

The structural development
of
CORNER CLOSE COTTAGE
9 Bell Lane, Thame
OXFORDSHIRE



K A Rodwell
for
JOHN MOORE HERITAGE SERVICES

December 2006

**THE STRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF
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Introduction

This report outlines the structural development of Corner Close Cottage, a grade II listed building in Bell Lane, Thame. It was commissioned to inform a planning application by the owners, who propose to alter a section of roof tiling to thatch and to extend the building westwards. The drawings used as a basis for the survey (Figs 2-3) are those supplied by Peter North and Partners, Chartered Surveyors.

Description

The house lies north of the High Street on the west side of Bell Lane and is on the edge of the historic built up area; it is detached and set back from the street frontage. The VCH (1962, 166) described it as 'Among the best preserved 16th-17th century houses....., a picturesque thatched building of brick plaster and timber'. The rear of the plot on which it stood (Fig 1) has been developed for housing.

Exterior (Figs 1-3)

The house is L-shaped in plan with a square projecting wing on the west side. The main part of the building is timber-framed, the wing is brick and the roof is thatched with a patch of tiling on the east side. The east elevation is three bays long and the greater part is two-storeyed; it has a regular timber frame set on a rubble plinth of five posts tenoned into a cill beam; intermediate studs and rails form three tiers of near-square panels. All the windows are 20th century reproductions with leaded lights; on the first floor they are set within the framing, on the ground floor posts have been removed to insert them. The south end of the elevation is only 1½ storeys high and is out of line with the main house wall; it lacks a plinth and has a slighter, more irregular frame nogged with brick. Between the two builds is an old brick chimney stack, with a central raised rib, that rises to the height of the upper ridge. The adjoining roof slope is covered in plain clay peg tiles for a width of c.2m which corresponds to the internal depth of the stack; the remainder of the roof is thatched. The wall below the tiled section is bisected by a narrow rail but is otherwise covered in modern render which

hides the substructure. The gabled south elevation is part-rendered brick and has 20th century windows.

On the west elevation the framing of the two-storeyed house mirrors the east side but is largely hidden by the later west wing. The front door lies to the south and is a good quality early 20th century reproduction in 'Tudor' style. It abuts the end post of the two-storeyed range which is tenoned into a cill beam that continues south for a short distance to a blocked doorway at the north end of the lower range. This has a rendered plinth at a lower level and three further panels of slighter exposed framing. The roof slope on this elevation is fully thatched.

The wing is butted against the timber frame and built of thin handmade bricks in English bond (full courses of alternating headers and stretchers) with a rubble plinth and a rendered gable. This elevation has 20th century windows, there are two small probably original windows in the south wall lighting the stair and the basement and the north wall is blank. The north end of the main house is framed like the side elevations with a half-hipped roof and an external chimney stack; the lower half is rubble, the remainder rebuilt in brick.

Interior (Figs 2, 4)

The main part of the house has three rooms in line, all heated, with a 20th century hallway cut out of the middle room. The timber framing is exposed and the majority of doors are of a reproduction boarded pattern with wooden closers and ornamental strap hinges which date to the earlier 20th century. The sitting room has an early 20th century brick arched fireplace surround with a contemporary panelled overmantel and dado. There is a lateral chamfered ceiling beam and the partition to the dining room is original. This room has exposed ceiling joists and a large fireplace with rubble jambs and a wooden lintel masked by a Jacobean-style panel. To the west of this deep stack is a lobby which formerly had an external door and to the south is the kitchen. This has a large open fireplace in the reverse of the stack with a series of recesses in the side walls. There is no access to the east side of the stack below the tiled roof section. The ceiling height in this room is very low and the beams slope towards the south.

