

The George Inn
Dorchester-on-Thames
South Oxfordshire District

Historic Building Assessment



John Moore Heritage Services

May 2010

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location

1.1.1 The George Inn, Dorchester is a Grade II* listed building on the west side of High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames (South Oxfordshire District Council), opposite to the entrance to Dorchester Abbey. The Cottage to its south (No. 25 High Street) is separately listed as 'No. 23 High Street'. It is one of a series of historic buildings along the street front, which is in the centre of the Dorchester Conservation Area.

1.2 Commission

1.2.1 Oxford Archaeology has been commissioned by John Moore Heritage Services to carry out the assessment of The George Inn, with regard to the architectural and historic interest of the building in relation to current proposals for creation of new bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms within existing rooms.

1.2.2 This report is produced for Kestrel Design on behalf of the owners of the Premises, following initial consultation with the South Oxfordshire Conservation Officer.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Designations

2.1.1 The George Inn, Dorchester is a Grade II* listed building, first listed on 18 July 1963, and described as an inn of the late 15th or early 16th century having a '5-gabled front' (see list entries in Appendix B). Immediately to the south of the Inn is a pair of cottages (Nos. 23 & 25 High Street), formerly listed as George Hotel Cottage, and now as 'No. 23 Farriers Cottage', described as dating from the 16th or 17th century and having a two-window front with a central through passage (see Appendix B). As discussed below, this may have been of one build with the adjacent listed building, No. 21 Virginia Cottage (see Appendix B), since they share the same plinth and roof profile.

2.1.2 These buildings have a group listing, and form a group with most of the premises on that side of the street. All are within the Dorchester Conservation Area.

2.2 Location and Historic Background

2.2.1 The George Hotel is an historic inn which has been in continuous use as an inn since the 15th century, and has been the subject of previous studies by Pantin (1961, 174; Fig 2) and Airs and Steane (1983, 71; Fig 4). The latter was undertaken prior to the creation of a conference centre in the south range in 1982.

2.2.2 The inn is located on the west side of High Street, Dorchester at NGR SU 5781 9425. The underlying geology is Thames Valley gravels and the site lies at c.48.6m OD.

Dorchester was a Roman town, and Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical centre, and then a modest-sized market town in the shadow of the Augustinian monastery, situated on one of the main transport routes through the Thames valley.

- 2.2.3 The hotel lies in the centre of the village on the main street, opposite the gateway to the abbey. The street frontage comprises five jettied and gabled bays incorporating a covered carriage-way which leads to a trapezoidal rear courtyard. This is flanked by long wings to north and south and is open at the west end to a car park and a large lawned area at the back of the plot.

3 DESCRIPTION AND ASSESSMENT

3.1 General Description of George Inn

- 3.1.1 The *front range* consists on the south side of a twin-gabled, double-jettied timber-framed block with two chimney stacks and having two large fireplaces on the ground floor; these may always have been the principal public rooms of the inn, and led through to the hall at the rear.
- 3.1.2 The next two bays to the north are set back and placed at an angle to the first part; they are another twin-gabled and jettied timber-framed unit, containing the entrance way and one side room. There is a room over the entrance, and at the rear is an added passage at first-floor level linking the two sides of the inn. The last bay to the north is in line with the last, has a single gable and jetty, and has a door to the street suggesting that it is not part of the medieval inn. The ground floor rooms north of the entrance form part of the present scheme that is the subject of this report.
- 3.1.3 The *rear north range* is a timber-framed range of post-medieval date, and has a modern single-storeyed accommodation block at its west end.
- 3.1.4 The *rear south range* consists of two late medieval timber-framed units: to the east a two-bay open hall and to the west a six-bay lodging range with a galleried upper storey. The kitchen and other services occupy the ground floor of this range; part of the first floor retains its original use as bedrooms and the western half was converted into a conference centre in the early 1980s. The framing of the south and west walls has been infilled with a variety of brick and stone nogging of different dates.
- 3.1.5 The north elevation is weather-boarded, a finish that dates back at least to the late 19th century, as can be seen from a photograph of c.1890 hanging in the bar. The west end of this elevation is gabled and has a truncated appearance. This is borne out both by the internal roof structure and by early editions of the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey maps which show a complete west range with a central carriageway closing off this end of the yard (Fig 1). This had largely been demolished by 1961 when a photograph shows only a single-storey weather-boarded lean-to attached to the gable (Pantin 1961, 174, pl.XV).
- 3.1.6 The *cottages to the south* of the George Inn consist of a pair (Nos 23 and 25) next the George listed as No. 23 Farriers Cottage, and another pair to the south listed as No. 21 Virginia Cottage. These have a continuous roof on approximately the same level, and a partly continuous stone plinth at the base of the wall. They also have a variety of horizontal sliding casement windows at first floor. It seems likely that the possibly late medieval framing seen in the northernmost one continues through as a single construction either for the two or all four cottages, as a single row. There are other instances of row houses in Dorchester, including those next on the south. The ground and first-floor rooms in No. 25 next the George Inn form part of the present scheme that is the subject of this report.

