

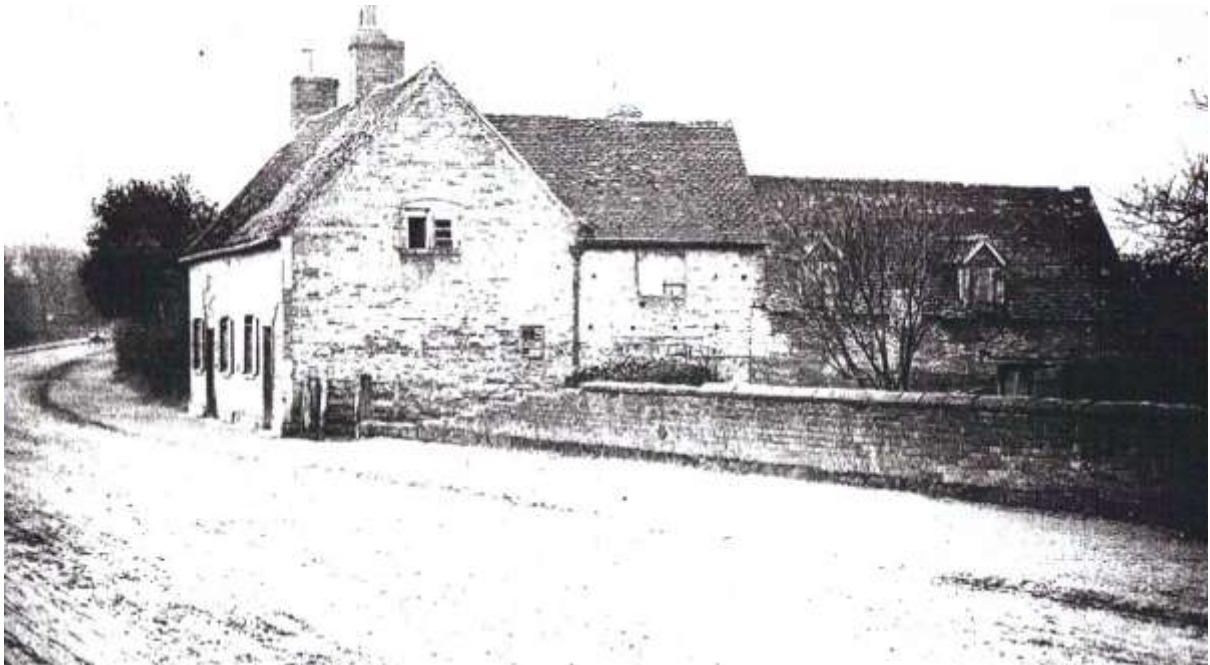
The Cottage at 144 Birmingham Road, Wylde Green

By Alan Howells

Introduction

This cottage is one of a pair of semi-detached small cottages that have fronted onto the main Birmingham Road in Sutton Coldfield for as long as anyone can remember. They are situated at the edge of the pavement on the west side of the road at the top of Jockey Hill.

It was known that the cottages were of considerable age, and this was confirmed by an old photograph, one of a series taken about 1892 in order to record old cottages and houses in the Wylde Green area at that time. The photograph was taken by Sir Benjamin Stone, who, in 1886, was the first Mayor of Sutton Coldfield.



Cottages nos. 144 and 146 Birmingham Road, c.1892

Investigation revealed that the buildings were not listed and had no statutory protection in spite of their age. When the cottage at number 144 was put up for sale early in 2005, the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group was concerned that this would result in major alterations or even demolition. So it was decided to carry out some research to determine the building's history and, if possible, its age.

Maps

A search of the local history archives in Sutton Library did not reveal any significant data on the cottage. However, study of old maps of the area showed that the cottages were marked on Greenwood's 1821 map of Warwickshire. The 1789 Yates map of Warwickshire at the same scale (1" : 1 mile) did not show the cottages, but this may be because the buildings were of minor importance. Later maps of 1839 and 1856 show the cottages, but the first accurate

large-scale map showing the layout of the cottages and land is the 25" Ordnance Survey of 1887.

The Cottage Buildings

With the old 1892 photograph for comparison, a visual inspection was carried out while the cottage was on the market on a cold winter's day early in 2005. The photo showed that the front door of the cottage opened onto the pavement; this had been blocked up and a new entrance made at the north side of the building. There were windows in the east and north walls.

At the rear, the first floor appeared to have been used for storage, with ventilation slots in the north wall and crude wooden shutters at the window. The rear barn section had two small dormer windows in the roof, facing north, both shuttered, and a pair of dilapidated doors covering the entrance for the animals. The building appeared to have been used as a byre, with fodder stored via the dormer windows. The base of all the walls was of local sandstone and the face of the brickwork above was spalling. Other photographs of the adjacent cottages on the north side showed a nearby well.