The stairs open off the hall and are housed in the corner of the wing; they are of winder type in an old studwork enclosure but the treads may have been adjusted in the 20th century for access to the room over the cellar; the doorways have early 20th century facings. A separate flight leads down to a semi-basement. The upper wing rooms have floors at intermediate storey heights and are now bathrooms; the attic room has a timber-framed gable wall. On the first floor of the main house the timber framing is exposed in the north bedroom; the internal partition is original and the posts have diagonal braces to the wall plates, not visible externally. The outline of a two-light window blocked by the wing can be seen in the west wall. The ceiling has a lateral beam lodged on the truss tie beams and exposed rafters. In the roof space over this room the partitions are fully plastered (with old plaster) and the floor boarded. The roof has waney elm purlins and pole rafters. The middle bedroom has a raised ceiling and a framed partition at the south end facing-up the chimney stack, which is not visible at this level; the ends of the purlins to the lower south roof are lodged on the tie beam.

The development of the house

1 The house appears to have been constructed as a two-storeyed building with a good quality box-frame set on a stone plinth. It was probably three rooms long and had a lobby entry plan with the front door opening into the space alongside the large double-sided chimney between the two southern rooms. The stack appears to be a single-period construction and the cill beam to the west wall extends beyond the end of the extant two-storeyed range, which both imply that the original building was longer and that the south end has been rebuilt. The chimney at the north end of the house may be a later addition and the north bedroom has an original window blocked by the construction of the west wing. The location of the original stairs is not known. The lobby entry house plan developed in the second half of the 16th century and became widespread in the region during the first half of the 17th century; Upper House Farm, Nuffield has a tree ring date of 1624 (VA 20, 47). This house is probably early 17th century but could date to the end of the 16th century.

2 The south end of the house was rebuilt, retaining the main stack but with a lower roofline and on a slightly different alignment. It has slighter brick-nogged framing and an intermittent plinth course; the door position in the lobby was retained.

This reconstruction may have been as a consequence of a fire and is difficult to date closely; it could be late 17th or 18th century and may post-date the addition of the brick wing, which is higher quality work.

3 The brick west wing is butted against the framing of the main part of the house and blocks at least one original window. It contains a cellar and two upper rooms at intermediate levels to the rest of the house. The staircase appears to have occupied its present position since the wing was built, although there appears to have been later modification in its detail. The wing probably dates to the late 17th or early 18th century and is more substantially built than the reconstructed kitchen. It is not certain which came first but the differences in materials suggest that they are unlikely to be contemporary.

4 The house appears to have been restored in the early 20th century; the present front door and the windows date to this time as well as the internal layout and many of the fittings. These include the creation of the hallway and landing, modifications to the stairs, panelling, 'Tudor' style boarded doors and the opening up of the sitting room and dining room fireplaces.

The tiled roof

The patch of roof tiling it is proposed to replace with thatch is on the east slope of the rebuilt south end of the house. It is about 2m wide and covers the body of the stack over the flue. Some of the tiles are old, probably 19th century, but there has been extensive more recent patching. Little of the adjoining fabric is visible; the underside is inaccessible internally and the external wall has modern render so that its date and precise function remain unclear. It is possible that it was intended as a firebreak, although this is by no means a universal feature of thatched houses in the area. It may be that it was introduced when the house was restored in the early 20th century as a part-practical and part-picturesque feature. On the other hand the whole of the lower roof may have been tiled before this date and the thatch reintroduced as part of the restoration, retaining just this area for practical reasons. The tiling appears to be of limited historic significance and a fully thatched roof replacement roof would be more satisfactory from a structural point of view.

References

Rodwell, K (ed), 1975 *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: a survey of the new county*
VA *Vernacular Architecture*, Tree ring dates (as volume number)
VCH 1962, *Victoria History of the counties of England: Oxfordshire: Dorchester & Thame Hundreds*, 7

Statutory list

THAME BELL LANE SP7006SE (North-west side) 9/13 No.9 24/04/51 (Formerly listed as Corner Close) II House. Probably early C17 to left, with add C17 main house. Large timber framing with rendered infill; thatch roof; brick end stacks. 2-storey, 2-window range with single-storey, single-window portion to left. C20 door to rear. Irregular fenestration of casements. Interior not inspected.

