

THE CHURCH LOFT, WEST WYCOMBE.

Some months ago the following appeal was issued by the Vicar, the Rev. W. Upton Wooler, a member of our Society, and Churchwardens:—"The Church Loft at West Wycombe, Bucks, Diocese Oxford, on the high road between London and Oxford, is an ancient and interesting building of brick and timber, which has long been identified with the civil and religious life of the parish, the former curiously exemplified by the lock-up and the remains of the whipping post at one end, and the latter by the matrix of a Crucifix at the other. The exact date of its erection is unknown, but it is supposed to have been erected by the Monks of Bisham Priory on the Thames, some time after Cardinal Beaufort gave them possession of the Rectory in 1417. On the ground floor are distinct traces of four cells, which may have been used by the Monks in connection with their work for the spiritual welfare of the parish. The ground floor is at present used as a carpenter's shop, a lumber room, and coal places. The upper room is used for a Sunday School and meetings. The building was restored in 1676, when Peter Chalfont and John Parker were churchwardens; the bell attached to the old clock is dated 1668. If the necessary funds can be raised, it is proposed to restore it again, and while preserving all the ancient architectural features, adapt it to present-day requirements, specially by providing on the ground floor a good church room easy of access, which can be used for Sunday School and other parish purposes, and save the expense of a room which is being rented. Mr. W. D. Caröe, F.S.A., of 3, Great College Street, Westminster, an architect specially qualified to deal with ancient buildings, has made a careful survey, and gives the sum of £367 as the cost of restoration. This is a large sum to be raised in a poor parish like this, where so much needs raising for other purposes, so we are venturing to ask you kindly to allow us to add your name to the list of contributors to this interesting and useful work."

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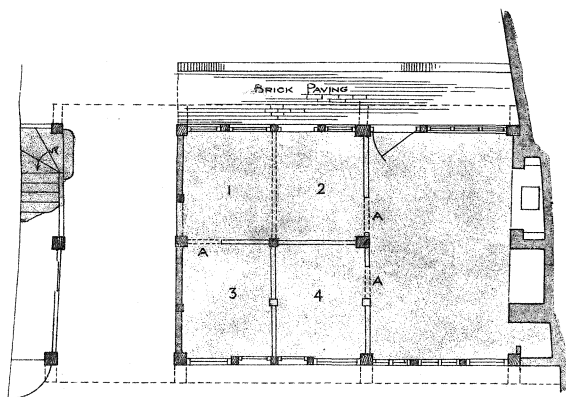


ELEVATION TO STREET

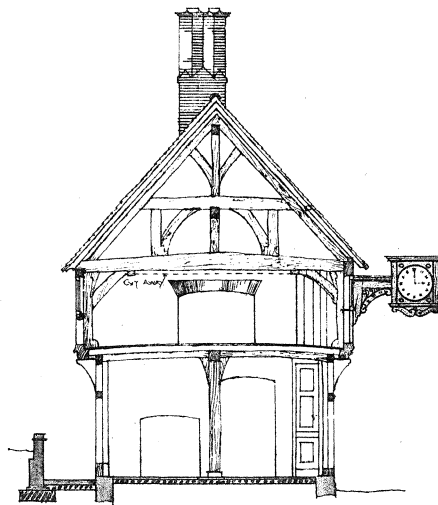
WEST WYCOMBE,
THE LOFT



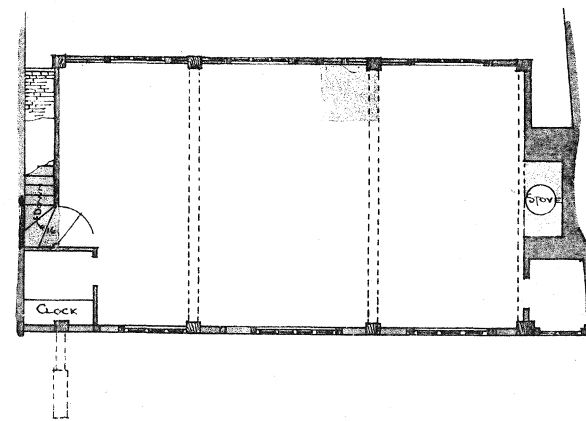
BACK ELEVATION



GROVND PLAN



SECTION



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

10 5 9 10 20 30 40 50 FEET

W.D. LARKE
3 Gt. COLLEGE ST.
WESTMINSTER, S.W.

The Architect reported as follows:—*“This is a building of quite exceptional interest, and merits some careful work of preservation. Whether or no it was originally designed to stand isolated is not certain, as there is an original covered way through it. It is more likely to be the remains of a longer range. There are, in fact, indications that this is the case, and that the extensions at both ends have been removed to make way for the existing cottages now hemming it in. This would account for the fact that there is no remnant of an ancient staircase. The one that exists is a mere makeshift, constructed, no doubt, when the Western cottage was built.

