



DBRG NEWS

June 2024



White Hart Lodge, Nutfield
(see p. 12)

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From the Editor

Here is your June Newsletter – rather a short one as contributions were sadly lacking. However many thanks to Hazel Morris for writing up the talk and walk from the AGM visit to Nutfield, and to Martin for a report on an interesting talk on medieval carpenters and what we learn about some of our Surrey buildings.

With the summer coming up maybe some of you will be off on your travels. If you are away and see an interesting old building, maybe you could take a photo or two for the Newsletter - if you can find out a little about it, all the better.

Rosemary Hughesdon

Research Topics

Mediaeval Carpenters' Guilds and training

DBRGs sister group to our south, the Wealden Buildings Study Group, recently invited Professor Christopher Dyer to reprise on zoom a talk he gave on mediaeval carpenters' guilds and training to the Vernacular Architecture Group some years ago. Christopher believed this was a much neglected subject, and gave the original lecture in the hope of stimulating research. The actual title was something like "Carpenters in the medieval ages, an important craft in need of a history". Virtually nothing was known for certain at that time although the absence of evidence for dedicated carpenters' guilds had been discussed periodically in conference meal queues.

Christopher started his refreshed talk by saying how disappointed he had been that there were no questions after his original talk, and no one has taken up the baton to study the subject. It remains the case that almost nothing is known about carpenters' training or collective life. In Sussex for example there is not even a record of a carpenter being indentured (apprenticed). I remember the original lecture and being relieved there was no learned paper I had missed in my earlier studies. In fact there were no questions because Christopher had done such a thorough job in searching for evidence without finding any. How could we improve on his professional research? So, here is a brief summary

of what he found and some thoughts on where research may be productive.

First, it is important to know that many of the carpenters were identified by surname, as a trade would commonly form a second name up to the 14th century. That's why English surnames include other building trades like Sawyer, Thatcher, Tyler and Mason. Tax collectors wanted to be sure they had collected from every William in the area.

As a consequence most of Christopher's carpenters were identified through tax records, but he also used court records and wills. For instance, in the Wiltshire Poll Tax of 1379 there were 41 carpenters, 63 Weavers and 68 Taylors. Coventry in 1522 also had more weavers than the 18 carpenters. Winchester on the other hand had 52 carpenters and 29 masons, perhaps a reflection on the bishop's extensive estate and the strong timber framed tradition in the area. The carpenters were hired for individual jobs and not tied to their landlord.

One interesting source was the late 13th century conscription records to build royal Welsh castles. Each county typically provided 20 carpenters, but Oxford supplied 47. Such mass gatherings would have given opportunities for ideas and techniques to be shared. In the later period I have heard it suggested that the rebuilding of London after The Great Fire of 1666 drew carpenters from all over the Home Counties and could have been a melting pot of ideas.

Christopher estimated that at any one time in the medieval period there were four to five thousand working carpenters.

Where Christopher had been able to map carpenters homes in Gloucestershire (1327) they were more common in the wooded areas than pastoral areas. This supports the idea that trees were converted to timber and framed into buildings close to the timber source. By the late 14th century there was some clustering in villages. One such cluster was near Singleton and Hangleton (Sussex), which the audience suggested could be linked to the demand from the Arundel estate.

Christopher suggested four classes of carpenter, defined by the distance between their home and where they were employed (in brackets is the number identified over the period 1200-1540):

- Celebrity Carpenters (15) would travel more than 50 miles;
- Contractor Carpenters (32) would travel typically 20 miles;
- Heroic Artisan Carpenters (60) would travel up to 10 miles;

