

Upper Wharfedale Heritage Group and The Kilnsey Project: History from Vernacular Buildings

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In 2014 members of Upper Wharfedale Heritage Group (UWHG) began a new project examining the township of Kilnsey in Wharfedale, in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Vernacular buildings, probably one of the least investigated historical resources, form a prominent feature of the built landscape today and a start was made to record an identified 38 standing structures, most of which are barns rather than dwellings. The aims were to find evidence of rebuilding in the 17th century – a building phase seen throughout England – and to look for structural evidence of the older buildings they replaced, such as reused timber or older walling. So far, the buildings reveal a complexity that will only be fully understood when all the surveys are completed and analysed, but some initial examples are given here.

Introduction

Kilnsey, in Craven, is well-known for its impressive over-hanging limestone crag framing a tiny hamlet built around a green. From the mid-12th century until the Dissolution, Kilnsey was an important grange of Fountains Abbey, situated on the eastern edge of the Abbey's extensive sheep-grazing estates in the uplands of Craven (Coppock 2003). UWHG has been involved in surveys and excavations in the township for some years and the richness of the multi-phase landscape is clear. However, the vernacular houses and barns have not received much attention, although experts have dated the Old Hall gatehouse as possibly 14th or even 17th century. The investigation involved measured-survey drawings, at scale 1:100, as a method of collecting and recording the evidence from buildings. Funding for dendrochronology may be sought at a later date. Alongside building surveys, another UWHG team is transcribing Kilnsey documents from Yorkshire archives.

Some Kilnsey buildings

Kilnsey's vernacular buildings can be broadly grouped into three types. Firstly, there are dwelling houses, although one of these is a former lead smelting mill of 18th and 19th-century date, converted to residential use in c. 1910. Secondly, there are small field barns situated in distant meadows, where cows were over-wintered in shippsons (cowhouses) with their hay fodder filling the loft and hay mew. Thirdly, there are larger, dual-purpose barns of five bays in length, built near a farmhouse and which include a cart entry and possible threshing floor as well as shippsons and hay storage.

Dwelling houses include the former monastic farms of North Cote and Chapel House (Whitaker 1812). North Cote housed 'a ewe flock' and 'the Abbots sheep' in 1456 (Walbran 1923) and Thomas Ward had a large house here with six hearths recorded in the Hearth Tax of 1672/3. This building was mostly demolished in the 19th century but maps indicate it had a U-shape arrangement suggesting a plan with a central hall or housebody and a wing at each end. Today only the 17th-century south wing remains (Fig. 1), along with a passage and some thick walls embedded in 19th-century modifications to the north. These features may mark the cross passage site, separating hall and wing.

Kilnsey Old Hall has a different plan and is a puzzling three-storey 17th-century house, which was thoroughly surveyed in 1995 when roofless (Ryder 2004). Interpretation is still far from clear. The doorhead datestone 'CW 1648' records the 17th-century rebuilding by Christopher Wade, although the house retains a medieval plan in its first floor entry over a basement, suggesting a possible rebuilding of the monastic courthouse at Kilnsey. The courthouse, where Fountains Abbey conducted the business of the manorial estates it had inherited in Craven, had walls still standing in 1598 (Whitaker 1812).

Further down the green is Crag Cottage of three linear bays and with a lobby entry beside the chimney stack. The mullioned windows and an arched fireplace are 17th century, but with some evidence that dressed stonework had been cut down and re-used to fit the spaces. The lower parts of two roof trusses were visible upstairs, where small wall posts and a stub tie beam might suggest a 15th-century roof re-used.

Also on the green, and facing east onto the main road up the dale, is the Tenant Arms public house of late 18th-century date with an added mid-19th century hotel block. The southerly end of the frontage, however, exhibits some blocked-up earlier windows, a boulder plinth and a straight joint marking the end of an earlier building. Around the corner, on the south side (Fig. 2), the building is viewed from the green and exhibits a very different facade incorporating a 17th-century house, with a former housebody or hall in the centre and gabled wings at each side. The original 17th-century entry door is now blocked up but once formed a lobby entry beside the fireplace, as at Crag Cottage. Inside, the lobby fireplace no longer remains but part of a large, arched, stone fireplace, now placed in the public toilets in the upper wing, may well be part of it.