“The ground floor walls of the building were originally a half-timbered construction, probably filled with brick nogging. They stood upon a massive oak plate, which still remains on the roadside and along one side of the thoroughfare. At the back the ground has risen, covered the plate, and destroyed it. The feet of the timbers are thus rotted away, and rest upon brickwork. Some part of the wall at the back has evidently fallen away altogether, and been replaced by 9-inch modern brickwork. A peculiarity of the building consists of the remnants of two pairs of cells, each of them about 9ft. by 7ft. Two faced north and two south. Each cell was entered by a Tudor-headed doorway, by the side of which was a Tudor-headed window, apparently unglazed, but which we shall probably find was protected by iron bars. Similar openings may have existed at the back, but the records are lost. Wattle partitions seem to have divided these cells from one another. At the eastern end of the building were two rooms, each with an open fireplace, but the walls of both these rooms are modern. Attention should be directed to the sunk matrix of a Crucifix on the road-side, beneath which are evident signs of some erection, the form of which tended to horizontality. Part of this was affixed to the base stone of one of the storey posts. These base stones were originally just covered. Still affixed to

* *South Bucks Standard*, February 22, 1912.

the westernmost post on the road-side is the remnant of a ring forming part of a whipping post. The upper storey overhangs 1ft. 5in. on both sides, and encloses a good room 38ft. by 21ft. 6in. with an open timbered roof. The soffit moulding of the beams has unfortunately been cut away for the sake of the head room, but otherwise the roof, so far as it can be seen, appears to be in excellent order. The same is to be said of much of the external oakwork, noticeable for the large scantling and solidarity of some of its supports. I am disposed to think that the building was originally some form of Court House, and the lower part was the penitentiary. The whipping post and the cells are evident, while the lost erection, some evidences of which exist, may have been a stocks or some other punitive installation. It remains to be said that none of the windows of the first floor are original. They have, however, sufficient antiquity and interest to warrant respect. The third fireplace on the ground floor and the one in the room above are interpolations, inserted after the original uses of the building have ceased. There is, I think, little doubt that the partitions on the ground storey are original. They were, however, all inserted after the building was completed, and have no part in the structure.* Provided a record is kept, I see no reason why they should not give way to modern claims of utility. A careful treatment to this end will preserve and reveal much more than the loss of the partitions will imply. A useful room with a fireplace can be secured with uninterrupted floor space, excepting for the two wooden supports. The area should be covered with concrete and wood blocks. I should take out the modern brickwork at the back, and insert there a door and a good window. The ground at the back should be excavated, and the bank supported by a low brick wall. This will allow of the lowering of the ground floor to its original level throughout. As regards the treatment of the exterior, doors, not

* This is not intended to imply that they were no part of the original scheme. In my view they certainly were, and I should lose them with regret, on archaeological grounds. It is a case where the practical demands seem to be imperative.—W. D. C.

all made to open, should be inserted in the old door openings, and all the existing architectural features should be preserved. Wherever new work is introduced, either in necessary windows or doors, it should be simple, direct, and harmonious, and should tell its own story as belonging to to-day. I have shown where I think no objection could be raised to two new windows thus treated. On the first floor the roof should be opened out and repaired. This will involve stripping, boarding, felting, and two sets of battens, and re-laying the tiles. The windows and glazing need some repair, but, although not original, I should not alter their character. Iron casements should be used in place of the existing wooden ones, which are very poor and thin. I should remove the stove and chimney, and form a new opening at the east end, using one of the flues from below. The chimney will require raising, and the old bricks could be re-used. As regards the staircase, I have shown how this can be re-modelled, but nothing can be done unless the little cupboard now in the next cottage can be secured. There ought to be no difficulty about this. The loss to the cottage is virtually *nil*; the gain to the Loft is immense.

"I estimate the cost of the above works, exclusive of the staircase, at £347. If the staircase be renewed in oak, add £20. If funds are forthcoming it would be a great advantage to case in the cast-iron supports of the clock, which are at present a serious disfigurement to the building.

"(Signed) W. D. CARÖE.

"3, Great College Street,
"Westminster."

By the courtesy of the Vicar and his Architect I am able to reproduce a view of the street front of this old building (heading the appeal given above), and also scale drawings made by Mr. Caröe. With reference to the latter I should state that I am responsible for the indications on the ground plan of the four very interesting cells marked 1, 2, 3, and 4, which are not shown on Mr. Caröe's plan, the proposal being, in order to be able to use the ground

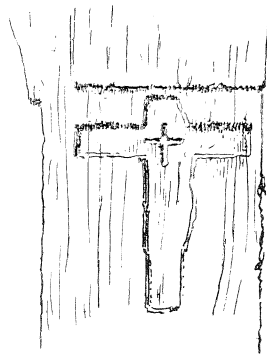
floor for Sunday School purposes, to remove the partitions which form these cells and make one room of it, only retaining two storey-posts to which these timber, wattle, and plaster partitions were attached.

