

11 Castle Street, Thornbury

11 Castle Street, Thornbury, otherwise known as Porch House/ Christ the King parish hall/ the Catholic Club, is in fact two houses in one with additions. The oldest part is the parish hall, while the parlour, offices and kitchen are parts of a house which was built on in the seventeenth century. The club and the entrance from the car park, together with the upstairs rooms on that side are new, adapted from former outbuildings. The garden was the reason for buying the property in 1961, as it was large enough to build the church.

Old houses mean problems, at the moment most obviously the death watch beetle happily chewing its way through the first floor woodwork. They are also often inconvenient, so in 1982 the west end of the house was re-ordered as part of the changes to the church. At the same time the hall was altered. At the time it was a two-storey building, of which the ground floor had been adapted for use as a church before the new church was opened in 1964. In 1982 most of the first floor was removed, leaving the roof structure with its oak beams and windbraces exposed. And that made it possible to assess the age of the timber used.

Tree-ring dating relies on the fact that 'the width of a tree's annual growth rings varies from year to year, so that each series of years has a unique pattern of narrow and wide rings.' Oak tree-ring patterns have now been recorded over the last 2000 years or more, so the tree-ring pattern of an oak timber can be compared with this data base and the date when the tree was felled can be identified. As in medieval times wood was almost always used 'green' (unseasoned), we can then be reasonably sure that the roof in question was erected shortly after the date of the felling of the oak used.

In October last year Dr Andy Moir of Tree-Ring Services in Mitcheldean came and took core samples from the timbers in Porch House. He came and took more samples in March this year, and his summary conclusion is that the chronology of the oak timbers in Porch House 'span [the years] AD1249 to AD1400. One timber felled in 1400, together with close felling-date ranges from two other timbers, provides reasonable evidence that construction of Porch House occurred in AD1401, or soon after.' The old doorway, but not the porch, was found to be 'a feature of the original building'.

So it seems Porch House has been standing on Castle Street for some 600 years. The third Duke of Buckingham must have passed it on his way to execution in London on the orders of Henry VIII, and the story that the house was attacked during the English Civil War is certainly possible. The next question is, who built it, and why?

I would like to thank Andy Moir for his time and expertise, and Lesley for help with access to the hall. I should perhaps add that there was no cost to the parish. Quotations are from Dr Moir's final report, a copy of which can be borrowed from me. A copy will also go to the parish, and to the Thornbury museum.

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