through to the south west of Whitleys.

The First Series, second edition, Ordnance Survey 25" map of the area surveyed 1893 - 96 shows the coach house with the addition of the roadside building now making a substantial block. Very little change is shown on the New Series 25" map, surveyed 1913 - 1922 other than the positive division between the coach house and lean-to is clearly shown. By the field names and uses recorded on the Tithe Award the farm was at this time mainly arable.

The Coach House.

This brick building is very typical of that late eighteenth century period when many houses had the addition of a coach house. With the improvement in roads more use of coach travel could be safely made rather than journeys being on horseback.

It is built in good red brick laid in Flemish bond and has a classical frontage, facing approximately south east, symmetrically set out with a pedimented large central opening flanked by balanced openings each side. Due to the thickness of the walls the internal brick bond finish is English.

Each side of the centre opening doorway is a central doorway flanked by Diocletian semi-circular windows to either side and a circular window above each of these doorways. The brickwork to the windows is rubbed gauged brick forming accurate semi and full circles. This gauged heads of each doorway are also rubbed with additional scored lines for lime putty mortar.

The central opening is constructed with brick pilasters flanking an arched opening of extremely flat form all in rubbed and gauged brickwork. The pilasters end awkwardly in line with the top of this arch and a rubbed brick cornice runs across the full width just above the tops of the pilasters. Above this the rise to the pediment just breaks above the height of the roof eaves again making an awkward junction. The pediment detail is well constructed in rubbed and moulded brickwork.

Below eaves level is a dogtooth course. The hipped roof is covered in black glazed pan tiles with grey crested ridge tiles.

The south western gable of the building has a high level loading door while the north eastern gable end shows a blocked doorway at ground level towards the north-east corner.

The north west side of the building has a lean-to extension of similar floor size to the main coach house. This appears to be of nineteenth century construction, possibly about the middle of that century. This building was not entered during this

survey and no access was gained to view the outside of the north western wall of the coach house.

The brickwork in general is in relatively good condition. The main failures are in the rubbed brickwork to door heads and window surrounds and settlement to the centre of the main arched opening. The original window frames appear to be in place as do the original small doors. The windows are timber-framed and other than the southern most semi-circular window on the frontage have all detail in place. They were vertical mullioned originally possibly without glass having a heavy central mullion flanked by thinner ones to each side. The doors are vertical boarded with four ledges having long wrought iron hinges attached to the upper and lower ledges. The wrought iron finger catches and staples survive.

At the south western end the upper loading door is of similar construction but with only three ledges. On the trapped north west face is a high level 'pitching' door only opened from the inside. This has two ledges and lighter hinges. All door and window openings have Queen closers in the brickwork other than the higher level loading door. Here the brickwork suggests Queen closers to one side but to maintain bond many of the bricks vary in size of cut. The door opening appears to be original as evidenced by the brick coursing, penny struck pointing and construction of the opening. This door appears to have originally had steps from ground level. The small 'pitching' door on the north west wall is also an original feature. On the north east wall as previously mentioned is a blocked ground floor doorway of normal opening width possibly as an entry to the stables area. The whole presents an easily understandable pattern suggesting a high coach entry to the centre with stabling and tack areas to each side.

Within the building, the layout, use, and development show many mysterious features and raise many questions as to how this building was used.

The central area, originally open to the roof, had the main door opening height lowered when an upper floor and stair was inserted into this bay. This was done by a boarded infill below the original timber lintel. At the rear of this area is now a wooden staircase rising to the upper floor. From structural details this would have been inserted at the same time as the floor. No sign of notching for floor joists exists over the area of the stairs. The insertion of the staircase leaves the 'pitching' door on the north west wall high up above the staircase of no use to load or remove hay from the upper floor. It would also have been no use as a 'pitching' door in the original layout if the central area was open.

The wide staircase is well made with a panelled side to the open side constructed with wide softwood boarding laid parallel to the angle of the stairs. This central opening was also at the time of flooring closed by partitions to either side of this central bay. The main beams across the building at this point are chamfered to each side but not to the centre. No details of these division walls survive other than empty mortises to the underside of what was the upper plate of the walls and plaster scars remain on the rear walls.

Above this former open bay and supported onto the tiebeams to either side of the central opening are two longitudinal timber beams. They are supported high in the roof on two vertical posts, each braced back to the tiebeams. The beams are retained parallel by timber ties at each end. The whole structure is very strong and suggests the anchor area for a hoist lifting system. Why it was needed cannot be surmised but wheelwright shops often had winches to raise carts to an upper floor.