Other alterations proposed and shown on these drawings are the removal of nearly all the more or less modern window and door fittings and the substitution of others more in the style of the original building. The doorways and flanking windows of the cells have their original arched heads in great part remaining, so that under this scheme these are to be completed as they are believed to have been originally. Probably the rather wide windows on either side of the cell doorways were divided into two lights, evidence of which may perhaps be found when the modern insertions are removed; but of course by leaving them undivided a little more light would be admitted. It seems quite right to allow the 17th or 18th century windows of the upper storey to remain. Mr. Carøe shows on his plan two separate fireplaces at the eastern end of the ground-floor room. But this was originally one very wide fireplace, and only divided when the room was divided by the present brick partition which it is proposed to remove.

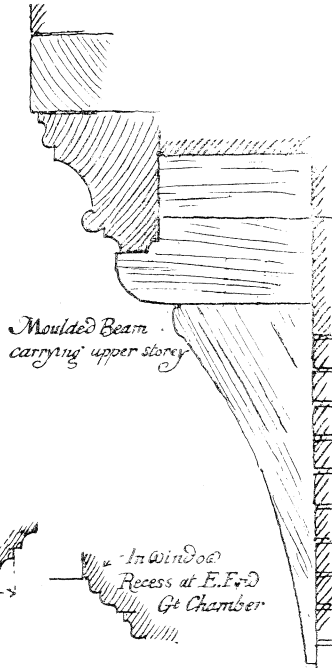
There are points of resemblance between this building and the Old Court House, Long Crendon, visited on our excursion this year. The latter was well illustrated in *Country Life* of February 17th, 1912. It used to be called Staple Hall, sheep of the Oxfordshire Downs supplying wool for East Anglian and other looms; also Court House from the manorial courts which for centuries were held here. Both buildings are timber constructions of the Tudor period, of two storeys, set upon dwarf stone walls; the site of both seems to have been chosen with reference to the church, the Crendon building standing quite close to the church, and the subject of this article bridges the chief approach to the church of West Wycombe from the village street. Both have a long and undivided chamber on the upper floor, the floor in each case rising to the centre, like the deck of a ship, due to the camber of the timbers supporting them. Both are covered by roofs of similar



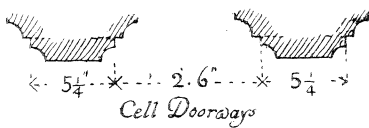
EXTERIOR OF WEST WYCOMBE CHURCH LOFT.



Matrix of Crucifix



*Moulded Beam
carrying upper storey*



Cell Doorways

SKETCH DETAILS.

construction, except that at Crendon there is no king-post, but our present subject shows superiority in having some of its timbers moulded, though that on the under side of the great tie-beams has been cut away to give more head-way. Wattle and daub was used here for the partitions and the filling of panels in the upper storey walls; the same at Crendon until the National Trust substituted brick. Both buildings had on the ground floor, at the east end, one great fireplace. At Crendon little interest remains in the ground floor. The National Trust found it in 1900 divided into tenements, and, after removing these, they have made their own alterations so as to make it tenantable. Here, at West Wycombe, while the upper chamber is rather finer than the other, the original arrangement of the ground floor may still be traced. Reference to the plan will show how the western half of the ground-floor was divided into four cells. Three of these partitions remain as before, except that they have been pierced by modern doorways, as at A., A. The partitions of cells 1 and 2 have been removed, but the position of the cross partition is quite plainly indicated. The two front cells were entered from the street: No. 1 from the covered entry, and No. 2 probably from within the building. There was no communication from one cell to another. The other half of the ground-floor was formerly undivided. The question is—What was this building erected for, and what was the purpose of these four separate cells? A writer in the *Bucks Herald* asserted, without any doubt, that they were all “lock-ups”—rather a serious reflection upon the manners and morals of the village. Considering that there was a lock-up on the other side of the covered entry, that it was only two miles from a large town where criminals could be dealt with, and that the construction of these cells was too slight to withstand the efforts of a malefactor bent on escaping, this seems highly improbable. The matrix of a crucifix on the easternmost storey-post, a great timber which measures on its face $13\frac{3}{4}$ inches, seems to indicate that the building was dedicated to religion and charity, and my opinion is that it was a kind of

casual ward of the period, that it offered shelter to the pilgrim and wayfarer who could not afford the inn—as did the more important and much more ancient hospice of St. John Bapt. at High Wycombe. The large room with the very wide fireplace may have served as refectory, warming and drying-room, where the tramp would have his supper, warm himself in cold weather, and in wet have his clothes dried while he slept in one of the adjoining cubicles.

The accompanying sketches of detail and sections of mouldings will serve to show the period of erection. Some of the original brickwork, five courses rising 12 inches, under the shelter of the covered way, still remains, but much has been replaced. Herring-bone work may be noticed at the back of the great fireplace. Two 17th century oak tables are preserved in the “loft.”

W. N.