

## Outbuilding at High House Farm, High Common, Wreningham

High House Farm may be familiar to most people in the village as an impressive early to mid-17<sup>th</sup> century brick-built house on the Wymondham Road at the west end of the parish, surrounded by beautiful gardens. What you may be less familiar with is the dilapidated corrugated iron clad structure just to the south. The corrugated Iron hides the crumbling remains of another broadly 17<sup>th</sup> century timber-framed house.

High House Farm lies at what was, until 1777, the entrance to High Common, a large expanse of open common land extending westwards to the parish boundary with Wymondham (where there was another adjoining common) and northwards to the main road at the Lotus Factory and the boarder with the parish of Hethel. High house is one of several historic buildings at this entrance to the common, including High Common Cottage (perhaps early 16<sup>th</sup> century in date) and High Common Farm (perhaps another 17<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse beneath its skin of modern brick), forming a small common-edge hamlet. Additionally, it has been suggested that High House Farm itself may lie within the filled-in remains of a medieval moat.

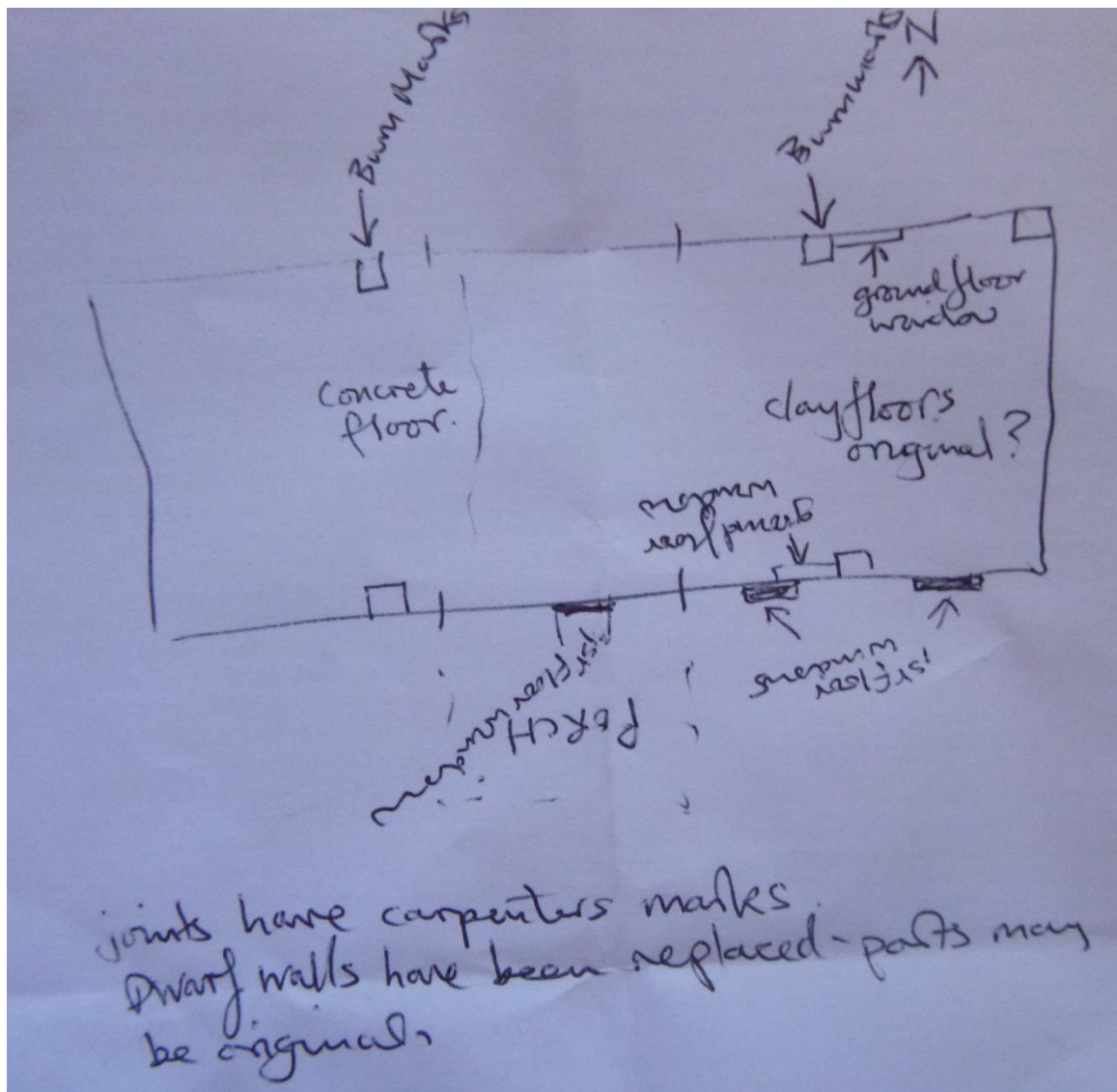


*The interior, facing north taken from the 19<sup>th</sup> century barn porch with High House in the background*

The owner of High House Farm (John McIlwham) allowed myself and members of the WHG access to look at the outbuilding on 11<sup>th</sup> August. It had previously been visited by Stephen Heywood, formerly of the NCC Historic Environment Team in 2016 who had written a short report on it and suggested that it was a house and that there was a possibility that it may have predated the adjacent farmhouse, before it was converted to a barn in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The outbuilding is the remains of a typical South Norfolk 17<sup>th</sup> century (c.1580-1730) three celled timber-framed farmhouse). The frame rests on a masonry dwarf wall, thereby keeping the timber frame above ground level to prevent the rotting you get with earth-fast posts. Looking at the bricks used in the dwarf wall, it appears that most of it has been replaced. Likewise, the sill beams (the horizontal beams forming the base of the timber frame, resting on the dwarf walls) are badly decayed through most of the structure, apart from the south wall.

