

The Rectorial Barn at Church Enstone

By RAYMOND B. WOOD-JONES

THE Rectorial Barn at Church Enstone, Oxfordshire, represents a medieval structure of the greatest interest, which has survived to the present day in a very fair state of preservation. Its particular interest lies in its unusual and early structure in relation to the regional forms of timber construction, and in the fine fourteenth-century inscribed date-stone built into the structure, making the building an invaluable, if controversial, dating point in vernacular building.

Enstone, as a manor and later a parish, was dependent on the Benedictine Abbey of Winchcombe in Gloucestershire, which had been possessed of the estate since the ninth century.¹ In 1307, the valuable living was appropriated to the use of the abbey by Pope Clement V,² and in 1382 Abbot Walter de Wynforton erected a barn (PL. II, A, B) at the request of Robert Mason, who was acting as bailiff of the monastic estate at Enstone. This fact is recorded in a Latin inscription (PL. II, C), now to be found on the external face of the south wall of the barn, which reads :

‘Ista Grangia facta et fundata fuit
A.D. M^oCCC^oLXXXII^o per Walterum de
Wynforton abbatem de Wynchecumbe ad
exorationem Roberti Mason ballivi loci istius.’

This may be translated :

‘This barn (or grange) was founded and built in the year 1382 by Walter de Wynforton, Abbot of Winchcombe, at the petition of Robert Mason, bailiff of this place.’

The inscribed stone, which reveals fine craftsmanship, is somewhat arbitrarily placed in the rubble masonry of the south wall, protected by a much-weathered drip-mould with carved ends. There appears to be no reason to doubt the authenticity of the stone in relation to the barn at Enstone, but it has almost certainly been reset in its present position, having been

¹ J. Jordan, *Parochial History of Enstone* (1857), chap. 3.

² *Calendar of Papal Letters*, ii, p. 27.

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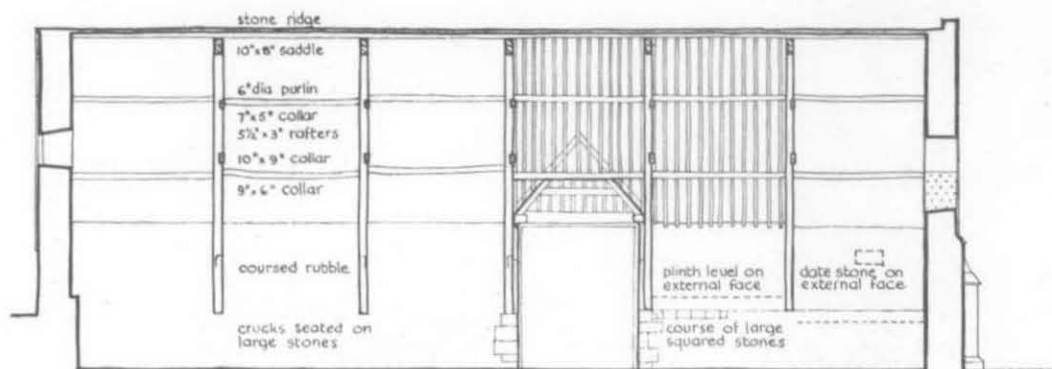
removed from another part of the present barn, or from an earlier structure, long since demolished. Though protected by a later out-building, the inscription is badly weathered, but still legible.³

The barn itself is a simple structure, measuring internally approximately 72 feet by 26 feet, with a through cartway, the south and principal entrance being protected by a porch. The walls are of stone, averaging 2 feet 10 inches in thickness, of coursed rubble, using the local oolitic limestone with dressings of the dark brown ferruginous limestone of the lias belt. Enstone lies between two geological regions, the brown iron stone which centres on Banbury, and which is still mined in Hornton, and the grey oolitic limestone which finds its particular expression in the Cotswold region. The use of the two stones together, for decorative effect, is characteristic of the border areas, where the two materials can be obtained from the same local quarry.

