

# THE ROOKERY, BISHOPSTONE, AYLESBURY: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL BUILDING SURVEY

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*A building survey was carried out on The Rookery, 102-104 Bishopstone, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, a grade II listed cottage constructed of witchert, a highly localised form of cob. The survey aimed to provide a record of the building in its current form, to investigate the structural development of the cottage and to attempt to date the various phases of construction and alteration. Structural evidence pointed to a seventeenth century date for the first phase of the building, although analysis and dating proved difficult due to extensive alterations carried out in the 1970s. Documentary evidence was of particular interest because it provided a link between this building and the current veterinary hospital in the town. The Rookery is a good example of a vernacular building, utilising highly localised witchert in its construction, and as such this survey may be of interest in any wider studies of this type of dwelling.*

## INTRODUCTION

An historic building survey was carried out in March 2007 on The Rookery, a grade II listed witchert dwelling, situated in Bishopstone, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire (NGR SP 8080 1005). The property is within the civil parish of Stone with Bishopstone and Hartwell, and is sited at the south-east end of the village. The current Department Of Environment listing is given as:

“House, formerly two cottages, probably 18th century, witchert, rendered and painted, on stone base. Altered and extended 20th century. Thatched roof, 3 brick stacks, the southern one 20th century. Three eaves dormers to east side, two on west. 20th century cross wing, also thatched, at south end. Door in angle, and second door and 2 windows to RH side of east side.” (DOE, 1985).

The survey was carried out as part of the learning requirements of the MA in Archaeology and Heritage (Distance Learning), University of Leicester, with the aims of investigating the structural development of the building, attempting to date each phase of construction and creating a record of the property as an example of a witchert building of local significance.

Witchert (variously spelled *wichert*, *wychert*, *witchit*, the word deriving from “white earth”) is a localised form of cob which is found in Bucking-

hamshire and Oxfordshire, in a belt extending from the south west of Aylesbury across to Dorchester on Thames. The high content of decomposed limestone in the local clay subsoil makes it particularly suitable for use in witchert construction. There are examples of its use in houses, walls and churches in a number of villages around Bishopstone, most notably in Haddenham and there are six listed witchert cottages in Bishopstone itself, making The Rookery of particular local significance.

When making witchert, the larger limestone pieces are used for foundations and plinths, whilst the smaller pieces are crushed and mixed with the witchert soil, to provide bulk. When the witchert dries, it becomes a pale, cream colour, although it is usually lime rendered and whitewashed. Most cob walls are between 50–900 mm thick but witchert walls are usually thinner, because of the strength of the clay-chalk subsoil, although there is often a reduction in the thickness of the upper storey, as can be observed at The Rookery.

Witchert buildings have a solid masonry plinth or “grumpling” to raise the cob above rain splash and rising damp and exterior walls rendered with a mixture of finely worked clay and chopped straw, or lime plaster. They also required no guttering, rain being thrown clear of the walls by the long over-hanging eaves of the thatched roof. Chimneys were usually constructed of cob or stone, but most

have been replaced by brick. Witchert will last indefinitely if well made and protected from wet, but it will collapse if it becomes saturated (McCann, 2004; Davies, 1994; Pearson, 1992).

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Bishopstone is an agricultural hamlet, its name possibly derived from “Bishop’s *tun*”, meaning the farm of the bishop, a reference to Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, who held land within the manor of Stone after the Norman Conquest (Mawer and Stenton, 1925, 165). Bishopstone has several farms to the present day but little in the way of a physical centre, being a linear settlement, with dwellings straggling along the single main road. The Rookery is one of 29 pre-twentieth century domestic dwellings in the hamlet and one of the 15 listed buildings (Fox, 2009).

