

A Fifteenth Century Wealden House in Oxford

By JULIAN MUNBY

IN 1821 J. C. Buckler made a sketch entitled 'Old House in St Thomas' Parish Oxford' which shows a timber-framed house of the wealden type¹ (PL. VI). This was illustrated in T. Squires *In West Oxford* (1928), Pl. ciii, where the house was, surprisingly, wrongly identified as being at the north-east corner of the Hamel. In a discussion of the distribution of wealden houses S. E. Rigold used the drawing, and the house appeared as an outlier on his distribution map (there being very few in the Oxford region, the main concentration lying in the south-east.)² The house can be exactly located within St. Thomas' and the documentary history of the site suggests a date for its construction.

Buckler's view shows a house fronting onto a stream, with a bridge over it, at a road junction. Across the road is a building with a small wing projecting into the street. These arrangements are precisely met in the topography of the south end of Hollybush Row. As late as the Ordnance Survey 1:500 plan of 1878 (Oxpens Road did not then exist) the Red Ox public house on the south side of High Street St. Thomas had a projecting wing at the front. That there was a stream along the west side of Hollybush Row (once Rewley Lane) is proved by Loggan's map of 1675, which shows the house, and it was not yet filled in when Badcock surveyed the Christ Church properties in 1829.³ The house was therefore at the north-west corner of the junction between Hollybush Row and High Street St. Thomas. Indeed in another view by Buckler, looking west along High Street, the house can be seen at the corner.⁴

As to the structure of the house there is little evidence apart from Buckler's drawing, at least until the site is excavated. By the time of the 1772 survey for the Paving Commissioners,⁵ the house was already divided (the northern part, including a yard or workshop, 38 ft. ; the southern end, from the bridge to the corner, 20 ft. 6 ins. and the frontage onto High Street, 46 ft.). Badcock's Survey seems to make the house about 42 ft. on Rewley Lane, which if evenly divided would give three bays of 14 ft.

As well as his field sketch Buckler did a more precise 'improved' version,⁶ which alters the ground floor windows, inserts a middle rail across the ground floor, removes a third bracket beneath the jetty of the south wing and shows all the pegs (PL. VII). Although this second drawing may have made use of field notes no longer extant, or just memory, it is perhaps safer only to accept the first as an accurate

¹ B. M. Add. MS. 36376, f. 159. Bod. Lib. Minn Coll. Neg. 19/11a, MS. Top. Oxon. d. 505, f. 90. The water-colour version, based on this drawing, is in MS. Top. Oxon. a68 f. 412.

² I. Ll. Foster & L. Alcock (eds.), *Culture and Environment* (1963), 351 ff., Pl. xiii.

³ H. E. Salter (ed.), *Cartulary of Osney Abbey* (hereinafter *CO*), O.H.S. (1928 onwards), Vol. II, 616.

⁴ Squires, *op. cit.*, Pl. cv. B. M. Add. MS. 36376, f. 158. Bod. Lib. Minn Coll. Neg. 19/11. MS. Top. Oxon. d. 505, f. 59.

⁵ H. E. Salter (ed.), *Surveys and Tokens*, O.H.S. 75 (1923), 39.

⁶ B.M. Add. MS. 36437, f. 31.

representation of the building. This may serve as a useful caveat in instances where only Buckler's 'improved' drawings are known.

