

Cruck Cottage in Church Lane, Harwell

By J. M. FLETCHER, M.A., Ph.D.

CHURCH Lane winds south-eastwards from the High Street, across the small Chilbrook to the Church and Prince's Manor. Dell Cottage (PL. XII A), the subject of this article, is a small medieval dwelling which lies at a slight angle to the lane on its south-west side. Till 1951 it was part of a croft of 1 rood 22 poles which was described in the Enclosure Award of 1805 as a copyhold 'house and garden'. At that time it belonged to Martha Thomas, a person who owned three other small properties and 13 acres of land in the parish: more recently it was owned by the Rev. W. Gooderidge till c. 1920, then by Henry Tyrrell, a former baker who also purchased the adjacent Lockton Farm: since 1946, the occupant has been the owner.

The cottage, with crucks visible at each end, is the most obvious house with this type of construction in Harwell. There are, however, other houses in the village with crucks, the nearest¹ of these being Le Carillon directly opposite to Dell Cottage on the other side of Church Lane.

Dell Cottage has undergone many modifications and extensions, the last being by Mr. Godsell, who purchased it in 1951 and saved it from a Closing Order threatened by the local Council. His renovations and improvements left its exterior appearance almost unchanged but turned what had been two cottages, each with its separate entrance and staircase, into a convenient single unit of accommodation.

The ground plan of the dwelling as it stands today is shown in FIG. 1 A. There are three main components:

- I The rectangular cruck unit. This is divided into parts A and B, each of two storeys, by the central chimney stack. The floor-levels of both were lowered by Mr. Godsell, that of part A, on higher ground, now being a foot higher than that of part B.
- II The wide gable-ended extension (seen in PL. XII B) added to the south side of A. This now reaches only 3 ft. beyond the south wall of the cruck unit. Its ridge and the ridge of that part of the cruck unit onto which it abuts are about 2 ft. higher than the apexes of the crucks. This extension is supported at the west by the post C, which

¹ Others are at School House, Jennings Lane and at Pomander Cottage: there are also crucks in barns, e.g. at Middle Farm.

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is in line with the blades I and II, and at the east by the tapered post D which is free-standing.

- III The rectangular single-storeyed unit F, the latest addition. This incorporates the half-height plate E which connects the posts C and D.

Except for the last item, the cottage is thatched. Two small gable windows have been inserted on the north and one on the south side: inside the recess formed by the most recent, the north-east,² of these windows, some rafters, 4 in. wide and roughly finished, are exposed; but otherwise the rafters are hidden by the thatch outside and by the plastered ceilings inside. Although some of the panels in the external walls are filled with brick, many are of wattle and daub covered with plaster.

THE WESTERN CRUCK (FIG. 1 B and PL. XII B)

The blades at this end are representative of cruck construction at its apogee. They are firmly elbowed³ and wide, 17-18 ins. where elbowed, and 12 ins. at their apex; the knots in them and a marked irregularity in the grain above the tie-beam show that they were formed by the division of a single elbowed board.³ They are 5-5½ in. thick and there has been deterioration of the feet which are tapered to a width of about 7 in. On the north side there are traces of the original sill beam: the stone block, V, on which it rested protrudes prominently.

There is no vertical flanking stud⁴ on this side: although there is one on the south side, it is an addition related to the construction of the gabled extension. On the north blade, I, there is a concrete-filled mortice, W, for what would have been a rail at about 3½ ft. from the ground: there has been too much concrete-infilling (at X) on the southern blade, II—this has subsided somewhat causing downward bending of the tie-beam—for any similar mortice there to be visible.

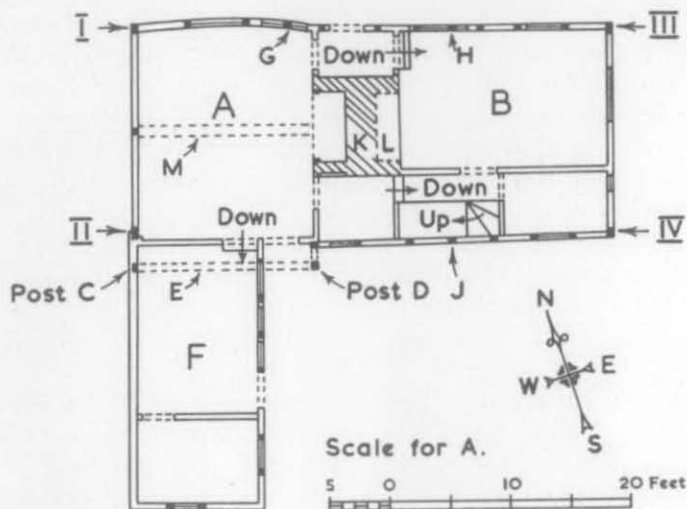
The 6 in. wide, extended tie-beam is seen on the inside of the house to be halved into the blades, the pegs by which it is secured being over 1 in. wide and almost square. Below the tie-beam, there have been alterations to the original wall: a 5 in. thick brick wall now fills the panels that are formed by rather narrow studs and rails. Above the tie-beam there is wattle and