The title deeds of the property date back to 1925, with the earliest conveyance making reference to an indenture dated 3rd December 1866 for the sale of two cottages and two parcels of land adjoining, to Mr. Joseph East, a veterinary surgeon with a practice in Aylesbury. The census shows that Joseph East was born in Bishopstone in 1829, to father William, a blacksmith and farrier (Musson and Craven, 1853) and mother Susanna. He trained as a veterinary surgeon in London, lodging in Camden Town, before returning to Aylesbury to set up in practice, initially in Buckingham Street, but by 1869 at 49 Cambridge Street, the site of the current veterinary hospital in the town. The 1866 indenture refers to the sale of Rookery Cottages to Joseph East by Messrs. Harry Wilmot Buxton, William Rutter, Thomas Chapman, Robert Wilkinson and Charles Lowndes. Rutter was an agent to John Lee of Hartwell (BAS 1939.1833.1). Lowndes was, in all likelihood, the Reverend Charles Lowndes of Hartwell Church and secretary of the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society (BAS 213.1920) and Chapman was most probably Thomas Sands Chapman, a local banker (Dell, 1986, ch.2, 17). Chapman and Rutter are recorded as purchasing land in Bishopstone in a deed of settlement dated 1854 (D/LE, Bundle 1, 881, CBS).

However, the 1871 census states that East lived at the Cambridge Street address, with his wife Mary and their three children. This suggests that The Rookery was purchased by East perhaps as an

investment, possibly being rented out to tenants. Early census records for Bishopstone did not list the house number or name for the majority of properties in the village; thus it is difficult to trace the occupants of the house in the late 1800s with any degree of certainty. However, it is clear that the majority of villagers were agricultural labourers, or had occupations associated with farming, such as blacksmith or wheelwright.

Joseph’s eldest son James followed him into the veterinary profession, the practice being called East and Son in Kelly’s 1887 directory. By 1901, Joseph had retired and James was living and working at 49 Cambridge Street with his wife Adelaide and their three children. James East died in 1923 and his wife sold The Rookery in 1925 to Mary Jane Batson and her son Ernest Edward Batson, the property remaining in the Batson family until 1974, when it was sold to the predecessor of the current owners. It was at this stage that the majority of the extensions and alterations were carried out. The current owners acquired the property in 2004.

## BUILDING SURVEY

### Description of exterior

The Rookery is a two-storey, rendered and white-washed building, the central part being of witchert with a stone plinth. There is a single storey brick extension on the northern elevation, and a two storey brick cross-wing extension to the south. The roof is of thatch, with three brick chimneys, one on the northern gable end, one in the cross-wing extension and one sited off-centre in the witchert section. The extensions were both added in the 20th century, the witchert section being the oldest part of the house. All the windows of the house are wooden casement style, side-opening, with four or six panes. Most of the upper floor windows are dormered. The majority of the windows were replaced in the 1970s, with the exception of three which are clearly earlier, as evidenced by their simple fastening hooks.

The current entrance is in the eastern elevation (Fig.1), which opens onto the courtyard drive, but there is evidence that the western elevation (Fig. 2) was at one time the front of the building, having two original dormer windows and facing the rest of the village. The 1925 title deeds confirm this, by showing pedestrian access on this side of the prop-



FIGURE 1 Eastern elevation



FIGURE 2 Western elevation

erty, with a range of agricultural out-buildings to the rear (Fig. 3). This plan also shows the building divided into two dwellings, although it is described as "two cottages or tenements (formerly one messuage or tenement)". Plans of the witchert section of the building suggest a classic lobby-entry house typical of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century onwards (Brunskill, 1981, 53). There is ample architectural evidence to support this view, as will be discussed in due course.

### Description of interior

The witchert section of the building comprises three ground floor and three upper floor rooms. Whilst the current front door is in the eastern eleva-

tion, there is structural evidence that the original front door was in the western elevation, later being replaced by a window; it would have opened onto a lobby, with an inglenook fireplace behind. It will also be noted from the plans (Figs. 8 and 9), that the central chimney stack would have been on a close alignment with the original door, corroborating the suggestion of a lobby-entry dwelling (Brunskill, 1981, 52). The lack of smoke blackening in the roof timbers suggests that the brick chimney stack was in place when the building was first constructed, rather than being inserted at a later date (M. Andrew, pers. comm).

