

ASHCOMBE FARM, STOODLEIGH, TIVERTON, DEVON

RAPID HISTORIC BUILDING APPRAISAL



Stewart Brown Associates

February 2018

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THE PROJECT

In February 2018, Susi Tichener, the owner of the property, commissioned Stewart Brown Associates to carry out a rapid building appraisal of the farmhouse at Ashcombe. The appraisal was required by Devon County Council as a planning condition; the details of the work were supplied as follows:

Application No. 17/02056/FULL

Ashcombe Farm, Stoodleigh, Tiverton, Devon, EX16 9QA - Erection of replacement dwelling: Historic Environment

My ref: Arch/DM/MD/32095a

I refer to the above application. The proposed development involves the demolition of the extant Ashcombe Farm. The date of this building is not known, but it is shown on the mid-19th century Tithe Map and, it is suggested by the Tiverton Archaeological Group in their response, that the standing building contains elements that may be of 16/17th century date. As such, I would advise that this application is supported by the results of a rapid historic building appraisal to understand its significance as a heritage asset associated with the agricultural heritage of the county. The requirement for this information is in accordance with guidance in paragraph 5.3 in the supporting text for Mid Devon Local Plan Policy DM27 and paragraph 128 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2012).

The results of the historic building appraisal would enable the significance of the extant historic building to be understood and enable an informed and reasonable planning decision to be made by your Authority on the loss of this heritage asset.

Stephen Reed

Senior Historic Environment Officer

THE BUILDING

The farmhouse appears on the tithe map of 1841 (Fig. 1), so was already in existence by then.

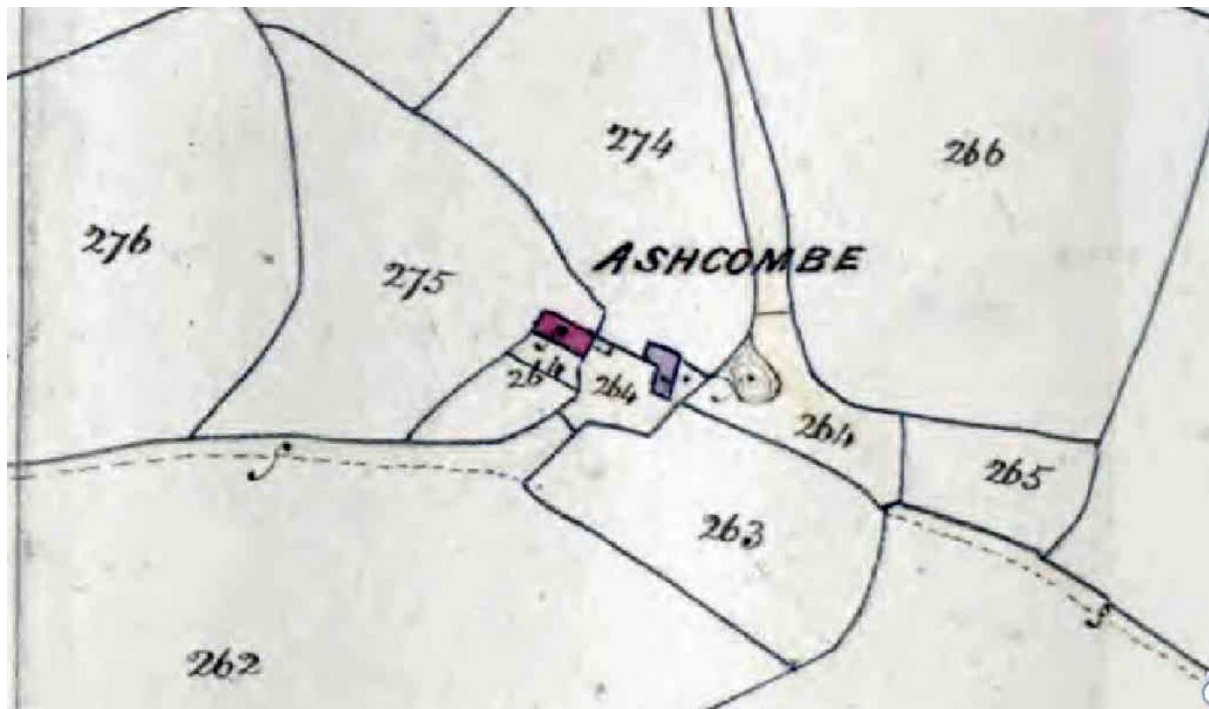


Fig. 1 Ashcombe Farm as it appears on the tithe map of 1841.

Summary

The earliest datable features of the building which are visible today date from around the mid 18th century. It is possible that earlier fabric survives beneath the external render and internal plaster, and that the external projection of former ovens beside fireplaces at each gable end also might belong to an earlier phase, but there are no strong indications to believe so.

