

Barn, North Farm, Shropham Road, Great Hockham, Norfolk

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Introduction

The barn at North Farm is located approx 500 metres to the northeast of the market centre at Great Hockham on the Shropham Road. The barn occupies a roadside position, as does the farm house that adjoins it to the south. At first glance the barn seems to be a typical Norfolk barn of clay lump construction, with a black bitumen exterior render that is frequently employed in clay lump barns to provide a waterproof covering for the vulnerable, un-fired clay beneath. However, appearances in this instance are deceiving and, on closer inspection the barn is of shuttered clay construction – a method of building which is both much rarer than clay lump, and also historically of much greater significance, as will be demonstrated.



Photograph 1

The west front of the barn, North Farm, Great Hockham. The gentle pitch of the pantiled roof, the black bitumen render of the side walls and gable, and the main threshing doors are all clearly visible. Notice, also, the rare lean-to at the rear. The barn is located directly on the roadside (Shropham Road). Although there were clay lump buildings on the site, and others in the village centre, this is the only securely identified example of a shuttered-clay building in Great Hockham. (Photograph taken by the author)



Photograph 2

The east view of the barn, North Farm, Great Hockham. The four-bay cart shed is probably a nineteenth-century addition to the barn proper. The barn appears to be of eighteenth century date – a construction date in the second half of the century being most likely.

The historical context

A great deal of research has been conducted into the origins of clay construction in Norfolk. The author's own research and that of others into medieval clay-walled buildings¹ has recently been published in the journal of the Vernacular Architecture Group (VAG). This research indicates that clay-walled buildings, constructed using

¹ A. Longcroft, 'Medieval Clay-walled Houses: A Case Study from Norfolk', *Vernacular Architecture*, 37 (2006) pp.61-74; M. Atkin, 'Medieval clay-walled building in Norwich' *Norfolk Archaeology*, 41 (1991) pp.176-7.

either a shuttered clay method or something akin to ‘cob’, appeared for the first time in Norfolk in the 11th century. Thereafter, clay-walled buildings were employed in town and countryside alike during the Middle Ages, with many examples having been discovered through excavation. A distinctive yet hitherto neglected type of medieval building, the clay-walled house can now be seen to be an important element of the medieval vernacular building tradition in Norfolk. It remained a key type of construction until the early 1500s, when a new wave of building using more fashionable and desirable materials such as flint, brick and timber-framing achieved supremacy and led to the rapid replacement of existing clay buildings.

In addition, authoritative academic papers have been published by others on the origins of clay lump as a building material². The latter is quite different from shuttered clay or cob, and employs wooden moulds into which the clay (mixed with aggregates and binding agents such as straw and hair) is placed. Once dry the clay blocks are removed from their moulds and employed in much the same way as brick – except that the clay lumps are much larger than bricks and are unfired. The unfired nature of the blocks means that it is imperative that they are kept dry, so the clay lump blocks historically tended to be covered by either a mud or lime mortar render, or a thick layer of bitumen (or both). The leading authority on the history of clay lump – John McCann – has argued very convincingly that the technique was introduced into Norfolk in the early 1800s. It is, therefore, a nineteenth century innovation.

This leaves a period between about 1550 and 1800 when the use of clay as a building material is little understood. Very few securely dated examples of clay-walled buildings of this date have yet been identified in Norfolk. Any building which can be demonstrated to have been built from clay in this period may be viewed legitimately as a ‘*missing link*’ between an earlier medieval clay building tradition, and a much later nineteenth-century one. It would also possess, therefore, a much greater inherent historical importance and not only deserves to be preserved, but also, arguably, deserves to be subjected to detailed archaeological recording as a means of establishing the finer details of its construction and adaptation over time. Buildings like the barn at North Farm demonstrate that clay-walling was NOT eradicated as an element of the vernacular tradition in Norfolk in the sixteenth century – instead, it merely went into abeyance in the 17th and 18th centuries, being used, perhaps, on a far more selective and limited basis until the new technique of clay lump exploded onto the scene in the early 1800s.

This begs the question, therefore, of whether the barn at North Farm really is one of our ‘missing links’. The documentary evidence is very helpful here and a map of 1798 shows what appears to be the barn and farmhouse in their present locations. They are shown again on an estate map of 1830. Whilst it is impossible to be 100% certain that the buildings depicted on the maps are those which survive today, this does seem VERY likely.

The barn

Inspection of the barn by the author on 8 August 2009 revealed that it is definitely of shuttered clay construction and NOT clay lump. It is impossible to date the clay from which the barn is built, but it is possible to see the distinctive changes in fabric which denote the ‘shifts’ in which they clay walls were raised in stages. The roof has a relatively gentle pitch (approx 35%) which may suggest that it was always covered by

² J. McCann, ‘Is Clay Lump a traditional building material?’, *Vernacular Architecture*, 18 (1987) 1-16. McCann restates his thesis in ‘The Origin of Clay Lump in England’, *Vernacular Architecture*, 28 (1997) pp.57-67.

pantiles rather than thatch – the latter requires a steeper pitch to work effectively and a roof which was formerly thatched would normally be expected to have a pitch of at least 45 degrees. The roof uses relatively thin scantling of poor quality – some of the timbers still retain the sapwood and bark edge which suggests that the building was not erected using high-grade timbers but rather timbers of lesser quality which were available on the estate at the time of its erection. The roof is of butt-purlin type with purlins that have heavily diminished tenons – a feature that is normally associated with a declining carpentry tradition and one that normally indicates a date after c.1690. This suggests, therefore, that the barn was built in the eighteenth century. It is difficult to be more precise since there are so few datable features that one can rely on, but on the balance of probability a build date in the second half of the eighteenth century (1750-1800) would seem most likely.



