

# CERNE ABBAS AND A HISTORY OF ITS HOUSES



The largely Georgian façade of many of the houses in Cerne Abbas conceals a much older village. The village is medieval at its heart, the centre having developed during the existence of the Benedictine Cerne Abbey from 987AD until the Dissolution in 1539. The subsequent destruction of the Abbey released valuable building material for a further expansion of the village. This expansion continued into the 18th Century when the brewing trade in particular brought a new prosperity to the village and with it the 'polite' fronts to many of the houses that can be seen today.

The Society is researching in more detail the construction behind this Georgian façade of a selection of houses in the village, and who lived in them over the centuries. Our aim is to achieve a better appreciation of the development and character of Cerne Abbas from earliest times. This research has only just begun and the results will be presented here as the project develops.

To protect the security and privacy of their present owners, only a summary of the results for each house will be given, but more details may be available to those with a particular interest by application to the Society.



**1 LONG STREET CERNE ABBAS** has travelled through 400 years. Originally a traditional Dorset farmhouse with 2 rooms up stairs and down built around 1650.

As farming remained the main activity in the village so the house reflected a gentle increase in prosperity. It was enlarged in two phases during the late 17th /early 18th century expanding back as far as the river. Probably at that time farm buildings were built along the river bank. Sometime in the 1790's copyhold to the house was acquired by a Sarah Eveleigh. It is hypothesized that Sarah, who was a woman of some substance, added

the final upgrade by building the Georgian front on the south side. We believe this to be so from a lead well top found in 2000 in the garden with the initials SE 1791. This ties in with the poor quality of the roof timbers – during the Napoleonic wars all the good timber was used in naval ship building. The single storey phases built in the late 17th and early 18th centuries almost certainly had thatched roofs. Finally, the early 21st century saw a major internal refurbishment and added garage to the footprint. The house was part of the Pitt-Rivers estate until they were forced to sell, to cover death duties and running costs, in 1919 when it was sold for £285 to a motor engineer. From then on it changed hands quite often with owners ranging from a vicar, service officers, a hotel owner in Weymouth and the headmaster of the Windsor choir school, reflecting the villages changing population over the last 100 years. In the 1950/60's all the roofs were replaced with new timbers and tiles.



**29 LONG STREET CERNE ABBAS** lies within the Cerne Abbas Conservation Area and is Grade 2 listed.

The house and its garden follows the original boundary as mapped out in the earliest known plan of the village (dated 1768) and the boundary may well go back to medieval times. The integrated 'L' shaped design in its internal layout gives the impression of one homogeneous house, but it is actually made up from three separate buildings. The earliest part probably dates from about the time when Abbey Street was

built (late C15th). The other parts of the house were built later, almost certainly in the period immediately following the Dissolution of the Abbey in 1539 using material released by its demolition. A major update took place in the latter half of the C18th, when the separate parts were combined into one house and the attractive bricked face to the front of the house added. Apart from minor changes, the house has remained essentially unchanged since then.

The surviving Pitt-Rivers estate papers show that the house was in the copyhold tenure of the Farr family in the early 18th C. In 1766, Betty Farr married Thomas Coombs, the tenure then continuing in his name. The two families had become wealthy as maltsters of Cerne Abbas and it was probably this marriage that initiated the major update of the house. In 1828 the house passed into the ownership of the Thorne family, hat makers and carriers, in which it remained until 1948. By 1828 the tenure had become freehold and therefore the house was one of the few not included in the 1919 Sale of the village.



**32 LONG STREET CERNE ABBAS** is believed to date from the 16th century and is Grade 2 listed. There is a substantial barn to the rear.

Research to date indicates that in the 1768 plan of the village two cottages, Nos. 149 and 150, occupied the site of the current house. In 1830 a fire destroyed most of No. 150 and the land it occupied is now the side garden to the house. In the 1919 Pitt-Rivers auction the two farm cottages, by then Nos. 119 and 120 (it is assumed the much smaller 120 is what remained of 150 after the fire), were sold as part of Lot 6, Black Hills Farm, and the

tenants at that time were M Paull (119) and J Devenish (120). The barn was referred to as the 'Old Malthouse'. The cottages each went through several ownerships until 1951 when Mrs Nesbitt-Dufort of No. 119 also purchased No 120 and combined the two cottages. In 1984 a fire destroyed much of the upper floor and interior and the upper floor was substantially rebuilt. A fine oak-panelled wall remains in the house and a historical survey prior to the 1984 fire describes jointed crucks which would date the construction to the 16th century. The western portion of the house has a cob wall frontage, while the eastern third is of masonry rubble, comprising flint, chalk blocks and the local greensand, the Shaftsbury Sandstone. It is probable that some of the materials came from the Abbey remains. This reliance on local materials would favour an origin as agricultural labourer's cottages.



**36 LONG STREET CERNE ABBAS** is mid-terraced, grade 2 listed and dates back to the mid 1700's.

Originally the ground floor probably comprised a main living area containing an inglenook fireplace for heating and cooking with stairs alongside. There was a second smaller room off to the right. Out buildings were converted to a scullery in the mid 1800's, and the stick house converted into a downstairs bathroom in the mid 1900's.

With the exception of the frontage, the house, built over three floors, is constructed of brick and flint and was thatched until around 1922 when a 'tin' roof was added over the existing thatch. This remained in place until restoration work began in 2005. Amongst other things, this work revealed that contrary to appearances the front was constructed with just two first floor windows and not as would seem three. It is most likely that the frontage was copied from another building of an earlier vintage, which would have had its window bricked up as a result of window tax.

Number 123 as it was until the 1970's was occupied by a retired Millwright in the mid to late 18th century. It was subsequently occupied by tradesmen including a hatter, a saddler and a courier. This could account for the large timber lintel to the right of the front door and the now bricked in larger opening, suggesting trade of some description. From around 1880 until 2004 it was occupied by just two families.





**BARTON FARMHOUSE CERNE ABBAS** is listed as 17th century. Barton is Saxon meaning barley / corn enclosure or grange.

Barton Farm included the tithe barn, the surrounding barns, the workers cottages and 800 acres south of Cerne. Originally it belonged to the Abbey, later to the Pitt Rivers estate and finally to Peter Lovell, the Engineering contractor. The last farm managers who lived in the farmhouse were Charles Marsh and his son Joe. The house has alternate courses of squared flints and clunch, a soft chalky limestone; hamstone

mullion windows with diamond leads; a through passage; and a tiled roof that was thatched until 1910. There are 3 pairs of raised crucks which still support the roof. The inglenook fireplaces and chimneys were built using reclamation Abbey stone. The smoke-blackened crucks, the non-original inglenooks, the un-matching windows and the small arched rear window all suggest that the building was probably Tudor in origin. The floors were inserted after the chimneys, with circular stairs alongside the inglenooks for access. The floors are supported by 24ft oak beams which rest on the wooden window lintels. The front door faced south with access to Barton Lane, now extinct. The old hamstone door frame has chamfered sides supporting a huge lintel with a pointed arch. The banded flint and clunch was possibly added to the north wall in 18th century together with a redesigned doorway to create a new main access through the farmyard. The flint garden walls still enclose the old toilet and well.