



The saving of Cruck Hall

by Clive Fewins

Fourteen years after purchasing the run-down Grade II listed former pub and hairdressing salon a few doors away from his home, former motor engineer and physics teacher Terry Randall is preparing to move into the building, which he has revealed in all its glory as a 15th century cruck-framed hall house.

The restoration has been a mammoth task. The ancient frame of the building, parts of which date from about 1450, was almost completely concealed by later alterations when it was bought in 2004 by Terry and his wife Andrea, who live in the same small street in the small town of Wantage, at the foot of the Oxfordshire Ridgeway. The only external clue to the long history of the house was the base of an ancient cruck that showed at the bottom of the north-facing wall. Apart from that a tour of the inside showed only the lower end of a cruck in the present day hall, and upstairs one of the two pairs of remaining cruck blades.



Above and left:

The only external clue to the long history of the house was the base of an ancient cruck that showed at the bottom of the north-facing wall. This can be seen low down on the extreme left of the picture

After the southern part of the original hall house (now the next door building) was reconstructed a third storey was added. All this made researching the history of the building far more difficult. Terry's research has shown that it was all once a single timber-framed medieval building, not least because one of the purlins in the roof runs through both the cruck house and the building to the south



There is one theory that the villa of the Saxon Royal Family was on the site used earlier by the Romans



The kitchen floor today. The large clay tiles came from a local church that was being refurbished. They are very old and some display finger and thumb prints of the makers. The smaller floor tiles are Victorian and came from a 19th century house in the town that was being demolished



The old kitchen floor had been ruined by masonry nails driven through it. When Terry took it up he dug down to the bedrock, a marl with more than a hint of history about it. This was confirmed when he found a Roman coin minted in this country (Colchester) and dated AD290. When Terry and his wife Andrea bought the house there was a shattered old range and side oven in this room. They can just be seen in the photograph

probably one of several residences of the royal house of Wessex and the one in which Alfred was born.

"Some later historians placed the compound in which Alfred was born as on rising ground at the rear of the cruck house, known in the past as High Gardens. The land is now a retail park."

The building's history was confirmed by one of the county's leading specialists in vernacular timber-framed buildings, who examined the house. He concluded it was part of a two-bay hall house supported by two full height cruck frames dating from the mid-15th century.

Terry's later research led him to make a convincing case for the house to be part of the missing Wantage Manor, the home of the Fitzwaryn family, who were local grandees from the time of the Norman Conquest until the 1600s. It also suggested that the house stands very close to the site which is believed by many to be the palace or ancient complex of buildings where King Alfred was born in the town in the year 849.

"Wantage was a Royal 'vill'," said Terry. "Scholars think there was a compound, villa or palace of sorts in the town which was

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One of Terry's first tasks on taking possession of the empty building was to replace the kitchen floor, which necessitated digging up the old. In the course of this work he made a number of interesting finds. He also commissioned some dendrochronology in the house, which produced a date of 1448/9 for some of the cruck blades, plus one of the kitchen wall timbers.

His most fascinating discovery beneath the floor was a Roman coin dated AD 290. This find supports previous archaeological evidence of Roman activity in Wantage.

"There is one theory that the villa of the Saxon Royal Family was on the site used earlier by the Romans," Terry said. "If the controlling Fitzwaryn family occupied the same site, then my theory is that this house is probably the replacement manor house for the one that existed before 1450."

As the date of 1450 produced by the dendrochronology tallied with the list description of the house, which describes it as a 15th century hall house, Terry then set about finding clues to prove this to be correct – or otherwise.

Major clues came from 13 of what Terry believes to be original rafters in the roof. They are all smoke-blackened, a sure sign that the building was originally open to the roof, and when Terry began to strip the interior walls he uncovered evidence of all four crucks.

One thing that puzzles him is the cause of the severe racking which afflicted the building from, he believes, about the end of the 16th century. Racking is when a building becomes unstable and gradually begins to lean sideways. It is usually caused when something dramatic happens. Terry thinks it might have been caused by the removal of some of the original windbraces when the open hall style of the building was changed in the sixteenth century.

He believes the building only stands today because somebody chose to restructure the southern section. Therefore, as you enter the house nowadays you see the internal wattle and daub kitchen wall that Terry has repaired and limewashed, and which provided the dendro dating of 1450. This abuts the section of the original house to the south, now a three-storey modern-looking building.

