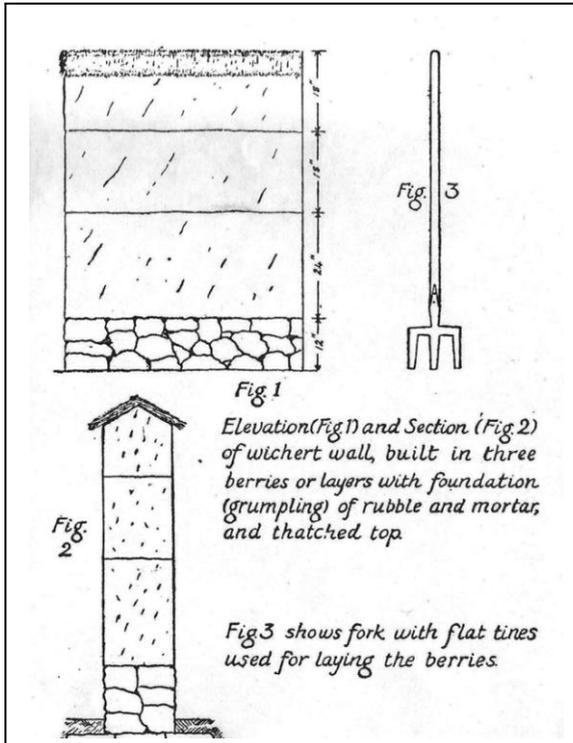


WALLS WITH HATS ON – AND MUD

THE WITCHERT WALLS OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Over the years there has been considerable interest in one Buckinghamshire building material, namely witchert, a localised white-clay formation that is occasionally present in the Purbeck formations in mid-Buckinghamshire. It is most obviously present in the walls and buildings of Haddenham and nearby mid-Buckinghamshire villages.

Walter Rose, a well-known Buckinghamshire craftsman and Haddenham resident, includes a brief description of witchert in his books *Good Neighbours* (1942, 34-6) and *The Village Carpenter* (1946, 101). He was the local source of information used earlier by Harman in a fuller description which was included as an Appendix to his book *Buckinghamshire Dialect* (1929). Harman also includes an informative diagram which is reproduced here (Figures 1 - 3).



Andrew (1986) includes a distribution map of witchert structures and notes that in Haddenham, witchert can occur only nine inches below the surface. He also notes local wisdom that a witchert wall ‘... must have a good hat and stout boots otherwise it will wet itself.’ This provides the excuse to include the accompanying photographs taken recently in Ford which clearly show ‘the boots’ and also the fabric of the wall which contains numerous bits of fragmented limestone as well as its clay matrix (Fig. 4), which are often hidden beneath render.



Figure 4: Fabric of witchert wall

I couldn't resist also including a picture of a well- maintained Haddenham witchert house (Fig.5). Incidentally, one such, 'Croft Cottage', that was to be demolished was 'reconstructed' in 2007 at the Chiltern Open-Air Museum utilising witchert derived from the house itself.



Figure 5: A well- maintained Haddenham witchert house

In a section on building materials in Pevsner's *Buckinghamshire*, Buildings of England series, Roger Evans (1994, 30-31), has a section on witchert but also notes the presence of other 'earth-wall' buildings in areas of Buckinghamshire where no witchert was present; namely Moulsoe, Grendon Underwood and Bledlow. The latter seems to be a rather neglected topic in the county's literature. Clay-walled buildings

are often slightly disparagingly referred to in early accounts as 'mud houses' where they are often characterised as either temporary structures or as dwellings of the poor. An example is cited by Miles Green (2007, 42) who notes that in the late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries when illegal enclosure was taking place on Tylers Green Common, buildings were constructed ' ... mainly by artisans and agricultural labourers ... who ' ... started by building mud houses in or close to the clay pits ...'

Although such structures may have been regarded as undesirable then, this was not always the case. For instance from Reed (1997) we learn that in AD 1607 Burnham Vicarage consisted of: '16 baies, the wales are all made of Lome , and the rooffe covered with tyle ..' This was obviously a house of considerable size ...'. However, in contrast, Medmenham's vicarage as described in 1605, must have had a much less wealthy vicar, being tiny in comparison with Marlow's: 'Item the Vicaridge house consisting of 2 baye built with mudd walles and rough cast and covered with tyle, both bayes being chambered over and boarded , porched and a studdy over that ..'. At least we know that it had two storeys.

References:

Andrew M 1986. Walls with hats on, *Country Life* , 2/10/1968.

Green M 2007. *Mansions and mud houses. the story of Penn and Tylers Green Conservation Area.* Penn and Tylers Green Residents Society [Booklet]

Reed M 1997. *Buckinghamshire Glebe Terriers of 1578-1640.* (Buckinghamshire Record Society No30.

Mike Farley