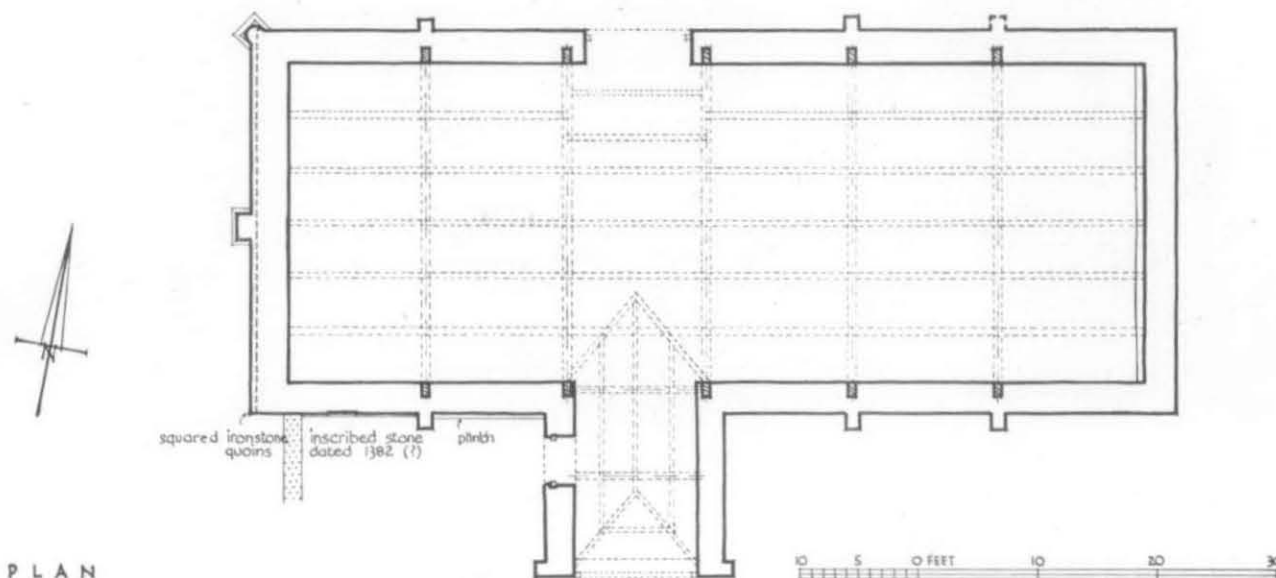
The barn is divided into six bays, averaging 12 feet wide, there being slight variations from one bay to another. The roof structure (PL. III, A ; FIG. 15) is of cruck form, and the principals show an interesting and unusual variation on this principle of construction. The lateral walls are built up to a height of 5 feet from floor level, and on the south wall, which appears to have escaped rebuilding, this is capped on the inner face by a course of large squared stones, which act as a continuous base for the feet of the crucks. The cruck blades, averaging 1 foot 6 inches deep by 9 inches wide at the bottom, rest on this raised plinth, and are built into the rubble walling above, which rises to a height internally of about 12 feet. The crucks are of oak, roughly squared but showing the outer bark in places, and appear to be paired from the same tree trunks. The blades are shaped, curving from the feet to a slight knee, then rising almost straight to the ridge, with an even taper. No system of numbering the crucks has been detected, but a carpenter's mark can be seen on several blades near the knee. There is no tie beam or spur from the knee, at the level of the wall top, and the first collar occurs at a height of 17 feet above the floor, with a second collar above. Both collars are squared and dressed timbers, secured to the crucks by pegged, dove-tailed, halved joints.

The apex of the crucks is formed by a saddle 10 inches high and 8 inches thick—the same thickness as the top of the blades, to which it is morticed and pegged. On top of this saddle is a further triangular shaped block, pegged through the saddle, to raise the 4 inch squared ridge pole clear of the crucks. There are two purlins on each side of the ridge, laid flat and partly housed into the upper edge of the cruck. There are no wind-braces, nor any indication of such having been provided.