List of figures

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Fig 2 Phased plans

Fig 3 Phased elevations

Fig 4 Internal photographs

Corner Close Cottage, 9 Bell Lane Thame

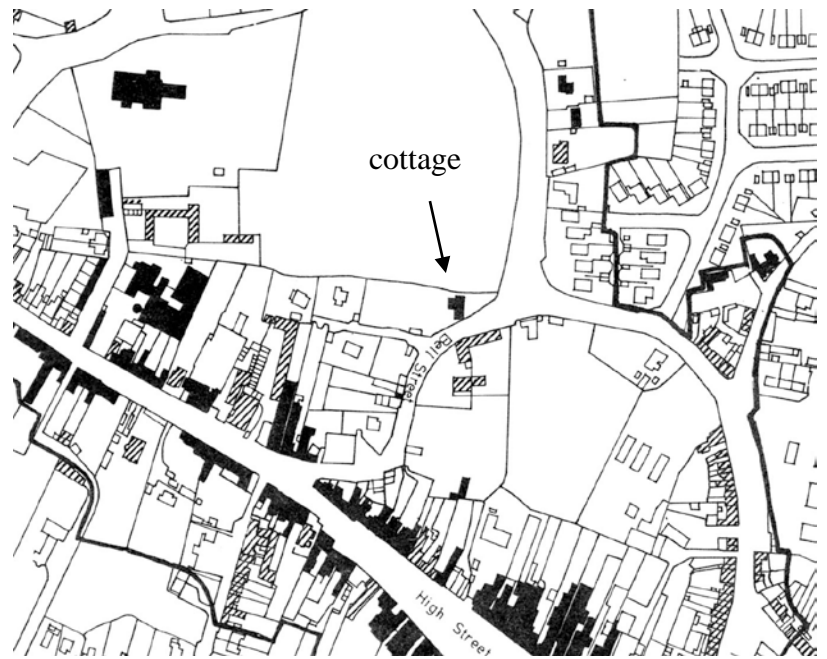
Fig 1

Location map
(Rodwell 1975, 154)