3.2 The Rooms North of the Entrance

- 3.2.1 Of the two rooms north of the entrance one occupies the outer room of the medieval inn, and the other is in the adjacent building to the north. The side walls of the entrance passage have exposed medieval timber framing of large posts and braces, but almost none of this is now visible inside the north rooms.
- 3.2.2 The *first room* off the passage has a modern door and renewed windows, and a curious modern fireplace made up of older materials. The west wall of the room appears to be a modern partition, and beyond this is a store room reached from the yard through a renewed door, perhaps originally of 18th-cent. date. This store room has in the rear north-west corner a large post which is likely to be the outer corner of the medieval frame (following across from the diagonal line of the medieval rear wall).
- 3.2.3 **Assessment:** This space is a significant part of the plan form of the medieval inn, though the opening to the next room and rebuilding of the fireplace has deprived it of any real historic character. The store room at the west end obscures the line of the original back wall (and this no doubt happened long ago).
- 3.2.4 The *second room* is now reached from the first through modern double door, though it also has a door to the street from when it was a separate premises. In the party wall there is one timber post next the double door and some modern stonework beneath it, but no other indication of framing. This room has a window and a former door to the street, and a door at the back to the passage. At the end of the room next the back door is a cupboard. The cupboard and back doors are both modern fire doors in an older, 19th-cent. frame. Both rooms have solid floors that may be concrete.
- 3.2.5 **Assessment:** This was perhaps once a separate shop though it may previously have been part of the inn. Apart from the one post, whose context is not obvious, and the door and window at the front, no significant features can be seen.

3.3 The Cottage to the South (No. 25)

- 3.3.1 As described above, the cottage is certainly part of a pair with No. 23, and possibly once formed a longer row. It was formerly a small shop, and has its own front door beside the door to the brick-paved passage that divides the cottages. The front is timber-framed on an offset plinth and the rear has two brick gables (one for No. 23, one for 25) that indicate a rebuilding at the back part in the late 18th or early 19th century.
- 3.3.2 The *ground floor front room* has timber framing of the adjacent inn building in the north wall, and some elements of its own framing near the front door. The old front door and window are present, but there are no other features of note in the front room (the floor has a linoleum covering and a block-built cupboard has been removed).
- 3.3.3 A modern concrete block wall divides the front and rear, and there is a modern door to the side passage in what was the middle room, which also has a modern open stair to the first floor.
- 3.3.4 The *ground floor rear room* has a brick wall and renewed casement window to the yard, and a brick fireplace of 18th/19th-cent. date in the south wall. The floor is of concrete, and there is a single ceiling beam running north-south. There was a modern stud and plasterboard partition dividing the middle from the back room.
- 3.3.5 **Assessment:** The ground floor was once a separate shop and is likely to have been divided into front and back rooms; it is important in forming a pair with the adjoining cottage, and possibly being part of a longer row. The fabric of the front and north walls are the most significant parts, and little else remains to be seen in the current state of the building.

- 3.3.6 The *stair* is a modern open stair lightly constructed against the north wall, rising to a landing which (like the former bathroom) is enclosed by modern partitions covered by plasterboard.
- 3.3.7 The *bathroom* on the first floor was formed against the brick chimney on the west, and against a concrete block wall on the south side, and has a floor of modern softwood boards. The partition walls enclosing it are of 20th-century construction but including minor elements of older framing (18th or 19th-century), but the wall on the east is likely to have been on the site of an earlier partition between front and back, since it is aligned with the rear wall of the front room. As originally built the back wall of the timber frame of No. 25 would have been further back, nearer to the west wall of the former bathroom, since the roof came back this far, as can be seen from the (damp-damaged) purlin beneath the skylight.
- 3.3.8 The *first floor front room* has much of the framing of main inn exposed in the north wall, while the front wall has elements of its own framing exposed on either side of the window. The room was open to the roof, and the pair of the bathroom purlin is visible in the roof slope, but no other details of the roof carpentry. The floor has traditional wide boards (probably of elm) which look to be old.
- 3.3.9 The *first floor rear room* has a brick wall and 19th-cent. window to the yard (with an old casement window), and timber purlins/wallplate for the gable in the side walls. The floor is of 19th-cent. softwood boards running north-south. The corner post of the inn's medieval frame is exposed in the room, with a jowled post and end of the main tiebeam, and the framing beneath this is visible in the stair and front room.
- 3.3.10 **Assessment:** The first floor is likely to have been divided into front and back rooms, though it is not entirely clear how this was done; it is important in forming a pair with the adjoining cottage, and possibly being part of a longer row. The exposed fabric of the George Inn in the north wall is a very significant part, but the timber framing of the front wall, the floor boards and floor joists and the remains of the roof are very important parts of this building, that may date from the 16th century.