The unheated cottage was entered through the repositioned door and porch into what was originally the one main ground-floor room. There was a brick fireplace and a corner staircase to the first floor room and the upper room at the rear. There was a door and passageway to the rear ground floor room, and a small bathroom had been inserted between the two rooms as part of a twentieth century improvement. Access had been made from this room into the barn to create a larger room. The rear section of the barn had been made into a storage and workshop area. A boarded ceiling had been inserted into the barn with ladder access to the loft, and there was a brick water closet at the end of the barn. The small paddock at the rear had a corrugated iron shelter for horses, and the property was bounded to the west by a substantial bank and ditch. Photographs were taken to record the state of the building at the time.

The cottage was purchased by a builder who proposed to renovate it, and work began in August 2005. The builder allowed access to the cottage during renovation, and the following details were noted which, it is hoped, will help to determine its age.

Cottage Roof

The old roof tiles were removed to reveal a supporting framework made entirely of oak. The large oak purlins were crudely trimmed, with the bark still in situ in places. The rafters and tile laths were coarsely cut or split and many were misshapen. On the interior the roof had been lined with a lath and plaster finish, the oak laths being secured to the rafters with hand-made square iron nails, 18th or 19th century. The hand-made roof tiles had nail or peg holes with integral tile nibs for fitting onto the laths, probably of 19th century make and probably produced locally – no dated or marks were found on the tiles. The tiles had been torched on the underside with a lime mortar (19th century) – the same tiles were replaced using modern treated softwood lath attached to the original rafters. The ends of the purlins are embedded in the gable end walls, and a length has been left exposed internally as a decorative feature.

The roof of the rear wing was similarly treated. The ridge beam has mortice slots along its length, indicating that it had been salvaged from another building – the re-use of this valuable

material in timber-framed buildings over the centuries is quite common.. This beam may have served as a wall-plate in a previous building with mortice slots for vertical wall timbers or rafters, and could be of considerable age.

Cottage First Floor Rooms

The walls of the main room were rendered or plastered, with evidence of many alterations over the years, including partitions and alterations to the rear wing apex. The floorboards were of an old type, very wide (10½ inches) and long, not oak but a softwood, probably elm. The first choice for floorboards in the 16th and 17th centuries would have been oak, but this was superseded in the 18th century by elm and other softwoods. The boards had been laid across the joists.

The rear upper floor room appears to have been used for food storage, since it had ventilation slots in the outer wall. The floor (now replaced with plywood) would have been boards covered in a hard mortar surface to prevent rot and keep items cool. Similar storage rooms were found at nearby New Shipton farmhouse and Wylde Green farmhouse (17th to 19th centuries).

The stairs to these rooms were an original winding staircase to the main upper room, but other stairs were added to give access to the rear upper storage room. The stairs are made up of several string treads and risers of 18th century date. The area underneath the stairs would have been storage, possibly a pantry.

Cottage Ground Floor Rooms

The front door of the main room/kitchen which opened onto the pavement in 1892 had been repositioned in the north wall. On the party wall with 146 there was a brick fireplace and chimney breast, but no sign of a bread oven or other datable feature (some of the upper room bricks and tiles were smoke-blackened). The one window in the east wall overlooking the road was as in the 1892 photo, but the windows on either side of the door were inserted into the north wall in the 20th century. All these windows have been replaced during renovation with wooden-framed double glazed units.

The floor had been resurfaced with a concrete base at an unknown date, and a small bathroom (now removed) had been created at the west end of the room. The 19th century hand pump supplying water for the kitchen is still present outside the north wall, although the cottage has had a piped water supply for over 100 years. The lower part of the walls are of sandstone with brickwork above. The bricks measure 2¾ x 8½ x 4 inches, made of local clay with pebble intrusions, probably of the local red marl of which occurs on the east side of Sutton, where there were brickworks in the 18th century. There are diagonal mould marks on some of the bricks similar to those on the bricks of the miller's cottage at New Hall Mill, which was built in 1711. The brick bond is irregular, and the lime mortar has been repointed with cement. The face of some of the bricks has crumbled away (spalling) and this spalling face had been resurfaced some time ago with a coloured mortar.

It has been suggested that the brick walls replaced an earlier timber-framed structure mounted on the stone base, but no evidence was found to support this theory. The stone east wall has been faced with bricks and covered in a cement render. Another theory is that the cottage served as a tollhouse – Birmingham Road was a turnpike road from 1896 until the 1870s –

but this seems unlikely since it is not easy to observe the oncoming traffic in either direction, an essential requirement for a tollhouse.

Byre/barn building

The building at the rear was originally built as an animal byre, with thick stone walls, probably 18th century. There were two small dormer windows with crude shutters giving access to the loft where fodder would have been stored – these were removed early in the twentieth century when the roof was retiled. During renovation two new, larger dormer windows were inserted, double glazed with wooden frames, in approximately the same position.

