



THE HISTORY OF LOWERFIELD HOUSE

Introduction

Lowerfield House has evolved in its structure and use over several centuries. Changes in building methods and materials over the centuries guide the conclusions about the dates at which various parts were constructed. Additionally, a collection of photographs dating back to 1910 provide a more comprehensive record of the evolution of the house over the past century showing how doors and windows have been changed or replaced either for functional or, more probably, for maintenance reasons. Most significantly, the photographs record the evolution of the frontage of the house over the past century, disproving any illusion that the architecture or materials are still the original Georgian design. Notably, the large curved bay windows, previously assumed to be Georgian, were clearly formed of three straight sections, probably until the early 1930s, with the side panels not even being glazed until sometime later than 1910.

Early development and main extensions

The earliest plan of the house is the Tythe mapping of 1840 that shows the footprint of the house to be more-or-less as it is today. However, the house was clearly not all built as the present large house from the outset and study of the various stages of construction indicate much smaller and earlier origins although it is difficult to ascertain the date of the oldest parts. All we can say is that the original long house pre-dates 1800. The basic construction was (and still is) of cob walls, a mixture of straw and mud that is almost unique to Devonshire; and doubtless a thatched roof. The private kitchen, used by the current owners, includes a large stone-arched fireplace where cooking would have originally taken place over open fires. Although there is no remaining visible evidence of any bread ovens within this fireplace, the profile of the original external wall suggests that a bread-oven originally existed within this space. One of the wall-openings for the present kitchen windows extends through to the floor, suggesting that this would have been the original entrance door. This door still existed in the 1910 photograph (Page 5, below). Evidence would therefore suggest that the original house centred around this door and, when viewed from the front, would have included the room to the left of the present main door but extend no further. Detailed study of the internal structure confirms that the original right-hand wall was a cob external wall but that this was completely demolished for the easterly extension.



Figure 1 Likely extent of original dwelling

There is no evidence within the layout of the original upper floor joists of where the original stairway to the upper floor might have been, suggesting that the original dwelling may have simply been a two-room single story cottage with a central door. The (now) central stairway (of three) and the only stairway that extends to the attic where five separate small rooms were created for the probable use of servants, is also of cob construction. This is positioned as if an external extension to the NW corner of the original house suggesting that the upper floor, including the addition of the habitable attic, may have happened later than the original small dwelling. Internal evidence also indicates considerable subsidence of the left-hand corner of the frontage after original construction but this evidence is less pronounced in the upper stories, again suggesting that the original building was single-storey and later extended upwards. While the building fabric itself clearly shows signs of significant subsidence it is interesting to note that the windows of the subsided rooms do not replicate the settlement, indicating the age of the windows to be much later than the original construction and that they must have been completely renewed at some stage. Differences in architecture and window fittings from room to room also suggest (as one might expect) that all window frames will have rotted away and been completely replaced at various different times in history. While the style has clearly been broadly maintained it is totally improbable that any timberwork is authentic Georgian: the materials simply would not last three centuries.



Figure 2 First extension to 2/3 stories

The current frontage suggests that the addition of the current main stairway and reception room to the right of the front-door, with the creation of the two large (angular – not curved) bay windows, probably took place before 1800. It is likely that the outbuildings, including the well shed and the (then) detached dairy would have been added during this era as they too are constructed of old cob walls. Documentary evidence shows the 6-bedroom 'mansion' being offered for sale in 1800 suggesting these major extensions may have taken place prior to this date, although if the servants bedrooms in the roof space were included in this quoted number of bedrooms then the extension linking the house to the dairy might have happened later.

TO be SOLD, The Fee-simple and Inheritance of the Premises, called MANSION-HOUSE, situate near the Church-town, of Lapford; consisting of two parlours, lobby, kitchen, six bed-rooms, and every necessary out-building, a large walled garden, well stocked with fruit trees, and about twelve acres of rich land. The premises are pleasantly situated, the house modern, and is a desirable residence for a small family. Lapford is about four miles from Chulmleigh and seven from Crediton, near the post-road.

For disposing of the same a Public Survey will be held on Thursday the 20th day of March next, by three o'clock in the afternoon, at the Mansion-House aforesaid.

