

ELM HOUSE, 19 CASTLE SQUARE, BENSON

EXTERIOR

Built between 1820 and 1830. Interestingly, the 1788 map by Richard Davis (see Miss Ditmas' history of Benson), shows a building already in place, beyond the "Castle" buildings, so maybe the present house was built on an earlier dwelling.

I have a theory (though Kate Murray doesn't seem quite so entranced with my theory!) that the house was originally built as a wide, but shallow house, for a middle-class yeoman or merchant. My reason for thinking this is that the frontage is a mess architecturally, and I don't think it could have been built like this originally, when exterior symmetry was important. I think it could have looked like this:



John Aldridge, from his "My Village" series, writes: "*...next to Elm House is a retail shop with a frontage of vitreous bricks with red brick dressings, finished with a parapet to a clay tile roof. The original 18th century building, with a small walled courtyard, stables and stores, is built in ragstone and brick, with extensive careful and sympathetic alterations in recent times*".

The middle and back part of the house were added in the later 19th century. From the side, there is a distinct division between the front, shallow house (Oxfordshire "clunch" and old brick), and the Victorian red brick of the later 19th century additions.

On the exterior wall of what is now our sitting-room at the back of the house, is the shape of a large brick arch. This suggests that this (now) house-wall was originally a garden or yard wall, with a large gateway for coaches, carts, etc. This probably went with the original building.

If the shop was a grocery shop, from at least 1841, it is possible that the "shop" was created in a front room of the original house, to the right-hand side. Kate Murray thinks the present shop frontage probably dates from the 1850s, which is probably when our present front door was moved several feet to the left (if one goes along with my theory!).

INTERIOR

The first thing we noticed, when we got to know the house, was the difference in the doors. In the old (front) part, the doors are shorter and wider, and have heavier hinges. In the rest of the house, the doors are more conventional 4-panel Victorian doors.

There is a wide, shallow cellar underneath the oldest part of the house, at the front (now divided), with a large recess in the wall below what is now our dining-room fireplace. This suggests to me a kitchen, as there is a good window below pavement level. Access could have been from the Savage's side of the building, as our access is through a small trapdoor, which is relatively modern. On the Savage's side there appears to be a more substantial, older staircase.

The Taylors created a kitchen in what I originally took to be a dairy, but there is no evidence that milk deliveries were part of the grocery shop. This kitchen was housed in a small barn or shed, about 18" below the level of the Test of the house, with a concrete floor, open to the roof (one could see daylight through the tiles!), and one tiny wall window, and an even smaller skylight. If not a dairy, then maybe it was a "cool room" for storing butter, lard and other perishables. It was accessed via a dark corridor that led to the back door. Knocking down the wall between corridor and "cool room", we created our own, modernised kitchen.

As mentioned before, the small room that we now use as a cloakroom, was originally used for storing the flitches of bacon. It had hooks in the beams, and bars on the narrow window.

Our dining-room was originally the sitting-room or parlour - it has an elegant grey marble fireplace, and a pretty frieze above the picture rail (not plaster, but papier-mache, probably put up in Victorian times). Our sitting-room was originally the dining-room. This also has a papier-mache frieze. It is probable that the bay windows in both rooms were put in the 1880s.

The first floor contained all the bedrooms, including maids' rooms, and the top floor, which already had a staircase by the early 1900s, was used for hardware storage for the shop - crockery, cutlery, pots and pans, etc. (this information came from the late Tommy Selwood).

SHOP

Walking into our hall from the front door, one can still clearly see the shapes on the right-hand wall of the openings that led into the shop from the house. Another quote from John Aldridge's "My Village": ". . .to the rear (of the shop) was a bakehouse, which was used mainly for baking bread until about 1925. My grandmother. . .told me that these brick ovens were also used to cook the Christmas goose or larger-than-usual joints of meat for those with small kitchen ranges".

"From 1907 till around 1928, Charles A. Wood & Sons delivered all provisions, including freshly-baked bread, by a horse-drawn van, to homes in Benson, Roke, Berrick and Ewelme (I also heard Goring and Streatley added to the list), six days a week. Paraffin oil and vinegar were dispensed directly into customers' own cans and bottles. Sugar, biscuits, and most dry goods were stored in large containers, and sold by weight, then wrapped in twisted paper cones. Butter and lard was patted on marble slabs, and wrapped in grease-proof paper".

The canvas-covered, horse-drawn van or vans (I don't know how many they had) were kept behind the Castle Inn, as were the horses (2 per van). Presumably Woods & Sons didn't have stabling. It was from Castle Yard in 1922, that the vans and horses had to be rescued from the fire.