Field barns, also called ‘field houses’ which are dotted about in distant meadows, are part of the post-monastic farming regime in the Dales, when cow-keeping, milk and hay production became a major part of the rural economy. Cows were over-wintered in the barn along with their hay fodder cut from the surrounding meadows. In summer, as the meadow grass grew, cows were moved up to the higher pastures. So far, surveys reveal that most field barns have been enlarged, reflecting periods of farming intensification and increased grass yields. Outgang Laithe, set in Outgang Meadow, is one of the highest barns, at 260m OD, and stands on the edge of extensive earlier earthworks. It began as a three-bay building running down the hillside from west to east. There are some re-used cruck blades, quoins of limestone rather than sandstone, low and steep eaves for a thatched roof and a substantial boulder plinth, all indicating a former cruck-built barn of pre-1600 date. Further shippings were added to the south side. The low-end shippion was widened first, probably about 1700 with a fine wide-chamfered doorway, and the building received a heightened roof of sandstone flags, perhaps sourced from the



Figure 1 North Cote: the surviving 17th century south wing of the house.



Figure 2 Tenant Arms: a 17th-century house is incorporated into the south side of a later public house.

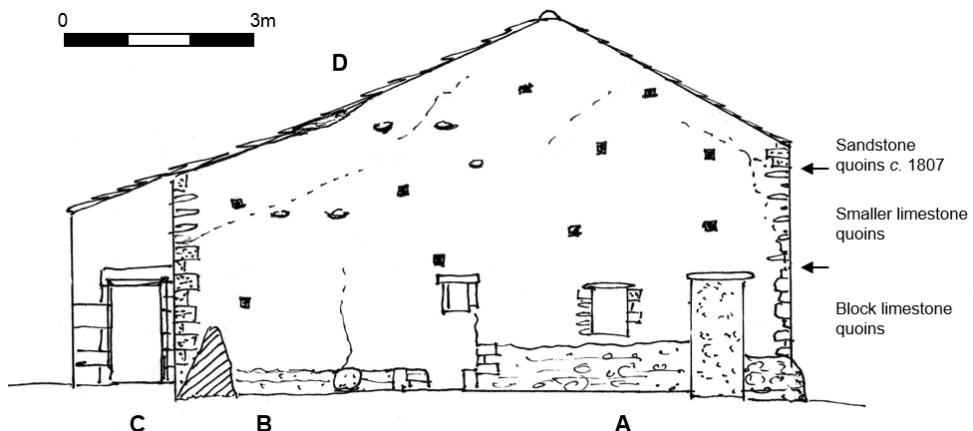


Figure 3 Outgang Laithe: field drawing of the east gable showing four walling phases.

- [A] Barn with low eaves;
- [B] Extension with stone roof;
- [C] Shippon added c. 1720;
- [D] Roof heightened 1807.

Hard Rake or Bycliffe quarries across the dale. The addition gave standings for two more cows as well as a cart door. A little later, probably c. 1730, a further shippon was added to the south frontage with good chamfered stone doorways enclosing the porch. A major extension was added in 1807. This date is inscribed, and later emphasized with carpenter's red chalk, on a roof truss made largely from imported Baltic timber but which incorporates some pieces from the older roof of about 1700. For this extension, the old west gable was demolished and a whole new end bay added to the upper end of both the original barn and 18th-century shippon. These phases can be seen on the east gable (Fig. 3). The overall number of over-wintered cow standings had thus increased from the original five or six to around 17.