East elevation

North end of west elevation

West side of house from the
south-west



tiled roof



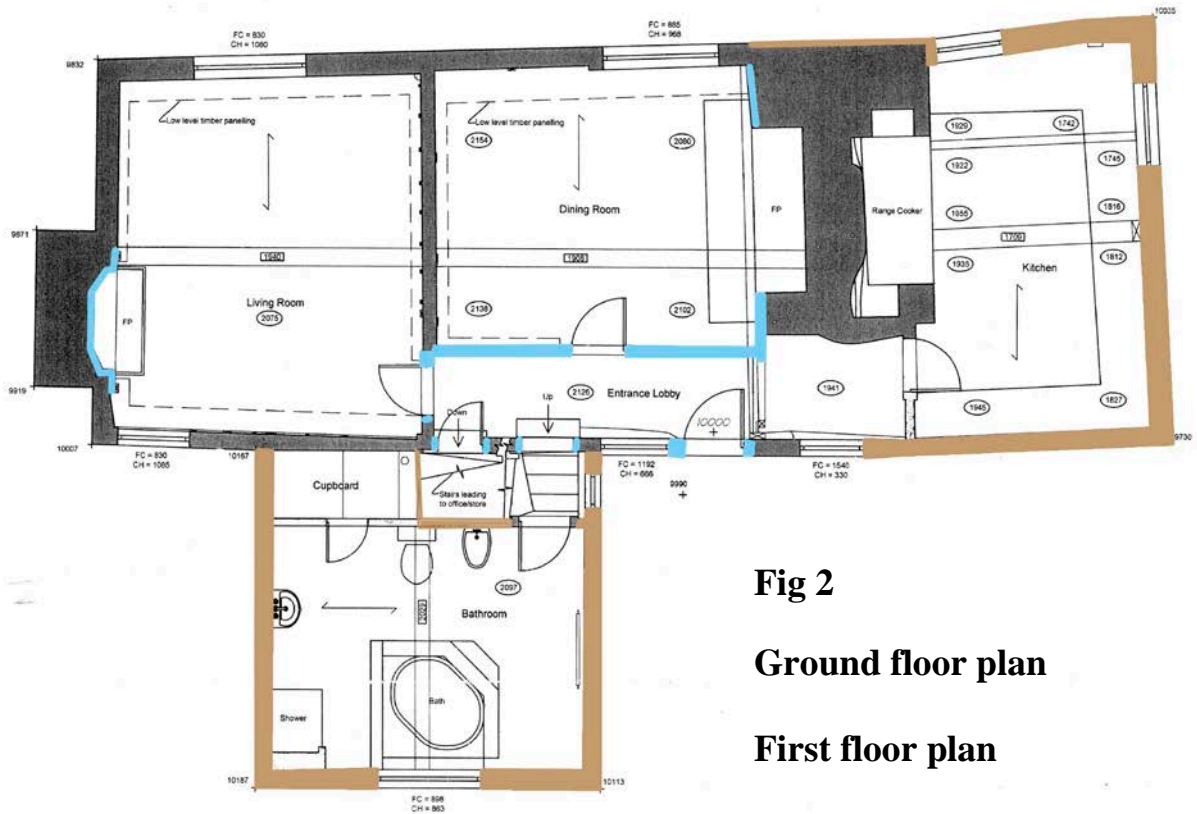


Fig 2

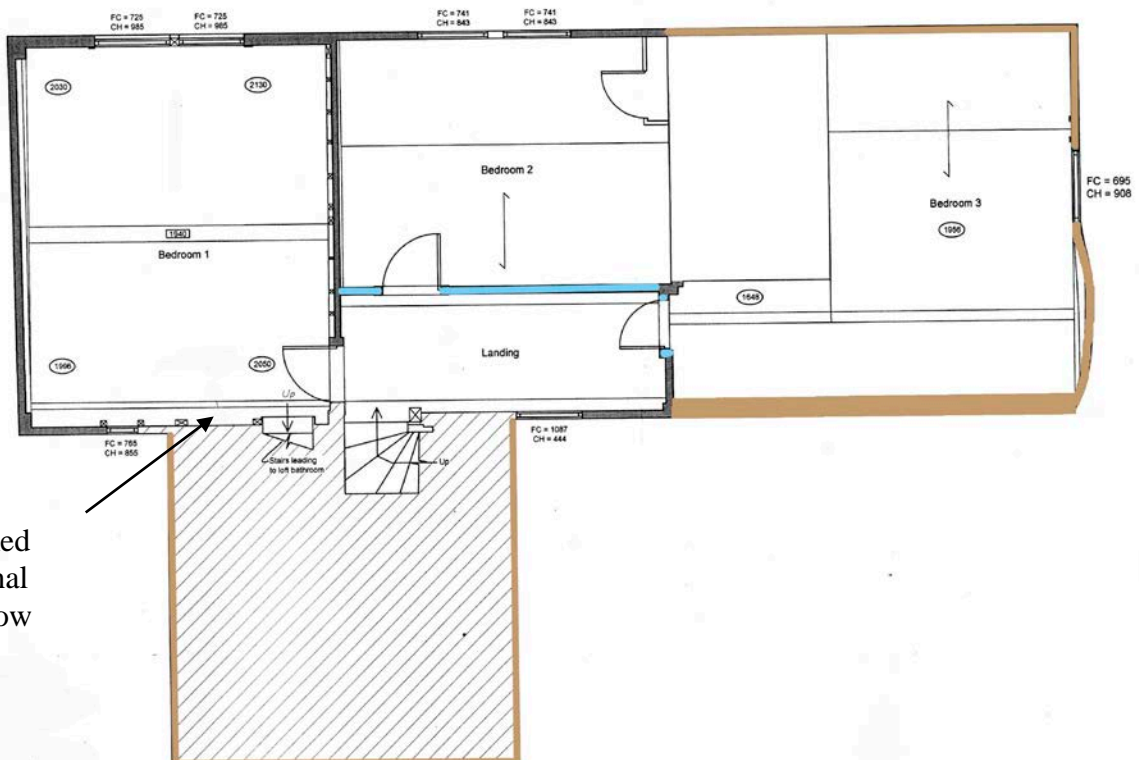
Ground floor plan

First floor plan

Grey early 17th century
 Brown late 17th or 18th century
 (more than one phase)
 Blue early 20th century