There is also structural evidence for the original staircase which would have risen from the area to

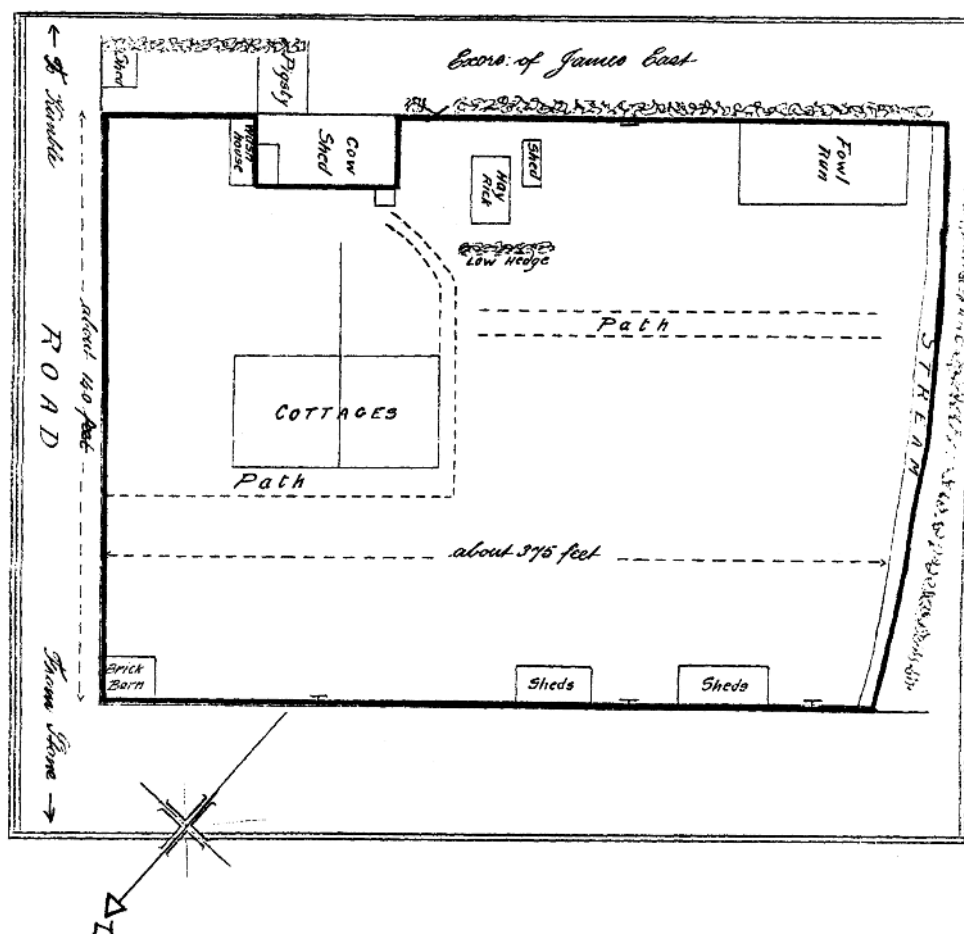


FIGURE 3 Plan taken from 1925 title deeds showing The Rookery as two cottages

the rear of the fireplace; the floor in room 4 is noticeably uneven and the area of floor to the right of the chimney steps down in height. It is at this point that the former stairs from the ground floor would have emerged. Most of the wood in the witchert section of the house appears to be of considerable age, the majority of timbers being rough-hewn with wooden peg fixings. The joists in the current kitchen (room 3) differ in dimensions from those in the other two ground floor rooms.

Another point of interest is that there is a solid wall between rooms 5 and 6 on the upper floor, with evidence in the roof space of an original gable end on the same alignment as this wall. This sheds light upon the chronological development of the building. The window in the western elevation of room 1 is set deeper than the others, within a reveal. There was at one time a door here, since removed, which would have served as the original main door of the house.

The roof space of the witchert section is now continuous, but with the remnants of a plaster and lath partition, suggesting that the space was divided at one time. As in all witchert buildings, the rafters are positioned onto a timber pad or wall-plate, sitting directly on the top of the walls, and are jointed to the ridge beam by use of simple wooden pegs. Thatching battens run horizontally between the rafters to hold the thatch in place. Many of the rafters have been replaced, and there is no differentiation between common and principal rafters, all being roughly the same size. The section of the roof space over room 6, to the north of the partition, appears to have been a later addition or replacement. The timbers are more regularly sawn than those in the central section, and there is a plaster infill between the rafters, probably for fire protection.

