

THE COTSWOLDS HIDDEN CRUCKS PROJECT – BISHOP’S CLEEVE

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The background

The idea of including Bishop’s Cleeve in the Cotswolds Hidden Cruck Project came from the local branch of the U3A, following previous projects conducted by the Gloucestershire Building Research Group (GBRG) in Gloucester, Newent and Tewkesbury. The group was contacted and confirmed it would be a worthwhile project. Gloucestershire Archaeology generously awarded the annual Frocester Fund grant to the project and the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society and the Vernacular Architecture Group also gave grants so that the project could proceed at no cost to the householders. The project was launched on 14 July 2023 by the authors Dr Andy Moir, chairman of the GBRG, and David Aldred, at a well-attended meeting in the Tithe Barn in the village. Dr Moir carried out all the dendrochronology sampling. The response from households was so good that all the timber-framed houses in the historic village were dated, albeit most stylistically. The fieldwork was carried out between 11 September 2023 and 16 April 2024. (see Fig. 1)

Summary

Eight buildings from Bishop’s Cleeve and surrounding parishes were tree-ring dated, including four buildings of cruck construction. The earliest date came from the roof of the great hall of Southam House, now the Ellenborough Park Hotel, which was dated to 1317. Three other cruck buildings were dated, Bishop’s Cleeve Tithe Barn to 1382, and Southam Tithe Barn to 1430. Slightly further afield, Postlip Tithe Barn was dated unexpectedly late in 1603 which seems to have been a time of rebuilding rather than the original construction. Other tree-ring dates were 1607 for both 79 Station Road and White’s Farm in Gotherington. The roof of the porch of St Michael’s church was dated to 1449 and, in addition, the dugout chest inside the church was dated as likely constructed between 1475 and 1507. Disturbances in the tree-ring series caused by management of the growing trees are likely to have been the reason for the failure to date some of the samples.

The prevalence of elm in buildings in Bishop’s Cleeve was unexpected and necessitated the stylistic assessment of a greater number of buildings than anticipated because dendrochronology dating is confined to oak. In total, fifteen buildings were stylistically dated in Bishop’s Cleeve and three in

Gotherington, which lay in the historic ecclesiastical parish of Bishop’s Cleeve. In total ten buildings of cruck construction were identified. Cruck construction is shown to have been used up to around the end of the sixteenth century; an upper cruck in the front range of Eversfield House in Station Road was stylistically dated to 1580 -1620. The earliest building of box-frame design identified in Bishop’s Cleeve, 29 Church Rd, was tree-ring dated to 1447 and two other buildings, the Old Farm in Station Road and Willow Cottage in Stoke Road, were stylistically dated to c.1480 and c.1500, respectively. One tree-ring dated building at 79 Station Road (dated 1607), together with six stylistically dated Jacobean (1600–39) buildings, identified a previously unrecognised expansion of building in the village. This period of building continued into the Stuart period (1640–1700), with the likely construction of seven buildings.

During the project a total of ten timber-framed houses and barns were discovered to have been demolished in the last 60 years. Only one, a barn in Church Road, was recorded (Fig. 2). A date in the 18th century was given, with the possibility it had Medieval origins.¹



Fig. 2. The timber-framed barn in Church Road which was replaced by the Parish Office in 2009



Fig. 1. Plan of the historic centre of the village showing the location of the numbered buildings in the text (CC-BY [LNS])

The buildings (Fig. 3) and who might have built them

People have been living in Bishop's Cleeve continuously since the Bronze Age (c.2000BC–c.800BC) but the only evidence for this has had to come from the archaeological excavations as the village has expanded since the late 1980s.² A nucleated village seems to have formed around the minster church of St Michael, first recorded in 777–79, as people moved from their individual farmsteads dispersed around the local area, several of which have been discovered by the archaeologists over the last thirty years. However, the oldest standing building is St Michael's church, where the styles of the architecture indicate the oldest parts date from c.1190 (1). The oldest part of Cleeve Hall (2), originally the Bishop of Worcester's manor house, dates from about half a century later and the Tithe Barn (previously the bishop's barn) has been dated by the project to 1382 (3).³ Significantly, stone from Cleeve Hill was only being used in these high-status buildings. The oldest timber-framed building precisely dated by the project was 29 Church Road; the felling of the timbers was dated to 1447 (4). This is one year after the village made a plea to government to be excused from paying national taxes for 20 years because of a devastating fire.⁴ Historians have debated whether the claim was just an excuse to refuse to pay taxes, but 29 Church Road may support the theory that the fire did happen and that it is the sole survivor of the re-building. Cruck-built Shady Nook in Shutter Lane in Gotherington, which was in the Bishop of Worcester's manor of Lower Gotherington, has been stylistically dated by the project to c.1350, which gives an indication of what has been lost in Bishop's Cleeve (Fig. 4).