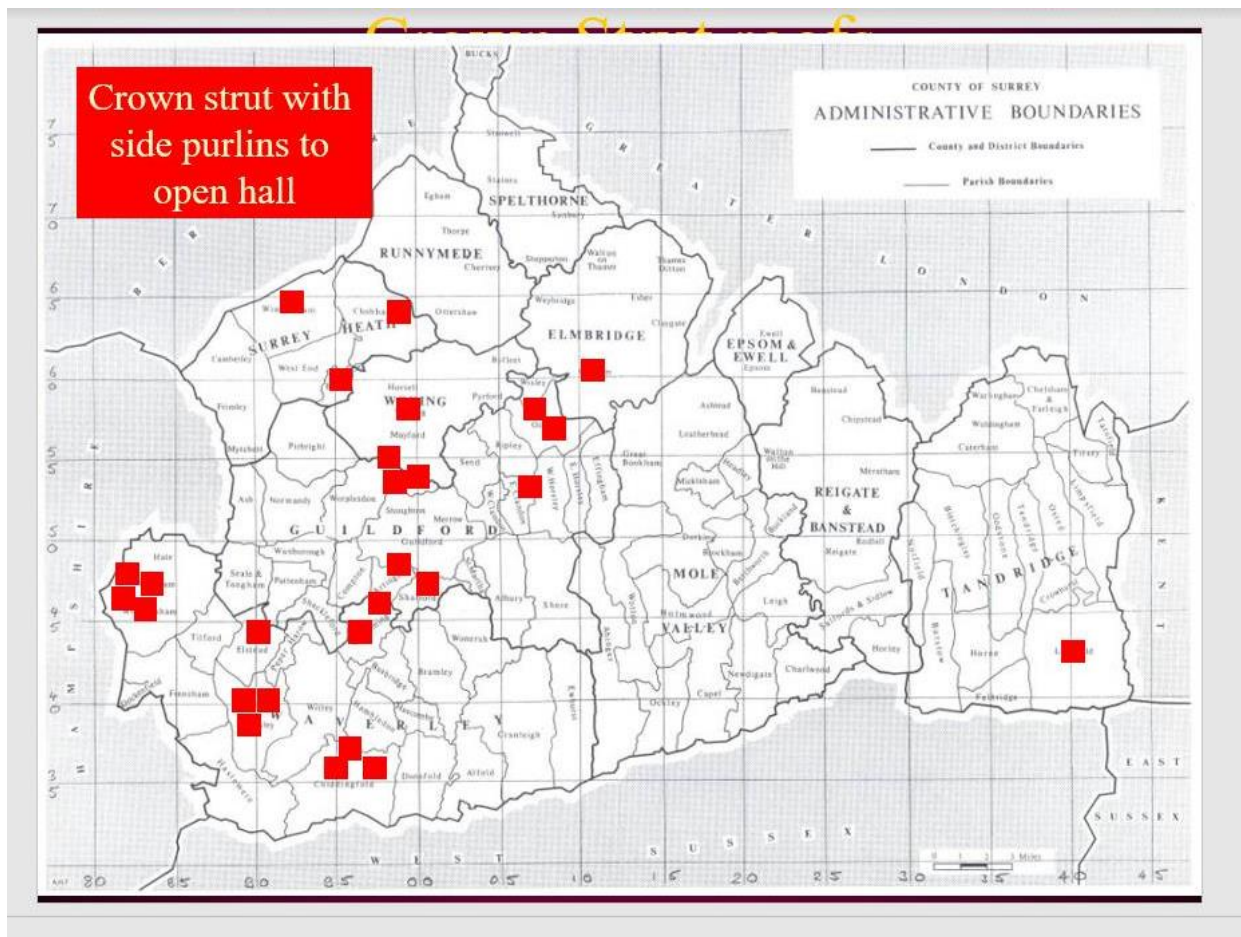
Artisan Carpenters (51) would only work locally.



Place Farm, Bletchingley – once the gate house to a Palace. The roof has one of the earliest dated king posts in the country (1547)

In Surrey we occasionally identify a building as being out-of-the-ordinary to an extent that it must be the work of a Celebrity Carpenter. Gate House Farm in Newchapel with its unusual roof is one example (Jan 2024 NEWS), another is the exceptionally early king post roof of 1547 at Place Farm, Bletchingley (Oct 2009 NEWS). The Guest House in Lingfield has king strut roof which is way outside its home

territory (see map below). Perhaps this ecclesiastical building was built by a carpenter from Winchester.



Map showing crown strut with side purlins to open hall.

At the opposite end of the scale, surely two buildings with roof wind braces rising from butt purlins must be a single Artisan Carpenter who didn't understand the basics of construction (illustrated is one from Warlingham, there is a second in Bletchingley, 6 miles away).



A rising wind brace in a barn at Warlingham

The Surrey Dendrochronology Project showed how slowly new roof types were adopted with the side purlin becoming dominant in the west of the county by 1460 but only reaching the Kent boundary by 1540 (*The Development of Timber Framing in Surrey's Old Buildings* 2022,

Rod Wild et al. p54 and 56 respectively). That approximates to just half a mile per year. An Artisan Carpenter could only base a new building on one he knew.

