

The Old Thatched Cottage, Monks Eleigh, Suffolk

Heritage Asset Assessment



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Content

Page

1	Summary
2	Documentary History, Map Regression & Photographs
9	Building Analysis
	Existing ground and first-floor plans
	Listing Entry
10	Plans showing original layout
11	Proportions, structure and date
	Layout
12	The Lean-to Rear Shed
	Historic Significance
13-26	Illustrations

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Heritage Asset Assessment

This report provides an historic analysis at Historic England (2016) Level 2 of a grade II-listed building at TL 96601 47577, and is intended to inform and accompany an application for Listed Building Consent. The site was inspected on 1st March 2022.

Summary

The Old Thatched Cottage is an unusually well preserved pair of small two-up/two-down tenements dating from the very late-18th century or the beginning of the 19th. Its attractive symmetrical facade makes an important contribution to one of the most picturesque village greens in East Anglia. At the time of the parish tithe survey in 1840 the timber-framed building was occupied by agricultural labourers and belonged to a local farmer who also owned the older adjoining cottage to the east and a slightly later detached brick terrace on the west. Each tenement extended to only 6 m in length by 4.25 m in internal width, excluding their shared central chimney which retains both original fireplaces (20 ft by 14). The inexpensive nature of the framing reflects these modest proportions, consisting of a mixture of re-used and unusually small, roughly hewn timber built against the formerly external gable of its eastern neighbour (with which it is jointly listed). The original internal partitions of the right-hand (western) tenement have been removed, but they still survive to the left and the building is of considerable historic interest as an illustration of the dwellings of the rural poor. The two layouts were almost mirror-images of each other, with halls against the chimney and pantries against the outer gables, but the western stair lay behind the chimney while the other rose in the building's south-eastern corner (where it remains intact). A brick and pantiled lean-to wash house with a copper was added to the rear in the mid-19th century and was probably shared by both households. Small tenements of this kind are now far less common than larger contemporary houses, especially in anything resembling their original form, and although combined into a single dwelling during the 20th century the property is of sufficient significance to warrant a separate entry in Historic England's Schedule.

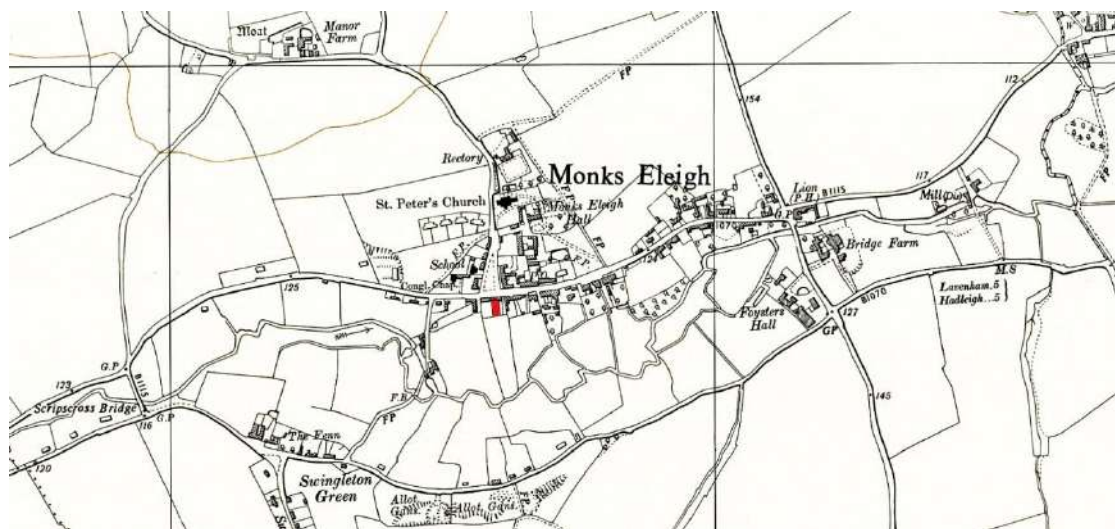


Figure 1. Location map showing the property to the south of the famous village green.

Documentary History, Map Regression & Photographs

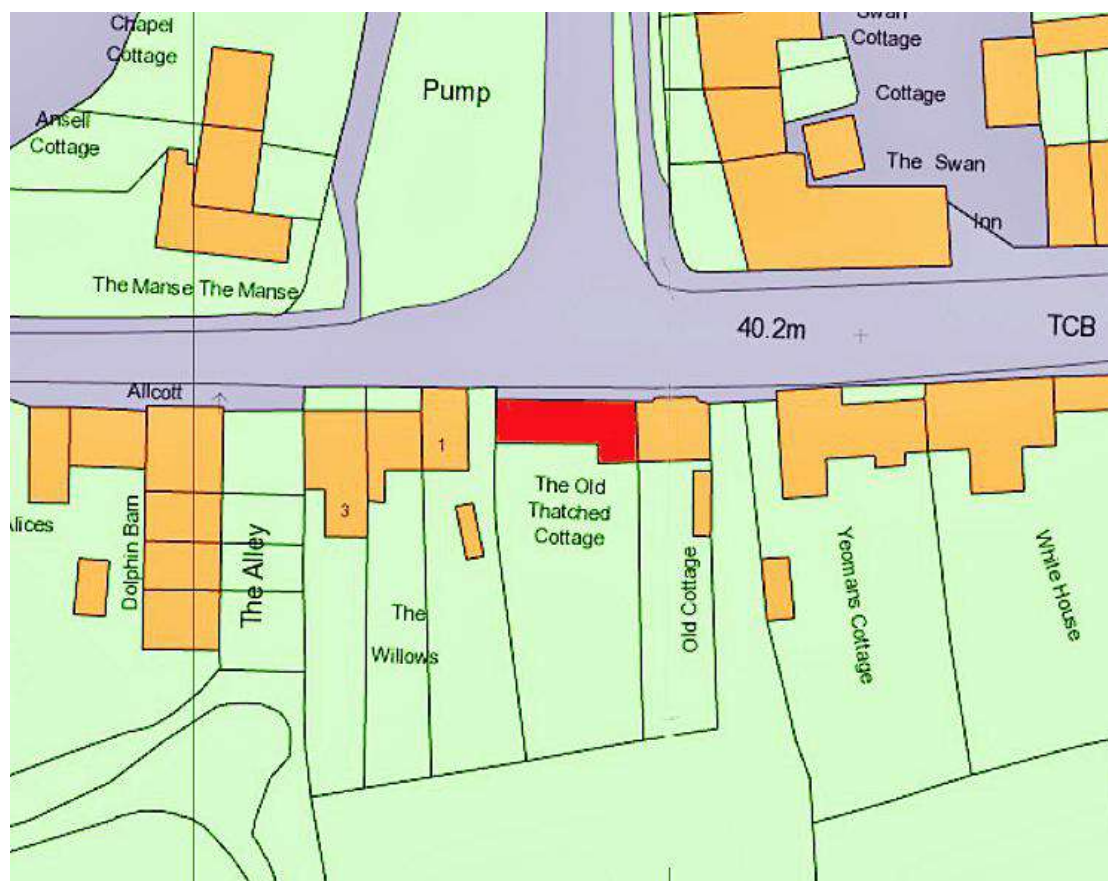


Figure 2
Site plan highlighting the grade II-listed house in red with Old Cottage to the east.