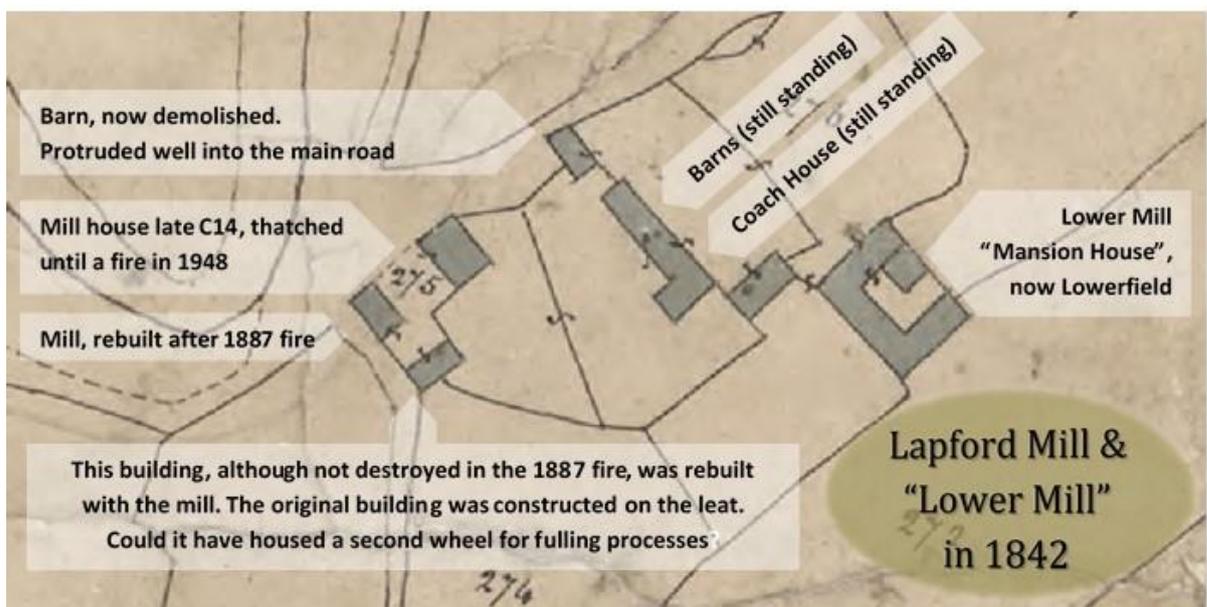
For a sight of the house and grounds apply to Mrs. Snell, on the premises, of which an early possession may be had; any further particulars apply to Mr. Chanter, Chulmleigh, or Mr. Browne, Southmolton.

Half the purchase money may be left for a security on the premises.

Dated February 15, 1800.

Figure 3 1800 Sale document describing the house

Mapping dated around 1840 (copied here in 1842) also shows the footprint of the house to be much as it is today.



Sometime prior to this mapping the main house was extended to the rear creating the two house-length corridors at ground floor and first floor levels. A later 2-storey link was built between the house and the dairy bringing them together as one very large dwelling, albeit with multitudinous changes in floor levels as you move between the different historical parts. In so doing, this created the enclosed lower courtyard.

Sometime between 1800 and 1840, the large, then detached, room standing out at the front left of the house, also of solid brick, was added. The fall in ground levels to the front of the house also enabled this room to be constructed with a substantial cellar which latterly became adopted as an apple store. The 1840 mapping shows this room detached from the main house and entered via a large central door along the longer side. This was later blocked-off and a new internal access door created when a link passageway to the main house with an early 'indoor' WC, was constructed. It is not clear for what purpose this extension was built. It was divided internally into at least three sections, evidenced in part by there being two separate chimneys, with a huge central doorway. Unusually high ceilings add to the mystery. During the late 1950s, this doorway was partially bricked-up to produce an opening of more practical size while the then-owner ran a TV maintenance business from within. These same owners later demolished the internal partitions, bricked up the external access completely and created a snooker room accessible through the internal link-passageway from the main house. Later owners (in 1976) again re-split the space into three areas and used the space as a freestanding annex/flat before further new owners in 1993 re-opened the space into a very large single room, as it remains to this day.