Between the 9th century and 1561 the Bishop of Worcester held the manor, apart from a much smaller manor held by the rector of St Michael's church. Some of the houses date stylistically from these years. The Old Farm in Station Road c.1480 (5), Willow Cottage, Stoke Road c.1500 (6) and cruck-built 23 and 25 Station Road, previously Cleevelands farmhouse, c.1450–c.1500 (7i,7ii). Laburnum Cottage in Church Road, stylistically dated to the early 16th century, also contains crucks (8). The two wings behind 43 Station Road have been similarly dated, although the front range dates from c.1740 (9i,9ii). The bishop's records can help us to understand why so few timber-framed buildings survive from this time. The Black Death of 1348–49 affected the village over a century before the possible fire and it reduced the population by a third and so buildings would have consequently stood empty and become ruinous.⁵ Then throughout the 15th and into the 16th century there are frequent references in the bishop's manorial court rolls to tenants being ordered to repair their ruinous

buildings. In a court held in October 1503, five tenants were ordered to undertake repairs. Eleven years later four had still not repaired them and neither had 'other tenants'.⁶ This situation often happened when a tenant took over extra holdings and allowed its buildings to decay. These were the forerunners of the holdings which allowed their owners to build houses which were studied in the project. Much more recently, in 1956 twenty houses 'in the low category' were identified for demolition by the county planning authorities and several of these were timber framed.⁷

In 1561 the bishop's manor of Bishop's Cleeve came into the hands of the crown. Three buildings have been identified as possibly being built during the crown's possession: St Michael's Cottage in Priory Lane (10), Littlecroft in Tobyfield Lane (11) and the King's Head public house in Cheltenham Road (12), although the latter two might have been built soon after 1604 when King James I sold the manor to two London merchants, Peter Vanlore and William Blake, for £2300.⁸ They were obviously asset strippers. In 1606 they sold off 43a (16½ha) to William Fowler, described as a yeoman, for £103.⁹ Several houses have been dated by the project to the first half of the 17th century. 79 Station Road has been tree-ring dated to 1607 (13), the same year as White's Farm in Gotherington (Fig. 5). Cleeveland Cottage in Evesham Road (14), Church Cottage in School Road (15) and The Old Cottage 47 Station Road (16), 87 Station Road (17) and Rose Cottage, 89 Station Road (18) have also been dated stylistically to the same period. If a possible factor behind this period of building came from attempts by the lords of the manor to increase their income by providing houses for their tenants, whose rents provided them with their wealth, the asset stripping new lords, and Giles Broadway of Postlip to whom they sold the manor in 1620 for £2700, seem unlikely instigators.¹⁰ Three years later Giles sold off 10a (4ha).¹¹ Giles only held the manor for four years before selling it to Timothy Gate, who had been rector of Bishop's Cleeve since 1612 and who remained rector and lord of the manor until 1659. He was rector in the early years of the 17th century and was possibly still alive when a second wave of house building was occurring.¹² The main range of Eversfield House in Station Road is dated c.1640–c.1700 (19) (and see below). Timothy was a rich man, paying £3000 for the manor, the land of which at that time extended to 486a (202ha).¹³ As the parish of Bishop's Cleeve was 2,326a (969ha) in size, most of which had formed the bishop's manor, much of its land had already been sold off and the two above transactions for which the records survive can represent only part of the trend of asset stripping.¹⁴ Timothy came from a minor gentry family in East Anglia and had married the widow of his predecessor Peter Cocks who had inherited her husband's

