



HOW OLD IS YOUR HOUSE?

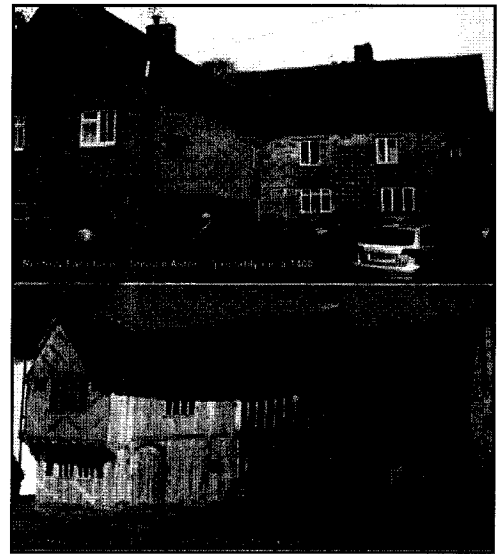
A Report on the Spring Talk by Paul Clark of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record

Step outside your front door. Walk out a few steps and look back. Try to see your house as it was when it was built. What is original and what has been changed? Some things are hard to change – the shape and building materials for instance. If it's symmetrical, with the front door in the middle, then it's probably built during or after the Georgian period (c 1730) when public taste was for balance and proportion. If asymmetric with the door offset from the centre and the original chimney in the middle somewhere rather than at the end, then there's a chance it is medieval and the shape was determined by usage rather than the wish for a classic "regular" appearance.

Paul Clark of the Oxfordshire Building Record in his Spring Talk invited us to be our own house detectives and armed us with the means to do just that. The history of famous public buildings is well documented; the origins of ordinary houses – vernacular architecture- much less so. Paul's talk was an introduction to the focus of SAVA's activities this year – the study of houses in the village.

Using photographs of village houses alongside those of examples elsewhere, Paul helped the audience to understand the evolution of ordinary dwellings from the early round and long houses through to the hall house and up to the present time. Rectory Farmhouse (c.1400) opposite the church was a hall house and is probably the oldest in the village with its decorated timber truss, smoke-blackened from the original open fires. Paul made the comparison with Lavenham Hall in Suffolk. Both houses share the plan of a typical hall house with a cross-passage plan and service areas at the lowest end.

Roof timbers can yield lots of clues to the age of a house. They tend to be less subject to alteration. Paul encouraged his audience to look at surface marks like those from a saw. It is possible to fathom out the type of saw used and attach a date to it. If there was carving or ornate work of any kind, then the timber was probably on show in an important part of the house. One of the aids to dating a house made possible these days is dendrochronology – the study of tree rings, like a barcode of the seasons' growths which can give the age of a timber to the exact year.



A steep roof pitch can indicate that it was originally thatched from local material. When transport links made it possible to bring in tiles from further away, a flatter roof became possible and many owners took the chance to add headroom or even another storey. Look at the gable end to Grange Cottage where the inverted V below the chimney shows the line of the original thatched roof.

Windows, we were reminded, were not always glazed. As literally "wind eyes", their function was to control air as well as light through the house (remember that open fire). Glass was precious and expensive to make so that leaded panes were often taken away with the furniture when someone moved! As technology developed so did the size and clarity of the glass it was possible to produce. Window bars on sash windows became thinner over time until they were not structurally necessary by the mid 19C. However, Paul cautioned, that did not mean that window bars would no longer be employed. Once established, a style cannot be "uninvented" and can reappear for centuries afterwards provided there is a taste for it. The same goes for doors, ceilings and fireplaces.

Paul Clark's lively insights were well received by his audience and SAVA is happy to know that he will maintain close contact with us as we focus on our study of homes in the village. For the Autumn Exhibition, he will bring along some OBR exhibits to complement our own and hopefully will attend and respond to queries.

For those interested in reading around the subject he suggested:

"How Old is Your House" by Pamela Cunnington (Marston House Publishing)

"Period House Fixtures and Fittings 1300-1900" by Linda Hall (Countryside Books)