The Old Thatched Cottage lies on the southern side of The Street in Monks Eleigh, facing one of the most famous and photographed village greens in Suffolk. The picturesque thatched building with its symmetrical facade makes a significant contribution to the scene. Listed at grade II along with an older tiled property known as Old Cottage which adjoins on the east, the building was constructed as a pair of tenements sharing a central chimney. The 1840 tithe map depicts all three dwellings as an elongated rectangle owned by William Gage and occupied by 'Bowers and others' (figure 4). The census of the following year records William Gage as the farmer at Highlands Farm to the north-east of the village, and although exact addresses were not included Henry Bowers was a 48-year-old agricultural labourer somewhere in the High Street. He lived with his three children ranging in age from 7 to 18, and between the dwellings of two other agricultural labourers: one of 76 who lived with his wife of 77 and the other of 49 with a wife and four girls aged between 8 and 20. This is consistent with the modest scale of the individual dwellings. The fine map of the parish drawn in 1724 shows a different pattern of buildings, with what appears to be a barn or possibly a cow shed lacking a chimney on the site of Old Cottage and a large domestic house at some distance to the west (figure 3). The site of The Old Thatched Cottage was empty, and this too is consistent with its timber framing which indicates a date in the late-18th or early-19th century. The apparent barn belonged to a wealthy local landowner, John Canham Esquire of Mildenhall, who also owned the land adjoining the river to the rear. Old Cottage is likely either to post-date 1724 or to represent the later conversion of the non-domestic building on the map. By 1885 the surviving lean-to brick extension had been added to the back of the eastern cottage (figure 5), but the property's outline otherwise remains unchanged today – although at some point in the 20th century the two tenements were combined into one.



Figure 3

John Miller's 'Map of the Town and Parish of Monks Eleigh' drawn in 1724 (Suffolk Record Office FL607/1/3), with a detail of the village green below (reoriented to show north in the usual direction). The buildings are stylised but domestic houses are distinguished from farm buildings by the presence of chimneys. The site of Old Cottage was occupied by a small unheated barn or byre that was owned by John Canham of Mildenhall along with the field to the rear. The site of The Old Thatched Cottage is an empty plot between this building and a substantial detached house to the west.

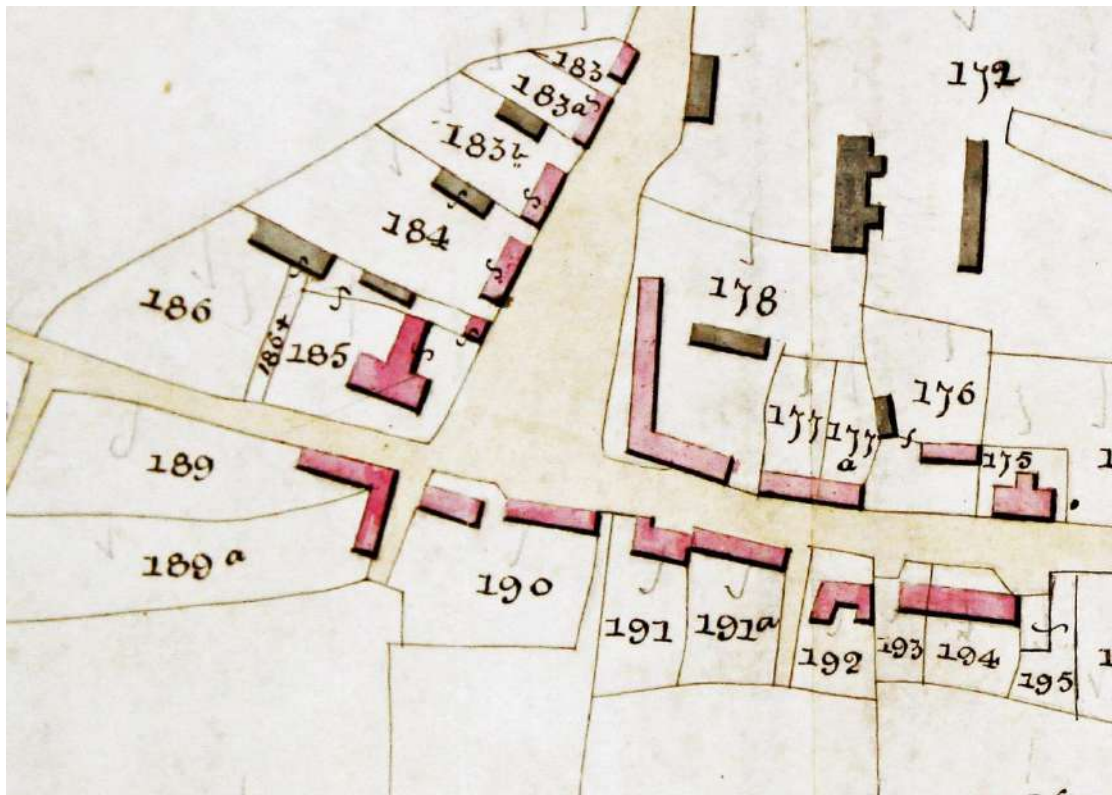
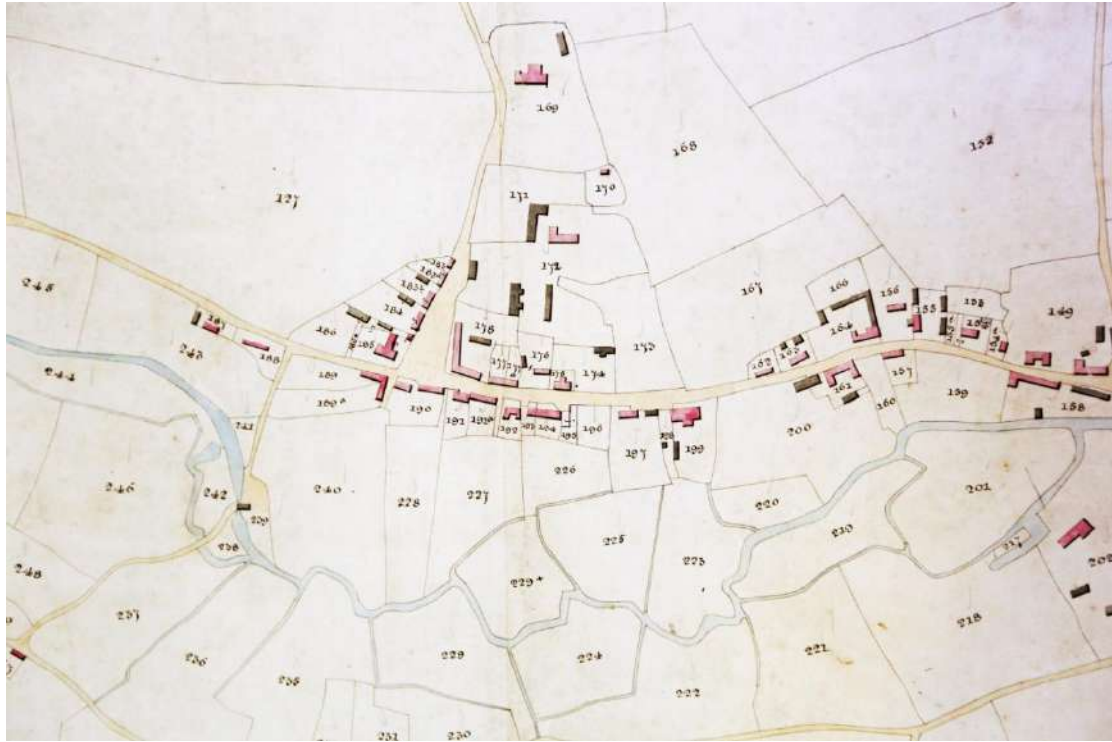