## DATING THE BUILDING

### **Documentary evidence**

A building on the current footprint of The Rookery can be traced back to the 1776 enclosure map (Ma 96/I.R. CBS), the land being annotated with the name "John Haws", suggesting that the property was in private ownership at that time (figure 4). This is confirmed by a document amongst the Lee Estate papers (D/LE/D.12, paper 45, CBS) which gives accounts for sums paid to landowners following the enclosure of fields in Hartwell and

Stone. John Haws received the sum of £1: 15s: 3½d for his land at Bishopstone, with an additional sum paid for fencing. Whilst map evidence cannot confirm that this was the same building as The Rookery, it seems likely to be the case, given the similarities in size and orientation.

The 1879 Ordnance Survey County Series map (1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1:2500, accessed on-line) clearly shows the property as divided into two dwellings, and it is known that it was divided by 1866 when Joseph East acquired the building. Pre-1776 maps are not sufficiently detailed to show any building on the site of The Rookery, and attempts to trace the property further back in date by use of Hearth Tax records proved impossible, as these documents are missing for this particular parish.

### **Structural evidence**

Andrew (1986) reports that surviving witchert buildings in Buckinghamshire date from the 17th century until the 1900s, and other witchert cottages in the village are recorded as either 17th or 18th century. There are no date marks on the building itself and witchert buildings are notoriously difficult to date, partly because they are simple vernacular structures with few dateable architectural features, and partly because the witchert and render conceal many alterations and additions to the original property (Morris, 2000, 157, 161).

Structural evidence for a late 17th or early 18th century date for the first phase of the building includes the classic lobby-entry arrangement already discussed, a small yoke or high collar on the principal roof truss and the position and nature of a number of the original tie and spine beams (M. Andrew, pers. comm). The presence of a stair window and of small casement windows in a cob building suggests a pre-1700 date (Smith and Yates, 1968, 572). These are both present in The Rookery, the stair window being sited in the eastern elevation and two small, possibly original, casement windows in the western elevation.

## STRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT

The Rookery is a vernacular building which has in all probability been used as a dwelling since its construction. It was originally built as one house, possibly extended and then subsequently divided into two cottages, before being returned to a single dwelling in the 1970s. Documentary evidence has





FIGURE 4 Tracing of 1776 enclosure map, showing a building presumed to be The Rookery, on land belonging to John Haws

provided the latest date of 1776 for the existence of the original building, and although no construction date has been established, the structural evidence presented points to this being around 1700. Enclosure records suggest that it was in private ownership in the late 1700s, rather than forming part of the manorial estate of Baronet Lee of Hartwell, which owned much of the land and many properties in Bishopstone. Powell (1984, 23) in his discussion of vernacular Georgian architecture, points out that many old village farmhouses were divided into labourers' cottages at this time, when their owners left the property for outlying farms in the newly enclosed land. The act of enclosure led to greater poverty, and with the population as a whole rising,

there was thus a greater demand for housing (Hoskins, 1955, 168). Therefore, it might be concluded that the house was divided into two dwellings at the end of the 18th century.

A number of architectural features in The Rookery are difficult to interpret, and the rendered witchert conceals constructional details. However, an attempt has been made to phase the building's construction:

### Phase 1

It seems certain that The Rookery was originally built as one house and only later divided into two cottages. The first witchert dwelling probably comprised a two unit, lobby-entry farmhouse, with

a central inglenook fireplace and stairs to the rear. This phase may be dated to around 1700. There are a number of timbers which have clearly been re-used from an earlier timber-framed building, evidenced by redundant stave holes and void mortice slots. Such re-use might suggest that the original owner was of “middling” status, perhaps a yeoman farmer, rather than a wealthy land-owner (M. Andrew, pers. comm).

### **Phase 2**

It is not clear whether the current kitchen (room 3) was part of the first phase, built as a service unit, as suggested by Brunskill (1971, 108–9) or whether it was an addition. There are several pieces of architectural evidence to suggest the latter. Firstly, the ceiling joists in room 3 are markedly different in dimension to those of rooms 1 and 2, suggesting a different construction date.

Secondly, there is a half-lapped scarf joint

protruding from the wall of room 2 into room 3, and the main spine beam chamfer stops abruptly at this joint, some distance from the wall. This might be a matter of re-use of timber, but might also suggest that room 3 was added at a later date. If this was the case, then provision had been made for the extension by the projecting timber (M. Andrew, pers. comm). It is also apparent that the length of timber required to span rooms 2 and 3, if built at the same time, would be unlikely to exceed that of available timber, thus making the scarf joint unnecessary, unless it was to extend the beam at a later date.