Heightening and extending is seen in other field barns. Renard Close Laithe, built at the edge of its meadow close, has documentary evidence for a 16th-century date. In 1582 James Rayner acquired the field closes here (Pacey 2015). One close already included 'a house standing' which is likely to be this building, with the field close now named after Rayner. In 1665 Cuthbert Wade had bought the Rayner property and must have set about modifying the old thatched cruck barn by heightening and adding a stone flag roof. 'CW 1667' is inscribed over the foddergang door. Wade seems to have made use of the old ashwood cruck blades and purlins for two new roof trusses (Fig. 4). The lap joint carpentry on four re-used cruck blades and some cruck purlins is well seen and the cruck structure fits



Figure 4 Renard Close Laithe: former cruck blades re-used in new roof trusses of 1667.

the dimensions and form of others measured in the Craven area (Armstrong and Pacey 2000). A number of documentary references in Wharfedale show that old timbers were often re-used on site in rebuilds of the 17th and 18th centuries. In nearby Cracoe, crucks of both ash and oak timber are recorded in 16th-century accounts for building new cruck barns and houses (YAS Skipton Castle Records 1557). Unfortunately ash, which is the main hardwood tree of the Craven Dales, is not yet dateable by dendrochronology.

Jackson Close Laithe is a ruin that stands amongst the ridge and furrow of the former open field of Coulterlands, enclosed sometime before 1636 (Pacey 2015). The shippon lintel inscription ‘LH 1715’ marks an addition to an older barn housing five or six cows. The earliest walling has a massive boulder plinth, as seen in other older barns, but here with some unusual walling above. This incorporates regular blocks of tufa between sandstone flag courses. Tufa is a calcareous deposit formed in watercourses in the area but, curiously, cut blocks of it are scattered around Kilnsey hamlet and are even seen recycled in 19th century rebuilding. John Jackson, ‘a waller’ in the early 17th century, was associated with this property and could have been recycling older building materials (Pacey 2015). A very weathered timber, which still lies over the porch, is re-used and retains brace mortices and pegholes. Measured drawing interprets this as a possible post with braces from a timber-framed building.

Of the larger barns with cart entrances, two are of particular interest for their re-used timbers and earlier walling phases. The five-bay High Laithe near Chapel House (a former monastic farm) has stonework showing at least three phases of heightening (Fig. 5). Whilst the frontage has 18th-century features, such as the large cart arch and porch, the rear wall retains a massive plinth and lower walling of boulders whilst above there is some rather well-coursed walling reaching to a former low roofline for thatch. Evidence of low, steep-pitched, thatched roofs, probably of pre-1600 date, is not unusual in Craven as records of the Yorkshire Vernacular Buildings Study Group show. There are some regular vertical joints too, combined with unusual indentations through the wall. This is also seen at Scar Laithe and these features probably mark where full cruck blades and padstones have been pulled out of the wall during later rebuilding. Some oak cruck blades have been re-used inside, but the rectangular barn plan indicates the footprint of a rather large cruck barn, possibly of late monastic date. Recent dendrochronology of re-used oak crucks in nearby townships has produced late monastic felling dates of 1527 and around 1508 (Alcock and Tyers 2014) and perhaps that would apply here. The lack of any door entrances might suggest a storage barn rather than a barn with cow shippons. The building was heightened in the 17th or 18th century when the crucks were probably pulled out of the wall and a stone roof replaced thatch. The final phase came in 1840, a date inscribed on one of the 19th-century queen strut roof trusses, when the roof was heightened again, this time with masoned sandstone quoins on the exterior. The queen strut trusses are of Baltic timber that would have come by canal from the Humber to Leeds and, after 1777, to Skipton. A Baltic ‘shipping mark’ is inscribed on one timber.

Scar Laithe, also of five bays, is another larger barn and stands on the flat riverside fields that were once part of the medieval open arable strips under the towering Kilnsey Crag (Fig. 6). Like High Laithe, this barn has a prominent boulder plinth with some vertical joints as well as phases of heightening from original low eaves. Inside, the four roof trusses are of a style common around 1700 but incorporate very large re-used cruck blades and cruck purlins, all of good quality oak, with characteristic lap joints. Recent dendrochronology has demonstrated that these are likely to date from before 1539 (Alcock and Tyers 2014). The



Figure 5 High Laithe: the rear west wall with building phases.