Figure 4

The 1840 tithe map with a detail below. Old Cottage and The Old Thatched Cottage are shown as a single rectangle owned together with the surviving detached row of three red-brick cottages to the west by local farmer William Gage. Gage owned several other cottages in the parish, most of which were occupied by agricultural labourers. The land to the south was a pasture of 1.5 acres called Swan Meadow that belonged to Bartholomew Hogger of Rushbrooks in The Street 150 m to the east.

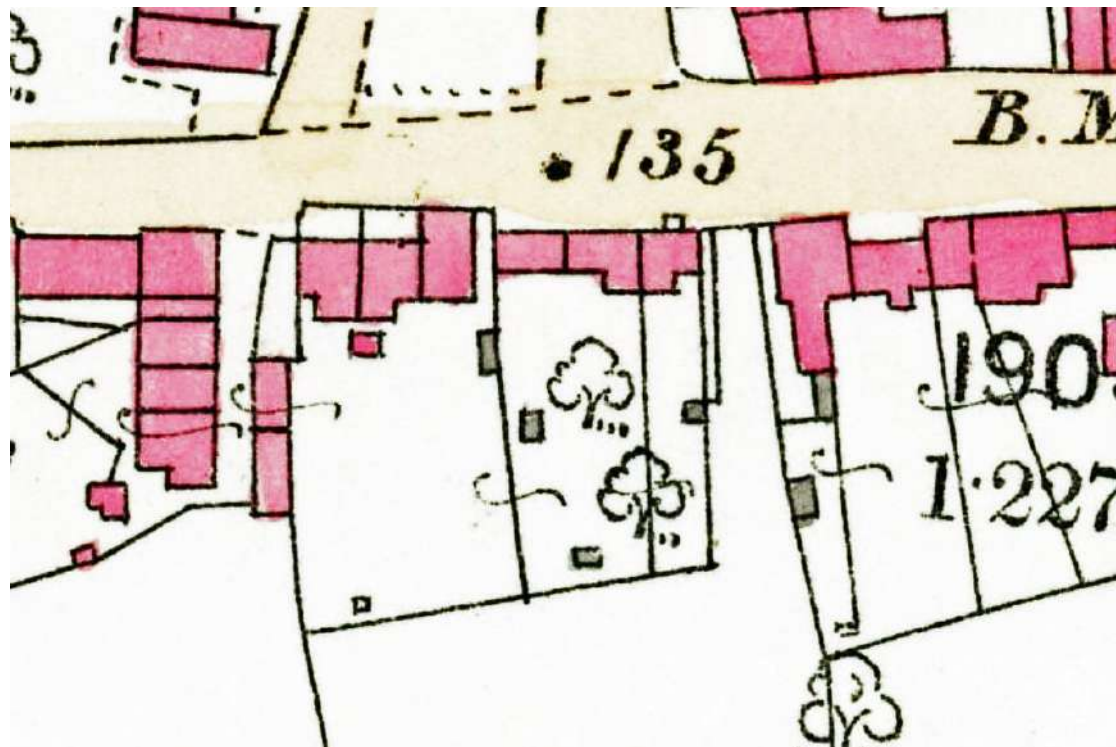
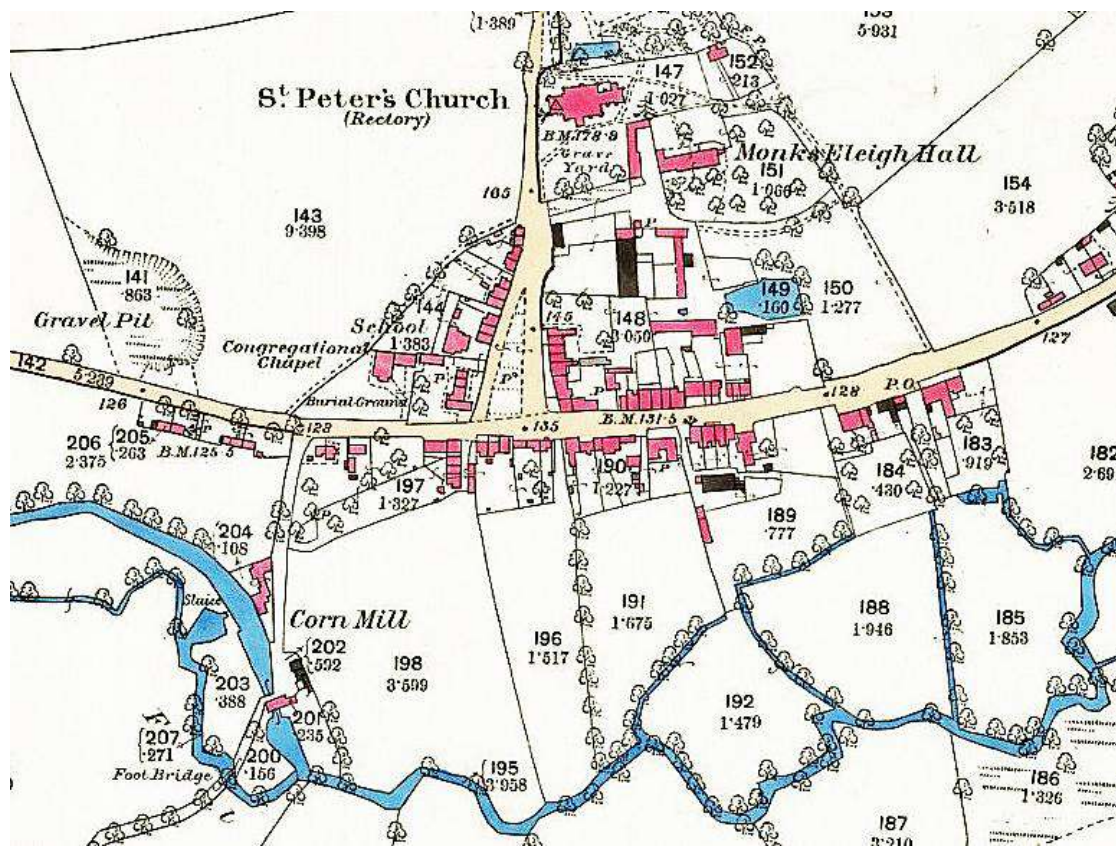
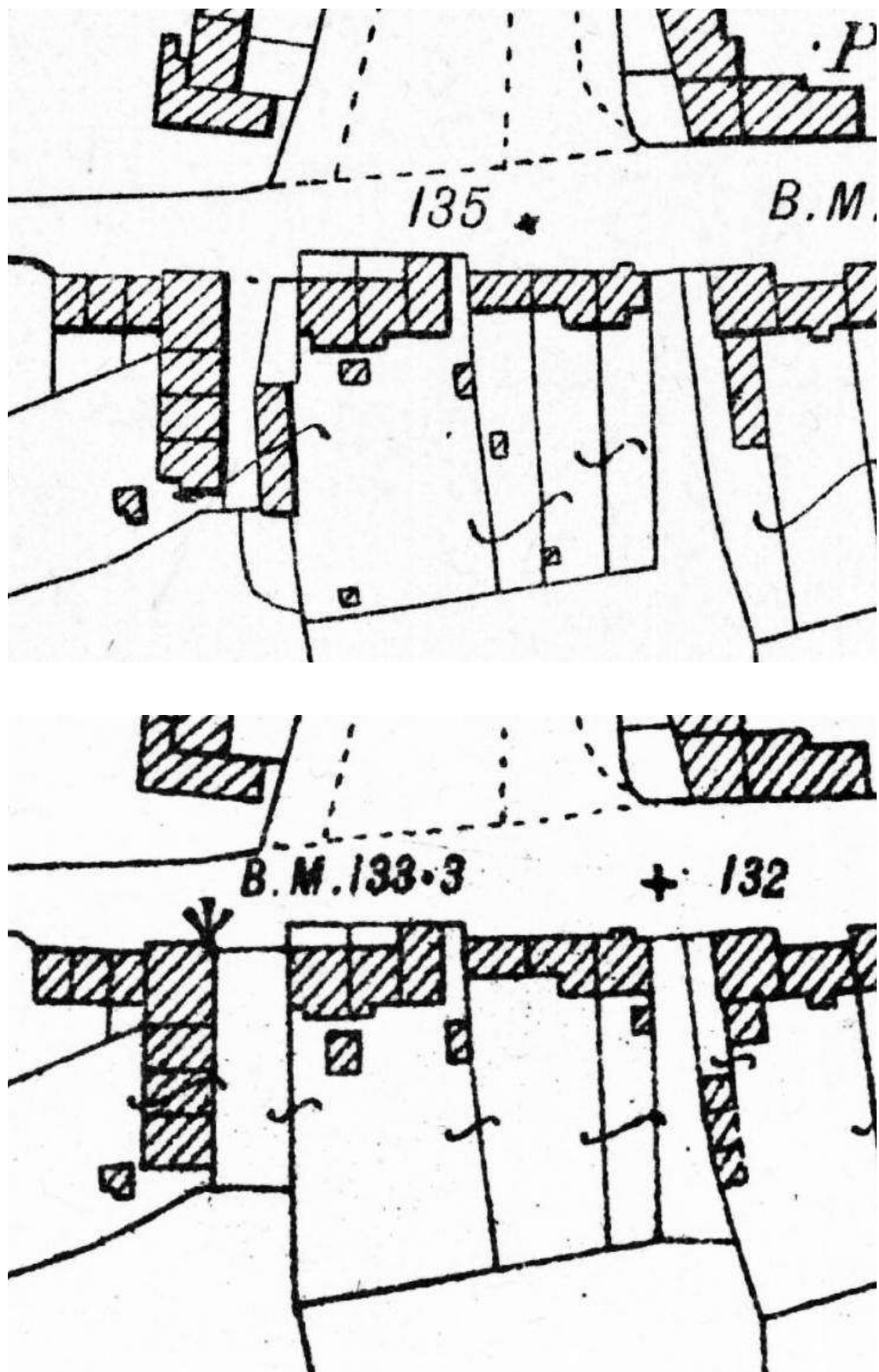


Figure 5. The First Edition 25 inch Ordnance Survey of 1885. This highly accurate map shows the small lean-to wash-house behind the eastern cottage adjoining a similar addition to Old Cottage. It may well have been shared by both tenants, just as they shared a single garden with no formal division. The unusual single-storied projecting shop with its classical pediment had been added to the neighbouring cottage on the left since 1840.



Figures 6 and 7
The 25 inch Ordnance Surveys of 1902 and 1924 showing little change since 1885.



Figure 8

A photograph of the early-20th century in the possession of the current owners (top) and another of 1960 showing the property much as it remains today, with the unusual pedimented shop on the right. The end of a demolished brick boundary wall projecting onto the pavement is visible behind the shop but has since been demolished.



