

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - July 2023

Local History Visit - Chiltern Open Air Museum

In July, Wargrave Local History Society members make a visit to a place of local history interest, and this year this was to the Chiltern Open Air Museum, near Chalfont St Giles. The museum was founded in 1976, when it was realised that a number of buildings across the Chilterns area were at risk of being demolished, and the way of life they illustrated would be lost. A 45 acre site set in rural Buckinghamshire was obtained, and it first opened to visitors in 1981. To date, 37 buildings have been carefully dismantled, from their original locations, each part being numbered, so that when brought to the museum they can be re-assembled like a large 3D jigsaw puzzle (the iron age hut has been recreated using the archaeological evidence of a Bedfordshire example).

The first building that our guide took us to see was the Astleham Manor Cottage. It began, probably in the 15th century, as a hall house - which was a single large room with a fire in the middle, at Littleton, a village near Staines. In the 17th century it had an upper floor and an extension added, and the whole house was moved in 1913, to make way for a reservoir being built where it stood. When gravel extraction took place in the early 1980s, it was moved again to the museum. The gardens surrounding it are laid out in the style of Gertrude Jekyll.



As might be expected, there are several large barns on the site, those from Northolt, in Middlesex and Arborfield, for example, dating from the 16th century. The latter came from Carters Hill Farm, and has a cruck frame, where the roof is supported by pairs of curved pieces of oak that lean against each other in the shape of a letter A. This particular barn has the doorway towards one end of the side, rather than half way along, which suggests that it was originally used to keep animals in, rather than for storing grain or other crops. The roof is constructed of thatch, whilst the side and end walls are made by having thinner pieces of oak woven across smaller vertical pieces of

wood, which enabled the air to flow through the barn. This example had been condemned in 1977 as unsuitable for its original uses, and so was rescued and re-erected at the museum.

Not all the buildings on the museum site are ancient, but all are part of our history. An example of that is the Pre-fab house, which once stood in Amersham. At the end of World War 2, there was an urgent need for housing - much having been destroyed during that time. These houses were pre-fabricated (hence the name) in factories away from the building site. There were several designs, but the basic structure was made of asbestos concrete (quite safe if treated appropriately), which would neither burn nor rust.



The various plumbing services were arranged to be in a central core part of the building, to make assembly easier and quicker., the kitchen, as seen here on the right, backing on to the bathroom. They were intended to last for about 10 years - this one was built in 1947, and the family who moved there in 1948 were still living there 40 years later! The garage on the left had originally stood in Western Avenue, in Henley.

Opposite to the pre-fab stand two Nissen huts. Our guide, Paula, (on the far left) is explaining that the one on the left is of the style built for use during World War 1, whereas the one on the right dates from World War 2. The basic design was created by Major Peter Nissen (after whom they are named), as an easily transported and erected building for the army to use, and they could be packed onto a lorry, driven to where needed, and then put together in 4 hours by a team of 6 men. The earlier version had a wooden lining under the corrugated iron sheets - but often the wood was used by the soldiers to burn in the hut heater! The right-hand hut houses a briefing room, used to tell RAF crews about their mission.



The museum has created gardens around each of the buildings as they might have appeared when they were occupied. The pre-fab, for example, has the neat lawn edged with flower beds typical of the 1950s, and alongside is a period style allotment. In some cases, these gardens have been created in the way gardeners of old might have done - with seeds or cuttings from other gardens - and a mix of flowers and fruit and vegetables.

The wheelbarrow of flowers on the left is a colourful feature found in the garden around the Legrave Cottages.



Leagrave is near Luton, and Paula showed the group the way in which strands of straw were woven into plaits for the hat making industry in that town. It would take about 22 yards of plait to make a straw boater, which might take a week to weave. Such work was done by women at home, with children encouraged to become proficient in the task by the age of 8. This particular pair of cottages began life as a wooden framed barn, but in the 1770s a brick wall was added to divide it into two cottages. The left-hand half of the building is clad with wooden boards, whilst there is brick and plaster work under the thatch of the right-hand cottage, restored to its 1920s condition, including the kitchen range seen above.



Next door to the Leagrave cottages is a chapel that had stood in the Oxfordshire village of Henton. There was no church close by, so the local people wanted somewhere more convenient for worship, so in 1886 they bought a 'tin tabernacle' from the firm of Boulton and Paul, in Norwich. This was transported by train to the village as a 'kit of parts' to make a wooden frame, covered with corrugated iron sheets on the outside, and wood panels inside. It fell out of use in the early 1970s, and was moved to the museum in the 1990s.



Behind the chapel (just visible on the right of the picture, with the Nissen huts in the middle distance), is another barn. The museum uses traditional methods to care for its site, and the meadow was being cut using a scythe during our visit.



Across the village green from there stands Croft Cottage, from Haddenham in Oxfordshire. This dates from the 1840s. There are limestone blocks at the base, known colloquially as grumplings, on which were put layers of a local material called wychert, made by mixing chalk, clay, straw and water. Each layer had to harden before the next could be added. Inside the house, the kitchen and one of the bedrooms are set out as they were in Victorian times, another bedroom as it was in the Edwardian era, whilst the third is in 1970s style - with typical wallpaper of that time. Outside is a privy - there being no toilets inside such cottages when they were originally built.

Down in the valley behind Croft Cottage stands a re-creation of an iron age house. This uses evidence from various sites in the Chilterns area. There are 12 oak posts with the walls infilled with wattle and daub, and the roof of made of thatch. The structure has a single doorway, but no windows, the lime wash on the walls helping to make the interior feel lighter. Inside, there a central area for a fire, over which could be hung either cooking vessels or pieces of meat to be cured. A clay lined pit, fitted with a wooden cover, was where foods like milk might be stored, as being set into the ground it was cooler than being above ground.



One structure that at the museum still serves its original purpose - the public toilets that used to stand at the tram terminus in Caversham. This was built in 1906 using over 400 cast iron panels with perforated tops to provide for ventilation. Earlier, such structures had only made provision for men, but this one also had facilities for ladies.

As is traditional for a society summer visit, our afternoon included a delicious cream tea, served in one of the barns, the good weather enabling some people to enjoy theirs at tables on the village green.

There are many other buildings on the museum site, from wooden granaries to a blacksmith's

forge, a village hall, and several of the group feel that a return visit will be needed to explore further, and details about the museum opening times can be found at www.coam.org.uk.

For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk
