

The Great Barn at Wanborough

Rod Wild had no difficulty in showing us why he regards this as one of the finest surviving medieval timber-framed buildings in Surrey. His reasons were very convincing: - it is all of a piece, built on a grand scale, entirely timber-framed, largely unaltered, with massive timbers, all of which can easily be seen from ground level.

This last point was very striking. Many of our visits to timber-framed buildings are to old houses, which by their nature will have been occupied, fitted and furnished, and often substantially altered, over many years. Since this process will have occurred throughout the whole building, including at upper floor levels and the roof space, inevitably it will have obscured or even obliterated many integral timbers. In the Great Barn, however, there is no such problem. Here the visitor can easily see all inner parts of the original structure, because it has never been furnished - and right up to the roof, because it has never had an upper storey. So here there is no need to go through trap doors, remove coverings, climb ladders, or crawl through a narrow loft space, to see the original timbers.

The huge scale of this building is shown by its dimensions: - 33.55m long; 9.7m wide; and 5.49m high to wall plate. It comprises a seven-bay aisled barn, with massive timbers supporting an enormous tile clad roof. This roof was originally hipped - cf Harmondsworth Barn (1424) - but is now gabled. It surmounts side walls which are part brick and part horizontal boarding - the latter replacing vertical boarding, as we know from grooves on the underside of the wall plate.

A typical barn feature which Rod pointed out is the difference in size of the main doors. Those on one side are much higher than those on the other. There was a practical reason for this - to allow the loaded wagons to enter on the higher side, and then leave empty on the lower one.

We now know from dendrodating that most of the building we see today dates back to **1388**, but includes some re-used material. These re-used timbers include two massive octagonal timber posts, which probably came from a grander building (possibly Waverley Abbey), and for which tree-ring analysis indicates an earlier date range, **c1308-1340**. The absence of any sign of capitals or mortices for arcade braces suggests that their height was reduced when they were installed here. However, we could see no adze or cutting marks to show signs of this.

The Barn also contains five other reused timbers, of massive size, even though it can be seen that they are cut down in all three dimensions. Of particular interest were three notched lap-joints. These rare, archaic joints could not be tree-ring dated, but are of a type identifiable to the period 1150-1250. As such, they must surely be amongst the earliest carpentry timbers in the county, and may even have come from an earlier barn on this site.

There are also some later extensions, when the aisles were widened in places, which tree ring dating shows to have occurred in **1705**.

To complement Rod's explanation of its architecture, local resident Isobel Willis then gave us a helpful summary of the interesting history of the building. As she confirmed, this was never a tithe barn, but was originally built and operated (via lay brothers) by the monks of Waverley Abbey, a Cistercian Order, who owned Wanborough Manor as a Grange from 1130 until the Dissolution in 1536.

Thereafter the building remained in private hands, continuing to be used as a barn, until the 1990s. After a period of uncertainty about its future, it was extensively restored in **1997**, as part of a development scheme for seven new houses in the area. The Barn is now owned by Guildford Borough Council, and managed by a local Committee whose Chairman Eric Barker greatly helped to organise this visit. It is currently open to view on various public open days, and is also used for events such as concerts and weddings.

Isobel then gave us some interesting details of the history of Wanborough, including its origins from the Saxon "Wenberge" (most probably "bump barrow", referring to a bronze age bell barrow which once stood on the Hog's Back before removal for road works), and the more recent history of the **Manor House** (17th c brick house, which we viewed externally), first as the home of Gladstone's private secretary Sir Algernon West and then of Herbert Asquith, and more recently as a SOE training base during World War II.

Richard Woodhouse.