Figure 9

An early-20th century image in the owners' possession showing the western end of the back wall with the neighbouring brick cottage in the rear. The 19th century casement window alongside the door has since been replaced by a 'picture' window of the 1970s or 80s, but at this date the pantry adjoining the gable appears to have lacked a window in this elevation. The inserted additional window either replicated the example shown here or incorporated some of its components.

Building Analysis

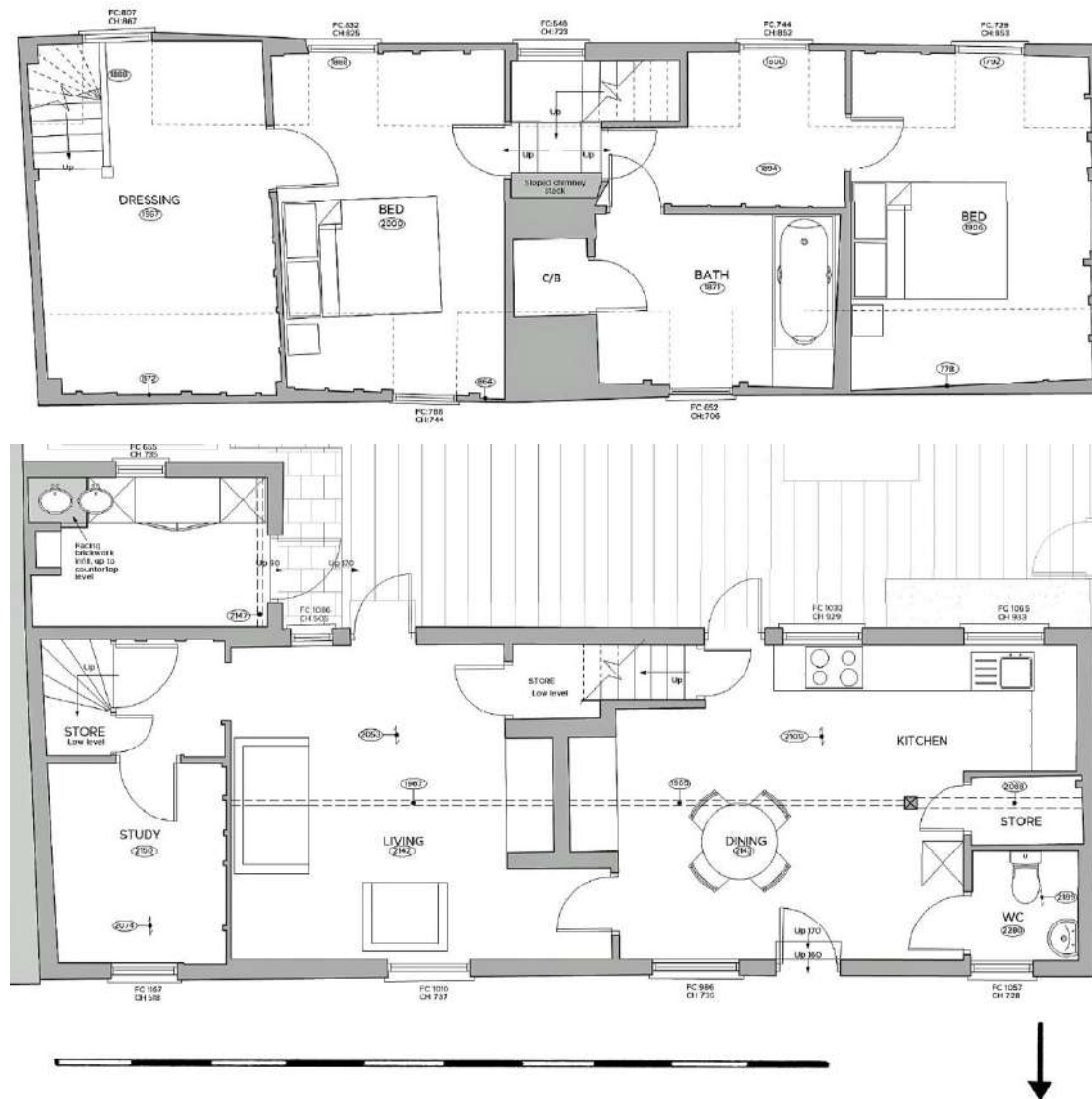


Figure 10
Current ground (bottom) and first-floor plans by Wincer Kievenaar. Scale in metres.

Listing Entry

The Old Thatched Cottage is listed at grade II and shares a single entry in Historic England's schedule with its adjoining neighbour on the east (no. 1284678). Both were first listed in 1958 but the entry was revised in 1987. The neighbouring property is known as Old Cottage, with the subject of this report referred to somewhat ignominiously only as 'Cottage adjoining on the west':

Monks Eleigh, The Street, south side. Old Cottage and Cottage adjoining on the west. (Formerly listed as Old Cottage and Cottage adjoining on the west, owned by Mr Banks.) (Formerly listed as Cottage facing the green and about 30 yards SW of the Swan Inn.) Old Cottage. Cottage. Later C17. Timber framed, the front encased in brick, C19, and painted, plaintile roof. 2 cell lobby entry plan. 1½ storeys. Off centre axial brick stack. 4-pane timber casement to left; canted bay with plastic small paned window to right; above 4-pane casement raking dormer with slate roof. Brick porch, also painted, with boarded door.

Blocked doorway to right of right window. Left hand gable, said to be of thinner scantling than the majority of the frame. Small ground floor light, 4-pane timber casement to upper floor. Added outshut to rear. Fireplace exposed to right, the original is probably recased in later brickwork. Clasped purlin roof. Cottage adjoining to west. **Pair of dwellings. Probably C17 or C18. Timber framed, plastered, thatched roof. 1½ storeys. 4 small casement windows. Pair of boarded doors. 2 gabled 4 pane dormer casements. Axial brick stack. Interior not inspected.**

As the inspector unfortunately failed to gain access this account is not helpful, particularly as the horizontally sliding sash windows of the facade are wrongly described as casements. Old Cottage certainly pre-dates The Old Thatched Cottage but its apparent absence from the 1724 map calls its 'later 17th century' date into question. It would be interesting to establish whether it represents a conversion or a replacement of the agricultural building on the map. Given the historic interest and structural independence of the 'Cottage adjoining to west' it warrants a dedicated entry of its own.



Figure 11

Ground and first-floor plans by Wincer Kievenaar adapted to show the original layout of the building in red and the mid-19th century lean-to extension in green. The structure lacked an eastern gable and simply abutted the formerly external gable of the neighbouring cottage. The exact configuration of the missing internal partition of the western cottage is conjectural as the two tenements were not identical: the stair of the western cottage appears to have adjoined the back of the central chimney while its counterpart lay in the building's south-eastern corner (where it still survives).