² A photograph taken by Mr. Severn Storr about 1920 shows that this window was then absent.

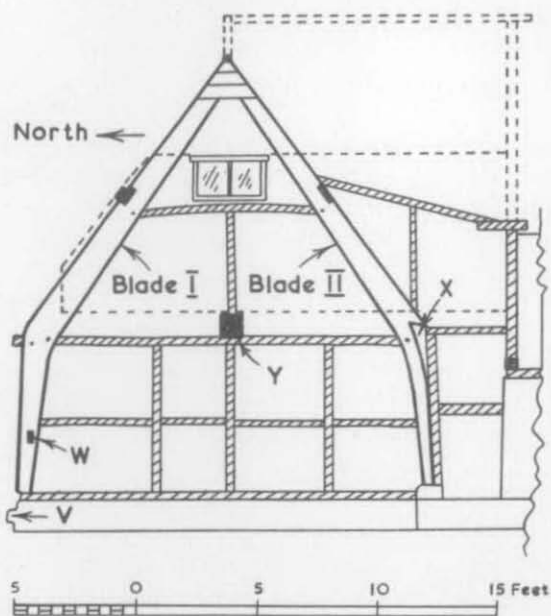
³ Cf. crucks described in *Monmouthshire Houses*, Part I, Fox and Raglan, 1951. On p. 38 of this reference the method by which elbowed boards were cut from forest oaks is outlined; advantage was taken of a branch about 15 ft. from the ground to give the elbow: with this technique the blades in cruck houses are butt-end uppermost. The local Berkshire tradition that crucks were formerly ships' timbers must be discounted but it is possible that similar methods were employed for both requirements.

⁴ Monmouthshire crucks always have these, but they are absent on the well-elbowed cruck at Lacock, Wilts., and on other crucks in Harwell.

A. GROUND PLAN



B. WESTERN CRUCK



C. EASTERN CRUCK

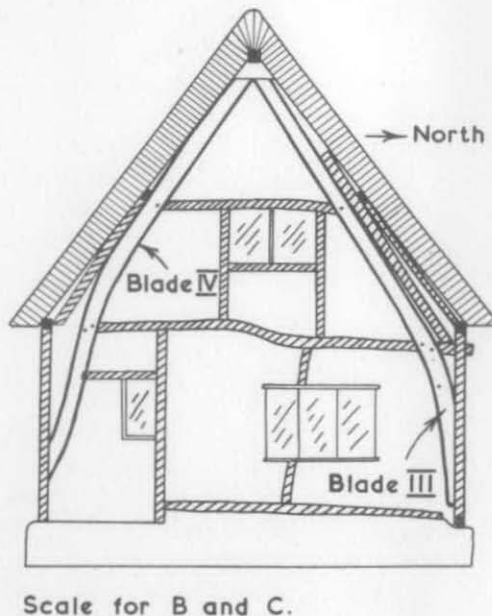


FIG. 1
Dell Cottage, Church Lane, Harwell, Berks.

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daub, but some changes to the original timber framework may have accompanied the insertion through the narrow wall of the 11 in. by 11 in. ceiling beam, Y, also marked M in FIG. 1 A.

The blades terminate at a saddle which has been modified to support the sloping ridge pole required by the half-hip, itself made necessary by the high southern extension. Inside the cottage, there is evidence that windbraces at one time joined each blade to its respective purlin: these windbraces are now cut flush with the inner face of the blades. As no such traces of windbraces exist on the present outer face of the blades, this truss is presumed always to have been a terminal one.