Photograph 3

The interior of the barn. The roof is of butt-purlin type and the use of heavily diminished (chamfered) tenons is a good indicator of relatively late construction – in this case probably in the second half of the eighteenth century. (Photograph taken by the author). The straight wind braces can be seen clearly, along with the collar and the elbowed braces employed to support the tie beams. These are nailed into position (not pegged) and are probably nineteenth-century additions. (Photograph by the author).



Photograph 4

The interior of the barn, showing the shuttered clay construction of the walls. The distinctive 'block' pattern associated with clay lump is entirely absent. Instead, one can discern the individual 'shifts' in which the shuttered clay walls were raised. The use of shuttering is indicated by the verticality of the walls – there is none of the typical 'tapering from bottom to top' which one would expect to see in a 'cob' wall. (Photograph by the author).

The farmhouse

The farmhouse was also inspected by the author. The house, like many in Norfolk, has acquired a new brick outer skin, executed in red brick. However, its steep pitched gable and massive axial chimneystack immediately suggest that the structure has origins that pre-date 1700. This is confirmed by closer inspection. On the ground floor, in the former hall, there is an ovolo-moulded cross beam which has chamfer stops. The latter comprise an ogee stop and multiple 'nicks'. These are characteristic features of the seventeenth century. There very few datable features visible on the ground floor, but the ceiling in the former service bay at the north end of the house, appears to have been inserted into an earlier timber-frame using a 'clamp' at north and south ends to support the joists of the inserted ceiling. It is impossible to close-date the ceiling since there are no decorative features (chamfers etc), but it is significant that the joists are set on edge (rather than flat) – a method of construction that, again, would tend to suggest a seventeenth century date. However, if the ceiling is 'dropped into' a pre-existing building in the 1600s, how old is the pre-existing structure? Again, it is very difficult to be certain as to the age of the timber-frame itself since it is only partially visible, but the low eaves, the tall wall studs (there is no girding beam or mid-rail) which rise from sill plate to wall plate, and the heavily cambered tie beam at the north end of the house suggest a late medieval origin (c. 1450-1530). It would seem reasonable to conclude that North Farm contains the core of a medieval hall house with open hall flanked originally by one or two bays, containing services and a parlour. If the services lacked a chamber above (which is suggested by the inserted 17th-century ceiling) the house may have essentially been a single-storey structure at this time with all three ground floor rooms open to the rafters. Like many old medieval houses the farmhouse was 'up-graded' in the 17th century by inserting new ceilings into each room and cutting through the tiebeams so as to provide new connecting doorways at first floor level – a tactic frequently employed to provide a usable domestic space on the first floor and one that can be seen, for example, at Pond Farm, Cringleford. The chimneystack was almost certainly inserted as part of this seventeenth-century up-grade.

Interestingly, there is a further phase of development at North Farm which sees the replacement of the roof. The earlier seventeenth-century roof was ripped out (the result of a thatch fire perhaps?) and replaced with a roof which bears many similarities with that in the barn – in particular the use of purlins with heavily diminished tenons. The rebuilding of the roof may date to the same phase of rebuilding which saw the building of the barn and the two buildings may, therefore, be part of a more general programme of 'improvements' initiated by the estate in the eighteenth century – if they are, then they again provide important evidence of the manner in which estate owners went about up-grading their estate buildings and tenant cottages in the Georgian period.

Summary

The physical and documentary evidence which survives indicates that the barn at North Farm is a shuttered-clay building of eighteenth century date which may have been erected as part of a wider policy of estate improvement which also saw the replacement of the roof in the neighbouring farmhouse. The use of shuttered clay construction in the barn ensures that the property has a historical significance which is out of all proportion to its size, status or sophistication. The weight of evidence suggests that it is one of a very small group of buildings which employ clay as a walling material in the period between 1550 and 1800 and it constitutes, therefore, a 'missing link' between an earlier medieval clay-walling tradition and a new wave of clay lump construction in the early 1800s. Judged purely in terms of its historical interest and significance it is one of the most important survivals I have inspected in

recent years and fully merits closer and more thorough investigation and recording. Demolition of a property of this kind would constitute, in my view, an act of vandalism and the removal of the building would be greatly to the detriment of the character of the historic landscape of the village of Great Hockham. Every effort needs to be made to find a way forwards which ensures the continued survival of this building so that it can be enjoyed by current and future generations and so that its full historical value can be determined via detailed archaeological recording. This is not 'just another clay building' – it is a rare and important survival.

Dr Adam Longcroft
9 August 2009