

The little round house on Wheatlands Lane

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Summary

The little round building (HER no. 15827) in a field SK 241721 to the west of Baslow has been the subject of much speculation about its date of erection and use. It is recorded in the Peak Park

Treasures survey in 1977 and as a building of national or regional importance in a survey of 1999-2000.

This research aimed to investigate the building further and to assess the level of deterioration by a building survey and by using maps and other sources. It has not been possible to find any specific evidence and until more becomes available the conclusion is speculative. However evidence suggests that it is most likely to be an ash house erected before 1799 when the land was being enclosed from the moor and stored potash was used to improve the land for agriculture. As such it is a very unusual and possibly unique remnant of these times in Derbyshire and should be considered for repair and possible protection as a listed building by Historic England especially as there is evidence of deterioration.

Building description

It is a subcircular stone building with the remains of a stone domed or conical corbelled roof and open doorway. It measures approximately 1.75 to 1.85 m internally and is approximately 2.7 m high. It has the building specification of an ash house as described in the National Farm Building Types published by Historic England.

Walls

The walls are between 0.45 and 0.55m thick and are made of a mixture of sandstone in a similar manner to a dry stone wall, having an outer and inner layer filled with rubble. However the stones are held together with limestone mortar both inside and out, much of which has deteriorated. Internally in some places the mortar has been heavily applied suggesting a previous use which required some weather proofing. However it may be that the lime mortar is not part of the original structure and has been used at a later date during its repair.

There are four areas in the wall where stone has been lost. Two openings to the north vary between 0.20 and 0.35 m each through both layers. They appear to have a lintel on the inner side but not on the outer side suggesting that these may have been niches within the building, which have weakened the wall and have allowed deterioration of the outer face in these areas. The lintel stones are not robust and may be fortuitous, meaning that the openings result solely from deterioration in both sides of the wall. A third area of stone loss through both the outer and inner layers to the north of the building is smaller approximately 0.20 x 0.25 m and has no lintel stone. A fourth area to the south is 0.30 x 0.40 m and only present in the outer layer. These last two areas were not described during a survey in 1999-2000 suggesting that the wall condition is gradually deteriorating.

There appears to be a pale grey deposit on the lower, inner courses of wall stone to the north which has a different appearance to the lime mortar, being less white. No evidence of the deposit was found on the irregularly deposited stones under the shallow layer of soil (approximately 0.1 m) which had accumulated on the floor but the limited extent of this inspection means that the nature of the floor is yet to be determined. If the building had been an ash house then spectroscopy might be used to identify higher concentrations of potassium in the deposit or soil and give evidence to support this interpretation of its use.

The doorway faces south east and is approximately 0.80 m wide and 1.65 m high. with quoins and a sill made of one large stone. The keystone over the doorway is no longer in place and it appears to

be found within the stones on the ground nearby. There is no evidence for fixing or attachment of a door to the stone in the past.

Roof

The roof is made of sandstone blocks which have been dressed to form a corbelled roof. The lowest course protrudes and five courses rest on this base. The sixth course is present with some stones missing on the south. It is not possible to tell if the roof was domed or conical although there are only a few stones remaining within the base of the structure suggesting that it was domed. Whether these fully represent stone from a lost dome or there has been some removal of stone cannot be determined meaning that the roof may have been conical. The stones are dressed to form into a circle on the outer side but have been left coarser on the inner side. Lime mortaring is also present in the roof. Some larger stones on the floor of the building may be from some of the missing courses.

An old photograph from the first half of the 1900s shows that the building had seven full courses of stone with the upper layers missing providing evidence for deterioration.