THE EASTERN CRUCK (FIG. 1 C and PL. XIII A)

This is very different from the western one. The blades are narrow and feebly elbowed: instead of acting as the main support to the roof, their function is largely reduced to that of carrying the ridge pole: thus the wall plates rest entirely on the flanking studs. The timber framework at this end also is visible inside the house: here, the blade, IV, at the south-east corner is of interest as it has both an extended tie-beam halved into it and also a spur-tie 2 in. above. At the north-east corner, the blade, III, has no similar spur-tie nor does it show the remnant of any windbrace such as exists on the inside of blade IV. Thus a blade, which had at one time been part of a partition truss elsewhere, was used as IV and another beam of narrow scantling was used as III.

These features suggest that the east face in its present general form was constructed (or reconstructed) at a date later than that of the western cruck, e.g. when the earlier cruck dwelling was being modified or extended. As with other parts of the cottage, there have been numerous minor alterations, such as the insertion of windows, at this end.

THE CRUCK UNIT

Fortunately, the length of the bay is revealed on the external north face by a large protruding stone block (at G in FIG. 1 A) on which rests a small section, which passes *through* the wall, of the original sill beam, 9 in by 6 in. This evidence fixes the length of a bay as $13\frac{1}{2}$ ft. and also, since this sill beam is directed across the house, indicates that here was a partition truss. Although there is no definite indication of the existence of another truss at the line HJ, i.e. at a distance of $26\frac{1}{2}$ ft. from the west end, it is significant that there is at H a marked discontinuity in height in the rubble stone plinth, and at J on the south wall a change in the footing from stone to brick.

It is concluded that the dwelling of which the western cruck is now the

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main surviving feature, consisted of two $13\frac{1}{2}$ ft. bays separated by a partition. One bay, probably the western, would have provided the chamber—perhaps with a loft above it: the other, the 'hall'. To the east and at a rather lower level due to the slight slope of the land, there may have been some simple 'backhouse' or the remnant of an earlier one-room dwelling, as occupation of this site from Conquest times is likely.

The quality of the blades at the western end is in conflict with the suggestion⁵ that craftsmanship of cruck carpentry in Wales was superior to that in the English Midlands. These blades at Dell Cottage are the equal of the best of those in Monmouthshire.

MODIFICATIONS

Both the insertion of the stone chimney breast, K, with its back-to-back fireplace and the addition of the wide, gabled extension at the south-west corner can be attributed to the rebuilding phase^{5, 6} which occurred between 1575 and 1640. A typical feature, found in many other houses in the village, is the oak beam, 7 ft. 4 in. by 7 in., above the now enclosed hearth L. Was the construction of the east face contemporary with this major reconstruction or did it precede it? The present purlins suggest the latter: they appear to be replacements of earlier ones as they show no mortices for windbraces and the north one occupies only part of the 9 in. wide notch on blade I: they therefore belong to the period when the cruck cottage assumed its present length of 40 ft., i.e. when the east face was constructed. The manner in which the purlin on the south side has been abruptly terminated at the point where the gabled extension occurs implies that it predates this extension, and belongs to an earlier and minor phase of rebuilding such as might have occurred about 1500.

Evidence is provided by truncated wall-plates that the wide extension on the south at one time reached further south than the present face (seen in PL. XII B). An additional bay, 15-20 ft. wide, would have given the house a typical L-shape. The destruction of this bay had left a truss, originally internal, to form an unusually wide gable, in which all the beams except the half-height plate E are likely to be original. The single-storeyed unit F contains as studs, etc., several aged oak beams which may have been taken from the previous structure.

So far, whether considered as a 2-bay medieval dwelling, as a rather larger 3-bay unit of c. 1500, or as a reconstructed and extended house after the Great Rebuilding epoch, this property was sufficiently large to have

⁵ M. W. Barley, *The English Farmhouse and Cottage*, 1961, p. 22.

⁶ W. G. Hoskins, *Past and Present*, 1953, 4, 44.

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belonged to a person of some substance in the village. Portman⁷ has noticed that such dwellings were sometimes converted in the 18th or 19th centuries into two cottages for farm labourers, while the farmer himself moved to a new and more imposing house. In Church Lane, Harwell, the building in the 18th century of Lockton Farm, which is situated slightly to the west of Dell Cottage, could have provided the occasion for the division of this cottage: this may have occurred about 1742—the date engraved on the north side of its central brick chimney.