I drew up an annotated sketch plan of the building (see below) and took some photographs showing what remains of the structure.



Virtually the whole of the south wall survives up to the level of the eaves (the 'Wall Plate'), but the western end has suffered and much of the timber framing there has been replaced and covered on the outside with weatherboarding (unusual in Norfolk). At the wall's eastern end, many panels of the original wattle and daub infilling remain, although it is rapidly decaying. Three first floor windows were identifiable, the eastern one still has its diamond mullions with no evidence of ever containing glass. The other two first floor windows were only identifiable from the joints for the diamond mullion showing on the underside of the wall plate. Likewise, the two ground-floor windows (one on the south wall, one on the north wall) were only identified by the joints on the underside of the 'girding beam' (the horizontal beam that would have supported the first-floor floor beams).

The north wall only survives to just above the upper floor level, meaning it is now half the height of the south wall.

The west gable end has totally gone, replaced by a clay-lump lower wall with corrugated iron above.

The east gable framing is mostly intact, but the upper portion has gone.

The floor of the eastern portion has been covered with cast concrete, but there is evidence that the original clay floor may survive in the western bay.

The building would have had a brick-built, off-centre chimney stack but there is no visible evidence of this. The surviving framing suggests that it would have been located between the western and central bays.

Only five out of the original, perhaps 10 Truss posts survive wholly or in part.

In its later life, perhaps in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the house was converted into a barn by removing its chimney stack, internal walls, first floor and creating two large, two storey opposed entrances to enable carts to enter and to create a through draft, useful when threshing grain. A porch was added on the south side, largely constructed from reused timbers from those elements removed in the conversion. The opening of the south entrance has caused a major structural failure of the wall plate above the south entrance, which was always going to be a weak spot due to the simple scarf joint there. This was initially reinforced by attaching a reused beam (perhaps originally an internal wall beam) as reinforcement, then further reinforced by placing a reused telegraph pole to support the weak scarf joint.

Of further interest are some of the markings on the timbers:

- On the south wall, some carpenters' marks. These are Roman numerals inscribed on the timbers around the joints. The timber frame was initially constructed in the carpenter's yard, then disassembled, transported to the building site, and then reassembled. The carpenters' marks ensure that the timbers are reassembled in the right order, a bit like an old Airfix kit (tab A goes into slot B!). These are especially visible beneath the girding beam adjacent to where the walls studs (the upright timbers forming the wall, the gaps between being filled with wattle and daub) are jointed in.
- There are 'burn marks' on two of the truss posts (the trusses are the transverse frames separating the bays or rooms in this case) made by candles, tapers or rush lights in the north wall and on a displaced timber (probably a wall stud) lying on the concrete floor of the eastern bay. These may be 'apotropaic' marks, a folk-charm guarding against the danger of accidental fire. These are often thought to be where candles or tapers have been placed to provide light internally, which have accidentally burnt the timber. However, people who live in timber houses tend to be very wary of the danger of accidental fire, so this explanation is unlikely. Also, they often occur associated with fireplaces – where additional light is probably least needed!

**Photographs:**



*Ritual burn marks on the northeastern-most surviving truss post*



*The eastern-most first floor window, internal view, showing the diamond mullions and the form of wattle and daub infilling*



*The central first floor window (infilled) with the joints for a ground-floor window visible on the underside of the girding beam. The wall plate is above the first-floor window and the easternmost surviving truss post of the south wall to the left*



*The western gable, completely replaced by a c.19<sup>th</sup> century clay lump wall and 20<sup>th</sup> century corrugated iron.*



*The eastern gable with a girthing beam (the horizontal beam) and one surviving brace (the upper right diagonal beam) and some original wall studs (the smaller, vertical beams)*



*The failed wall beam by the 19<sup>th</sup> century south doorway. The 19<sup>th</sup> century barn porch is to the right, the central cell of the 17<sup>th</sup> century house to the left. The joints on the underside of the wall plate are for the wall studs, and one window mullion is just visible behind the telegraph post. The telegraph post supports the failed scarf joint, which had previously been strengthened by the addition of a reused 17<sup>th</sup> century beam (probably an unneeded girding beam) joined to it by iron framing.*





*The probable remains of clay internal flooring, perhaps original to the house*

Thanks are due to WHG members and the owners, John and Ann McIlwham for allowing us access.

***Steve Hickling, 12<sup>th</sup> August 2022 for the Wreningham History Group***

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