This may also suggest a reason for the 'pitching' door high in the rear wall. This door could have allowed a rope from the hoist through to either direct power outside or maybe to a horse engine within the area now covered by the lean-to. This system appears to have been inserted possibly soon after the original construction and certainly before the roof area was ceiled and the partitions inserted. Some of the timbers for the hoist structure are reused from a medieval house having mortises for diamond mullions and a shutter groove.

Either side of the central bay are two further floored bays. That to the north east has been converted to a granary on the upper floor with a division wall rising from the floor to collar level with a central doorway having the appearance of being inserted into what may have been an original division wall, feather edged boarded to tiebeam level, wide boards to the granary and narrow to the centre with lath and plaster above. Later ventilation slats have been inserted after the original build. The two bays are still plastered to tiebeam level with iron sheet plating sealing the floor to the walls. Above tiebeam level the lath and plaster has been removed. The floor of this area is all of later construction with elm joists, quarter sawn, supported on hand sawn elm beams. This may suggest that this end of the building was originally open to the roof as no signs exist of any earlier way up to that level.

Below this end at ground floor are the best remains of the earlier stabling with lacing pieces in the brick walls showing nail holes for vertical boarding and scars in the plaster on the north east wall show the stall end post position with a rising line to a little below the existing floor level. Further scars show possible stall divisions allowing for three double horse bays. High lacing pieces provide for the fixing of a hay rack on the north wall. On this wall the plaster stops at what would have been the height for a feed trough. At floor level and immediately to each side of the central bay are what appear to mucking out holes, now blocked.

The floor construction to the south west of the central bay appears original to the construction using heavy imported Scandinavian softwood with visible 'bracking' marks as the main supporting beams. The bracking marks identify the original source/port that the timber came from. In line with the first floor end loading door to this floor are two parallel timbers supported over the tiebeams. An iron pulley survives showing it to have had some type of lifting device available to this door opening. The floor through this area is level with the central inserted floor and not raised above it as the later floor to the north east. Brickwork scars on the north west wall inline with the central bay suggest that this side was also closed at the upper level in the original construction. Again the lower roof timbers show signs of former plastering laths. This suggests that the whole length of the building was originally plastered to collar level. Below the floor at ground level to the south west remains of the original layout are sparse. The walls still have lacing pieces suggesting that it had lower boarding and some plaster remains. Of interest in the brickwork visible inside, throughout the building, is the use of long malting bricks in the inner face of the walls immediately above the timber lacing pieces. This would have the effect of spreading the walling load more evenly onto the lacing pieces.

The hipped roof is typical late eighteenth to early nineteenth century construction. It is made from coupled rafters having halving joints at the apex. On every fourth rafter truss is a trenched collar fastened to the rafters with two pegs and two nails. Cut-outs in the collars retain the side purlins in clasped form. The two central tiebeams, reused in this build as are the other two, supported the pediment roof and failure of this roof area has caused much damage and erosion to the tiebeam ends, possibly causing some of the settlement seen in the outer brickwork front of the building. The main timber tie forming the lintel of the original opening is clearly visible now some distance above the inserted floor.

Discussion.

As the one surviving building of a previously prosperous site with early remnants such as the moat and at least one of the farm buildings it makes it extremely difficult to explain why all the changes that have taken place to this classical service building.

It was built to a high specification with the pedimented frontage seeming to face the main entry into the moated area, where the house stood, at the time it was built towards the end of the eighteenth century.

The details appear to be copying something possibly seen elsewhere but the craftsmen have not fully understood the architectural details. Maybe the owner had seen such stable blocks as that at Audley End and similar ones at smaller properties such as Debden Hall.

The most unusual feature inside must be the hoist system and what it may have been used for. It was only for a limited time as the insertion of the floor to the central area would have removed its usefulness.

What was the lean-to building to the north-west built for? Did that also have something to do with this central hoist system?

The now lost divisions either side of this bay also raise questions as they do not appear to have been in the original design but it would be very unusual not to divide the horses from the carriage area.

The suggestion of only one side of the upper level being floored as a hay loft raises questions of operation and how the material was moved to the other side and into hay racks above the stalls. Even on the south west side no provision had been made in the floor construction to allow the direct drop of hay from above as is found in many such buildings.

How did the lifting system to the south-west loading door work? Was there a further structure outside all traces of which have now vanished?

Why was the access stair to the upper level built to such a high standard? The space it absorbed almost certainly precluded the parking of a wagon or carriage within the area left to the main doors.

This is an interesting, and, at the time expensive well built service building to an estate now bereft of any good surviving features that may be deduced it once had considering the vivid descriptions of the landscaping carried out to the area in the same period.