The following analysis is intended to be read in conjunction with the captions to illustrations 1-28, which form part of the description.

Proportions, Structure and Date

The 1.5 storey timber-framed and rendered structure extends to 13.75 m in length on an east-west axis by a total of 4.6 m in width (45 ft by 15). The width of a framed building is usually closely related to its social status, with most ranging between 14 and 17 ft and only high quality merchant and farm houses exceeding 19 ft, so The Old Thatched Cottage lies very much at the lower end of the scale. Smaller houses of this kind were often poorly built and are now far less common than their larger counterparts. In this instance the wall and ceiling fabric consists chiefly of re-used oak timber from one or more older structures of the 17th century or before, although the rafters of the clasped-purlin roof were cut for the present building. These rafters vary considerably in scantling, but many are little more than two inches square at the ridge and consist of roughly hewn individual branches retaining much of their bark (illus. 20-21). Several vertical wall studs are similarly slender, such as the example to the right in illustration 22, and are typical of the final years of the vernacular framing tradition before uniformly sawn imported softwood became the norm in the middle decades of the 19th century. The use of nailed rather than pegged diagonal braces is consistent with the same period, as are the crudely splayed and nailed scarf joints in illustration 23 and the absence of jowls (i.e. swollen tops) from the principal posts, but the copious secondhand timber gives a false impression of an older building. A date at the very end of the 18th century or the beginning of the 19th can be assigned with confidence, particularly as this period saw many similar cottages built for agricultural labourers with the profits of the Napoleonic wars (which restricted food imports and raised grain prices to the great benefit of local farmers).

Layout

The building originally formed a pair of almost identical mirror-image tenements sharing a central chimney (figure 11). Each contained a hall that would have operated as a kitchen and general living area along with a small unheated pantry and two bedchambers on the upper storey. The bedchambers were of the same size but the halls were longer than the pantries at 3.5 and 2.5 m respectively (11.5 and 8.25 ft). Excluding the chimney, each cottage was therefore 6 m long (20 ft). Although modest, these proportions created a two-up/two down arrangement that offered more flexibility than many contemporary labourers' tenements with only one room on each floor. The eastern cottage is the best preserved, retaining its original staircase and internal partitions of slender studs as highlighted in red in figure 11 (illus. 11-13). The pantry now contains the modern study as labelled on the existing plans, and was initially connected to the hall by a blocked door just inside the front wall. The entrance to the hall is also blocked internally but its door survives externally approximately 1 m from the pantry door in order to avoid a clash. The front window lay towards the fireplace as might be expected. The pantry partition supports the junction between the ceilings of the two rooms, which are constructed differently. The hall ceiling consists of re-used rafters laid on edge that bear the scars of lath-and-plaster from their former lives and span the entire width of the external walls. They are supported at the centre of the building by a similarly narrow-sectioned pine principal joist in an unusual but undoubtedly original manner. The pantry ceiling, in contrast, consists of shorter joists tenoned to a re-used flat-sectioned axial joist. The ceilings of the western cottage are identical but its pantry partition has been removed and the two axial joists are supported by a recently inserted post (illus. 18). An attempt to clean the axial joist in the former hall has resulted in an abraded surface that appears modern, but the timber matches its counterpart to the east and is clearly original. The western pantry was either larger than that of its neighbour or possibly subdivided in some way as there is no evidence of a stair in the cottage's rear outer corner to reflect that of the eastern cottage (illus.

28). The western stair evidently lay behind the chimney where it remains today, albeit in a rebuilt and enlarged form that explains the narrow new glazed rear door at its foot. The western cottage also appears to have possessed the area in front of the chimney as the remains of the partition between the tenements can still be seen to the east (illus. 14).

The Lean-to Rear Shed

A brick and pantiled shed was added to the back wall of the eastern cottage between its appearances on the 1840 tithe map and the 1885 Ordnance Survey (illus. 3-5). This retains a small original fireplace against its eastern gable, with a chimney now truncated below the roof, and an adjoining copper that is not integral to the fireplace and therefore a slightly later addition. An area of disturbance in the external southern wall adjacent to this copper suggests it once possessed a separate flue. The shed evidently formed a wash house for washing clothes and boiling water, and was probably shared by the two cottages in the same way as the rear garden (which lacked a partition). It has since been converted into a utility room and therefore still performs its original function.

Historic Significance

The Old Thatched Cottage is a largely intact pair of late-18th or early-19th century mirror-image labourer's tenements. Its picturesque facade retains its original symmetry despite the combination of the tenements into a single dwelling, and makes an importance contribution to the setting of Monks Eleigh's famous village green. Although the internal ground-floor partitions have been removed from the western half of the building they remain *in situ* to the east and allow the building's historic layout to be understood. Both fireplaces in the shared central chimney also remain unaltered, as do the majority of the wall framing and the entire roof structure. While some doors and windows were replaced during the 20th century most survive from the 19th, along with an impressive set of wide oak floorboards on the upper storey. The building's diminutive proportions and slender timbers illustrate the nature of urban labourers' tenements at the turn of the 19th century and it is accordingly of considerable historic interest. It is uncommon for pairs of cottages to remain substantially unaltered from this period, which pre-dates the proliferation of Victorian brick terraces by approximately half a century.

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Leigh Alston is a building archaeologist and architectural historian who for 20 years lectured on the understanding and recording of timber-framed structures in the Departments of Archaeology and Continuing Education at Cambridge University. He worked as the in-house building archaeologist for Suffolk County Council's Archaeological Service for 10 years and still fulfils this role for its successor, Suffolk Archaeology CIC. He also undertakes commissions on a freelance basis for the National Trust, private clients and various county archaeological units. Leigh co-founded the Suffolk Historic Buildings Group in 1993, serving as Chairman for 13 years, and has been involved in several television programmes including 'Grand Designs' and David Dimbleby's 'How We Built Britain'. Publications include 'Late Medieval Workshops in East Anglia' in 'The Vernacular Workshop' edited by Paul Barnwell & Malcolm Airs (CBA and English Heritage, 2004) and the National Trust guidebook to Lavenham Guildhall.

Illustrations (pp. 13-26)



Illus. 1. A general view from the village green to the north. The property lies immediately opposite the road to the left and makes a significant contribution to this famously picturesque scene. The red-brick cottages on the right were in the same ownership in 1840 and share the same horizontal sash windows.



