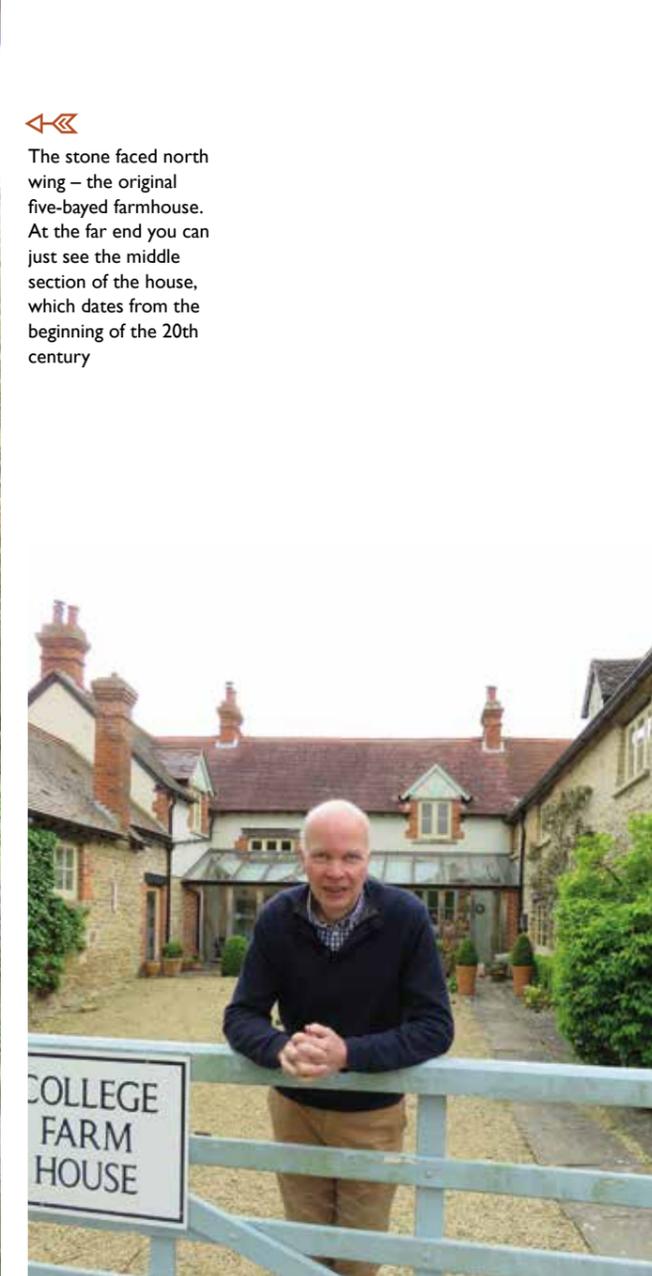


History and mystery: getting to grips with your house's past

by Clive Fewins



The stone faced north wing – the original five-bayed farmhouse. At the far end you can just see the middle section of the house, which dates from the beginning of the 20th century

Mike Greig had every intention of getting to grips with the history of his Grade II listed farmhouse after his retirement when he and his wife Karen bought it in 2006. What he did not know was that, as a parallel project (he left the educational computing company of which he had been finance director in 2010), he would produce a history of the village, which lies in the Vale of the White Horse, Oxfordshire, near Abingdon.

The large loose leaf tome that acts as his script when he gives lectures of his findings sits on his desk in the former kitchen that now serves as his office. Completing the history of College Farmhouse remains an ongoing project.

'Basically I was getting on quite well with the house history when I found myself even more immersed in the whole question of why the house is where it is – at the southern end of a long, linear village of about 50 houses that has changed very little, (as far as I can see) since before the Domesday Book,' said Mike.

Always one to try to answer the 'whys' that the study of both historic houses and landscape history constantly throw up, Mike, who studied physics at Cambridge and did not even study O level history, threw himself enthusiastically into the world of historic title and estate maps, old wills, Bronze Age barrows and ditches, Iron Age field boundaries, Roman villas, Anglo-Saxon charters and several aspects of the world and workings of nearby Abingdon Abbey.

It didn't leave much time for work on the history of the house, particularly because the couple also have a young daughter, who at that time demanded much of their attention.