DISCUSSION

LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS

At one time, crucks south of the Thames were considered a rarity. In the area of N. Berks between the northern slopes of the Berkshire Downs and the river, there are several villages, lying mainly on clay and with sources of oak available locally, which contain numerous medieval timber-framed houses. The persistence in one of these villages, Long Wittenham, of several crucks has recently been recorded by Portman;⁸ the cruck in the tractor-shed of Church Farm is well-elbowed and has tapered feet like that at the west end of Dell Cottage; others resemble the decadent cruck at the east end. The principal dimensions of the Long Wittenham crucks (and of another local example at Steventon)⁹ are compared in TABLE I with those at Dell Cottage and with a hitherto unrecorded cruck (PL. XIII B) at Le Carillon, Harwell. These Berkshire crucks have been classified in this Table into a small number of types of which other examples occur in such well-investigated areas as Monmouthshire³ and Leicestershire.¹⁰ The types illustrate for Southern England the development (and decline) of the cruck framework, a subject which Walton¹¹ has discussed in detail for England and Wales in relation to other countries.

One feature to be noticed on maps¹² which show the relative abundance of recorded crucks in Southern England is their absence in numerous areas. Many of these areas reflect the influence of different geological conditions; thus a line which passes northwards from the chalk of the Berkshire Downs through Harwell and Oxford cuts successively the Upper Greensand and Gault clay which lie south of the Thames: the limestone formations of Oxfordshire: and the Lower Lias clay in Warwickshire and Leicestershire. In this sequence of 70 miles, crucks are only found in the clay areas; in the others, suitable timber was not available locally, while in parts of Oxfordshire there was freestone as an alternative for building. However, on such maps some cruckless areas may still represent inadequate local records or a particularly low probability of survival.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DATING

Any date proposed for the cruck unit at Dell Cottage must be consistent not only with the archaeological findings but also with what is known historically

⁷ D. Portman, *Oxoniensia*, 1960, xxv, p. 49.

⁸ D. Portman, *Berks. Arch. J.*, 1958, 56, p. 35.

⁹ S. E. Rigold, *Trans. Newbury Dist. Field Club*, 1958, x, no. 4, p. 4.

¹⁰ V. R. Webster, *Trans. Leics. Arch. Soc.*, 1954, 30, p. 26.

¹¹ J. Walton, *Antiquity*, 1948, xxii, p. 179.

¹² J. T. Smith, *Arch. J.*, 1960, cxv, p. 111.

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TABLE I
DIMENSIONS OF CRUCKS IN HOUSES IN NORTH BERKS.

Type	Example	Breadth of Cruck Truss ft.	Approx. Height† ft.	Distance apart of Bays ft.
1. Blades well-elbowed, and wide at elbows; no flanking studs.	Harwell, Dell Cottage, W. gable	17½	18½	13½
2. Arch-braces* from blades to collar.	Wittenham, Tractor-shed	15	15½	13
3. Cruck truss broad and high. Elbows not pro- nounced.	Steventon, Cruck House, Internal Truss	16½	16	13?
	Wittenham, Barley Mow, E. gable	18	19	14—16
	Wittenham, Cruckfield Cottage, Truss II	18	18	10
	Harwell, Le Carillon, N.E. gable	19¼	20¼	24
4. Blades narrow and inclined.	Harwell, Dell Cottage, E. gable	17½	19	—
	Steventon, Cruck House, E. gable	17½	17	—

*Examples also occur at Pomander Cottage, Harwell.

†From sill-beam to ridge.

about the village. It is unlikely that there would have been any great incentive to build this type of dwelling in the period shortly after 1350 when the population was declining due to the Black Death; even if the demand existed, the necessary skilled labour would be difficult to find. This situation may well have lasted till about 1450. A pre-1350 or post-1450 date is therefore indicated. The latter would be consistent with the dates (from 1450 to 1550) suggested by Fox and Raglan¹³ as probable for many of the Monmouthshire crucks; however, as these authors have no positive evidence for this dating, it would be unwise to accept it uncritically for N. Berkshire, particularly as there could be some time-lag in the use of the same style in the South Midlands and in areas on its periphery.

In fact, there is much to favour the first half of the 14th century, i.e. a pre-1350 date. Crucks even then were an old design¹¹ and in this century were even going out of favour for important buildings.¹² There is evidence for local skill in carpentry from the pre-1350 timber roofs¹³ in Harwell Church¹⁴ and in two local halls—Middle Farm, Harwell and the Abbey, Sutton Courtenay.

Harwell,¹⁵ which lay on the main route westwards from London and Walling-

¹³ F. E. Howard, *Arch. J.*, 1914, LXXI, p. 294.