Illus. 2. The Old Thatched Cottage was built as two almost mirror-image tenements and retains its original symmetrical facade with twin entrance doors – although the door on the left is blocked. The property shares a single listing entry with its earlier tiled neighbour to the left. The unusual, projecting single-storied 19th century structure on the right is understood to have operated most recently as a tailor's shop.



Illus. 3. The still largely symmetrical rear elevation with the brick and pantiled mid-19th century lean-to addition on the right. Built as a wash-house its original external chimney has been removed. The unusually narrow back door of the western cottage on the left was truncated to accommodate the modern stair behind the chimney, which is longer and therefore less steep than its predecessor. Figure 9 suggests the ground-floor window to the extreme left is a later insertion, but all four dormers are original.



Illus. 4. The interior from its western entrance of the rear lean-to showing its narrow fireplace with a hot water copper to its right. The main chimney has been truncated below the roof and an area of disturbance in the brickwork to the right of the copper suggests it once possessed a separate flue of its own.



Illus. 5. A detail of the fireplace in illustration 4 with the stoke-hole of the brick copper base visible to the right. The copper was presumably a slightly later addition as its brickwork is not integral to that of the main chimney. The position of the copper itself is hidden by the modern work top but it is understood to have been removed.



Illus. 6. The modern living room from the east. This represents the hall/kitchen of the eastern cottage and preserves its original cooking fireplace, which is identical to that of its western counterpart in illustration 15. This cottage appears to have been slightly smaller, with no access to the area alongside the central chimney –apart from the cupboard under the western cottage’s stair to the left.



Illus. 7. The living room from the west showing the original partition of the pantry with a door to the corner stair on the right. The pantry door lay to the left but is now blocked (illus. 12), as is the front door in the northern facade to the extreme left.



Illus. 8. The front wall of the well preserved eastern cottage showing the 3.5 m length of its principal room with the position of the blocked entrance door to the right of the window in illustration 9. The ceiling is original to the structure and unusually consists of re-used timbers with lath nails in their sides which span the walls and are lodged upon rather than tenoned to a central narrow-sectioned axial joist of pine.



Illus. 9. A detail of the good 19th century horizontal sash window in the front wall of the eastern living room, with the famous view of the green beyond. These windows may well be contemporary with the building.



Illus. 10. The door to the original stair in the south-eastern corner of the building with the inserted entrance to the study on the left (originally a pantry). This door is a good 17th century example consisting of moulded planks, but was extended with a plain board on the left when it was re-used in its current position.



Illus. 11. The corner stair of the eastern cottage which appears to be entirely original to the building, with the re-used plank-and-batten door on the right. A similar stair lay behind the central chimney initially, but has since been rebuilt with a less precipitous incline.



Illus. 12. The study in the north-eastern corner of the building, lit by another horizontal sash window that fits the original wall framing. This room would have operated as a pantry and general storage area, and was directly linked to the main room by the blocked door to the left of the window. This door was later blocked by a short stud nailed to the original door lintel.



Illus. 13. The ground-floor partition to the west of the former pantry in illustration 12, with its blocked door on the right and the partition adjoining the stair lobby in illustrations 10-11 on the left. These are the only original internal walls to survive on the ground floor. The ceiling consists of common joists tenoned to a central axial joist on the left which is in turn supported by a short rail nailed to the studs. The same lintel presumably supports the narrow axial joist of the living room ceiling, which is constructed differently (with its joists resting on rather than tenoned to the axial joist).



Illus. 14. A detail from the west of the nailed notches for the missing original partition studs between the two cottages, with the remains of wattle-and-daub infill above. The partition remains place on the first floor (to the left in illustration 22).



Illus. 15. The original fireplace in the hall/kitchen of the western cottage, matching its counterpart to the east. The unusual ceiling also matches, with re-used joists displaying the scars of lath-and-plaster on their sides. The cupboard-like projection on the right conceals the modern stair which occupies the same position as its predecessor but projects further into the room - hence the narrow width of the modern back door.



Illus. 16. The modern kitchen in the western cottage, with the original entrance door on the right. The vertical post marks the position of the missing partition between the hall and pantry – and the two ceiling structures. The present pantry and WC partitions in the rear are modern insertions of brick or block-work and plasterboard.



Illus. 17. The front wall of the western cottage showing its original entrance and window positions. The site of the missing western wall is indicated by the post on the left



Illus. 18. A detail from the rear of the modern post which supports the two axial ceiling joists in the western cottage. The same task was originally performed by a studwork partition matching that in illustration 13, the notches of which are visible in the common joist immediately above. The common joists are all re-used, retaining nails, mortices and notches from their former lives, but those to the left are tenoned to a substantial axial joist while those on the right span the building and are supported by a narrow length of pine in the centre. The pine has been abraded and cleaned to the west of the chimney, producing a modern appearance, but preserves its original surface on the east.



Illus. 19. The eastern internal gable of the structure on its upper storey. The timber-framed walls were simply built against the earlier cottage with no separate gable of their own. The projecting, weathered ends of the neighbouring building's roof-plates are clearly visible to left and right, having form an external wall prior to the addition of The Old Thatched Cottage.



Illus. 20. The original clasped-purlin roof structure survives intact (as seen from the easternmost bedroom in illustration 19). In contrast to the external walls there is no evidence of re-used timber, but many of the rafters are unusually slender and new softwood rafters have been inserted alongside.