It is difficult to deduce the internal arrangements of the house from the drawing. There was probably an open hall, even if only a residual one open to the roof for half its length, with a room jutting out over the screens passage. The window above the door, possibly associated with such a room, could however have been added later if a completely open hall had been floored in. The timbers shown on the central recessed wall would allow for a window at the dais (south) end rising to the first floor. The front door seems rather narrow and too close to the centre of the hall to be leading to a passage. The entrance may originally have been immediately to the north of the door, where the window is. This window, which is shown with only a narrow rail and a single stud beneath it, seems likely to have been a later addition; it is excluded from the revised sketch. It is possible that the entrance was in the south wing, with the two brackets beneath the jetty marking a porch, but this would have required a different position for the bridge. On balance it is probable that the dais/parlour end was on the south, with a door leading from the bridge to the screens passage. Then the two chimney stacks would have stood between hall and parlour, and on the outer wall of the service end. The ground floor has traces of a middle rail right across, with short tension braces beneath it. The wing jetties have bressumers supported by seven common and two principal joists; these latter have brackets to the posts below. The first floor has windows in the centre of the wings, with long tension braces and no middle rail. The eave plate is typically carried over the hall recess by three brackets. At its north end the corner post is apparently jowled, as one would expect, thus receiving both plate and tie together. In the north wall an S-shaped brace is shown, which might be expected to be a feature later in date than the rest of the timberwork. It could be associated with a rebuilding of the north end, had the tie been severed in alterations to the chimney stack. The roof had perhaps six bays, the southern truss rising only to collar level to form the half-hipped exterior. A single purlin, probably at collar height, is visible at the north end.

Whatever the exact layout, the house would have provided a hall, with a parlour behind and a solar above this, then a kitchen and rooms above it at the other end. What there was on the southern frontage onto High Street, and whether there was any west wing as part of the original structure again cannot be told without excavation.

The position of the building can be correlated with documentary sources for the property. All the buildings from St. Thomas' churchyard to Rewley Lane were part of the original D'Oily benefaction to Oseney Abbey, and with the rest of that property passed to Christ Church at its foundation. The buildings are probably to be identified with an entry on the recently published portion of the Hundred Rolls (1279) for St. Thomas' Parish: *v cottagia cum gardino . . . de foedo Doyli . . . valet xxs.*⁷ They appear as three *cottagia* on the 1316 rental (CO, iii, 134), then as two *cottagia* and a *domus* in 1317 at 3s., 4s. and 6s. (CO, iii, 145), and again in 1320 (CO, iii, 151) and 1324 (CO, iii, 160). They are three *cottagia* in 1387 at the same rent (CO, iii, 181), in 1389 (CO, iii, 187) and 1402 (CO, iii, 199), when the chaplain of St. Thomas' seems to be the tenant. In 1417 Thomas Tackele was tenant at the previous rents (CO,

⁷J. Cooper, *Oxonensia*, xxxvii (1972), 169, no. 20.

iii, 219) and he purchased an eighty year lease in October 1420 (CO, ii, 431), with obligation to keep the property in repair. He paid the old rent in 1422 (CO, iii, 225) and 1428 (CO, iii, 235), but in the new rent roll of 1449 the total was 26s. 8d. instead of the old 13s. (CO, iii, 245). The *tria cottagia fundatoris* were given in the rent book⁸ at this new rent from 1453 to 1456 (Thomas Tacle) and in 1458 passed to a new owner, Agnes Burgan, who paid the same amount. From 1459 however the rent totalled 32s., the property being divided into *cottagium primum* at 8s., *cottagium secundum* at 4s. and *mansura angularis super conductum eiusdem* at 20s. (MS f. 63). Thomas Wynter was the tenant.

Although the wealden house was definitely on the site of the *mansura* there can be no absolute certainty that it was built immediately before the 1459 rental. The new appellation alone need not signify any change since rental descriptions are notoriously archaic and their updating random. In connexion with a rent rise, however, and in the context of other changes in the Oseney holdings, we can perhaps be more certain in putting the construction of the building at about this date.