3.4 Overall Assessment

- 3.4.1 The George Inn is one of Oxfordshire's iconic historic buildings and is a type-site for the English medieval inn. The surviving medieval parts of the timber-framed front, entrance passage and back wings are buildings of national importance and of interest for visitors to Dorchester. The adjoining cottage row to the south is not fully understood, but may be a late medieval or early post-medieval construction. These buildings are to be seen in the context of small town rich in vernacular architecture (especially timber-framed) of the medieval and early modern periods. The George Inn is properly listed as Grade II* and the adjoining cottage as Grade II.
- 3.4.2 The two parts of the present inn under consideration are important for different reasons. The rooms to the north relate to the provision of public rooms in the original inn, with the addition of the adjacent shop. One is an important part of the interior of the medieval inn, while the relation of the second room is uncertain and is likely to have been brought into the inn at a much later date.
- 3.4.3 The cottage to the south is to be seen in the context of the cottage rows occurring here and elsewhere in Dorchester. It is perhaps of 16th-century date and has a timber framing and roof of its own (as well as showing the south wall of the medieval inn frame). As cottage or shop with accommodation it has clearly been subdivided in its history and has been used to provide staff bedrooms. It is an interesting building, with some potential

(shared by other properties in the row) for further discovery by investigation of the fabric.

4 THE CURRENT PROPOSALS

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 The proposals are as shown on Kestrel Design's drawing 967/09 dated September 2009 (revised March 2010) 'Proposed additional bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms to disused cottage and meeting rooms'. Some part of the alterations had already commenced in the south cottage before work was stopped, but it is not thought that any significant fabric loss has taken place or that the fabric history has thereby been obscured or lost.

4.2 Changes to the rooms North of the Entrance

4.2.1 In the *first room* the existing store room at the back will be converted to an en-suite bathroom, linked by a door through the modern partition. The bedroom will be created by closing off the double door to the second room.

Impact of proposal: The conversion of the store to a bathroom need do no harm to the fabric or character of the listed building, provided that original timber post in the corner of the store room is not interfered with. The closing off of the second room will result in the recreation of the separate historic spaces.

4.2.2 In the *second room* the en-suite bathroom will be formed at the back of the room, and the separate bedroom will be created by closing off the double door to the first room.

Impact of proposal: The creation of the bathroom will not have any significant impact on the existing spaces, and indeed the closing off of the second room will result in the recreation of the separate historic space that must once have existed here.

4.3 Changes to the Cottage to the South

4.3.1 On the *ground floor* the stair is rebuilt as a proper enclosed stair, and one bathroom is formed within the back room and another within the existing front room, and a hot water cylinder is placed in the cupboard by the door.

Impact of proposal: The replacement of the stair will be beneficial and the other proposals need do no harm to the fabric or character of the listed building, provided that original timber framing in the front and side walls is not interfered with. Although the internal disposition may once have been different (and presumably there was once a front shop and a heated back room) the modification of the existing/recent three-room plan is not inappropriate, and could be reversed.

4.3.2 On the *first floor* the bathroom is reformed and slightly extended towards the rear to make two bathrooms from one, but otherwise keeping the existing plan arrangement.

Impact of proposal: This need do no further harm to the fabric and character of the listed building provided that original joists are not cut for service runs and the damaged purlin is secured against further damage, and the old floorboards and floor joists are safeguarded.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 The Current Proposals

- 5.1.1 In the north pair of rooms the en-suite bathrooms can be added without any significant impact on the existing spaces. The first will simply close off the end of the room and the other will use an existing store room. The second may once have been a separate premises but has for long been joined to the adjacent room as part of the public space of the inn. The main corner post of the medieval frame stands in the first bathroom but need not be harmed by the proposed fittings.
- 5.1.2 In the cottage the building has previously been subdivided, and en-suite bathrooms can be added without any significant impact on the existing spaces, and need do no harm to the fabric or character of the listed building, provided that elements of original timber framing are not interfered with, and the damaged roof timbers are protected.
- 5.1.3 The proposed changes will largely be reversible and do not preclude future re-ordering of the rooms in other ways. Neither proposal need have any impact on significant historic fabric, though it is important that historic fabric is not unnecessarily damaged.