However, Mike did manage to consult the archives of St John's College Oxford. There he learned that Sir Thomas White, a wealthy London merchant, who in 1554 bought the manor on which College Farm stands, founded St John's College Oxford the following year with the intention of producing men who would be 'educated clergy'.

This, then, was to be the first clue to the history of the house. It didn't provide the answer to why the land to the south, now owned by the Greigs, is referred to as 'The Green'. Nor did it explain the position of the building, the oldest section of which dates to soon after 1600, at the southern end of the village. It faces north and is built end-on to the one linear road on which all the houses in the village lie. Mike has an inkling that all these facts are of significance.

To answer these and other questions, Mike went on several relevant short courses in nearby Oxford and also carried out research at the Museum of English Rural Life at Reading University, the Oxfordshire and Berkshire county archives (the village lay in Berkshire until 1974) The British Library and the National Archives at Kew.

Much of the information he gained was relevant to both the position of the house and to the nature of the land on which it lies. A good example of this is that the land to the east of the road – College Farmhouse lies on the west side – forms a slightly elevated ridge between the River Ock, that flows through the Vale, and the nearby Childrey Brook.

So why did the college choose to build a house that was presumably of some significance to its fortunes on the lower lying side of the village? Or was the college not the builder, in which case, who did build College Farmhouse?

To tackle these as yet unanswered questions Mike at least has the sure knowledge that St Johns owned the land on which the house stands from 1555 until 1970, when it sold the building to the people who sold it to the Greigs. Not many owners of 400 year-old listed properties can be so lucky as to know with certainty that their homes have had only three owners!

Another sure way of learning more about your house is to study the building materials, and here again Mike was lucky. The local conservation officer who carried out an inspection early on when they had a few changes in mind was able to tell them conclusively that the building styles and materials indicate clearly that the northern wing is the oldest, dating from soon after 1600, that the middle section indeed dates from the beginning of the 20th century, and confirms a 1904 datestone and is stylistically correct, and

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Mike at the gate. In the background is a long oak-framed glazed porch which the Greigs added in 2007. This provides a front door, which is useful, as it was previously rather buried away in a corner on the north-west side. It has also provided a means of getting from one wing to the other with ease and in the dry



Lambs tongue stops on these beams in the old wing of the house are consistent with a building date soon after 1600

that the third wing, to the south, is Victorian. It was built as stables, but is now a spare bedroom, playroom and Karen's studio.

That meant that now Mike is able to concentrate more on the most interesting part of the building historically – the original wing, situated to the north – while at the same time he is trying to find out more from St Johns about the many tenant farmers who occupied the house from around 1620 to 1970.

Rewind to 2006 and Mike was still working full-time. This helped the Greigs to make a decision they have never regretted. On moving in they decided to resist the temptation to strip away the layers at a great pace and to concentrate on what really needed doing – making sure the building was weathertight, not about to fail in any dramatic way, and was safe from the electrical and plumbing point of view.

'Our intention from the outset was to make the building fit for modern living in a way that doesn't destroy any of the historic interest,' Mike said.

In 2007 they gained listed building permission to add the lengthy oak-framed porch. This provides a front door, which is useful, as it was previously rather buried away in a corner on the north-west side. It has also provided a means of getting from one wing to the other with ease and in the dry.

In the intervening years they were content to live in the house with much of it as it was. It was the creation of the new kitchen out of three rooms in the southern wing that provided the impetus for Mike to continue his work on the house history.

As an aid to his listed building application he commissioned a study from building historian Jamie Preston*, who knows the building styles of this part of Oxfordshire well.

It has made him think about the old stone wing – the original five-bayed farmhouse – and the clues in there. They include the downstairs main room (now Karen's study) which has a large old stone fireplace and a chamfered beam, and the original kitchen (now Mike's study) which has lambs tongue stops on the beams. These are consistent with a building date soon after 1600.