The east wing, comprising the breakfast kitchen and 'Burford' guest bedroom, complete with a very early full-size electric lift was added in 1962, as an independent annex for the aged and disabled parents of the Densham family; with the now en-suite bathroom having been a family bathroom entered directly from the main stairway landing. The slightly random locations of Crittal windows and doors suggest that some may have been installed to replace earlier rotten wooden frames while in other places the style of some wooden frames suggest 1940's or 1950's wood replacement of earlier Crittal windows. This compounds a slight mystery in that this part of the house was undoubtedly constructed in 1962 as is demonstrated by the cavity walls and other construction features (and as living descendants of the Densham family can testify), yet the footprint of this section was there prior to 1840. In other words, there must have been some parts of the building that were, for whatever reason, demolished. Whether or not these were previously habitable parts or store rooms/barns of some type is unclear. Either way, other than on the main house frontage, the windows and doors on all other aspects comprise an inconsistent mixture of styles that do not necessarily concur with the age and type of building structure in which they are located. The photograph dated 1910 also shows a lean-to shelter to the east elevation that no longer exists. This outbuilding appears in a photograph believed to be taken in 1959 but no longer exists in a picture of 1961, it having been demolished to enable access to the new side-entrance to the extended accommodation.



1910 photograph



Early 1950s Photograph (reproduced from 8mm cine film)



1959 Photograph



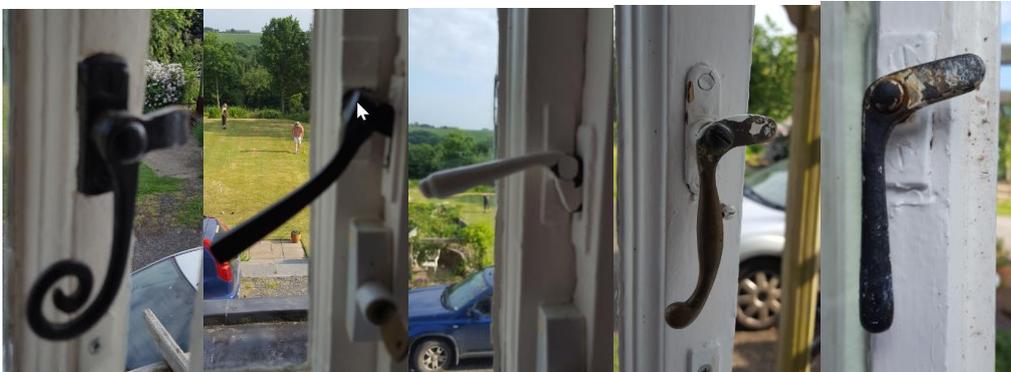
1961 Photograph

Close examination of these photographs shows original concrete surrounds to the upper story windows in keeping with the rest of the windows around the house. These must have decayed to the point of needing to be completely removed at some time post 1961. There is no logical explanation as to why these concrete sills and lintels were not replaced, affording the structural and weather protection for which the originals were intended. Ironically, the protected Listed Building status of the house prevents the reinstatement of this important structural feature that protects the cob walls from water ingress. Close examination of the current bay windows reveals the carpentry joints where the original straight windows were converted to curved section some time post 1910. The previous box sashes of the straight windows were retained, creating windows curved in two planes sitting in sashes of different orientation to the windows themselves and a mechanism that quite probably has never worked satisfactorily since the day it was installed. In any event, the window profile is clearly not 'Georgian'.

Study of the window furniture reveals inconsistencies suggesting that piecemeal repairs and upgrading of individual windows took place at various different times.



One room has three (of the five) different styles within the one space. Realistically, softwood window casements, even with good maintenance, would only last between 15 and 50 years. All window frames were therefore highly likely to have been replaced during the 20th century but probably not all at the same time. Successive owners would wish to match the general architecture in so far as they could but none of these features are likely to be original Georgian - indeed, the general size of the glazing is not typical of the Georgian period: the timberwork simply would not have survived the exposure to the weather. Variations in the beading also supports this hypothesis. The most likely evolution of the front windows is that at some time, probably in the 19th century, the main windows were all replaced at the same time and in identical style. Subsequently there has been piecemeal replacement or repair of individual windows maintaining that style in so far as is possible. Interestingly, the kitchen window that we know was previously a doorway until at least 1910, looks no older or newer than other windows in the frontage, suggesting they may all be from around that period.



Other old photographs show some openings on the west elevation as having large-paned 'picture windows' typical of the post-war period. These windows are currently of Georgian small-paned style suggesting that various owners over the years have made attempts to reproduce a Georgian-like appearance even though probably none are authentically Georgian. Even the large front bay-windows are clearly of different style to the surrounding openings suggesting a failed attempt to reproduce something to look older than it really is.



'Picture' windows on western elevation prior to being changed to mock Georgian windows.