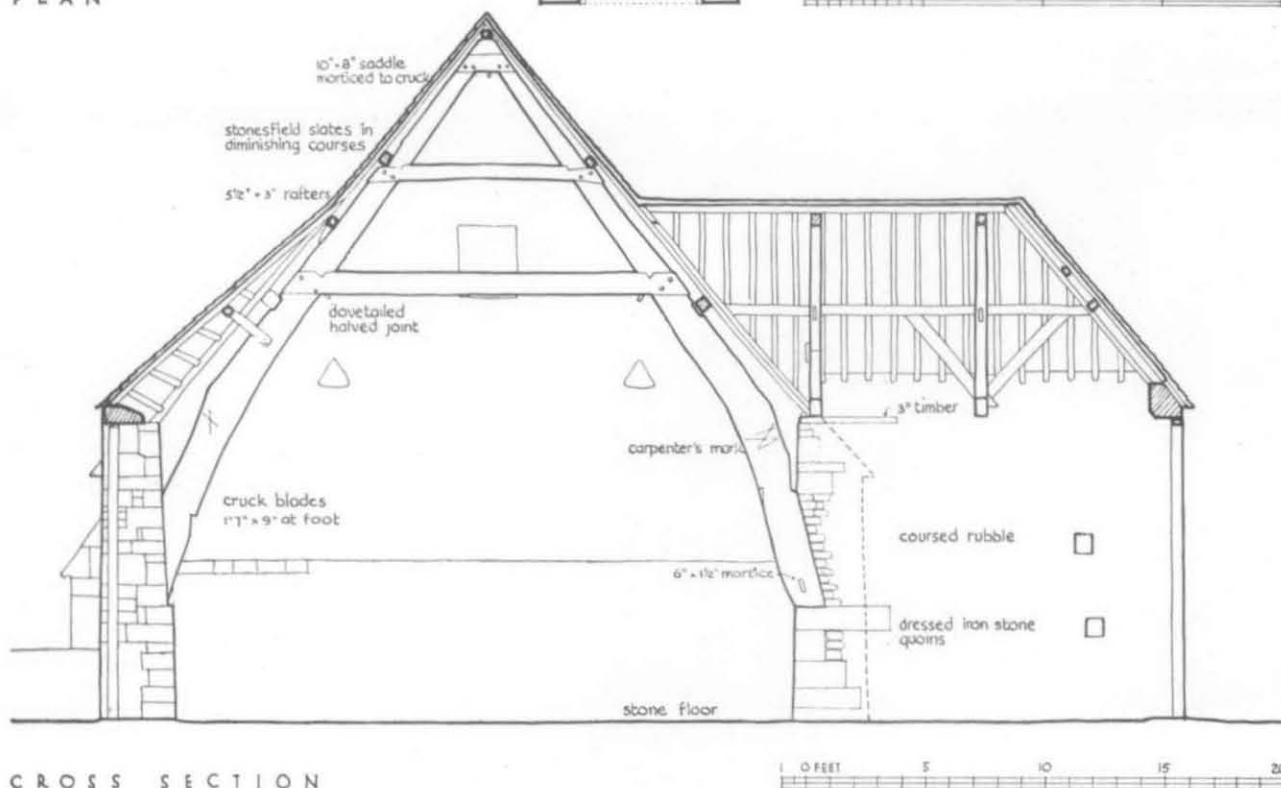
³ The inscription is recorded by Thomas Warton in his *History of Kiddington* (1782), p. 28.



SECTION



PLAN



CROSS SECTION

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The absence of any tie until more than half-way up the cruck would leave some tendency for spread at the foot, and this outward thrust is counteracted to some extent by small buttresses in the lateral walls at the points of support. Apart from the crucks, the greater part of the roof structure is not original. The earliest surviving rafters are roughly squared timbers averaging $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches by 3 inches, laid flat and continuous from ridge to eaves. There is no evidence of an original wall plate, a 9 inch by 2 inch oak beam of recent date fulfilling this function on the outer face of the north wall, whilst the stonework is built up to infill between the rafters. The roof pitch is approximately 50 degrees, with a covering of Stonesfield slates, secured by pegs to the riven oak battens, and laid in diminishing courses from ridge to eaves, with a stone ridge capping. There appears to be a rough torching of lime plaster on the under side of the slating.

The two existing entrances are of considerable size, but in their present form lack any architectural pretension, and show considerable rebuilding and alteration, probably in the seventeenth century and later.