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The view at the top of the attic stairs. From the outset the Greigs have resisted the temptation to strip away interesting features for fear of destroying much of the character of the wing formed by the original house



A rustic staircase winds its way up to the attic, which has this interesting arrangement. The Greigs have deliberately left it intact during their 11 years at the house



Mike Greig points out some layers of old paint that are clearly visible on the plaster panels that infill the oak-framed construction inside the original farmhouse. Mike intends to investigate this element of the original farmhouse further

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There is something of a mystery over this door, which leads from the middle attic bedroom to the small end room. It seems odd that a good quality six-panelled door has been used in an attic room that was probably occupied by a servant, and house historian Jamie Preston thinks it might have been downgraded for some reason and moved up to the attic from a grander room on the ground floor



The modern kitchen was constructed out of three rooms in the Victorian wing to the south



When the Greigs added the glazed porch in 2007 it gave them the opportunity to reinvigorate and redecorate the sitting room, which now has its original entrance, leading directly from the porch

There are also lambs tongue stops on the chamfered beams in the first floor rooms, again indicating a 17th century date. A rustic staircase winds its way up to the attic, which has two bedrooms and a smaller room and a well-worn old trussed timber roof.

The old doors in the attic probably date from the early 17th century but there is something of a mystery over the door to the smallest room – the one at the south end. Given that the other doors in the attic are of plank and batten type, it seems rather odd that a good quality six-panelled door has been used here, especially as these attic rooms would probably have been servants' quarters.

The likelihood, according to Jamie Preston, is that this door would originally have been positioned in a part of the house where it could be seen, probably on the ground floor.

Throughout the old part of the house there are indications of the oak frame construction beneath the outer covering of stone, with some wattle and daub infill remaining on the inside.

'There is a great deal more to do and who knows where it will all finish up,' Mike said. 'But my hope is that a detailed study of the building will help us to understand how the house functioned over the years, who lived here, and, if possible, how they went about their daily lives.'

'I suspect all this detective work is the reason why I always wanted to live in an old house. However I never imagined back in 2006 that I would get so immersed in the history of the village as well! All that has helped to give me an enormous sense of place and of belonging.'

'We could have handed the entire job over to a historic house research company, but I prefer to do it largely myself, hiring the advice of experts such as Jamie as we go along. I feel that doing the research yourself this way – the detective work and piecing together all the fragments of information you discover – makes the experience of living in an old house that much more enjoyable. An old house like this has a story to tell and I guess I am one of those people who just has to find out as much as possible of its past life.'

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This middle section at the rear of the house dates from the beginning of the 20th century. There is a 1904 datestone



FANCY BECOMING A HOUSE DETECTIVE? HERE ARE A FEW GUIDELINES

- Use your eyes. Nearby physical/landscape factors can be enormously important. A former water mill is the most obvious example.
- Likewise building materials. If there are elaborate stone or brick features, was there a quarry or brickworks nearby? Could the house have been associated with either? Try to ascertain the stages at which the house was built. They are rarely as obvious as they were in the case of Mike Greig's house.
- Deeds can be hard to come by. Mike Greig was extremely lucky in having pertinent documents available nearby at St John's College Oxford. In most cases deeds have been lost or destroyed, but sometimes relevant documents can be found by using your local studies library. This can also be a source of contact details and where you might be able to find old maps and photos

- of the area surrounding your property. You might also find documents such as sale particulars, Hearth Tax records, and Probate inventories. The staff may also be able to direct you towards former owners via census returns. Some may have copies of historic documents but generally the county archives are the principal source of these, including some of those listed above.
- Is there an active local history group or an historic buildings enthusiast nearby? Most villages have one – even if he/she is not a professional. Mike Greig employed the services of a professional building historian. This provided some good leads.
- Use the internet. You might be surprised at what is available in the way of online documents. A good starting point is Heritage Gateway which provides links to records held by county record offices. Other useful websites are Images of England and Pastscapes. The Victoria County History is also good for background if the work

has been recent. The British Library, RIBA Architectural Library and some county archives have online digital collections of maps, photographs and architectural drawings

- Once you get going you'll need to travel. The places you are most likely to visit are local and county record offices and possibly the National Archives at Kew.
- And finally..

There is no right or wrong way to go about being a house detective, but if you take a systematic approach your investigation should go more smoothly.

If at all possible, double check all your facts. Investigating your house history is like researching your family tree: there are many potential pitfalls and blind alleys, but in the end it can be hugely rewarding. Rare is the ancient house that gives away its secrets without a struggle! ☸

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