The 'Listed' Building

The official 'listing' description provides no historical facts or structural analysis but a simple statement of what could be seen on that day in 1965. The pre-cursor by the word 'probably' suggests that the author had limited understanding of the likely evolution of the building and clearly mistakenly assumed the whole house to have been constructed at one time.

House. Probably C18. Plastered cob and rubble; rubble stacks with C18 or C19 brick chimney shafts; slate roof. 3 room plan house facing south with entrance hall and stairs right (east) of centre. Projecting end stacks to both end rooms and rear lateral stack to central room. 2 storeys. Balanced but asymmetrical 5-window front. Doorway right of centre. Late C18-early C19 6-panel door is partly glazed; panelled reveals; fluted doorcase; and flat-roofed Tuscan porch has turned granite columns and moulded entablature. Doorway is flanked by curving bay windows containing forward 16-pane sashes and 8-pane side sashes. Other windows contain late C19 casements with glazing bars. Windows include great deal of old glass. Coved plaster eaves cornice. Roof hipped each end and flanked by tall brick chimney shafts.

Interior includes some original plasterwork and joinery.

In actual fact, the 1910 photograph proves that the listing assumptions of C18 features are actually all C20 fakes. None of them existed in 1910. Most importantly, the 'C18 Tuscan porch and turned granite columns' did not exist in 1910, nor did the internal 'original plasterwork and joinery' around the windows that are now known to have been a completely different profile at that time.

At some time after the 1910 photograph, a substantial summerhouse was constructed to the south (front) of the annex and of which the only record is this picture taken during the severe winter of 1962.



Whether this building collapsed or was demolished is not yet known although when looking at this photograph and the gradient of the ground in that area then this outbuilding probably had quite precarious foundations.

Only one significant building change has occurred since listing and that is the addition of an orangery to the west side in the early 2000s.

Other Historical Context



1840 Tythe Mapping

One feature that is difficult to analyse are the two single-storey WC's to the west of the main kitchen. These are also constructed of cob, suggesting early construction, but they do not appear on the mapping of 1840. They were probably originally detached from the main house and linked to the house at the same time as the passageway was constructed to create an internal passageway to the then detached annex. Drainage from these toilets follows a completely different pipe network to the rest of the house drainage, suggesting they may have once been a very early example of toilets with a direct outfall to the river rather than a cess pit of any sort. The steep fall of the land across the property also creates the unusual situation whereby the standing water level of the well is around 2m above the ground floor level of the house meaning that well water could have been piped by gravity feed both to the kitchen and to the toilets of the original house. To this day, the toilets throughout the house are plumbed separately from drinking and washing water supplies enabling them still to be fed directly from the well.

This map also shows an outbuilding at the top left of the general layout which must have been demolished (or conveniently collapsed) for the construction of the present road. The present road is effectively in a cutting at this point whereas the original road must have followed the contours of the land in a slightly wider, more westerly, arc before passing close to the mill and crossing the river at a ford. Furthermore, it can be seen that the part of the old stables closest to the road is of much more modern brick construction than the adjacent cob parts, re-enforcing the likelihood that the westerly end of the original stables completely collapsed at some stage.

Finally, the walled garden itself most probably has C18 origins being contained on two sides by old cob walling. The alignment of the westerly boundary follows that of the current roadway suggesting that the garden was constructed after the realignment of the road and demolition of the original most-westerly outbuilding. The original roadside section of wall is known to have become dangerously cracked at some point in the early 1960s and had to be completely demolished. This whole operation involved a complete road closure and was recorded on early 8mm home cinematography. The present concrete block construction was installed as a replacement at that time. Other parts of the old cob stables are also now replaced by concrete blocks most probably after failure of the original cob walls.

Summary

There has clearly been a substantial domestic dwelling on this site for around 300 years. The early house had at least 17 acres of adjacent land and the existence of the dairy indicates likely livestock farming. The house was originally known as 'Lower Mill Mansion House' but whether this just acknowledges the adjacent proximity of the Lapford Mill or whether the mill owner actually built the house for his own use is a matter of speculation. Either way, the house would appear to have been in private ownership throughout its existence, not being part of any historical heritage or occupied by any historically significant persons.

As a building with around 300 years of history under a succession of private owners, it is not surprising that each would make their mark, building extensions, changing the internal layout, or simply replacing fixtures that have decayed and failed. The result is a building, undoubtedly of Georgian origins, but with no demonstrably Georgian architectural features remaining other than the original cob walls. As this building material was (and still is) widely used throughout Devon then the fact that the building is so constructed does not give the building any special historical or architectural interest.