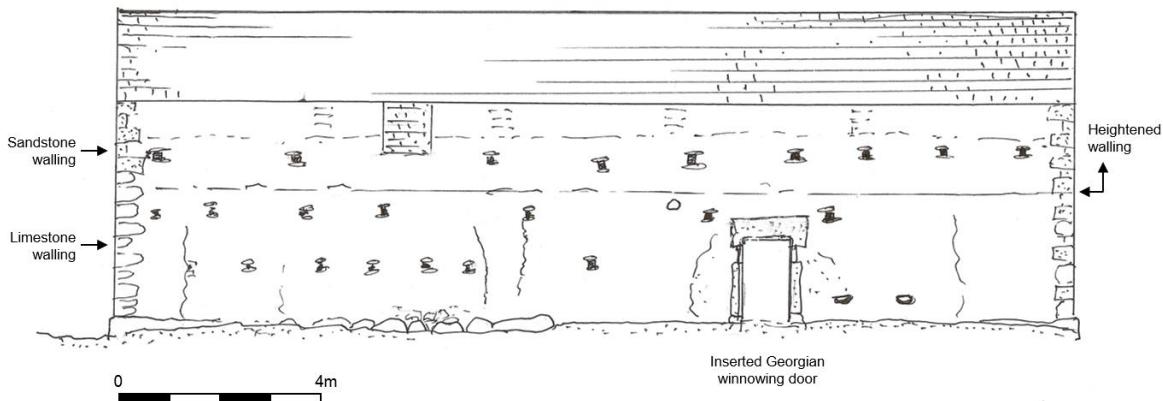


Figure 6 Scar Laithe: field drawing showing the north wall and building phases. This elevation is now obscured by a lean-to shed.

Fountains Abbey leases (Michelmore 1981) record that the Abbey often supplied ‘large timber’ and that Kilnsey also had managed woodlands. Oak, however, does not thrive on limestone and it is possible that timber came from Nidderdale or perhaps from the Forest of Barden. Two re-used straight timbers, 7m long, have elaborate carpenter’s construction markings reaching numbers as high as ‘9’, which are formed from inscribed dots as well as chiselled Roman numerals. These are not unlike the construction markings seen in the Great Barn at Bolton Priory, where dendrochronology gave felling dates of 1517/18. In Kilnsey, there are documentary references to a ‘great barn’ amongst the fields below the crag that survived into the 17th century and the building survey reflects this as a former cruck barn. In 1622 Cuthbert Wade owned the north end of the ‘great barn’ (Pacey 2015). The name ‘great barn’ was also applied to a large surviving building on Sawley Abbey’s farm at Winskill in Langcliffe. It too had been divided into two occupancies in the 16th century, as is suggested at Kilnsey and also contained re-used cruck timbers with lap joints (YVBSG 2002). In 1656 Wade bought further land under the scar at Kilnsey including fields near ‘two great barns at the west end of the highway leading under the scar’ (Pacey 2015). By 1664 Wade owned other land here including that ‘above two great barns of Cuthbert Wade abutting the highway leading under the scar.’ This highway, from Skirfare Bridge to Conistone, dates back to a charter of about 1156 (Farrer and Clay 1914). By 1674 the great barn was named ‘the new barn’ and perhaps this gives a date for the heightened walls and four tie beam trusses re-worked from timber salvaged from the old ‘great barn’. Only dendrochronology can confirm a date for the re-used oak timbers found in Kilnsey township but Scar Laithe would certainly be one candidate for a late monastic felling date.

In conclusion, intensive recording of every standing building in Kilnsey township is not yet complete but this work, combined with the survival of the remarkable deeds, has had some unexpected results and has shown clues to the fascinating transitional phase of buildings and fields from medieval and monastic to private ownership.

Archives

Archives are currently held by UWHG.

Acknowledgements

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