The walls are built of double thickness sandstone blocks with rubble infill in the centre. Such walls were quite adequate to support the heavy oak roof without the need for columns. There were vertical ventilation slots in the upper section of the north wall, a sign that the building had housed farm animals. Some of the sandstone blocks had been replaced with brickwork, notably round the doorway, replacing a former lintel, and there were two brick buttresses of early twentieth century date. The gable end facing west had had an inner leaf of modern bricks added. During renovation a new window was inserted in the north wall, and a window in the south wall which overlooked the rear yard of the adjacent cottage is now blocked up.



The north wall of the rear barn, before the new window was inserted.

During renovation the roof tiles were removed and replaced, tiles reclaimed from other old buildings being used where necessary. No date markings were found on any tiles, but some bore the maker's name "Whitlock Collier – Coalville". The tiles had already been refitted ,

probably when the dormer windows were removed, they had been mounted on softwood laths with a cement torching.



Roof of the rear barn during renovation

The ends of the large trenched purlins were embedded in the gable end of the cottage to the east and the barn gable to the west. Across the centre of the building the large oak tie beam rests on the oak wall plates and supports the principal rafters into which the purlins are trenched, with struts to the tie beam, all fastened with oak dowels, wedges and square nails, hand made of iron in the 18th century. During renovation the north purlin was moved down to accommodate the new dormer windows the south side purlin was moved up to make room for a new staircase, and the old oak rafters were replaced with treated softwood.

In an attempt to find out when the oak trees used for the roof timbers had been felled, a section of one of the purlins was sent to a dendrochronology laboratory, but without success as no matching data for the tree rings could be found. “1694” was carved on the inside apex of the rear gable; although there was some doubt as to whether this had been carved at some later date, such a date would seem reasonable for the original construction of the barn

An archway had been constructed in the stone east wall of the barn (the west wall of the cottage) to extend the rear room into the barn, with a step down to the barn floor level. The remainder of the barn at the west end had been used as a storage and workshop area. There was a concrete floor, covering the original floor on which the animals stood, and there was some staining in the concrete, thought to be from the underlying floor. The room extension into the barn has now been refurbished with feature ceiling beams, some being oak timbers reclaimed from elsewhere in the building. The old rear workshop now houses a central

heating boiler and has a staircase in the south-west corner to the new upper floor of the barn, which has been made habitable.

Garden and grounds

The hand pump near the cottage door is similar to the one at the old schoolhouse in Walmley (built 1826, demolished 2005). The driveway alongside the house has a surface of compacted earth, with a gate onto the road, and leads at the other end through another gate to a paddock of about half an acre; it once extended across the paddock to the western boundary of the property. The boundary is formed by a massive bank and ditch with a thick hedge; this feature does not extend beyond the property to the north or south, but it may be the remains of a former course of the road or the boundary of one of the old open fields of Maney. Horses had been kept in the paddock, with an old iron shelter, now demolished, and horseshoes recovered from the site decorate the cottage. Perhaps the horseshoes were made at the nearby Smithy in Maney; in the early twentieth century the tenant of the cottage worked a horse and cart from the premises.

Conclusion

Inspection of the cottage building confirmed the impression given by the archival photograph that this was one of the oldest buildings of its type in Sutton. The basic rural “one up one down” cottage has been modified many times over its long life. It is situated alongside the main road, together with the adjacent semi-detached cottage “Tsavo” and other cottages since demolished, the site being bounded to the west by a linear earthwork. One theory is that the course of the road may have been altered from the line of this earthwork to its present course, leaving a strip of land suitable for housing development between the old and new roads. The building materials used indicate that the present structure dates from about 1700, so the date of 1694 inscribed on the barn roof may be genuine. Confirmation of the date by analysis of the tree-rings of the largest timbers proved to be impossible.



"VESEY COTTAGE" 144 BIRMINGHAM ROAD
Alan Howell's 2006

The cottage has stood for over three centuries, most of the time in an agricultural landscape. To travelers along the road it would have been a welcome landmark – in the 1830s over 24 stagecoaches passed it front door each day. The 1850s saw the development of large Victorian houses built for wealthy manufacturers along Birmingham Road; after the opening in 1862 of Wylde Green station on the London and North Western Railway some less imposing houses were built. In the twentieth century there were periods of more intensive house-building, and the process of redevelopment continues. This has resulted in a road with houses and buildings of different periods and styles giving variety and interest along its length, and among these houses no. 144 stands out, a small but important piece of Sutton's history

Fortunately the cottage has been sympathetically renovated to make it fit for twenty-first century habitation, and thanks to the cooperation of the builders there is now a valuable record of one more small historic building in the local history of the Royal Borough of Sutton Coldfield.

This piece of research has concentrated on the physical features of the building; to get a more complete history, further research needs to be undertaken into the occupancy and use of the cottage throughout its lifetime.

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