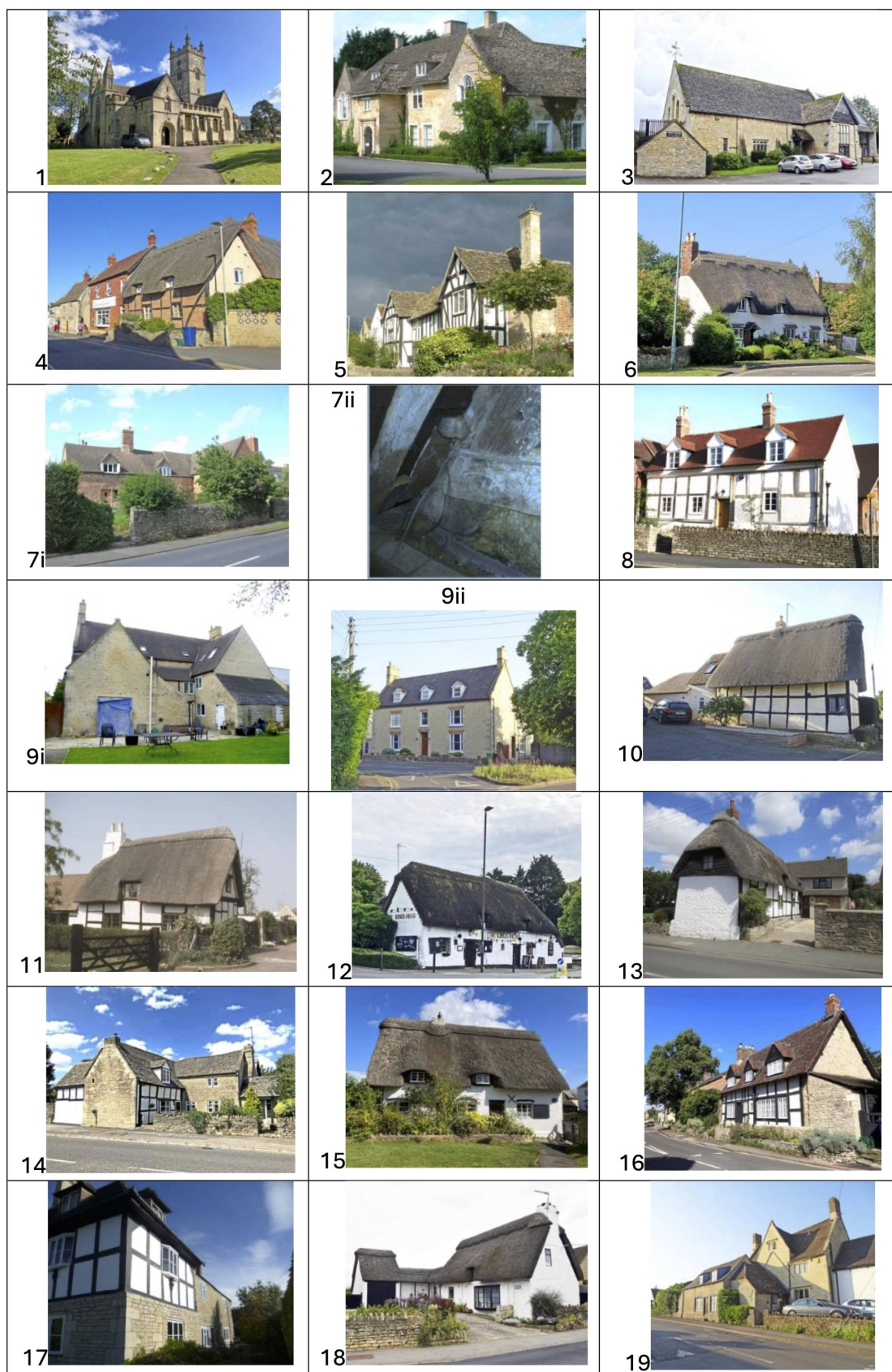


Fig. 3. The buildings of Bishop's Cleeve. (Numbers as per Fig.1)



Fig. 3. continued. The buildings of Bishop's Cleeve. (Numbers as per Fig.1)