Rather, the building's layout and present roof suggest a construction date in the 18th century.

The interior underwent a substantial refurbishment in the 20th century when most internal partitions and doors were replaced, and the first-floor ceiling was raised. Since then, the windows have been replaced with plastic ones (2004), and the two fireplaces substantially rebuilt, the rebuilding covering over or removing the two ovens. The ceiling of the most easterly ground-floor room has also been removed to reveal the joists. These recent alterations have left behind only a few surviving features from the 18th-century phase, the roof being the best preserved amongst them.

The layout

The present internal layout (Fig. 2) probably reflects the 18th-century one closely, since the 20th-century refurbishment appears to have simply rebuilt the internal partitions rather than changing the plan.

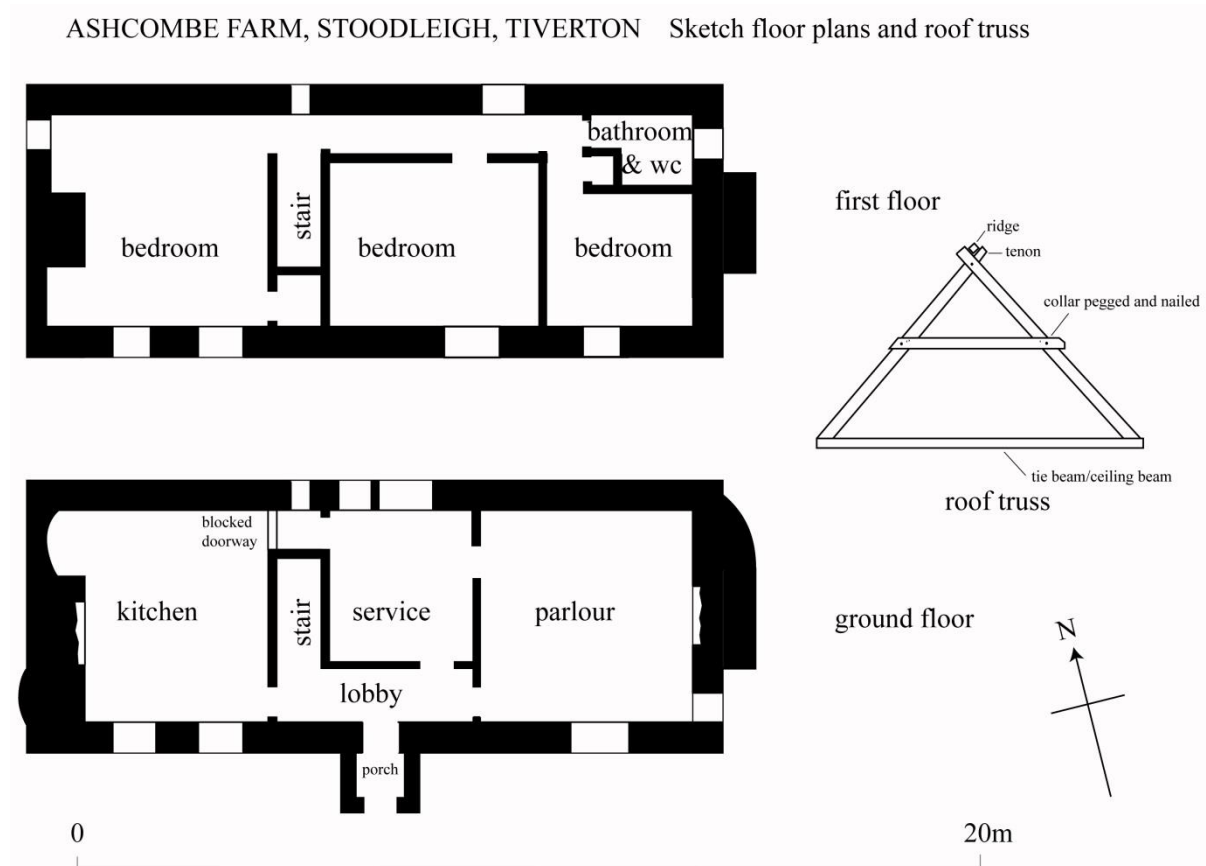


Fig. 2 Sketch floor plans and roof truss of Ashcombe Farmhouse.

The layout comprises three rooms on each floor. The ground floor comprises a kitchen/living room, central unheated service room, and parlour, with a central entrance opening into a lobby which leads to all three rooms and the stair. This post-dates the typical medieval and early post-medieval through passage plan. The first floor contains three bedrooms, all accessible from a landing at the head of the stair, and a bathroom and wc plus airing cupboard which were introduced in the 20th-century refurbishment.