blocked
original
window



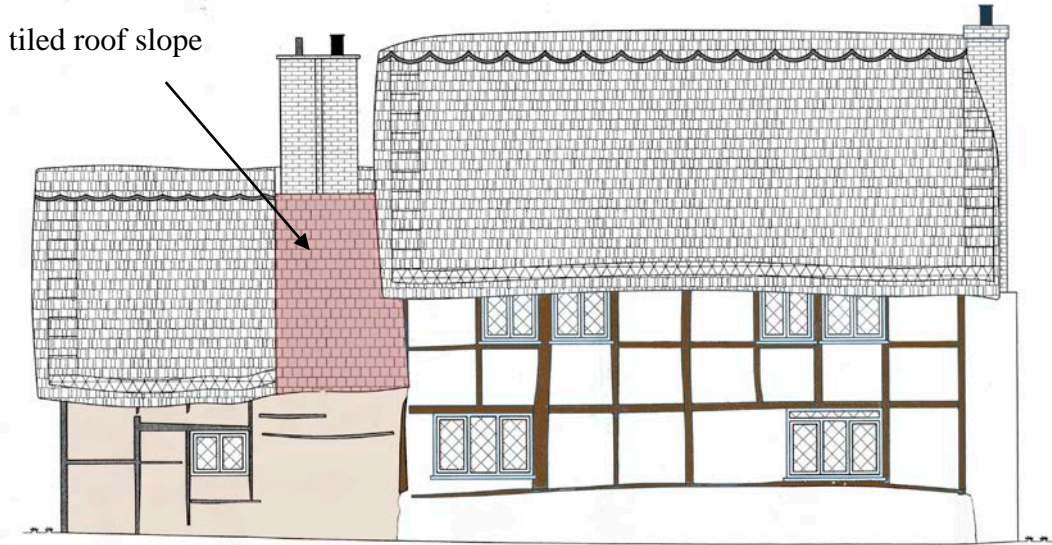


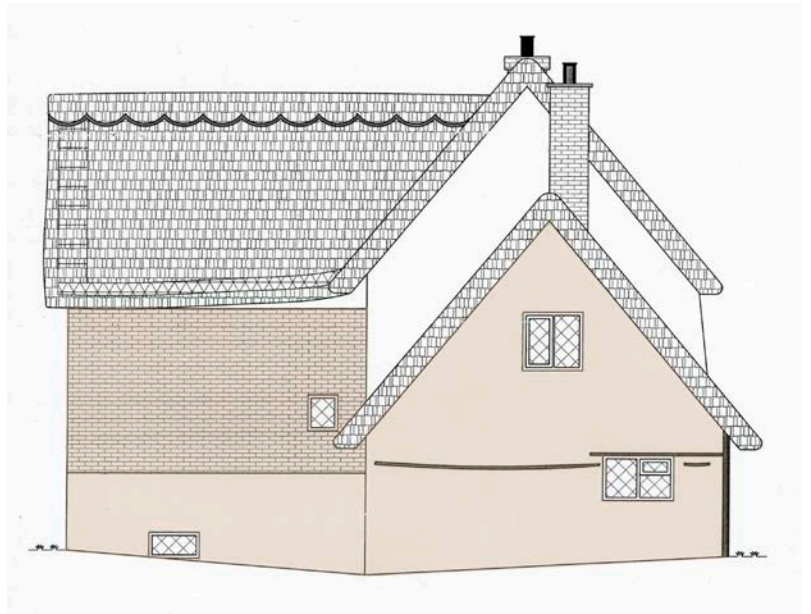
Fig 3 Elevations

East elevation

South elevation

West elevation

White early 17th century
Buff late 17th or 18th century
 (more than one phase)
Blue early 20th century



Corner Close Cottage, 9 Bell Lane Thame



Fig 4 Interiors (clockwise from above)

- Kitchen fireplace
- Dining room fireplace
- West wall of north bedroom with blocked window (W)
- Stairs to cellar
- Winder stairs from first floor landing
- Top of stairs