1. The west end of St Michael's church is part of the original construction, except the large window which was inserted in the fourteenth century
2. The oldest part of Cleeve Hall is nearest the camera with a lower roof than the rest of the building
3. The Tithe Barn was converted into a village hall in the 1950s and extended in 2011. The roof timbers have been precisely dated to 1382. Old maps show that there was a saw pit under the present car park. Here the timber used in many of the buildings was sawn
4. 29 Church Road. The timbers are modern but they follow the lines of the original timbers
5. The Old Farm is the most prestigious timber-framed building in the village
6. Willow Cottage on the corner of Stoke Road. Its timber-framed construction is hidden behind the rendered walls
- 7i. The use of brick in the late 17th or early 18th centuries has hidden the timber-framed construction of the former Cleevelands Farmhouse
- 7ii. The small patch of smoke-blackened timber in the roof evidence this was once a Medieval open hall lacking a chimney
8. Like many of the village's timber-framed buildings Laburnum Cottage was built using elm so that its crucks had to be stylistically dated
- 9i. The two wings at the back of 43 Station Road are much earlier than the front
- 9ii. The new front was built parallel to the road at right angles to the wings behind. It was built c.1740 for William Strahan of Haymes after he had bought the manor of Bishop's Cleeve
10. St Michael's Cottage in Priory Lane is one of three surviving timber-framed cottages built on an extension to the village before the Black Death called 'Abovetown'
11. Littlecroft in Tobyfield Lane photographed in 1976 (W. Potter archive)
12. The King's Head public house
13. 79 Station Road. One of three timber-framed cottages built in 'Abovetown' and all three are at right-angles to the road, unlike the surviving houses in the village centre
14. Cleeveland Cottage in Evesham Road
15. Church Cottage in School Road
16. The Old Cottage, 47 Station Road
17. 87 Station Road
18. Rose Cottage, 89 Station Road; the third surviving timber-framed building in 'Abovetown'
19. The main range of Eversfield House stands behind the earlier building which was stylistically dated to 1540s to 1620s
20. The west wall of The Priory with its hoodmoulds above the windows survives from the rebuilding after 1665 (W. Potter archive)
21. Greyholme in Church Road
22. The Old Mill in School Road. There is no evidence that it was ever a mill
23. Home Farm in Cheltenham Road. Circumstantial evidence suggests it was the rector's home farm, with its origins dating from the time when The Priory was the rectory until 1624. The present building is much later
24. 40 Station Road. The origins of this large brick house are not known
25. 8-10 School Road

considerable wealth.¹⁵ In addition, Timothy's annual income as rector was declared as £500 in 1650.¹⁶ He still had an eye to increase his wealth by being involved in the local tobacco growing venture in 1619.¹⁷ Unsurprisingly he was the only person living in the village who was recorded as a 'gentleman' in 1623.¹⁸ The house building in the 17th century could have been in part the result of his investing in the village infrastructure to increase further income, although leasing out the manor in 1647 and again in 1655 might suggest he regarded it only as a source of his wealth.¹⁹

Thus it seems the lords were unlikely to have been interested in building houses for their tenants, except, perhaps, for Timothy Gate, and so other reasons must be sought. The lack of a lord's close control over Bishop's Cleeve by this time, unlike in Gotherington and Southam, meant that individuals, whether crafts people, farmers or even landholders building up small estates, had the finances and freedom to build houses for themselves. That house building was active in 1607, the tree ring date of 79 Station Road (13), is also supported from a list of able-bodied men drawn up for military purposes in 1608. Five carpenters were recorded living in Gotherington, which is a large number in one small village, suggesting they had to work elsewhere, in this case constructing and working on houses in Bishop's Cleeve just a mile away.²⁰ Many historians agree that the 17th century saw a movement in the countryside out of agriculture and into trades and manufacturing.²¹ In 1608 already three tailors, four shoemakers, a blacksmith with two apprentices, a tanner, and butcher were amongst the non-agricultural occupations of able-bodied men living in the village. Some of these people would have had the means to build the houses which have survived. Also, others might have profited from the break-up of the manor to build up a landholding which they either farmed directly or rented out to produce the wealth to build houses for themselves. Unfortunately, the written records do not provide any individual details of the builders or occupants of the houses studied in the project, except for the Old Farm in Station Road (5). The likely builder was Thomas Yardington or his son, also Thomas. In 1474-75 Thomas senior was recorded as a cotlander who held just six acres (2½ hectares). From 1471 to 1525 they rented the Bishop of Worcester's demesne (the area not rented out to tenants) which extended to 400a (160ha). From the profits of this he was able to build for himself this prestigious house facing away from the village centre. His son Thomas described himself as a 'yeoman', a term of status.²²

Timothy Gate sold off all the land of the manor, except the Bishop of Worcester's former manor house

