

WEST WYCOMBE VILLAGE: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPRAISAL OF THE CHURCH LOFT AND VILLAGE BUILDINGS

GARY MARSHALL

The Church Loft is thought to be the oldest surviving building in West Wycombe village with dendrochronology dating suggesting 1465 for its construction. Situated in a prominent location on the north side of the High Street it has a fascinating history reflecting changing patterns of social, domestic and commercial activity in the village over a period of more than 500 years. This article describes the results of archive research and recording of the building undertaken by members of the Buildings Recording Group of Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society. It complements a wider archaeological and historical study of the village undertaken by Oxford Archaeology for the National Trust while a number of the village buildings were undergoing refurbishment between 2012 and 2014. Dendrochronology dating has provided a useful and accurate signpost for the construction and development of these buildings, suggesting that a major phase of building took place during the period between about 1530 and 1561 when a number of high status timber-framed buildings were erected along the High Street, possibly as part of a planned town instigated by the Bishop of Winchester as Lord of the Manor. The buildings were extended in the 17th century and re-fronted in the 18th century, when brick replaced the wattle and daub infill of many of the timber frames.

INTRODUCTION

West Wycombe village stands as something of a landmark for the National Trust. It was the first village to be acquired by the Trust when it was purchased from the Royal Society of Arts (hereafter RSA) in 1934. Through their 'Cottage Fund' the RSA were seeking to ensure the survival of vernacular architecture, and in particular the English country cottage. The village buildings had fallen into a dilapidated condition and the RSA acquired the buildings in 1929 from the West Wycombe estate. Restoration and adaption took place under the direction of the architect William Weir. The National Trust's ownership extends to about 50 properties, covering most of, though not the entire village, and including 23 listed buildings. All of these buildings are tenanted.

This article arises from the Trust's recent project to upgrade the buildings. This has involved stripping and re-covering the roofs and updating kitchens and bathrooms and internal facilities. As historic buildings they have previously been poor in terms of their energy efficiency and the roofing

works have included the installation of fibreboard insulation material. As part of this programme of refurbishment the National Trust commissioned Oxford Archaeology to record and re-assess the phasing and evolution of the buildings, adding to knowledge derived from earlier studies undertaken in the early 1990s. As part of the current project dendrochronology dating was also commissioned from the Oxfordshire Dendrochronology Laboratory of a select group of buildings. The article therefore summarises current understanding of the evolution of the village based on recent research, and also encompassing evidence from the earlier 1990s surveys. It also includes a detailed description and assessment of the building known as the 'Church Loft', situated on the north side of the High Street. This is in the ownership of the Diocese, and as the oldest dated building in the village it represents a significant omission from the Trust's survey. The author has therefore worked closely with members of the Buildings Recording Group of Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society to produce a drawn and descriptive record of the building, supported by documentary