GARDEN

According to the late Enid Brighting, the garden was "very boring"! It had a cinder path from the back door to the back of the garden (straight up the middle, in other words). There was a hedge or trellis half-way down, that divided the length into 2 sections. In front of the trellis

were lawns on each side of the path, with narrow borders for a few scrappy flowers. Beyond the trellis was a veg. garden.

At the far corner, on the left, appeared to be an old pig pen (?). The ground was cobbled, and the brick garden wall was rendered, very smooth, with the remains of white-wash on it. I have no idea which period this would have existed.

The present garden was created by the Taylors from the early 1950s. We took it over in 1977, and have changed little of the basic layout.

There is a well or deep sump in the garden, about 12 feet from the back door. There is also an old-fashioned pump, about 8 feet from the well, up against the wall of the old outside privy (an earth closet). This is a small brick building, with tiled roof, plastered on the inside walls, quite separate from the main house or shop - it is divided into 2 sections, which housed the staff lavatories in the early 1900s - ladies one end, gents in the other. When we moved to Elm House in 1977, the old wooden toilet was still in place, complete with a metal handle to activate the soil which dropped down to cover the "deposits", and which could then be shovelled out from the back, through a little flap, and disposed of appropriately. I assume the pump was close by for handwashing afterwards. This information came from Tommy Selwood.

PEOPLE

Tommy Selwood worked at the Woods & Sons shop for about 4 or 5 years. He started in about 1918, when he was 14, as a general errand boy. His older brother was already working there.

Tommy (then in his 70s) came to look around Elm House a couple of years after we moved in. He recognised quite a lot, especially our sitting-room (the Woods' dining-room), because the Woods entertained all the staff to lunch every Sunday. It was in that room that Tommy heard his first wireless broadcast, from a large, wooden-cased edifice, complete with fretwork frontage, which Mr. Wood had recently acquired.

Tommy became a little confused when I showed him the first floor - at the top of the stairs, he said, there should have been a long corridor ahead of Mm, where there was now a blank wall (this being the dividing wall between the 2 properties). He couldn't remember whether there was a bathroom on that floor or not - he pointed out that he wasn't a nosy boy, and if he was sent up to the very top floor to collect hardware for the shop, it was more than Ms job was worth to start nosing round the private areas of the house!

The late Enid Brighting worked in the shop for several years, as a cashier. Unfortunately, I didn't ask her whether it was for Woods or Chamberlains. Barbara Perry might remember.

John Aldridge's "My Village" suggests that the proprietors of the shop were as follows:

1830 John Baily

1841 James Burgis Sr.

1883 John Burgh

1895 Hannah Burgh

1903 Walter Fuller

1907 Charles A. Wood & Sons

1935 Frank Mattingley

1939 Chamberlain & Son (this was probably the time when the building was divided into shop/house) Chamberlains carried on until the late 1950s. After that it became an antique shop, trading as "Sarum Antiques", first under George Newton, and then Mike Hatton. Later it changed to a pine and gift shop called "Bumpkins", with Julie and Steve?, then reverted to antiques and pine with Dane Clouston, and is now a private house owned by Karen and Sean Savage.

According to the 1911 Census, John George Wood (31), a grocer and an employer, was living in the High Street, Benson-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, with his wife, Frederica Wood (32), his partner, Frank Mattingley (3), a grocer (single), and a visitor, John Edward Valentine Henwood (58), of independent means. John Wood was born in Croydon, Surrey, Frederica in Glentworth, Lincolnshire, Frank in Stanford-in-the-Vale, and John Henwood in Cornwall. John and Frederica had been married less than a year, and had no children. They occupied 9 rooms.

Although the address says "High Street", I assume it means the Castle Square premises.

John and Frederica went on to have 3 children - Barbara, Eileen and John Allen Wood.

John Allen Wood was born in 1918, to John and Frederica Wood, of 25 Castle Square, Benson, grocers and part-time bookmakers. He attended Benson School, then Wallingford Grammar School. After leaving school, he worked for a while at the Cowley Works, and then became a chef at Brasenose College, Oxford. He joined the RAF in 1938. His service no. was 901160, and he became a Sgt. tail-gunner with 35 Squadron. He died (missing in action) on 3 March 1942.

A lady called Rita ? used to live opposite Elm House. She once told me that her father was Sam Lawrence, who used to be the roundsman for Wood & Sons. She moved to Wallingford in the 1980s, and is presumably no longer with us. I have a vague recollection that a David Colclough, whom we met in the street outside Elm House, told me that Rita was his mother, but I'm not too clear on this. I believe David lives in Warborough, and I have a phone number for him. Benson was his childhood home.

Carole & John Johnson
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