The masonry has already been noted. The gable walls are 3 feet 6 inches thick up to eaves level, being reduced above to approximately 2 feet 9 inches. This reduction is achieved on the west gable by a set-back from the outer face, the offset being protected by a weathered and moulded coping in dressed iron-stone. On the east gable wall, there is a simple set-back of 8 inches from the inner face of the wall, forming a ledge within the building. The lateral buttresses have a single offset, and there is an unusual angle buttress of cylindrical form at the north-west corner. A further buttress is positioned in the centre of the west gable, but the absence of any buttress at the south-west angle probably indicates that there was originally an adjoining building at this point. The west gable is finished by a raking stone coping of flat section, 17 inches by $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick, with a simple raking termination. The stone slates are taken to a flush verge on the other gable, which may be the result of later repair to the roof. It has been noted, however, that a number of houses in this area have a parapet on one gable only, at the most important end of the building. In the centre of each end wall is a tall and narrow opening, widely splayed internally and originally fitted with stone louvres, whilst additional ventilation is provided by a pattern of small openings in the end walls.

Architecturally the barn is not pretentious. It lacks the detail and craftsmanship of many of the great tithe-barns of the fourteenth century, and is not comparable in the finish of masonry or timber with the fourteenth-century tithe-barn at Swalcliffe, eight miles to the north. The barn appears to belong more to the tradition of vernacular building, despite its monastic foundation, and its dating is of particular interest because of this.

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There are a number of points which invite particular consideration in attempting to date the structure. There is evidence of considerable rebuilding, and it is conceivable that the absence of an adequate tie to the principals may have caused the original structure to become unsafe soon after it was built. The north wall appears to have been completely reconstructed, with the original buttresses reset, but not bonded to the masonry. The crucks here are seated on large stones or on oak beams built into the wall. The west gable bears evidence of a change of building in its upper stages, and the east wall appears to have been considerably renewed. It is possible that the gable walls, part of the south wall, the buttresses and the crucks, represent the dated structure of the late fourteenth century. A comparison with the Swalcliffe barn of similar date would suggest that the entrances in their original form may have been finished with stone arches and gables, with the date-stone in the gable.

By comparison, however, with cruck forms recorded elsewhere in this country, the form of construction at Enstone appears to be later than the given date by a hundred years. The practice of placing the foot of the cruck upon a stone stylobate or plinth to provide a secure and dry foundation, free from damp and decay, is common in this country. The elevation of the complete cruck structure half-way up the wall, as at Enstone, is not commonly found. This form of structure does not fall within the category of the upper cruck, as defined by Fox and Raglan,⁴ where the curved foot of the cruck blade springs from the tie beam, which is supported on the lateral walls, and which itself supports the wall plate, maintaining the relationship of cruck and wall. The Enstone cruck appears to represent an interim stage between the full cruck and the later derivative truss forms, which simply rest upon the top of the wall. In stone barns of fifteenth century date recorded in Monmouthshire, Yorkshire and Cumberland, the crucks normally spring from a stone base near ground level, but a tie or cruck spur always projects from the knee of the cruck to the wall top to support the wall-plate from the cruck. At Enstone, the wall-plate, if any, is quite independent of the cruck frame, and in a number of buildings recorded in north Oxfordshire a similar form of raised cruck, without spurs, has been found. The tithe barn at Swalcliffe shows a more advanced form of this, with the crucks still further elevated up the walls.

The method of erecting the crucks in their elevated position is also of interest. In the cruck to the east of the main entrance, there is a 6 inch by 1½ inch mortice near the foot, which may correspond to the lifting or levering

⁴ Sir Cyril Fox and Lord Raglan, *Monmouthshire Houses*, 1, p. 67.

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hole commonly found in Yorkshire and northern crucks. A wooden lever, or a tenon, has been sawn off in the mortice. The other exposed foot, on the west side of this entrance, does not show this feature, and all the other blades are built into the wall. There is also to be noted a housing in the lower edge of several crucks, particularly those related to rebuilt walling, at a height of approximately 8 feet above ground. There are no indications of pegs, etc., to indicate the fixing of a permanent post or partition, and it is conjectured that these recesses may be related to the rebuilding, and may have formed a seating for a temporary prop to take the weight of the cruck, whilst its seating was being rebuilt. A similarly-shaped notch is noted in one blade of a cruck at Grayrigg Hall barn in Westmorland, where the cruck has obviously been temporarily supported to allow a decayed foot to be cut off, and a new stone plinth built up.