Thirdly, the tie beams in the upper rooms are similar in appearance and position, and seem to have served the same function of supporting the roof framework and original upper storey gable wall and tying the witchert walls to spread the roof load. These two walls would therefore both have been external in the first phase, and this would explain the unusual arrangement of the solid wall



FIGURE 5 Kitchen range removed in 1975

between the two halves of the house. Finally, the roof construction is noticeably different in the area above room 6, as compared with the areas above rooms 4 and 5, again suggesting a different construction date. The brick fireplace and chimney stack, at the northern gable end, may have been added during this phase. However, the presence of the stair window would suggest that the addition to this room was carried out early in the life of the building.

### Phase 3

At some date before 1866, quite possibly in the late 1700s after enclosure, the house, now comprising three units, was divided into two separate cottages. A second door for cottage number 104 was opened in the western elevation, which now serves as the door into the current kitchen of the property. Cottage number 102 was accessed via the original eastern elevation door. It is recorded, by the

gentleman who purchased the house in 1974, that the elderly man living in number 104 at that time used an old kitchen range for all his heating and cooking (Fig. 5), and had just one 15 amp socket feeding three light bulbs. Each of the cottages had a single cold water tap. Number 102 had a single outside privy on the western side of the property, which is still present; 104 had a two-holer privy attached to the barn on the eastern side (W. Fraser, pers. comm).

### Phase 4

The property remained as two dwellings until 1974, but at some time after 1925 the brick out-house was added onto the northern gable end. This did not form part of the building, but had a separate entrance in the eastern wall, as confirmed from planning drawings. Its use is not known; it may have been for storage.



FIGURE 6 1970s photograph of western elevation



### Phase 5

In 1975, the previous owner re-built the out-house to serve as a utility, replacing the northern brick chimney stack at the same time. Dormer windows were added to the eastern elevation and a third dormer added on the west. The original door in the western elevation of the witchert section was also blocked up, being replaced by a window. This effectively turned the orientation of the building to face east, instead of its original westerly facing aspect. In 1977, planning permission was granted for the construction of the southern cross-wing extension. This led to the blocking up of the windows in the existing southern gable end. Internally, the stairs in room 1 were removed, since access to the upper floor was now possible via the cross-wing staircase, in addition to the kitchen stairs (Figs. 6 and 7).

### CONCLUSION

This survey of a seemingly ordinary village “cottage” has revealed five phases of construction, demonstrated the often complex history of our vernacular buildings and provided a tangible link between this humble dwelling and 21st century Aylesbury through the person of Mr. Joseph East, veterinary surgeon.

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FIGURE 7 1970s photograph showing eastern elevation with brick out-house and northern chimney stack removed

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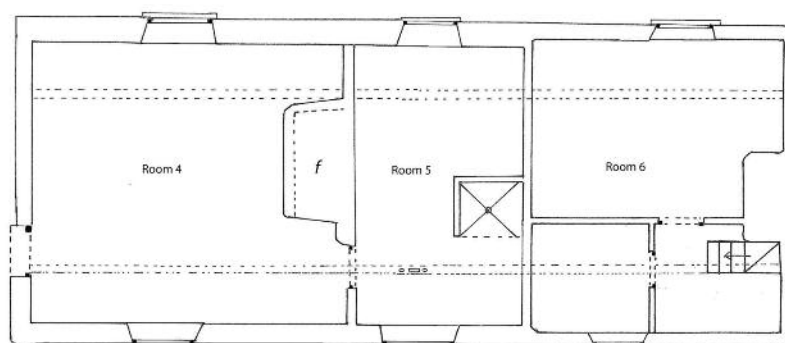
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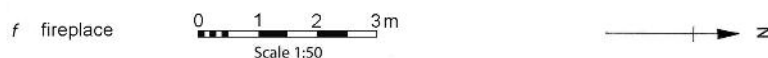
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Upper floor



Ground floor

FIGURE 8 Plans of the ground and upper floors of The Rookery, showing the pre-twentieth century parts of the building only (f= fireplace)

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