and its gardens, in 1659.²³ This change in the ownership of the land occurred about the time timber-framed houses ceased to be built. Brick began to appear, in the rebuilding of 23 and 25 Station Road after c.1660 (7i), and on the south and west facing walls of the Old Farm (5). It was also used to replace the wattle and daub infill in the timber framing. The bricks were made locally from two clay pits along Stoke Road, one of which survives at Lake View.²⁴ About the same time stone began to replace timber framing for the prestigious houses in the village. The Priory (20), facing the north side of St Michael's church, was rebuilt after Timothy Gate moved from what had been the rectory to the former bishop's manor house in 1624. The Priory was described as being in 'a ruinous state' and in 1665 it was described as 'delapidated'.²⁵ The main range of Eversfield House in Station Road (19), and Greyholme in Church Road (21) were built when hoodmoulds above the windows were fashionable, in the second half of the 17th century and into the early 18th century.²⁶ There is no evidence they were built as working farms although the wealth could have come from landowning. The expense of bringing stone from Cleeve Hill was one of the factors delaying its widespread use in the smaller houses until the 19th century. The Old Mill in School Road (22) has the date stone 1817 and it was one of the earliest such houses to have been built. The use of stone at this time was paralleled by the continuing use of brick, for example in Home Farm on Cheltenham Road (23) and the three-storey house, now 40 Station Road (24). Interestingly 8-10 School Road (25) was brick-built but with a stone-front. All these houses had been built before 1839.²⁷

The timber

A great deal of timber was needed to build a house or barn. The results of this project have shown that elm was the timber most used, with many fewer buildings constructed of oak. Elm trees were a common feature in the landscape until their decimation by Dutch Elm Disease in the 1960s and 1970s. Although elm trees grew in the local woodlands, an unknown number grew free-standing alongside roads and tracks and in the hedges, which existed mostly around the small, enclosed fields on the slopes of Nottingham Hill and Cleeve Hill. Only by 1847 had hedged fields been created in the vale by the enclosure of the former openfields with their corrugated ridge and furrow pattern.²⁸ Some idea of the value of these free-standing trees can be gained from a manorial survey in neighbouring Southam in 1620; the timber in Thrift Wood and Stutfield Wood on the slopes of Cleeve Hill was valued at £25, but the free-standing trees were valued at £1000.²⁹ Free standing trees had more space to grow into timber suitable for house building.



Fig. 4. The cruck construction of Shady Nook in Gotherington was exposed in 1979 when the building was extensively renovated



Fig. 5. White's Farm in Gotherington was built on that part of Gotherington which had belonged to the Bishop of Worcester until 1561



Fig. 6. The historic woodlands on the slopes of Cleeve Hill belonged to the manor of Southam and therefore could not be used as a source of timber for Bishop's Cleeve

References to nearby Queen's Wood can also give some idea how such woodlands were managed to provide timber for house building (Fig. 6). Although its main characteristic was coppiced woodland, in which the wood grew usually for seven to ten years before being felled, in 1537 there is a reference that it was timber from Queen's Wood which was being taken to repair timbers in Southam House.³⁰ Further reference to timber in 1591 supports the conclusion that timber for building was growing there, for it was recorded that the oak trees which had recently been planted, had been destroyed by cattle which had strayed into the wood.³¹ There is possible evidence that it was divided into areas to facilitate coppicing, but there has been too much soil slumping over the centuries to be absolutely sure.³² In 1599 and 1600 there were more complaints of the destruction of the young planted oak trees which had been deliberately planted for timber for building. Five years later we find the earliest historic reference that the trees in Queen's Wood were being managed.³³ In 1604 King James I, who then held the larger part of Southam manor, granted it to the two London merchants Peter Vanlore and William Blake to whom Bishop's Cleeve manor had been granted. The grant included the trees, wood and underwood of Queen's Wood, allowing the lopping (removal of the treetop) and shredding (removal of side branches) "as have heretofore usually been lopped and shredded".³⁴ Such actions not only provided fodder for animals, but also wood for handles, hurdles and wattles to supplement that cut from coppiced trees. This is clear evidence of the management of the trees which has prevented the dating of some of the samples taken in this project, by affecting the size of the annual ring growth of the trees so managed (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Evidence that Queen's Wood was carefully managed can be seen in surviving lengths of its boundary bank and ditch

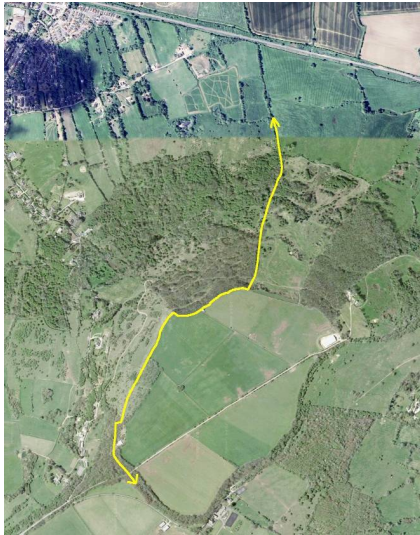


Fig. 8. Bushcombe Wood lies to the south of the boundary with Gotherington, shown by the yellow line. With Gotherington Grove to the north it was an extensive area of woodland, parts of which have been cleared for pasture (Based on Google maps)