St. Thomas' had at least from the 13th century been a poor parish from the landlord's point of view (Oseney owned much of the property in the parish), with a high number of vacancies and static or falling rents. The new rental of 1449 revalued many properties in the centre and on the edge of the town. In the 1450s there were several further increases in peripheral parishes (St. Thomas', St. Peter-le-Bailey and St. Mary Magdalen), with some reductions in central parishes. All that is known for certain from this is that Oseney knew that it could raise the face values of rents of some properties in these parishes, against the general trend in Oxford; it is not unreasonable to suppose that these rises were associated with rehabilitation or rebuilding. The *computus* which are preserved with the rentals from 1453 include building accounts, but are not particularly helpful on this matter, being mostly concerned with small repairs. As a landlord Oseney anyway tended to encourage tenants to do their own construction and repairs. We have a full description in a lease of 1450 of a house that John Dalton, a carpenter, was to build in the Hamel,⁹ and the specification could indeed refer to a wealden type of house. In the context of the rent rises in St. Thomas', and with this one example in mind, it is not improbable that the *mansura angularis* was built in the late 1450s. We cannot know who built it for although Tackele took out a long lease in 1420 it may well have been turned in (he is last recorded as paying rent in 1456), and virtually nothing is known of Burgan and Wynter.

Why should it have been a wealden house? In Warwickshire the high concentration of wealden houses has been the subject of a recent study,¹⁰ and it is found that most of the examples are urban, as are most wealden houses outside their south-eastern homeland. Moreover they are (in Coventry at least) predominantly in peripheral or suburban parishes.¹¹ Many were constructed as semi-detached 'half-wealden' units, and the most extensive is a range of six which has the hallmark of

⁸ Bod. Lib. MS. Wood F10. Salter prints the rentals without accounts in CO, iii, 274.

⁹ CO, ii, 422. Cf. E. A. Gee, 'Oxford Carpenters', *Oxoniensia*, xvii/xviii (1952-3), 112 ff.

¹⁰ S. R. Jones & J. T. Smith, *Birm. Arch. Soc. Trans. & Proc.*, 79 (1964), 24-35. For a recent discovery of an urban 'half-wealden' house, in Bishop's Stortford, Herts., cf. A. V. B. Gibson, *Herts. Arch.*, 3 (1973), 127-30.

¹¹ Jones & Smith, *op. cit.*, fig. 4.

speculative building. It seems that there, as in St. Thomas', permanent buildings were wanted, perhaps ones which could be constructed easily, for it is a convenient feature of the wealden type that it allows a simple, continuous roof over a more complex ground plan. In both cases there was still enough land to allow the luxury of a hall and cross wing laid out parallel to the street,¹² which there would not have been nearer the town centre. The *mansura angularis*, being free standing, is nearer to the true wealden type than most of the Coventry examples, where the cramped layout gives the impression of having been devised purely for the sake of having a 'hall'. The St. Thomas' wealden was probably rare enough for it to have been unusual, and it stood on a prominent site in the main street of the parish. Whether it was an isolated speculation or part of a wider effort to renovate the area cannot now be known. Apart from their names, almost nothing can be traced of the social status of the occupants,¹³ though unless the hall was being used as a workshop (as seems to have been the case with the smaller units in Coventry), the scale of the house was probably grander than most in St. Thomas'. The later history and owners of the property need not concern us here.¹⁴ It must have been demolished before 1841 when the Girls School was built on the site.¹⁵

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¹² W. A. Pantin, 'Medieval English Town House Plans', *Med. Arch.*, vi-vii (1962-3), 203.

¹³ Ric. Harrys (1461), Joh. Brawndon (1462-4), Hen. Tanner (1465-7), Joh. Danvers (1477-9); all in *CO*, iii, 274. Ric. Norcat (1498); *CO*, iii, 286.

¹⁴ The rentals are omitted, but the 17th-18th century leases are given by Salter in *CO*, ii, 537. Cf. also the divisions of the property in 1829 in *CO*, ii, 616.

¹⁵ Squires, *op. cit.*, 38, Pl. LXXVII.



'Old House in St. Thomas' Parish. Oxford. Augt. 23d 1821'. J. C. Buckler. Orig. 5 ins. \times 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ ins. B.M. Add. MS. 36376 f. 159.

Ph.: British Museum

PLATE VII



'In the Parish of St. Thomas' Oxford'. J. C. Buckler. Orig. 8½ ins. × 9 ins. B.M. Add. MS. 36437 f. 31.
Ph.: British Museum