

BUILDING INTERPRETATION AND RECORDING ONE-DAY WORKSHOP
held on 10th September, 2011 at The Agricultural Museum, Brook, near Wye, Kent

1st Report

There's something exciting about being told that you will find it useful to bring the following items to a workshop:

Clipboard with A4 plain paper,

Ruler and measuring tape

Torch and binoculars

So it was with high hopes for hands-on experience of the fascinating buildings at Brook that I set out from East Kent to the Downs on a fine, autumnal Saturday morning.

The timetable for the day was as follows:-

10.30 – 11.00 introduction by Mike Clinch and Sheila Sweetinburgh

11.00 – 12.30 Morning Workshop choices:-

Workshop 1:

Understanding Timber Framing & Construction, using the Barn,
led by Jane Wade MFA, GradDipConsAA

Workshop 2:

Reading & Interpreting a Building, using the Church of St. Mary at Brook
led by Peter Seary of Canterbury Archaeological Trust

Workshop 3:

Recording a Building using the Oast, led by George Denny RIBA and Katherine Rutherford
Examining Documentary Evidence relating to Medieval Buildings using Bedels' Rolls led by Sheila Sweetinburgh

The morning workshops were repeated in the afternoon, so we all attended two of the three on offer, finishing up with afternoon tea and biscuits on the lawns and a closing discussion in the church, the workshop event finished at 4pm.

So, what did I learn, how was the event run, what research questions can be posed and what evidence does this unique cluster of buildings present?

Sheila Sweetinburgh opened her introductory talk with a vivid description of the demense land and buildings at Brook – basically the medieval Home Farm with its barns, byres, sheepsheds and cartsheds and later (early nineteenth century) oasthouse and the Norman church. We learnt of the twice-yearly coming of the monk-warden, and of the management of the manor held by Christ Church Benedictine Cathedral Priory of Canterbury, the profits from which helped to pay for the maintenance of the monastery's refectory. Our knowledge of how this manor functioned mainly stems from the collection of about 25 bedels' rolls kept by the Priory and retained post Reformation because this manor was given back by the Crown to the Protestant Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral. Although not the most extensive of series (these surviving annual reports span over a century from the late 13th and are more prolific for the early decades), they do provide fascinating details on the farming practices, such as the use of pulses (peas, beans and vetch) – an early innovation in Kent, the use of horses rather than only oxen for ploughing, the production of cheese (dairy – ewes and cows), barley sown in winter and as well as the more usual spring, and the importance of winter wheat as the major cash crop. There is even evidence on the use of tiles rather than thatch – 1,000 prigs cost 9d at the end of the thirteenth century – a prig here meaning a peg for attaching tiles.

From these gleanings of medieval life on the farm, we proceeded to our choices of workshop. The church with Peter Seary was my chosen option. This workshop focussed on interpreting the standing architecture, material and location to construct a more nuanced understanding of the church fabric. This church has a number of distinctive, practically unique features, which made our attempts to read it, guided gently by Peter, both interesting and yet with even more questions. Is the tower – a stalwart impressive and expensive structure – the same age as the more standard nave and chancel although they are built of unknapped flint, with the same occasional herringbone construction, some Caen and some Quarr stone – an indication that this is all Norman work since Quarr stone quarry on the Isle of Wight was exhausted during Norman times? For what purpose was the later squint (a hole allowing one person to view the elevation of the Host from outside the Church) constructed? Did the West door once have a tympanum – or voussoirs? While inside we saw the remnants of thirteenth century wallpaintings and the unique upper chamber in the tower with its partly destroyed altar and wall painting of Christ Pantokrator in blessing - and the medieval bell-housing - I used my torch to locate the carpenters' marks and got thoroughly cobwebby.

From interpreting to recording, George Denny kindly and deftly gave us some of his immense knowledge on how to set about preparing groundplans of buildings, from sketches to CAD/CAM while Katherine Rutherford gave us a snapshot of the Oasthouse history (built 1812 in the move from ale to the advantages of the better preservative qualities of beer). We then moved on to measuring the building itself and discovered the vast amount of work it takes to go from rough sketch to finished plans.

This was an excellent day, I learnt a great deal – gently inserted by patient, enthusiastic and immensely knowledgeable experts.

Diane Heath

2nd Report:

Robert and I attended the Building Interpretation and Recording Workshop at the Agricultural Museum, Brook on Saturday 10th September. The weather was glorious and we arrived to a welcome coffee and biscuits served by Sheila Sweetinburgh, also we were entertained by the arrival of a fire engine responding to an alarm which had been sounding. After the firemen had scoured all the buildings and made sure that indeed there was no fire we all proceeded to the church for an introduction to the day and brief outline of the manor of Brook by Sheila.

The morning workshop of our choice was 'Understanding timber framing and construction' led by Jane Wade and we therefore proceeded to the barn. The group processed around the outside of the building noting materials and construction methods while Jane pointed out important features to assist in trying to unravel the history of the build, perhaps eventually leading to pinning a construction date to it. Once inside our eyes adjusted to the lower light levels and we were all stunned by its majestic timbering which at first glance looked fresh and sharp. Jane talked about joints, which had already been looked at on the outdoor recce and we all set to with torches, binoculars and pen and paper to note down types of scarf joints and their positions. Because the barn is seven and a half bays in length and contains many agricultural artefacts this took longer than I expected, but nevertheless a pattern emerged so that we could soon speed up. There followed a discussion about how the joints differed and which were the earliest. A hunt for lap joints followed and they revealed a possible early date of mid 14th century for the building BUT of course once the inspection was underway reused timber came to light as did the possibility of an even earlier building.

So from this participant: thank you Jane for an informative and enlightening morning.

Dorothy Beck

Brook Barn



Brook Church



Brook Oast



Brook Barn Interior



Brook Barn



Brook Study day

