AN ANALYSIS OF THE TIMBER FRAMEWORK OF ‘ORAM COTTAGE’ KNIGHTON (SK 5998 0130)

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This paper is based upon an RCHME level 3 survey of Oram Cottage, Church Lane, Knighton, Leicester (SK 5998 0130), undertaken in 2003 as part of coursework requirements for a Masters degree in Archaeology and Heritage at Leicester University. Oram Cottage is one of the few surviving examples of timber-framed building in Leicester and survey has revealed several phases of internal modification, resulting in the replacement of much of the early building fabric. Restoration of the property, undertaken by Leicester City Council in 1961, apparently sought to replicate a symmetrical aspect to the façade, for which there is no peg-hole evidence. Despite the later modifications, an original three-bay structure of one and a half storeys, with cross-passage entrance can be inferred from evidence in the early surviving timber work.

INTRODUCTION

A programme of building recording and survey was been carried out at Oram Cottage, Knighton. Sited on Church Lane, close to the church of St Mary Magdalene, the cottage is a Grade II listed building. It is one of only a handful of early buildings (including Knighton Hall and the 17th century Cradock Arms on Chapel Lane) which survive within the medieval core of Knighton, now a suburb of Leicester.

Oram Cottage was selected for survey as a possible example of a ‘mud and frame’ building. This is a tradition of vernacular building for which evidence is increasingly emerging, predominantly in the south of Leicestershire, and which combines a basic timber framework with solid mud lower walling (Courtney, 2006, Fig. 57, p225). This form of building appears to have co-existed alongside the more familiar box-frame tradition in the latter part of the 17th and early part of the 18th century. To date, around a dozen certain or probable examples of mud and frame building have been identified, all demonstrating certain common characteristics, which have helped to distinguish the tradition (Finn, forthcoming). An initial appraisal indicated that Oram Cottage might share some of these common characteristics (such as, for example, the unusual central stud at the gable end) and it was hoped that full survey might be able to provide more information.

No evidence was found during the survey to contradict the 17th century construction date recorded in the listing description, however, much of the original building fabric appears to have been replaced during the course of at least two major phases of alterations, primarily relating to the sub-division of the cottage into three separate dwellings during the 19th century and the subsequent restoration of 1961, when the property was donated to Leicester City Council and returned to single-occupancy status. This latter phase of work included the adjustment of original timbers for apparently aesthetic purposes, which has served to further confuse the original form of the building. Despite this, the building still retains its basic, three-bay structure of one and a half storeys and there are hints of an original cross passage entrance.

The terminology used in the description of the cottage follows Alcock et al. (1996).

The three bays of the building are defined by a series of cross-frames/principal roof trusses (hereafter referred to as trusses). These are nominally identified as Trusses 1–4 (T1-T4 on Figures 2 and 3), with T1 located at the northwest gable end.

T1 consists of a pair of straight principals, with scissor apex, tenoned into a slightly cambered tie-beam and linked by a collar beam at mid height.

Framed between collar and tie-beam are a pair of queen struts. A square-set ridge plate is supported in the fork of the crossed principals. The posts at the north and west corners of the building survive; these have jowled heads, but are truncated c.0.65m from the ground level. There are curved braces between the
Figs. 2 and 3. Ground and first floor plans.

NB: Floor joists and purlins are represented by centre measurement only
(For other conventions, see RCHME 1996)
corner posts and tie-beam. A central stud, tenoned into the underside of the tie-beam, is truncated at the point where a horizontal member has been inserted, possibly as part of the 1961 restoration. This evidently originally extended further down towards ground level. Peg-hole evidence indicates that rails were originally tenoned into this stud and into the corner posts, just above the level of the existing, inserted horizontal member.

T2 is of a similar form except that the principals are curved and the feet are inset some distance from the ends of the tie beam. The tie beam has been cut and a doorway inserted. The head of the corner post is more of a gunstock form and the brace is straight. Nothing of T2 is visible internally below 1st floor level although both wall posts are visible externally (see below).

T3 is the most complete of all the trusses and is of unusual form, with braces rising from a central stud to the tie-beam (Fig. 5). It is unclear, however, how much of the extant timber-work may be a result of the 1961 restoration. All that is seen of T3 at ground floor level is a rail, jointed to the central stud, which
extends down from the upper level. Nothing survives of T4, the southern gable end having been entirely rebuilt in brick, probably during the 18th century.

Survey of the external elevations indicates that very little of the original side-wall framing has survived. On the front elevation (Fig. 6.), the T1, 2 and 3 wall posts are visible. In addition, a single, possibly original stud is located at c.1m to the right of the T2 wall post, obscured by the porch, which was added in 1961. The Bay 1 girding beam appears to be original and is tenoned and pegged into the wall-posts. A peg-hole in the girding beam, is aligned with a corresponding hole on the wall-plate above, indicating the position of a removed stud, located c.2m from the T1 wall post. A ‘timber’ in the position of the girding beam in Bay 2 has been heavily restored and is almost entirely concealed by cement, distressed to replicate the appearance of timber. However, it seems likely that this corresponds with the position of an original member.