The cruck buildings of north Oxfordshire appear to represent a regional type, which shows some interesting variations from other areas so far recorded, and the Enstone barn is particularly important as an early and outstanding example of this form. The structure unfortunately shows signs of comparatively recent deterioration, partly due to the inherent weakness of the structural form. The crucks show clear indications of spreading, and the unbuttressed south-west angle is badly fractured. The heavy and irregular plinths on the external face of the south wall, adjacent to the date stone, may represent an early attempt to counteract the outward inclination of the wall at this point. Apart from this, however, the masonry is in good condition. The roof covering represents a more immediate danger, where the collapse of the purlins in one bay has brought down the stone slates, leaving the barn open to the elements. There are already indications of decay attacking the adjacent timbers, and this collapse will inevitably be repeated unless at least progressive repair and replacement is continued. The cost of properly restoring and preserving this building may well be beyond the resources of a private owner, and a wider effort is essential to ensure that this fine medieval structure is preserved for all time.

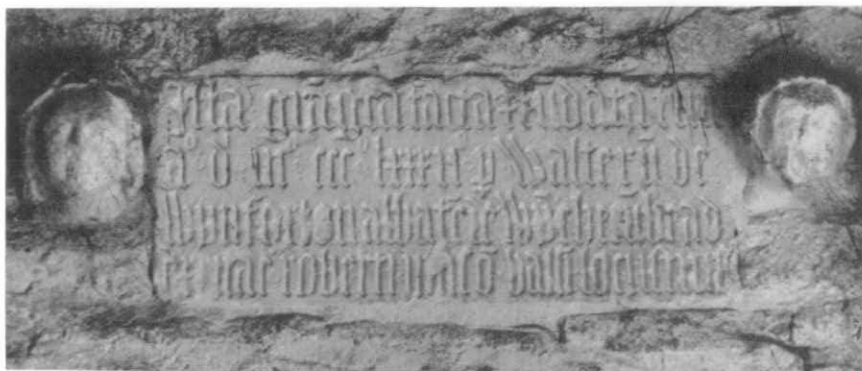
PLATE II



A



B



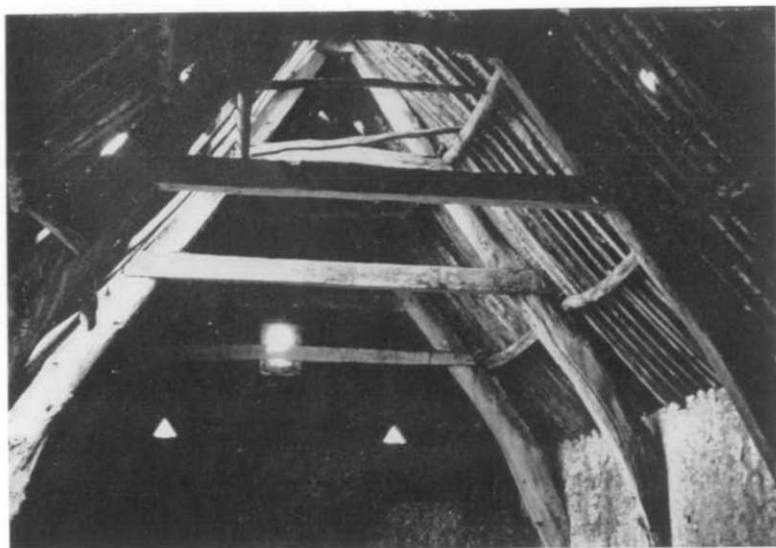
C

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- A. The barn from the north-west.
- B. The south entrance front.
- C. The fourteenth-century inscribed date-stone.

*Phh.: A, B, R. B. Wood-Jones
C, R. T. Lattey*

PLATE III



A



B

THE RECTORIAL BARN AT CHURCH ENSTONE.

- A. The cruck roof structure.
- B. The interior looking east.

Phh.: R. B. Wood-Jones