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May 2010

APPENDIX A: Bibliography

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- Henig M. Booth P. with Allen T., *Roman Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 2000)
- John Moore Heritage Services 2002 *An Archaeological Watching Brief at The Priory, 12 High Street, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire*. Unpublished report.
- Pantin, W.A., 'Medieval Inns', in *Studies in Building History* ed E M Jope (1961), 166-91
- Rodwell K., ed., *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire. A Survey of the New County*. Oxon Arch Unit Survey No. 3, (1975)

APPENDIX B: The List Descriptions

Source: Listed Buildings Online, 15 March, 2010

A. *The GEORGE HOTEL*

Building Name: THE GEORGE HOTEL *Parish:* DORCHESTER
District: SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE *County:* OXFORDSHIRE
Postcode: OX10 7HN *NGR:* SU5782394231
LBS Number: 248110 *Grade:* II* *Date Listed:* 18/07/1963

DORCHESTER HIGH STREET SU5794 (West side)
[Map no.] 5/80 The George Hotel [Date Listed] 18/07/63
[Group Value; Grade] GV II*

Inn. Late C15/early C16. Rendered and weatherboarded timber framing; old plain-tile roofs with brick stacks. 5-bay plan with parallel rear wings. 2 storeys. The 2 left bays of the 5-gabled front project and are double jettied with carved brackets and blind gables; windows are small-pane horizontal-sliding sashes and there is a glazed and panelled door, with canopy, in the right bay and a similar door in the return wall, to right. The 2 higher bays, to right, have a single jetty and contain a large carriage entry with a moulded timber surround, a tripartite sash, to right, and 12-pane sashes at first floor. The bay to extreme right is lower with a 2-panel door, 16-pane sashes and a jetty with a heavy diagonally-placed bracket to extreme right. Left rear wing includes a 2-bay hail range plus a 5-bay weatherboarded range containing an open first-floor gallery. Right wing is partly brick and partly timber framed at first floor. Framing, where exposed, is in large panels with heavy tension braces. Interior: open hall with lower king-strut trusses; several open fireplaces with chamfered brick jambs and bressumers; richly-moulded beam; early-C18 stair with turned balusters.

Listing NGR: SU5780294224

B. South of THE GEORGE HOTEL

The description of the first of these includes both No. 23 and No. 25 High Street

DORCHESTER HIGH STREET SU5794 (West side)
5/79 **No.23 (Farriers Cottage)** 18/07/63
(Formerly listed as George Hotel Cottage) GV II

House. C16/C17. Rendered timber framing; old plain-tile roof with brick stack. 2-unit through-passage plan. 2 storeys. 2-window front, divided by central passage entry with an old plank door, has, to left, 3-light small-pane horizontal-sliding sashes, with panelled shutters at ground floor, and, to right, an 8-panel door combined, under a tiled canopy, with a 3-light casement and, at first floor, a 2-light horizontal-sliding sash. Tall stack rises from roof slope to left of passage. Interior not inspected. Possibly originally two cottages.

DORCHESTER HIGH STREET SU5794 (West side)
5/78 **No.21 (Virginia Cottage)** 18/07/63
(Formerly listed as Virginia Cottage) GV II

House. C16/C17, altered C20. Rendered timber framing on rubble plinth; old plain-tile roof with brick ridge stack. 2-unit plan. 2 storeys. Front remodelled at ground-floor with, to left, an entrance between bow windows and, to right, a further entrance and garage doors under a tiled canopy. At first floor are, to left, a long window of two 2-light casements and 2 horizontal-sliding sashes and, to right, a 4-light casement with some leaded glazing. Roof is half-hipped to left and has a central stack. Interior not inspected.