¹⁴ There were substantial changes (J. W. Walker, *Berks. Arch. J.*, 1932, 36, p. 8 and *V.C.H. Berks.*, III, 1923, p. 484) to Harwell Church at more than one period in the 13th century and again about 1310, but almost none thereafter.

¹⁵ Almost the whole of the parish (2,521 acres) was under cultivation, mainly as arable land, and the population was perhaps about 300.

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ford to Gloucester, had at this time a connexion¹⁶ with the Court, itself often at Wallingford. This connection was beneficial to various members,¹⁷ of the village; one of them, Thomas Milis, must have acquired considerable wealth between 1300 and 1316 as he was able to purchase¹⁸ in the village about 100 acres of arable land and several messuages with their curtilages: one of the latter, released to him in March 1313 after payments totalling 150s., was adjacent to a tenement described as being 'near the street on the west side of the Church of Harwell'. Within another 15 months he had also obtained this tenement itself and another adjacent messuage. It is likely from the description of their situation that these were on the property now associated either with Dell Cottage or with Le Carillon. Dealings¹⁹ that Thomas Milis had at Oxford with the 'cementarius', i.e. plasterer, Bartholomew de Bradewelle suggest that he directed building operations. If so, he would have had not only the wealth but also the skilled craftsmen to have constructed the cruck unit.

Milis was not the only inhabitant in the first half of the 14th century to whom the building of a new house in Harwell would be economically possible and desirable. The deeds²⁰ of this period show that the yeoman Walter Catewy obtained one or more messuages in the vicinity of Church Lane in 1329 and that, in another part of the village, to a newcomer (Geoffrey de Chelcheheth, king's clerk) there were releases of messuages, etc., on adjacent pieces of land.

In addition to the effect of the Black Death, the breaking of the link between the manor of Harwell and the Black Prince in 1361 is likely to have reduced the opportunities for the construction of new vernacular dwellings in the village. By early Tudor times, when sufficient wealth had reappeared, the new method of post and rafter construction, giving a greater height and being suitable for a wide unencumbered hall, had appeared. The form of such crucks as were then (or later) erected in N. Berkshire, e.g. in the east gable at Dell Cottage, seems to reflect the inferior quality of what was becoming a decadent but not a dead culture.²¹

I am grateful to Martin Brett, James Doran, John Cherry and other members of the O.U. Archaeological Society for making measurements: to David Sturdy for suggestions and interpretations: to Mrs. Bowness, *née* Bessin, who lived in the cottage from 1916 to 1951, and to Mr. C. G. Godsell for helpful information: to the present owner, Mr. G. G. Jenkinson, for permitting numerous visits: and to Mrs. Storr of Le Carillon for drawing my attention to the crucks there.

¹⁶ Firstly as its manor was held successively by Edmund, Earl of Cornwall, and after his death by his widow, Margaret de Clare; by Margaret, the widow of Piers Gaveston and niece to the King; and by the Black Prince. Secondly, on a lower but perhaps more significant level, as the Rector, e.g. Walter of London from 1310 till c. 1335, was a king's clerk.

¹⁷ One, John de Harewell, became Chancellor of Aquitaine and Bishop of Bath and Wells. See the author's 'Master John atte Halle, John de Harewell', *Harlequin* (A.E.R.E. Harwell), Summer 1961.

¹⁸ Macray, *Calendar Berkshire*, vol. III, Harwell. There are about 60 deeds which concern these grants and releases made to him between 1304 and 1316. In all he paid about £130.

¹⁹ Ref. 18, no. 16c of 17 September 1313. In the same year (no. 73b) he is conducting business for the rector, Walter of London.

²⁰ Ref. 18, no. 45b of 3 August 1329 and no. 27b and 68a of May 1330.

²¹ The re-use of cruck blades in Harwell occurred early this century in the space above the baker's oven on the south side of Drewett's shop (information by the present owner, Mr. H. James), and also at Pomander Cottage.



A



B

A. Dell Cottage. From Church Lane looking south-west.
B. Dell Cottage. Western cruck from south-west, with Le Carillon, Church Lane, in background on left.

Phls.: H. R. Crooks

OXONIENSIA, VOLS. XXVI/XXVII (1962) FLETCHER, CRUCK COTTAGE IN CHURCH LANE, HARWELL

PLATE XIII



A



B

A. Dell Cottage. Eastern cruck from north-east.
B. Le Carillon. North-east face.

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