

New Insight into the Origins of the Ashdown Forest Centre Barns

The perceived wisdom about the three barns of the Ashdown Forest Centre is that they were traditional Sussex barns erected on their current site having become superfluous in their previous positions. However, trying to discover their exact provenance has been problematical. Surprisingly, the Conservators have very little information about where the barns came from, so the Ashdown Forest Research Group was invited by Pat Buesnel to try and find out more.

Work was begun on erecting the barns on their present site in April 1981, with Durtnell and Sons of Brasted providing manpower and materials, and three barns for the price of two. Unfortunately, although the company dates from 1591, their records don't. Paperwork is kept for twelve years, which from a 2014 perspective is no help in researching the 1980s. Likewise, land agents RH and RW Clutton have no records for that period. Other local personnel were involved in an advisory capacity, but many of these are long gone, taking their knowledge of where the barns came from – if they ever knew – with them.

John Comber of Comber and Son, local building contractors, remembered the project from when he was starting work with his father's company, but he didn't know where the barns had come from. Mr Comber senior was mentioned in the minutes of the Board of Conservators as offering his advice on the project free of charge. The son told me that his father had simply offered his expertise and guidance for love as he believed the project had value for the local community. The only area where his advice was ignored was regarding the heather roof (made from material reaped and sold on the Forest). When it leaked and had to be replaced, he couldn't resist a quick 'I told you so', as in his experience these never worked properly.

Happily, I was fortunate enough to be told about a book written in 1989 by Barbara Willard:



The Forest: Ashdown in East Sussex. In it, she describes the 1983 opening ceremony, performed by the then Earl de la Warr, and goes on to mention the people and organisations involved in the project: local contractors; the *Manpower Services Commission*, (supplied a foreman, a joiner and a couple of labourers); the *Youth Opportunities Programme* (made ten lads available as labourers); Steve Comber the builder; Arthur Wells the Quantity Surveyor, and a ranger by the name of John Pedder. According to Barbara Willard, and corroborated largely by recent inspection, only one of the barns is a genuine Sussex, probably from Hassocks; one comes from Kent and the third from Essex. I suspect this was the freebie from Durtnell's.

Willard says that second-hand Forest oak was used where beams needed repair. This would be in line with old-time farming practices: nothing was wasted; everything possible was recycled. It also explains some of the anomalies in the barns today. Interestingly, she considered the heather roof a triumph. Perhaps, at the time of writing, it had not begun to leak!

As building is not allowed on Ashdown, a non-Forest setting had to be found at the heart of the Forest. An old edition of *Ashdown Forest News* (Autumn 2003) shows this to have been facilitated by a local philanthropist, Alfred Wragg. He had been heavily involved in the *Manor Charitable Trust*, and it was this body which donated land for the barns, as well as for the Isle of Thorns Centre and Hindleap Warren.

Through the good offices of Brian Short (Emeritus Professor of Geography at Sussex University) we were put in contact with Dr Annabelle Hughes, an expert in timber-framed buildings, and she agreed to come and look at the barns. What followed was a magical morning as she shared her extensive knowledge, pointing out things we had never noticed before, and, better still, explaining their significance.

Our initial pride in showing off the barns was dampened somewhat in the Education Barn, as she was clearly underwhelmed by what she found. Mortises carved into beams failed to match up with their opposite numbers, so couldn't have held the expected but absent braces. Weathering on some of the internal posts showed them originally to have been used externally. Roof braces were too small for a structure of this size; some bays had queen posts (pairs of vertical posts linked by a horizontal and which are set on a tie beam as part of the roof truss) while others didn't, and holes in the tie braces weren't being used the way they should have been. Perhaps the feature which caused the most disdain was the use of a timber as an upright support which was cut with 'birdsmouths' - V-shaped notches sunk into an eaves beam to support rafters - something to be expected to be on a horizontal not a vertical feature.



By now, we were a little crestfallen. However, all this strongly suggested that this was the third barn, thrown in for free by Durtnells, and presumably either not complete in the first place (you get what you pay for!) or extensively renovated in its original setting. Although not totally authentic, this barn could be proud of having been regenerated into something which is today both useful and beautiful – and which fools most of the people most of the time. In addition, what a role model for recycling! All the timbers used clearly had a barn history – just not necessarily this barn.

The other two barns provoked a much more positive reaction. The Information Barn is the most likely to be the Sussex barn mentioned by Barbara Willard, its proportions in keeping with Wealden style, according to Dr Hughes. It currently has four bays, but there are signs that the northern end has been tampered with at some time, so there may have been a fifth originally. This would fit the hypothesis that it had been a threshing barn. Such buildings had a pairs of doors on either side of the middle bay to allow the wind to blow the chaff away. The large window opposite the current door has a horizontal beam above, suggesting



this is where the top of the threshing doors were. Mortises set on the 'door' side of the adjacent roof beams would tend to confirm this as it was customary to place roof braces on the door-side of the posts nearest the opening. The northwest corner has a good example of a root stock upright post. Placing the tree-trunk upside-down allows the top to splay out and provide enough material for the complex jointing needed.

Other notable features in this barn are: substantial roof braces, which on the whole fit into mortises carved for them; queen posts in keeping with the rest of the barn, so probably original; and eaves plates (the long horizontal beams where walls and roof meet) which have been scarfed - had a step cut at the end of two separate timbers so that they can be linked together to run the length of a wall. There is no ridge board in the apex of the roof; instead the rafters are pegged together at the top. This, and the fact that the barn also has butt purlins (horizontal, longitudinal beams in the roof) and that these are slightly staggered to spread the load on the rafters, suggest the barn was originally erected sometime between 1650 and 1750. This barn is sizeable, probably belonging originally to a farm of at least 100 acres.

The Administration Barn, adapted considerably to turn it into office space, still shows enough original features to make it likely that this is Barbara Willard's Kentish barn. Dr Hughes identified it as of at least Eastern Wealden origin, probably from Kent, referencing the close-studding beside the stairs, which runs the entire height of the wall. In the roof space there is wind-bracing, a technique designed to stop the roof twisting out of true. This, along with other features, like the fact that the apex has been pegged, suggests that the building dates from 1650 and 1700, maybe up to 50 years older than the Information Barn.



In a number of places, original braces are still in evidence, fitting snugly into the mortises made for them over 300 years ago. However, some of these would have blocked access, or cut across an office desk in the barn's current incarnation, so in places they have been replaced by knee braces, cut from timber which has grown naturally into a right-angle. Another notable feature in this barn is the use of clasped purlins - longitudinal beams in the roof fitted under rafters and over the collar beam between them. Beams have been scarfed here too, and the ties crossing the space at eaves level have been prepared to fit solid upright timbers. Here, though, these uprights no longer exist, leaving at least one tie beam looking as if it balances rather precariously on a baulk of wood bolted to the wall. This barn has four, possibly five bays, and probably also belonged to a sizeable farm of around 100 acres.

The wood used throughout was green oak; once seasoned, it's too hard to work. It is likely that the Sussex and Kentish barns were built originally on brick or stone underpinning. Because the barns have been adapted for different uses, their sole plates – horizontal timbers supporting the framework and which originally rested on the foundations - have been raised considerably; in some cases to just below window level. Both barns show much evidence of having been repaired and altered over the years, as need changed. Timber-framed buildings were built to last; some might say that they are over-engineered, but this means that after hundreds of years, despite having had timbers replaced, bays added or removed, been transported from their original settings, and, in one instance at least been in part redesigned and rebuilt with 'foreign' timbers, these three barns still provide a definitive link with our rural past as well as providing a beautiful and eye-catching setting for the Ashdown Forest Centre.

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