Braces rise from the wall posts to the wall-plate, with peg-hole evidence for a missing brace at the right hand side of the T3 wall post. A brace between the

Fig. 5. North west face of T3.
possibly original stud in the central bay and the wall-plate, is certainly a late insertion, probably part of the 1961 restoration. Peg-hole evidence for two removed studs was also noted in surviving sections of the wall-plate; however, a large part of the wall-plate in the central bay is replacement timber.

Corresponding carpenters marks: \textbf{III}, were noted on the T3 wall post and the wall-plate above this. No other carpenters marks were noted during the survey and it is uncertain how these marks relate to the construction process.

As part of the remodelling and restoration of the cottage undertaken by Leicester City Council in 1961, it would appear that, rather than recreating the original appearance of the cottage, a visible effort was made to establish a symmetrical aspect to the front elevation, which, as the surviving architectural
Although the porch was constructed in 1961, it is interesting to note the finely moulded timber posts utilised for this (Fig. 6).

It is clear from the form of the timbers that they predate the porch construction and it is quite possible that they may predate the construction of Oram Cottage itself. The ornate moulding suggests that they would have originated from a building of much higher status; given the number of historic properties owned by Leicester City Council that were subject to extensive alteration and remodelling during the post-war years (the nearby Aylestone Hall being a good example (N. Finn, forthcoming), this is perhaps not so surprising.

On the rear elevation, with the exception of the wall-plate, all of the surviving timber framework is located in Bay 1 (Fig. 7). The wall posts of Trusses 1 and 2 are both in situ, but are truncated above ground level. These are connected by a girding beam at first floor level, with tenoned and pegged joints at either end. An original brace rises from the T1 wall post and is pegged into the wall-plate. A short section of stud, flanked by a pair of braces, connects the wall-plate to the girding beam and is apparently truncated: if this is projected down to ground level, the framing arrangement of stud, girding beam and wall-post lends itself well to the positioning of a doorway. The missing stud indicated by peg-holes in the wall-plate and girding beam on the front elevation, is similarly positioned, apparently replicating the framing arrangement seen at the rear. The evidence therefore, albeit scant, appears to suggest a cross-passage through the house, built against the back of the chimney stack with opposing doorways at either end (see below).
The first floor structure consists of a series of axial beams which support the floor joists (Fig. 2). Two scarf joints, one of which appears to be original, exist on the axial beam, within Bay 2. The Bay 1 axial beam consists of a trimmed round wood, with bark still attached. The floor joists are tenoned into the axial beams, their outer ends carried on the girding beams. Many of the joists appear to be modern replacements. Original lime-ash flooring survives above the floor joists in Bay 2, surviving also in Bay 3 until recent collapse necessitated replacement (Mrs Crumbie, pers. comm.).

The roof structure is supported on the principal trusses described above, and comprises a square set ridge plate and side purlins, the latter trenched into the backs of the principals. Wind braces, tenoned into the side purlins and lapped over the backs of the principals, survive in both end bays, with evidence for a number of removed wind braces in Bays 2 and 3 (Fig. 3). It is notable that the ridge plate extending through Bays 2 and 3 is formed of a single length of timber, indicating that the two bays are contemporary. This contradicts the Listings Description, which suggests that ‘the right hand end is modern’. Although the walling has been rebuilt in brick, probably during the 18th century, a third bay certainly formed part of the original construction.

Despite a number of internal modifications relating to the alterations of the 19th and mid-20th centuries, the layout of the ground and first floors respects the plan form established by the position of the trusses, being clearly divided into three bays, a form not uncommon amongst vernacular houses of the 17th century. Bay 1, located at the north-western end (Fig. 2) is much narrower than Bays 2 and 3 and is likely to have been a ‘service’ end bay, separated by a cross-passage from a heated living/kitchen in Bay 2. Bay 3, in turn, may have functioned as an unheated parlour: the present chimney stack located against the southern gable-end wall is not original.

With nothing of the original structure surviving at ground floor level and none of the original walling material remaining, it is impossible to determine whether Oram Cottage was originally a mud and frame building, or whether it is a poorly preserved example of a box-frame structure. However, as the number of recognised examples of mud and frame building in Leicestershire increases, it may be possible to establish the criteria by which they are defined and the construction of Oram Cottage may be better understood in the future.

The former presence of mud-walled buildings in Knighton is well documented both in the photographic archive for Knighton held at the ROLLR (DE3736) and in the diaries of William Cobbet (1930, p664) who, in passing through the village in 1830 as part of his tour through the Midlands, described

‘the miserable sheds in which labourers reside...hovels made of mud and straw; bits of glass, or of old cast-off windows, without frames or hinges, frequently, but merely stuck in the mud wall.....’.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks are due to Mrs Crumbie for allowing access into her home and to Neil Finn for his assistance and advice during the survey.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