One area of study that has not been systematically studied is the system of assembly marks used by carpenters. They have been habitually recorded by DBRG by rubbing them. These are typically on the 'upper face' of the frame, but may also be on the sides of timbers (as is common with floor joists) or actually within the joint. We now realise that each frame has unique tag marks on the numbers to enable



timbers for that frame to be sorted quickly from the others. This means a four bay building, with at least nine frames, would have as many tag marks. Each carpenters preferred tag marks probably remained

relatively static for the working life of the carpenter, but there would be incrementally change over time as tools changed.



Carpenter's assembly number III with both crow's foot and crescent tags in Nutfield.

So, a final thought. We may not be able to identify named carpenters responsible for a Surrey building, but now Christopher has shown individuals did not travel far we may be able to identify the work of a particular individual by studying finer details such as the numbering system use for carpenter's assembly marks.

Martin Higgins

Visits

Report of the walk and talk at Limpsfield village prior to the AGM

Limpsfield is a most attractive village, with seven medieval hall houses along the High Street and what is probably the oldest house in Surrey, Old Court Cottage, at the north of the village. So it was with happy anticipation that we gathered prior to the AGM to enjoy a walk and talk about the buildings in the village led by Chris Reynolds, Historic Buildings Officer with Surrey County Council.

Unusually for villages in this area, Limpsfield is orientated north to south, rather than east to west along the A25. A turnpike was later created through the village between Crockham Hill and Titsey. Chris told us a bit about the history of the village; the earliest standing buildings are St Peter's Church, where the tower and west wall date from c1180, and Old Court Cottage, an aisled hall house, which has been dated based on its timber construction, including ornamental capitals in the hall, to c1180/1200. The profusion of later medieval hall houses in the High Street has been attributed to increased prosperity due to the abandonment of demesne farming following the Black Death. These buildings are set back from the High Street, whereas the later 17th and 18th century cottages are built close to the road, giving the village its enclosed appearance. The road network through Limpsfield changed during the 18th century, leaving Old Court Cottage at right angles to the new road. Although there was further development in the 19th century, this tailed off following the arrival of the railway to Oxted in 1884.

Chris then led the group around the village, which proved to be very enjoyable. We saw how the buildings have been changed over the years. Starting at the north end of the High Street, Chris pointed out the Manor House, which actually only dates from c1775, and was used as a school from 1896-1968. Followed by Vine Cottage, a good quality, early/mid-18th century vernacular building, that represents how the use of materials was changing at this time. The Bull PH was built, probably



mid-17th century, facing a former byway leading to Sandy Lane and Hookwood House to the east of the village that was stopped up by the early 19th century. We noted the ironstone on the High Street elevations of the pub.

Ironstone is found locally, it is a very hard, durable stone that cannot be dressed, but is used as it is taken from the ground. It has often been used in Surrey for pavements and roadways. We saw how the ironstone paving is an important feature in Limpsfield.

The hall houses are not immediately identifiable as such, so we enjoyed trying to decipher their constructional history. Opposite the Bull is Detillens, a much altered four-bay Wealden hall house, probably dating from c 1480. It was originally jettied at either end, but the jetties were cut away, supposedly in 1736, for a new fashionable brick frontage. Then Miles House, a hall house with a dragon beam, indicating that the south end was jettied to both elevations. We were interested to hear that this fine building had been condemned in the 1960's but was saved when the County Council provided a mortgage that allowed a new owner to repair it.

Gallets is also a hall house that dates from c 1500, but it has been disguised by the addition of the projecting gables towards the High



Gallets

Street, and the brick elevations. Tyrells is also a disguised hall house; the north bay is medieval, the middle section has been rebuilt and the south end has a gabled extension towards the street.

At Wickhams Courtyard, we saw that the ironstone endwall had been embellished by galletting, a local practice. Opposite and set back from the road, White Hart Lodge (*illus front page*) is another hall house that is heavily disguised by alterations over the centuries since it was built.