Building condition

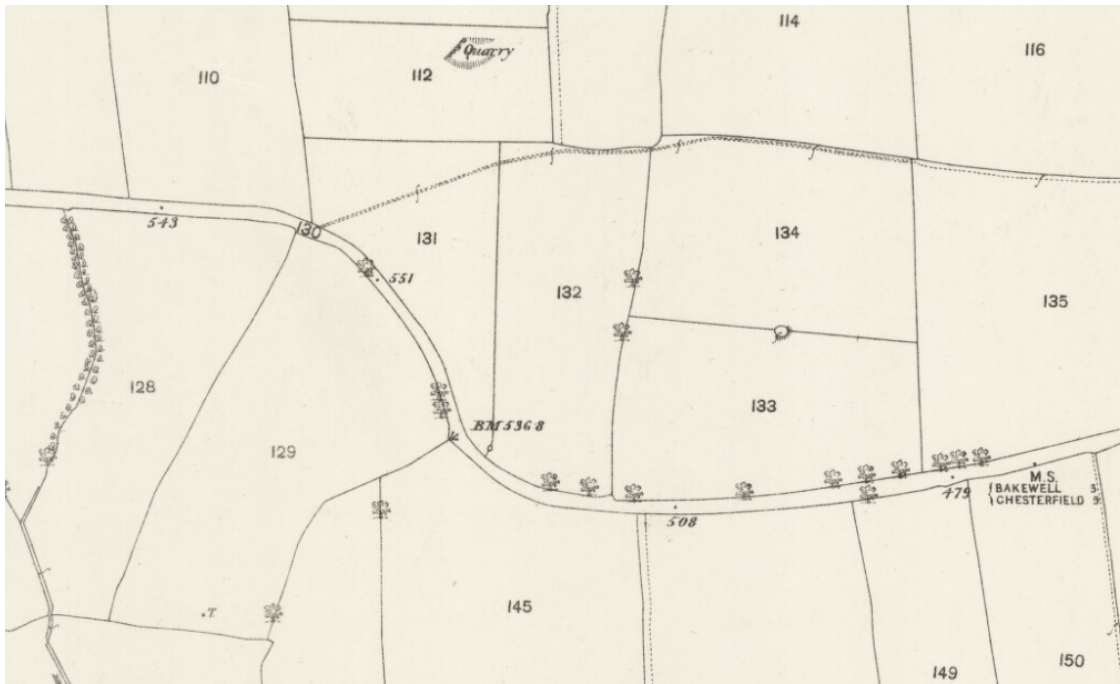
At some time in the past the building has been extensively pointed with lime mortar. This may have helped to explain its longevity. However this mortar has been lost in many places throughout the roof and walls leading to openings between the stones.

A comparison of old photographs and surveys shows that there is deterioration to both the roof and walls.

The roof is incomplete as shown in a photograph from the first part of the 1900s. By 1977 it had lost another course of stone completely and three stones are missing from the next lower course. This suggests that the integrity of the roof corbelling is at risk.

Loss of stone from the walls has occurred in four places. Two of these were present by 1999 and two more are now evident.

A recent spectacular flowering of poppies in June/July 2019 lead to international interest in the field and the farmer discovered that some visitors had climbed onto the structure "to obtain a better photograph" and this put the building unexpectedly at further at risk.



OS 25 inch England and Wales 1841-1952 Surveyed 1878, published 1879 Derbyshire XX111.4 Baslow and Bubnell. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

The round house is just below the BM 536.8. The remnants of strip fields to the lower right and other more irregular fields can be seen.

Map evidence

The building appears on the ordnance survey maps surveyed in 1878 where it is on a field boundary. This same field boundary is present on the 1799 Rutland map and 1848 tithe map but no building is marked. However field buildings were not always recorded when these maps were drawn.

The field boundary is visible in a photograph from the first half of the 1900s and it is a wall of stone (rather than a hedge). On the maps, the boundary to the north is straight but curves just before it abuts the round building thereby respecting the doorway. Also there is no evidence on the building today for these walls ever having been incorporated into the building. These factors suggest that it was present before the field walls were built and they were built to allow access to the south east doorway from the road via a field gate. The field boundaries nearby all respect the road which was formalised as a Turnpike in 1759 but there are likely to have been a trackway from Bubnell to Hassop before this road was built.

David Dalrymple Smith suggests that these walls were built at the time of the enclosure of the Bubnell, and before the Rutland map of 1799. The Historic Landscape Characteristic Survey describes these fields as irregular fields of possible medieval origin and unknown enclosure. The age of the enclosure of land to the west of Bubnell has been discussed in more detail by John Barnatt (1999-2000). He states that medieval strips probably once extended across all this land and piecemeal enclosures may have started in the later medieval period but not completed until the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Nearer to the building there is evidence of irregular/rectangular fields that may well have been created as piecemeal enclosure of a former common. The building is situated in

a position close to both the old strip fields and the common making it a convenient place to house ash to facilitate land improvement.