Ground floor

A survival from the 18th-century internal partitions is that of the lobby just inside the main entrance, which is timber framed and clad with horizontal planks, at least on its south side. This partition also contains one of the two oldest surviving doors, that leading into the central service room from the lobby (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 The horizontal planked side wall of the lobby and plank and batten door leading into the central service room.

The door retains its original iron handle and internal latch (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 18th-century handle and lifting bar latch on inside of door into central service room.

The door has an iron hinge hung from a pintle (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Strap hinge hung from a pintle on inside of door into central service room.

All other ground-floor partitions and doors appear to have been rebuilt in the 20th century, The doors have narrow regularly-sized planks and standardised hinges with uniform taper fixed with screws (Figs 6 and 7). They also have plastic door knobs.



Fig. 6 20th-century replacement doors with narrow planks leading into the parlour.



Fig. 7 20th-century iron hinge fixed with screws on most doors.

Fireplaces

Both of the ground-floor fireplaces have been extensively altered in recent times (Figs 8 and 9).



Fig. 8 The parlour fireplace with modern brick insertion and range.



Fig. 9 The kitchen fireplace with modern brick infilling beneath old timber lintel.

Both retain external ground-floor round projections for side ovens (Figs 10 and 11) but it is not known whether anything survives from the ovens themselves since they are now entirely covered over on the inside.



Fig. 10 The east gable end of the house showing round ground-floor projection for oven next to the parlour fireplace.



Fig. 11 The external ground-floor round projection for an oven next to the kitchen fireplace.

The kitchen/living room fireplace has an old timber lintel above it with a chamfer which tapers out at each end in accord with the old fireplace opening. It has two peg-holes in it however suggesting that it may have been salvaged from elsewhere and used in this context at the same time as the brick insertion. On the north side of the kitchen fireplace there is a recess with a curved back extending down to floor level. This may be a remnant from a boiling furnace. Side ovens occur next to fireplaces from the 17th to the early 19th century when they began to be replaced by ranges containing ovens. The kitchen once had direct access to the central service room by a doorway at its north-east corner. The doorway has since been blocked to create a small larder beneath the stair.

The porch may have old side walls but its roof is supported by small trusses formed from modern metal tubing.

First floor

The stair is a straight flight with a landing at its top opening onto a passage leading eastward along the north wall. There are remnants from original 18th-century doorway jambs at each end of the passage. The westernmost bedroom is the largest and is presumably the master bedroom. It has a cupboard at its south-east corner above the stair. The door of the cupboard is the second of the two surviving old ones in the house (Fig. 12), although it has been repaired and re-hung on new hinges. The old disused pintels survive however.



Fig. 12 The cupboard in the master bedroom, showing a surviving section of tie/ceiling beam.

Inside the cupboard is a surviving length of ceiling beam (more below). The master bedroom also retains one wide oak floor board, now mostly replaced by later narrow softwood ones (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13 A wide oak floor board (toward the rear) survives in the master bedroom amongst later narrower replacements.

In the middle bedroom, further old floor boards survive, but these are of softwood (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14 Old floor boards in the middle bedroom.

The smallest easternmost bedroom has had a bathroom and toilet inserted at its northern end together with an airing cupboard, which has the same style doors as the 20th-century replacement doors throughout the house (Fig 15).



Fig. 15 The airing cupboard doors.

The roof

The roof is of crude A-frame construction with a collar which is halved onto the principals and pegged and nailed in place. The apex is formed by a pegged tenoned joint between the principals, in which the tenon and opposing principal extend upward to clasp a diagonal ridge (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16 The 18th-century roof, showing crude construction not intended to be exposed and viewed.

The purlins are irregularly shaped and carried on the backs of the trusses (through purlins); some have been replaced in modern times, as has part of the ridge. Some rafters have also been replaced recently, probably when the roof covering was replaced with fibre cement tiles (Fig. 1).

The trusses once sat on tie beams or ceiling beams, most of which have been cut away in order to raise the ceiling height of the first floor leaving only stubs at each end (Figs 17 - 19). This probably happened in the 20th century when the internal partitions and doors were rebuilt or replaced. Only the tie/ceiling beam beneath the easternmost truss survives intact (Figs 17 and 18). One other survives in part, shown in Fig. 12 within the cupboard in the master bedroom. The remainder of the beam was removed when the ceiling above the stair was raised to the same height as the rest of the first floor.



Fig. 17 The sole surviving intact tie/ceiling beam beneath the easternmost truss, looking west.



Fig. 18 The north end of the surviving tie/ceiling beam, looking west, showing the ends of two further trusses now without the original tie/ceiling beams beneath them.