"The rebuild to the south essentially acts as a prop," Terry said. "Without it the remaining two bays which comprise the cruck hall would have fallen down and all evidence of the original Wantage Manor lost. Undoubtedly this action saved the house, but it meant that the

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The rebuilt cross passage. Terry is fairly certain that one of the replaced screens is back in its original position but the other has been added beneath a later ceiling beam. The elm boards all came from different local sources found by Terry and his architect son, Christian



The first floor landing area cruck. It shows the lean caused by the racking that Terry believes to date from about the end of the sixteenth century

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In the days when the building was a hair salon there were sinks and cutting stations in this room. Before that it was called The Bakehouse because, Terry believes, bread was baked there and beef roasted for local people. It was largely from this room that Terry removed more than 10 skip loads of soil in order to lower the floor – and the height of the rear extension. When Terry rebuilt this room he also built the fireplace and chimney



The dining room inglenook. When Terry started work there was a Victorian fireplace here. He believes the inglenook, which he repaired and restored, dates from about 1600 and served as a replacement for the central fire when this style and its successor, the smoke hood, fell out of use



The new bedroom at the rear. This was the section that needed a steel frame to hold up the new section of roof

other half of the hall house has been drastically altered and now looks like a modern building.

“When the southern part – that is, the next door building – was reconstructed, a third storey was added. All this muddled the waters when it came to researching the history of the building and means that within the last 200–300 years it never looked like a single building.

“However, we know it was once a single building because one of the purlins in the roof runs through both the cruck house and the building to the south.”

Renovations were supervised by the conservation officer, and a rear extension approved by local planners. This involved removing more than 10 skip loads of earth in

order to lower the levels at the rear. This was to conform to the planners’ stipulation that any new roofline should be lower than the original. Most of the material was taken out through the side entry. “This was a massive task,” Terry said. “I filled most of the skips and dug out all the foundations myself.”

The task was made even bigger by Terry’s decision to add an upper floor at the rear comprising one large bedroom. He built this himself. The only professional building help he received throughout the project was assistance from two men who helped erect the steel frame that holds up the roof of the extension.

“I was very lucky because I was helped all the way through by my architect son, who has a lot of experience with historic buildings,” Terry said. “He also helped me source many of the

contents including old floorboards, cupboard doors, a bressumer beam to span the rear fireplace, and an extraordinary wardrobe dating from 1905 that looks as if it has never been used and is now in the south-facing large upstairs rear bedroom.”

Probably the best architectural salvage finds were the hardwood (mainly elm) planks from which Terry constructed the plank and muntin screens that line the hallway. “One of these is probably on the same spot as the original!” Terry said. “It looked from the slots under the tie-beam as though there had been an original screen on the one side. The other I placed beneath a later structural beam.”

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The kitchen now that Terry has finished work on it



Terry with the skeleton of a rat. One of his many finds from when he dug beneath the kitchen floor. The wall behind him separates the surviving part of the original hall house – the section the Randalls own – and the part that is under different ownership and has been reconstructed. The date produced by dendrochronology on one of the horizontal beams here (the beam above the rat) is 1382. Terry's view is that this timber was introduced later, when the building was divided. He is satisfied that the list description is correct and that the main frame of the present house dates from around 1450. The finish on the wall panels is rough – Terry's preference – and covered with a coloured breathable coating



Terry is now planning to write a book, and is discussing his theories with experts at Wantage museum. "I have a provisional title," he said. "I think it may be a collection of essays by several local historians. I am not sure at the moment."

"It has all been a tremendous challenge and has involved a massive amount of hard work. I have always been interested in historic buildings and have worked on every house we have owned since we married in 1972. But this is the first listed one."

"For much of the past 14 years it has taken up a major space in my life. When you consider the thousands of hours I have put in it has been a labour of love rather than a money-making venture. I estimate the current value of the house to be about £450,000. We paid £180,000 for it back in 2004."

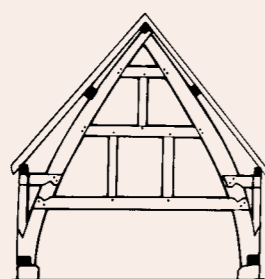
"Really, the project grew out of a desire to save the building as I felt someone less

favourably positioned might not undertake a full restoration. I thought that, if I didn't buy the building, some builder might purchase it and do an unsatisfactory job, leaving the fascinating history of the house undiscovered. My aim was to do a good job and save the building."

"The remaining challenge is somehow to get the opportunity to work on the building next door and try and find out where the rest of the open hall lay and try to corroborate some of my theories. In the meantime we are hoping to move into the cruck hall later this year."



Terry with a tray of finds from when the kitchen floor was geologically excavated. His finds included a Roman coin with the head of the Emperor Carausius on it. This short-lived Emperor is known to have issued coinage in London and Colchester. The tray also contains lesser coins, beads, assorted pottery (some medieval) and animal bones



CRUCK TRUSS:

Cruck framing is a method of timber-framed construction used widely in Wales and across the west of England. Each pair of curved 'cruck blades', often hewn from a single tree truck, rise from near to ground level to meet at the apex of the roof. Each pair of 'cruck blades' is referred to as a 'cruck truss' which provides the structural support for both the walls and the roof.

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