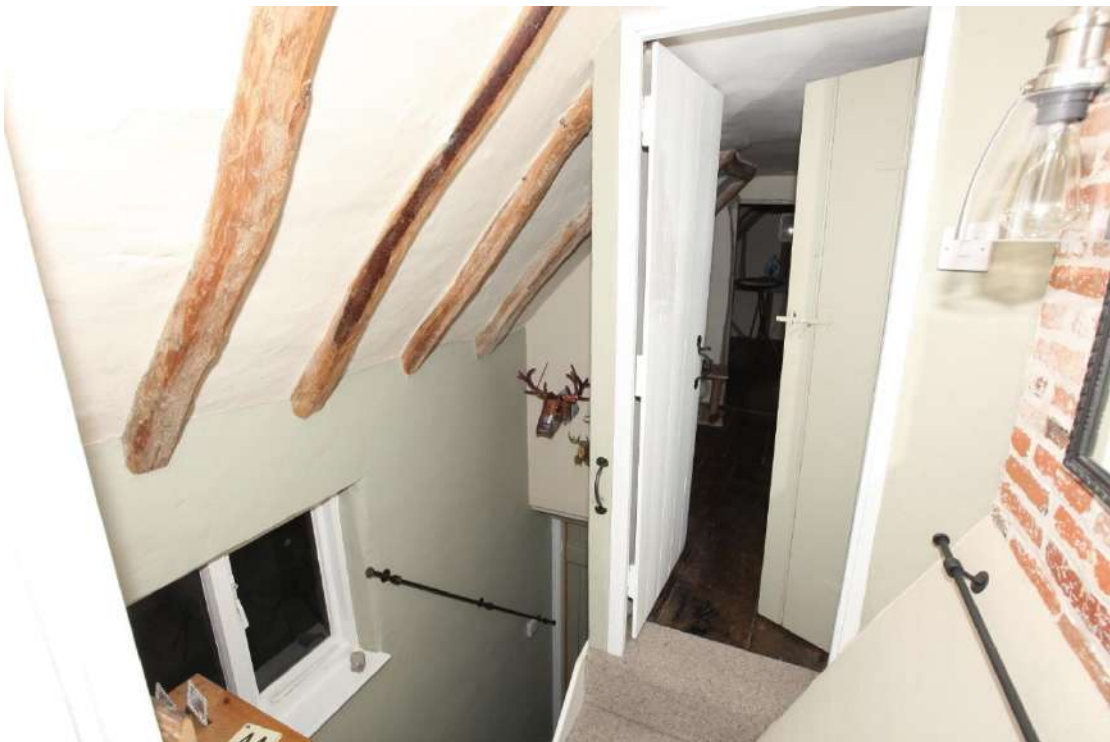
Illus. 21. A detail of the roof showing the plasterboard-clad eastern gable on the right. The size of the original rafters varies considerably, with some like those on the left no more than 2 inches square at the apex, but all are neatly pegged where they overlap.



Illus. 22. The front (northern) wall of the bedroom above the living room in the eastern cottage with the original partition against the chimney and western cottage to the left. The rafters consist of slender branches with waney edges that retain much of their bark. The wall timbers, in contrast, are largely re-used from older structures and are more substantial, although some studs such as the thin example to the right are similar to the rafters (and are not re-used). The timbers of the six dormer windows all appear to be contemporary with the building.



Illus. 23. A detail of the wall framing in illustration 20 showing a crude, diagonally splayed scarf joint with a re-used section of roof-plate on the left containing a dovetail joint for a tie-beam that is not matched in the opposite plate to the rear. The straight, diagonal primary braces interrupt the vertical studs and are nailed rather than pegged to the frame. These features all indicate a date towards the end of the framing tradition.



Illus. 24. The stair of the western cottage to the rear of the central chimney. This is a recent reconstruction but must occupy the position of the original stair as the ceiling joists and floorboards elsewhere contain no evidence of another trap.



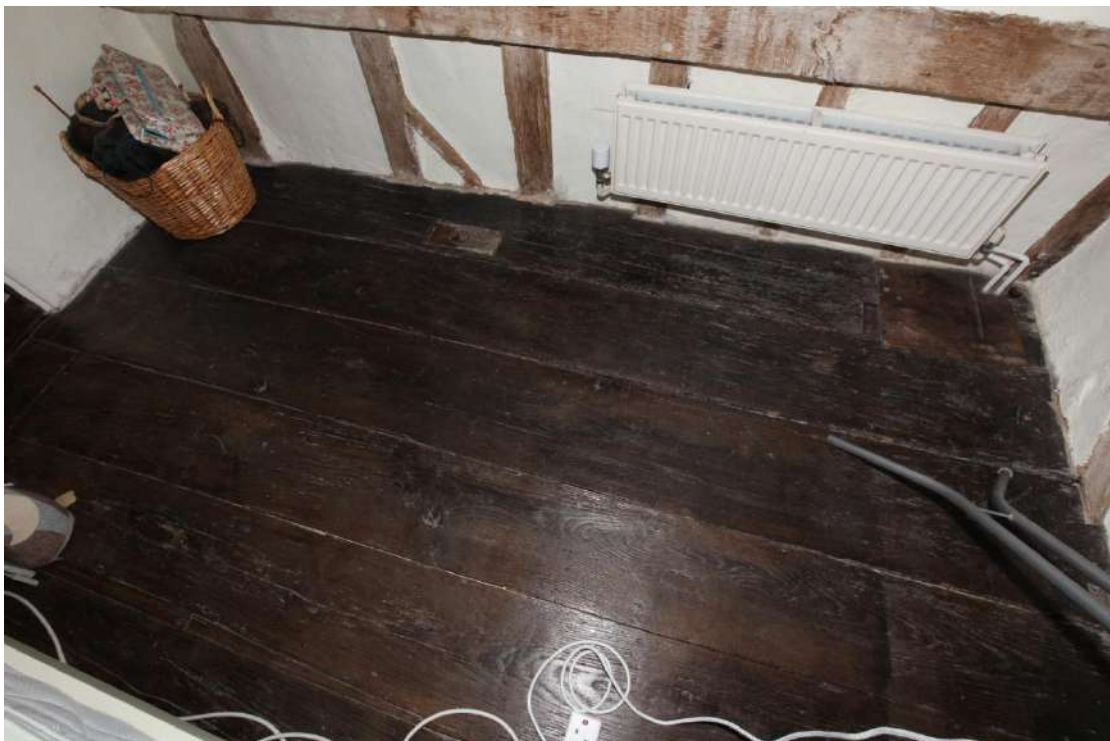
Illus. 25. The bedroom above the western hall/kitchen looking east towards the chimney and the partition enclosing the modern stair. The wall to the left is a modern insertion consisting of unpainted studs intended to replicate the originals and now forming the southern wall of a bathroom.



Illus. 26. The original partition of the eastern cottage, as seen from the east, showing its exposed studwork and the original connecting doorway to the western bedroom of the same cottage. The two first-floor partitions did not lie above the pantry walls on the lower storey but were placed centrally to create bedrooms of equal size.



Illus. 27. The intact original studwork of the western gable with the top of a nailed diagonal primary brace visible to the left.



Illus. 28. A detail of the impressive, 12-inch wide oak floorboards in the westernmost bedroom, with the southern wall framing in the rear. Narrower boards were the norm by the latter part of the 18th century and pine had begun to replace oak, so these may have been re-used from an older building like most of the wall timbers. This south-western corner of the property would have contained a stair if the two cottages were perfect mirror images of each other, but there is no evidence of a second stair trap in the exposed boards or ceiling joists anywhere in the building.