Fig. 19 The sawn-off stub of the tie/ceiling beam beneath the westernmost truss in the master bedroom.

The walls

Only one very small area of the masonry forming the walls of the house is currently exposed, in the toilet at the west end of the first floor. Here, the wall is built of local shale rubble bonded with light orange/brown earthy mortar containing lime flecks. It may be that the house is built entirely of such materials, or it could be built partly of cob.

CONCLUSION

The visible features and roof suggest a date of construction in the 18th century, after the traditional three-room and cross-passage plan gave way in Devon to more varied plan forms influenced by examples from wider afield across the country. Its unheated central room and lobby-entry plan is of a type which can be found as far afield as Northamptonshire, where it has been assigned class 5 in the RCHME classification of post-medieval houses (vol 6, *Architectural Monuments in North Northamptonshire*, HMSO 1984, *Small Houses*, and Fig. 5, 5). The RCHME description is as follows:

‘Their distinctive feature is a central unheated service room, flanked by two living rooms each with a gable stack. The entrance is roughly central, into a passage which gives access across the front of the house to all three rooms. The heated rooms are a parlour and a hall-living room. Few villages have more than one house of this plan, which was clearly used for houses of modestly high standing. The earliest houses of this plan in the area date from the late 17th century, although earlier examples have been discovered in Dorset (R. Machin,

Yetminster Houses (1978), 68). Their origins are not clear, but the distribution of the plan is associated with the Jurassic stone belt; it is absent from the easternmost villages in Northamptonshire, and in Huntingdonshire is confined to the stone villages to the N. (RCHM, Peterborough New Town, passim; RCHM, Huntingdonshire, passim) and is very rare in East Anglia. The latest houses of this plan date from the opening years of the 19th century’.

R Brunskill in his book *Vernacular Architecture* describes the plan form as ‘Central Service Room’ (1978, 108-9), and relates that ‘examples of this plan are not especially numerous or widespread but they may be seen in the southern half of Wales and in the South-West of England’.

In his chapter ‘Farmhouse Building Traditions’ p44, in the book *Devon Building*, Peter Child describes a similar type, but retaining a cross-passage, as ‘a late variant form ... with unheated central rooms (eg Burnthouse, Otterton), perhaps used as dairies, as in Dorset, where the type is relatively common (Machin, R. *The Houses of Yetminster*, 1978)’.

Nat Alcock in his chapter ‘The Development of the Vernacular House’ in the book *West Country Households 1500-1700* (eds John Allan, Nat Alcock and David Dawson 2015, p24-7, Fig. 1.15) describes the latter type (still with cross-passage) as ‘A more frequent and more distinctive south-western 17th-century plan-type has a central service room, as at South Town, Sampford Courtenay. These houses are apparently particularly frequent in Dorset (RCHME 1952-76); in Devon they are widely, though sparsely distributed. They provide the first examples of a feature which would come to dominate the profile of later 17th- and 18th-century houses: symmetrical facades with twin gable chimneys’.

The latter two writers are describing a slightly different variety of the central service room plan, which retains a cross-passage. The Ashcombe Farm plan follows a form which had adopted a lobby-entry turned at right-angles along the front of the house instead of the cross-passage, but which maintained the central service room. The relationship between the two forms is presently unclear, but it may be that the former plan type was gradually replaced by the latter.

Nat Alcock also mentions the central service room type in the book *West Country Farms House-and-Estate Surveys 1598-1764*, p41, where he says ‘The unheated central room is commonest in Dorset, and is discussed in detail by Machin, *Yetminster*. The type was frequently used from the 1620’s onwards, and the earliest example found was of 1592. By the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this plan became more widely distributed, moving north-eastwards across England: M. W. Barley, ‘Rural Housing in England’ in *Ag. Hist.* V(ii), 659.’

In his book *English Farmhouses* (1982, 116-7), R. J. Brown describes the Ashcombe type as one of a number of ‘lobby-entry’ farmhouse plans, and says that they ‘are not especially numerous but can be found in many parts of the country, for example Brockley Farm, Elsworth, Cambridgeshire, although most are located in the South-west and parts of Avon and Gloucestershire.’

The roof of the house was crudely built and not meant to be seen. It originally had tie/ceiling beams beneath its trusses which supported a ceiling which hid the roof from view. The ceiling was later raised and most of the beams cut off at the walls. The latter may have taken place at the same time that many of the internal arrangements and fittings were rebuilt/replaced in the 20th century. The style of the 20th-century replacements is very plain and economical, much as in the 18th-century phase.

Little more can be learnt from the building as it is. Few of the original fittings survive and most the roof trusses have been damaged. Almost all of the historic fabric is presently covered by external render and internal plaster.