Fig.9i. By the time of the first edition Ordnance Survey map (1811) only the name of West Wood was recorded on the map



Fig. 9ii. The 1811 woodland boundary and the boundary between Bishop's Cleeve and Charlton Abbots (which belonged to Winchcombe Abbey) superimposed on a modern aerial view. It shows how Wontley Wood has been completely destroyed (Based on Google maps)

There were two extensive areas of woodland in Bishop's Cleeve manor; Bushcombe Wood (Fig. 8) and Wontley Wood or East Wood (Fig. 9i, ii). The former survives as coppiced woodland, although it was once more extensive. Wontley Wood was grubbed out between 1828 and 1833 in an unsuccessful attempt to expand the arable land to make Wontley Farm profitable for the landowners, the Lawrence family of Sevenhampton.³⁵ All references to Bushcombe Wood would seem to indicate it was coppiced woodland where the trees were cut every seven to ten years for fences, staves, handles and firewood and where pigs were grazed. In 1299 the underwood was sold for 5s (25p).³⁶ So this meant that Wontley Wood with its elm and oak was the main woodland supply of the timber used in timber framing, despite its unfavourable location on the other side of Cleeve Common. It was a precious resource as the archives evidence. In c.1170 two keepers of the wood were recorded.³⁷ In 1299 Richard Cole and Henry Knight, who lived at the now deserted hamlet at Wontley immediately west of the ruined farm, were quit of half the rent paid to the bishop because they acted as woodwards.³⁸ In 1396–97 there is a reference to timber from the wood being cut to re-roof four of the shops at Cheapside, the area in the centre of Bishop's Cleeve where the war memorial is now located, on the rector's manor (Fig. 10).³⁹ This smaller manor must have had licence to cut timber from the bishop's wood as it was recorded that in 1491 Thomas Kear, described as the rector's servant, was fined 6d (2½p) for cutting withies (stakes) without a licence.⁴⁰ In 1474–75 the bishop's bailiff was paid a quarter of wheat a year for keeping the wood at Wontley, by which date the settlement there had been abandoned.⁴¹ Occasional references in the court rolls confirm the woods were



Fig. 10. This late 16th or early 17th century timber-framed house stood in Cheapside. It was demolished in 1966 and the site is now where the village war memorial stands

carefully protected. In 1505-06 13s 4d (66p) was paid to put a fence around Wontley Wood to protect it from straying animals.⁴² However the clearest reference to the importance of the woodland here can be found in the archives of Winchcombe Abbey. Since at least the 11th century the boundary between the manor of the Bishop of Worcester and that of the Abbot of Winchcombe had run in a straight line through the middle of the woodland, thus sharing it between them and emphasising its importance for both manors.⁴³ The abbey's part was named West Wood and the bishop's part Wontley Wood or East Wood. In 1554 the townspeople of Winchcombe petitioned the king and queen, Philip and Mary, who had inherited West Wood after the dissolution of Winchcombe Abbey in 1539, not to grant it away as a gift, for they claimed it was the only wood good enough to provide timber to repair 80–100 houses and five mills in the town.⁴⁴ By inference it was serving the same purpose for Bishop's Cleeve.

There are isolated references in the historical record that both the bishop and the rector also looked elsewhere for supplies of wood and timber. In 1396-97 the rector bought logs, presumably for his fire, from Alveley in Shropshire and Bewdley in Worcestershire.⁴⁵ In 1465 John Wythy was paid 10s (50p) for bringing timber from the bishop's manor of Hartlebury to repair his granary (now the Tithe Barn) in Bishop's Cleeve, not to build it as was previously thought, the project having dated the roof to 1382.⁴⁶ This transaction also evidences the importance for transportation of the River Severn with Tewkesbury as the local port.

The difficulties with obtaining sufficient quantities of timber was probably a local reason why stone from Cleeve Hill and brick were increasingly used from the 17th century. These alternatives to wood meant that Wontley Wood lost much of its importance so that it was destroyed as private property in the early 19th century without any objection, leaving only West Wood as the survivor of the historical importance of this area of woodland as a source of building material for both Bishop's Cleeve and Winchcombe.

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Cleeve U3A whose interest and enthusiasm instigated the project. The illustrations have been provided by the authors unless otherwise stated.

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