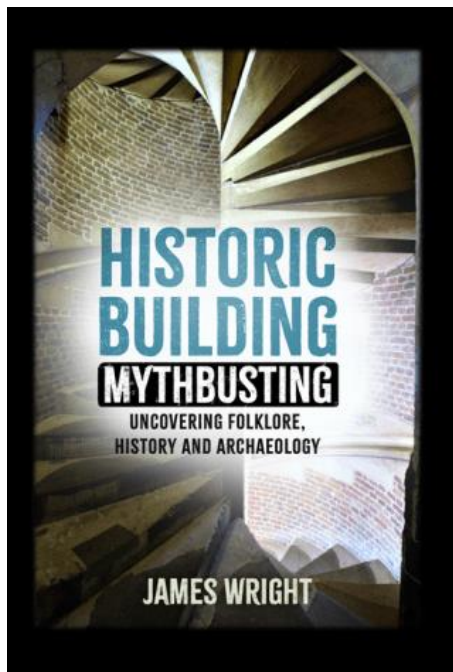


Old Court, Middle Court and Blue Goblin, (*above*) now three cottages, started in the early 15th century as a hall house with a cross wing at each end. Whilst White Hart Cottages hides its medieval origins behind its brick frontage; it has a crown post roof but no smoke blackening, suggesting that it started life as a barn. At the south end of the village we saw Rosewell, another hall house hidden behind its brick and tile-hung elevations. Then Jessamine and Sandridge Cottages which have been dated by documentary evidence to c1660, timber framed behind its ironstone, brick and tile-hung elevations.

And so we wandered back to St Peter's Hall, contemplating the secrets that we had been able to discover about the history of this lovely village from its ancient buildings. I think we all thought just how lucky we are to be in Surrey and to have enjoyed some sunshine.

Hazel Morris

Historic Building Mythbusting – Uncovering Folklore, History and Archaeology by Dr James Wright



The book is a deep dive into commonly believed and repeated stories about historic buildings. Nine themes will be investigated in detail, the myths will be debunked, underlying truths revealed, and there will be a look at how and why the tales developed in the first place.

James Wright said: “Go to any mediaeval building in the land and there will be interesting, exciting and romantic stories presented to the visitor. They are commonly believed and widely repeated – but are they really true?” He goes on to say: “These stories include those of secret passages linking ancient buildings, spiral staircases in castles giving advantage to right-handed defenders, ship timbers used in the construction of buildings on land, blocked doors in churches which are thought to keep the Devil out, and claims to be the oldest pub in the country. Delightful as these tales are, they can be a tad misleading in some cases and absolute myths in others.”

For example, tales of hidden tunnels are often connected to the Reformation and an emerging cultural identity which was suspicious of Catholicism. The spiral staircase myth was invented in 1902 by an art

critic obsessed with spirals, left-handedness, and fencing – it is intricately bound up with the Victorian obsession with militarism. Ship timber yarns can be linked to the ideals of a seafaring nation. Blocked doors in churches are connected to forgotten processions on church feast days. The book even looks at the archaeological evidence which points to the possible identification of what may genuinely be the oldest pub in the land.

Understanding the truths behind the myths is just one part of this book – it will also seek to understand how those tales came to be.

This book links folklore, history, art, architecture, archaeology, sociology, and psychology to delve into the myths surrounding many mysterious features in mediaeval buildings. We can learn so much of value about a society through what it builds. By explaining the development of myths and the underlying truths behind them, a broader and deeper understanding of historic buildings can bring us that little bit closer to their former occupants. Sometimes the realities hiding behind the stories are even more interesting, romantic, and exciting than the myth itself...

[Blurb taken from Triskele Heritage's website, [Historic Building Mythbusting by James Wright - Triskele Heritage \(triskelepublishing.com\)](http://www.triskelepublishing.com)]

DOMESTIC BUILDINGS RESEARCH GROUP (SURREY)

Surrey is rich in the smaller mediaeval timber-framed buildings. The Domestic Building Research Group (Surrey) is a voluntary group that has recorded, analysed and reported on more than 4,000 domestic and farm buildings, mainly in Surrey, over the past fifty years.

The DBRG has a few remaining publications for sale

George Howard, *The Smaller Brick, Stone and Weatherboard Houses of Surrey, 17th to mid 19th century. A statistical analysis*

Peter Gray, *Surrey Medieval Buildings An analysis and inventory*

Joan Harding, *Granaries in Surrey - An Obituary.*

Currently available from Rod Wild, 01483 232767

and

Marion Herridge & Joan Holman, *An Index of Surrey Probate Inventories.*

Available from Martin Higgins, 01737 842625)

For an index of recorded buildings, glossary and membership forms,
visit www.dbrg.org.uk

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I would welcome items for the next Newsletter
to reach me by 20th September, please

If it is possible, it is always very helpful if contributions could
be sent by e-mail, as an attachment, to
rosemary.hughesdon@virginmedia.com

Illustrations as separate jpegs please – you can always indicate in the
text approximately where they should go.