

No19: The Old Bluecoat School, Thatcham

SPAB member **Mark Thomas** writes about a local Berkshire landmark...

Alongside the A4 in Thatcham, Berkshire, is a small building now known as the Old Bluecoat School. Although it was a school in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the building's history is much longer than that. The style of the east window shows that it was once a chapel and it is believed to have been built in 1304 as the Chapel of the medieval Borough of Thatcham.

Living in Thatcham for over 30 years, I could not avoid noticing the rather tired old building by the side of the main road. Having a background in construction, I volunteered to help the trustees during the refurbishment in 2014 and quickly got co-opted onto the committee. Like others before me, I started to investigate the history of the building and became fascinated by how the ancient building had survived through cycles of decay and repair.

A Victorian historian, Samuel Barfield, discovered the original licence from the Bishop of Salisbury dated May 3, 1304, granting a local landowner and later Lord of the Manor, Sir Richard de Fockenham, and the parishioners of Thatcham the right to hold chantry services in the chapel which they had already built at their own expense.

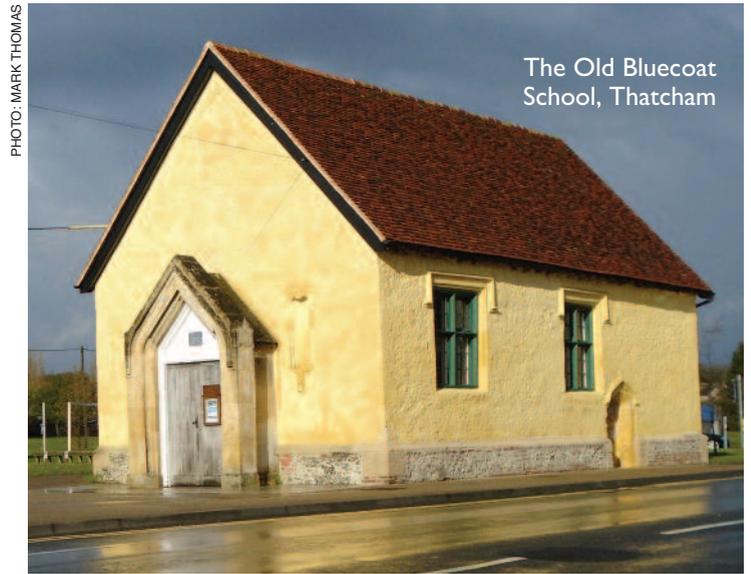
Later authors speculated about why the chapel was built, although, from its location adjacent to the historic London to Bath road, one likely use could have been as a wayside chapel situated at the boundary of the newly created borough. The promotion of Thatcham town to borough status appears contemporary with building of the chapel and it is tempting to see the new chapel as a prominent civic status symbol for the new borough. The national rarity of a surviving free-standing wayside chapel accounts for the

building's Grade-I listing in 1983.

Between 1304 and 1707 little is known about the chapel other than that, somehow, it survived. There is a single reference from 1446 saying that it is dedicated to St Thomas the Martyr. Another mystery is that there is supposedly no record of it at the 1547 Abolition of the Chantries during the Reformation. It appears in the records again in 1661 as "the Chapel of this Borough" almost as if it was still in use.

From 1707 we are on firmer historical ground. Lady Frances Winchcombe bought the "old decayed chapel" to convert into a charity school for 30 local poor boys, although it didn't properly open until 1794. The charity's surviving account books from that year record the clothing bought for the boys, but do not specifically describe the coats as blue until 1900. (A "Blue Coat" school was a popular unofficial name for one of many similar charity schools.)

The school closed in 1914 when the master was called up for military service. From the end of the First World War until 1964, Berkshire County Council rented the building for school cookery lessons. After 1964 the trustees of Lady Winchcombe's charity could not find a new use for the building and its upkeep was unsustainable. It was sold to Newbury District Council in 1969 for £2,500. The building was used as an antiques shop during the 1990s but fell empty again. In 2003, local councillor Barbara Collins-Wootton saw that the council was proposing to sell the building by public auction as surplus to requirements. Mrs Collins-Wootton set up a committee with other Thatcham residents and succeeded in transferring the building to a new charity with a long lease from the council to



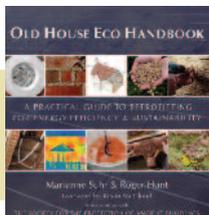
The Old Bluecoat School, Thatcham

manage it for community use.

After 10 years of fundraising, and thanks to the generosity of local businesses, a start was made on refurbishing the exterior of the building in 2014. Modern cement render was removed from the flint walls and replaced with lime render and limewash. Temporary acrylic window panes, which had been there for over 30 years, were replaced with leaded lights in the original wooden frames and were based on an old photograph from 1897. The roof was re-laid, while saving 75 per cent of the old tiles.

Currently the interior is suffering from the 1973 refurbishment of cement-rendered walls, a concrete floor slab and varnished plywood dado panels that cover up damp. The most striking feature is the attractive scissor-beamed roof. Described by some as Victorian or Tudor or, more credibly, as 15th century with an older tie-beam, the roof structure is an obvious candidate for more scientific dating.

The building is now in daily use by local clubs and societies. Classical music concerts have been very successful, with many performers commenting on the excellent acoustics. Longer term plans, money and permissions permitting, are to refurbish the interior by removing the concrete floor and cement render and replace them with more appropriate materials. The challenge for a historic building in daily use will be to include sympathetic modern facilities, such as a catering area, so that the building is attractive to hirers and will continue in community use for the foreseeable future.



Do you have a favourite "ancient" building you would like to tell fellow members about? If so, send a description (not more than 600 words) and a high resolution (300 dpi and above) photograph to kate@spab.org.uk Contributors whose recommendations appear in the *SPAB Magazine* will receive a copy of *The Old House Eco Hand Book*.