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**Historical Analysis of
The North Barn
at
Bridgefield Farm, Cowlinge, Suffolk**

for
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March 2010

Historical Appraisal of the North Barn at Bridgefield Farm, Cowlinge

Summary

The North Barn is one of a pair of low barns that stand parallel to the road at Bridgefield Farm. It is not listed in its own right, but is curtilage listed by its former association with the adjacent Erratts Farm. It was constructed at the very end of the 18th or beginning of the 19th century. The quality was only fair and much re-used timber was involved. The floor that was inserted in the later 19th century is of poor construction and barely connects to the building frame. The roof structure was replaced in the middle of the 20th century.

Introduction

The North Barn is a free-standing timber structure that forms part of the collection of three barns that used to belong to Erratts Farm. It is covered in black softwood boarding with a corrugated iron roof, which is hipped at its northern end. There is a straight gable next to the main barn, which stands very close. This main barn was converted to a dwelling at the end of the 20th century.

These buildings and the South Barn form a courtyard. None could be separated from their neighbour for further subdivision of the site, so they need to be utilised as a group. All the garden equipment is stored in the South Barn, which is in good condition. The North Barn, however, is not being used, there being just the one narrow door. The crudely laid concrete floor is above ground level and adds to the difficulty of finding an appropriate use.

Historical Analysis

The North Barn was constructed in timber-frame throughout and would have been covered originally with elm boards. The frame used a great deal of second-hand timbers of small square sectioned studs set in a series of interlocking triangles.



Part of the rear wall showing the original framing and inserted floor

Though the carpenter did have the skill to scribe his mortices, all of them were cut to the same size, irrespective of the dimension of the stud tenons. This was a rapidly produced structure assembled at the lowest cost possible.

It is not easy to put a date to such a structure, but it seems most likely that it was built at the end of the Napoleonic War, when crop prices were high and farmers were keen to reap the benefits, but when some may not have had the cash to pay for a good quality building.

The original design was a single storey structure. All evidence of the original roof has been lost, so it is not known whether the barn was thatched or tiled.

The original function of this building is unclear. It clearly was not a threshing barn as it and the South Barn are subservient to the main barn where the threshing would have taken place. Nor is there any surviving strong evidence for animals being housed here. The walls were covered in horizontal boarding [some survives], but there is no sign of partitioning as found in stables or cow stalls.

The only noteworthy feature is the pair of long boards holding crudely carved hooks along the eastern [front] wall. These are heavy enough to have taken such large equipment as horse collars, though they are perhaps too close together for that purpose. They appear to be original, because the joists of the later inserted floor make some of them unusable. However, there are tethering rings along the back wall [see above photo], which coupled with the central drain in the original brick floor could suggest that this was initially used as a milking parlour or a calving shed.



Some of the original timber hooks along the front wall, which have been compromised by the inserted floor

Later in the 19th century, an upper floor was added. This is supported by central Samson Posts and makes ample use of second-hand timbers, some of which may be 16th or 17th century in date. The construction is very crude, involving many packing pieces of various timber species. All the connections are nailed together; there is no longer any attempt at carpentry jointing.



One of the oak Samson posts supporting the inserted floor made of various second-hand timbers

Unusually, the floor stands just below tie-beam level and makes no attempt to create any structural connection. It also stops short of the northern end, which allows space for a wooden staircase, but this has been lost. A hayloft door was added at this time looking out over the courtyard.

In the middle of the 20th century, possibly just after World War II, the roof was rebuilt in softwood and covered with corrugated iron. This is a very utilitarian structure, which removed all evidence of earlier roofs.

Condition

The original structure shows signs of decay that probably reflects the long-lasting and serious agricultural depression that immediately followed the end of the Napoleonic War. This was felt particularly hard in Suffolk. Later, the external elm boards were all replaced with softwood.

The spine beam of the inserted floor was never intended to connect to the frame, because it stops just short of the southern end wall. Where the re-used cross-beams met the wall-plate they were dovetailed together, but the original frame has subsequently twisted and dropped, leaving the beam ends suspended some distance above. This means that the upper floor is now supported by the Samson Posts and the more slender posts along the back wall. It is not connected properly to the main frame. Additionally, some of the floorboards have warped away from their supporting joists.



Detached dovetail from the inserted floor. Empty mortise for a tenon from its former use

The quality and welfare of the timbers vary considerably. The best is the oak beam supporting the floor towards its southern end [see above], but many have been seriously damaged by worm attack, so that their structural ability is in major doubt [see photo overleaf]. This is widely noticeable amongst the floor joists, which are made of poplar or aspen. Both species are particularly vulnerable to insect attack and were never used in good quality carpentry.

The boards of the inserted floor have been repaired on more than one occasion and now consist of a varied collection of oak, elm and softwoods. Even so, many are badly decayed with worm and some have large holes in them. Currently, it would be unwise to attempt to walk on them.

The hayloft has sunk backwards into the roof so that it would be very difficult now to open the door [see overleaf]. The future stability of this element of the barn is seriously questionable.

The general conditions of the timbers of this barn suggest that the older roof had been leaking for many years and this neglect allowed a great deal of decay. The present 20th century roof met an urgent requirement, but it could not reverse the damage. The consequence of poor quality workmanship and long-term neglect has been that the building is now leaning quite distinctly, most noticeably towards the courtyard.

Conclusion

If this building were to be saved, a large amount of money and engineering skill would be required. However, the quality of the work of any of the building phases does not really warrant such an expense. None of the elements of this barn, with perhaps the exception of the timber hooks on their connecting boards, have any quality or historical value.



Decayed re-used timbers at the northern end of the inserted floor



The hayloft has sunk backwards into the roof. This is not an optical illusion.