

High Street, Eaton Bray, Bedfordshire



Front of the finished project viewed from the road

High Street, Eaton Bray comprised the remaining section of a considerably altered 16th Century building together with 18th Century and 19th Century rear extensions. The building is not listed and very little is known of its history and development, however many answers were revealed during the recent building and conservation works.

Stuart Little was appointed to undertake a pre-purchase survey with the buyers, recommended the Architect and helped during the scheme design. A detailed budget estimate was then prepared for the proposed building and conservation work. Further advice was given on suitable work packages and resourcing the project. Post-contract site monitoring was carried out during the main construction phase and conservation advice was provided throughout the project including investigating and recording the timber frame.

The building conservation philosophy for the project was to retain as much of the original historic fabric as possible. There were not the same constraints as for listed buildings, however the new owners were very keen to conserve and display all the original medieval features that were uncovered during the works. Traditional materials were used as much as possible throughout the project.

The project work consisted of a small amount of demolition work, refurbishment of the existing buildings, conservation work to the original front medieval building and large extensions to the rear of the existing building.



Rear extensions nearing completion

Many features were revealed during the building works and a dendrochronological analysis of the oak timbers, by Dr Andy Moir of Trees Ring Services, showed that the period timber frame was built in 1532 or soon after.

A large dias beam was fully exposed showing evidence of the former jetty / projecting first floor. The black paint was carefully removed from all the period timbers and some beautiful medieval paintings were revealed in the ground floor room.

There are many lamp marks to timber posts, where the original medieval lamp lights had scorched the timbers.

Some wattle and daub infill panels were found concealed behind later finishes which covered the period timber framework. The original wattle and daub was repaired with additional material dug from the rear garden. Other open panels were infilled with hemp lime blocks.

Large blocks of Totternhoe stone were used in the central cross wall and the rear dairy walls consisted of skins of Totternhoe stone with a rubble infill. Totternhoe stone was mined, in the adjacent village of Totternhoe, since Roman times. The Abbots and Kings quarries supplied Totternhoe stone for high status buildings including Windsor Castle, Westminster Abbey, St Albans Abbey, Woburn Abbey and many surrounding medieval churches.

A large quantity of broken Totternhoe stone window tracery was found during the excavation work. This carved stonework probably originated from the church next door, when the original gothic windows were replaced with shallow perpendicular arched windows.



Remaining period timber framed roof structure

Site investigation, recording the timbers and documentary evidence revealed a picture of the medieval period timber frame and the changes during the life of the building.

This 'Wealden' house was originally of three bays including a central open hall. The side bays had jetty / projecting first floors to the front. The roof had king struts braced downwards to the collars with long, straight braces and clasped purlins. There were closely spaced vertical studs to the first floor front and side suggesting a higher status building. The rear wall was square framed with an original outshoot with catslide roof behind. The walls had wattle and daub infill panels and the roof was thatched. An ornately moulded diaphragm beam identifies the high end and painted designs remain on many of the timbers at this end. There was a front and rear door to the central hall and a rear door to the first floor chamber in the left hand high end.

The building has been altered and its use changed over time. A large central chimney stack was built into the central hall which became a commercial food preparation area. The roof tie beams were cut out back to the jowl post positions. A further attached chimney stack was added to serve the first floor bedroom. Later, the large chimney stack was partially demolished, a partition added and a small fireplace inserted.

The front ground floor walls were moved forwards to remove the first floor jetty. The timber walls to first floor and side elevation were removed and rebuilt in brickwork. The windows were altered at various times. The original right hand timber framed bays were demolished in about 1970 to allow construction of the neighbouring detached house.

The building was a small 'Wealden' hall house of higher status with possible links to the church, the quarry or a wealthy landowner. There is still more history to be discovered.