Ash house?

There has been much speculation over the years about what the building was used for. Evidence presented here suggests that the most likely use is as an ash house. This is a place where potash was stored to spread on fields to improve the soil. The ash from wood fires containing potassium was carted from the farmhouse in a similar manner to the saving of other household waste in a midden which was then also used as a fertiliser. Wood ash is alkaline and helps to improve the acid soils which arise particularly when old moorland is cultivated for arable crops. Potassium carbonate, the useful constituent of wood ash, is soluble and the lime mortaring of the walls and roof along with the intact roof would provide some degree of protection from being washed away by rain.

It is very similar in form to ash houses elsewhere. In Devon for example, several ash houses have survived and can be circular or square and often have a stone corbelled roof. No other examples of Derbyshire ash houses were discovered during this research.

Ash houses are usually sited next to the farmhouse and the ashes were removed each evening to prevent fires in buildings made of wood and thatch. An old sketch of the original farmhouse at Bubnell Cliff shows that it was made of stone with a thatched roof and it is likely that the other tenants of these fields had similar properties so it seems conceivable that ash was removed at night to prevent fires. However unlike those in Devon it has been sited further away from the farms and nearer to the fields which needed fertilising. It may be that it was built in this upland area in the 1700s for the communal benefit of the Duke of Rutland's tenants and the ash was carted up from all the farmhouses in Bubnell. If it is indeed an ash house, it is surprisingly well built and at the same time rather small and sited possibly inconveniently away from the farmhouses providing the ash.

This use of ash continued into the 1900s in Derbyshire as a local farmer remembers collecting ash in her youth at the family farm for spreading on fields near Ashbourne in the 1960s.

There is some speculation that potash stored in the little round house could have been collected for use in the glass industry which was operating in Chesterfield. However industrial quantities of potash could not have been stored in a building of its size and there is no local supply of coal which by law had to provide potash for glass manufacture making this suggestion unlikely.

Other uses

Others ideas are similarly less convincing. Although there was a recognisable problem in earlier times with the secure containment of criminals overnight on a journey of several days travelling to court, the building really is too small to be a lockup or pound and there is no evidence of it ever having a door.

Other suggestions such as a hermitary, a tool store or a gamekeeper's or shepherd's hut do not seem practical again for these reasons.

It could be a toll collector's shelter as the road nearby was once the 1759 Turnpike road from Eastmoor to Wardlow via Baslow, Hassop and Bakewell before the A619 "thirteen bends" road was constructed. However it would be strange to collect a toll there when there is a toll house at the old Baslow Bridge which is likely to have operated from the earliest times and also there is no obvious

junction with a source of traffic. During a farm survey for the Chatsworth Settlement Trust it was reported that local knowledge suggested that it was a well head but there is no sign of a well now.

Chris Mills the present tenant of Bubnell Cliffe Farm was told that the fields at the bend in the road near the round house were used as an informal cattle trading area in the past and it is possible that the building is related to this use.

Research into the field names or the tenants' family history did not reveal any pertinent evidence for its use.

Acknowledgments

David Dalrymple Smith, Chris Hall, Natalie Ward and Rebecca Waddington and other members of the Peak District National Park Authority Conservation team, Chris and Sue Mills, Sandra Dilks, staff of the Matlock Record Office.

References

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Photographs

All taken by Ann Hall in July 2019, except the one in black and white taken by Frank Rodgers.





Unknown date (first part of 1900s?) showing the roof with seven courses of stone and with keystone absent and showing field walls on either side. Frank Rodgers. (N.B. I have been unable to contact the photographer to ask for permission to use this photograph or to establish a more definite date.)



From the north east showing two areas of wall loss and the stone sill of the doorway.



From the north. Showing another area of wall loss. (Rucksack for scale)



From the south showing wall loss in the outer layer only.



From the north east, showing the wall made of an outer and inner layer of sandstone and rubble fill, with lime mortaring