APPENDIX C: Illustrations

Fig. 1: OS map of 1899 showing the former extent of the inn courtyard

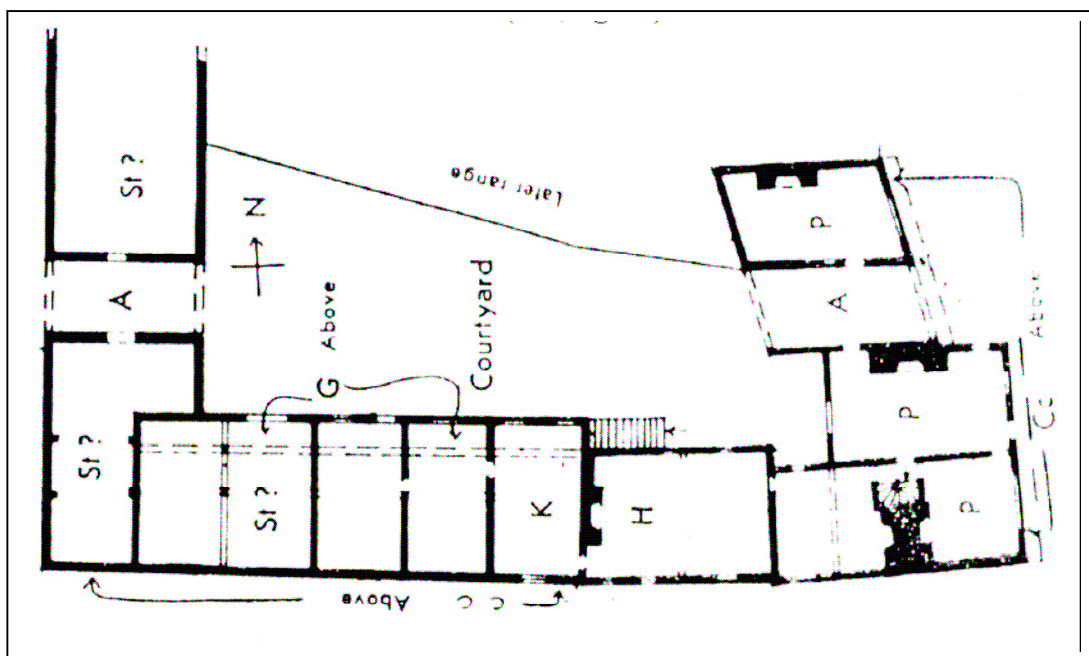
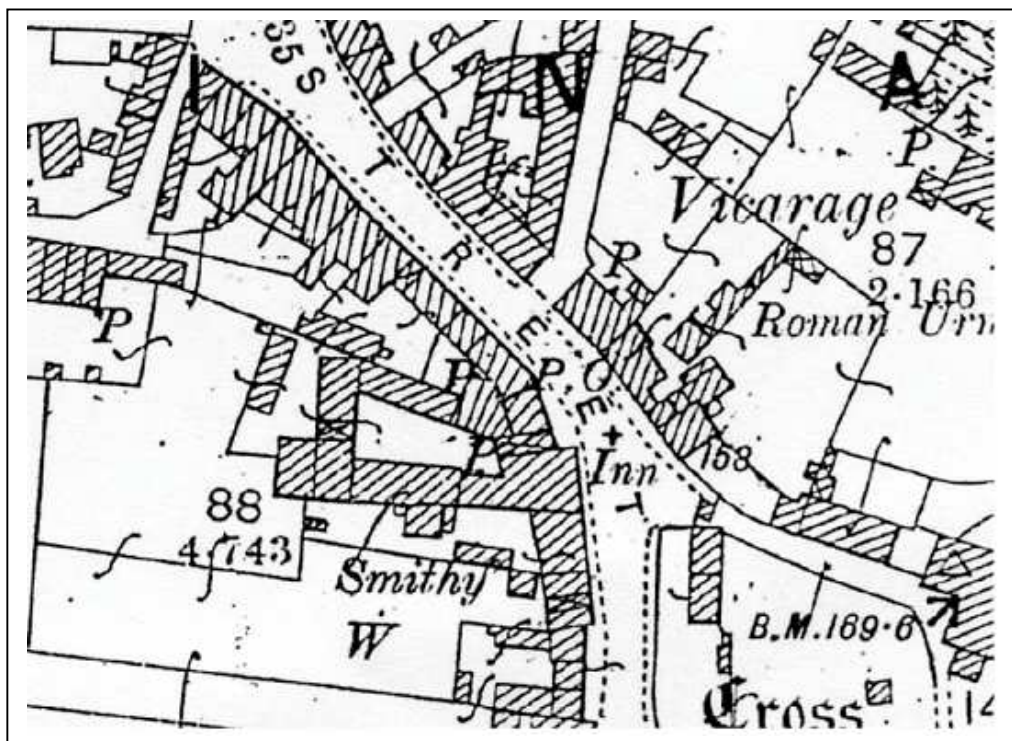


Fig. 2: W.A. Pantin's plan of the layout of the medieval inn.

Fig. 3: The first room north of the George Inn entrance and the second room on the right in the adjoining 'shop'



Fig. 4: The row of cottages south of the George Inn
(No. 25 is on the right, with a notice on the door)