

THE WOODCHESTER ROUNDHOUSE

Neville Crawford.

The Round House at Frogmarsh has been in the news for over 2 years in connection with several planning applications for its conversion into a house; (1) your Committee has been active in sending appropriate comments to the planning authority, and it is hoped that they helped to achieve a reasonable solution to a difficult problem. Incidentally, although the adaptation work has now been completed, further applications for alterations to the surrounds will continue to arrive.



A house called "Frogmarsh" has been recorded in documents going back to 1602 (2) and half a century later, in 1658, a fulling-mill and gig-mill with dye-house was noted. (3) This later became a cloth mill, though the exact date is not known. A change of use occurred in the early 1860s when Perkins, Critchley and Marmont commenced making pins here, and this continued until 1935 when the Carr Tanning Co. started. The mill site is well-known for a garden house and music room of 1720/30 which Lord Aberconway removed in 1938; it was re-erected at the south end of the Canal Terrace (4) in his beautiful gardens at Bodnant, situated in the Conway Valley.

To the west, across Frogmarsh Lane, was Rack Hill (5), used for drying and stretching the cloth on tenter racks, mostly scarlet or blue, and making a colourful display. In later years the cloth was dried indoors in long buildings. At the foot of this hill is the Round House, which for many years has also been called the Teasel Tower. (6) There has been an argument for a long time as to whether the building was originally constructed for drying wool, drying teasels, or bleaching wool.

One person who has written on the subject (7) believes that the Woodchester Tower was for wool drying, when the damp, dyed wool was placed on shelves round the tower. The wool was damp because it had been boiled in stale urine, a convenient way of obtaining ammonia to loosen the natural grease in the wool, and then rinsed out in clear water. (8) He considers that many other towers were not big enough for wool drying, especially those adjacent to the larger cloth mills, and that these stove houses were used for bleaching. Another writer (9) thinks that the building was almost certainly used as a sulphur stove for

bleaching. In this case sulphur was sprinkled onto an open fire of wood or charcoal and the building sealed with wet clay. The gasses re-acted with the yellow wool and bleached it to a white or pale cream shade.

The tower method of wool drying and bleaching eventually became out-of-date, and it was then that the Woodchester building was used for storing the teasel heads needed to raise the nap of the cloth; this would account for the name Teasel Tower. The teasels, mostly from Somerset, were fitted into a revolving cylinder and the raising process took approximately 12 hours. Later still the ground floor of the Woodchester Tower was fitted out as a stable with hay lofts on the upper floor.

The general consensus regards the tower as 18th century (7) (10), which again agrees with the recent article in the GSIA Journal, (11), when the earliest references mentioned for stove-houses are late 18th or early 19th century. However, the book on the history of Woodchester (6) says that it is a 16th century drying tower which was restored in 1937, but unfortunately no supporting evidence is given for the 16th century date, and the author tends to be unreliable. Unreliable also for lack of evidence is a story (12) that the site had been occupied prior to the 16th century by woad boilers and distillers working in a hutment, the foundations of which were said to be beneath the the present tower.

Difficulties of dating are increased by the fact that the tower is shown neither on the Dudbridge-Nailsworth Turnpike Map of 1780 (13), nor on the important Tithe Apportionment Plan of 1838 (5), a map which goes into considerable detail. Other maps of that period are too small in scale to show such a building.

The first planning application to alter the Round Tower into a house (14) was strongly opposed by your Committee as it partly wrapped the proposed house round the tower, which would have resulted in a "Scottish Baronial" appearance. This application was withdrawn at the end of that year, and a further one submitted (15) with a smaller new tower in natural stone walling and roof attached to the original. This was agreed to, and the additions and alterations were carried out in the summer of 1982, though the new tower had at one time to be pulled down and re-erected.

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(Note. Bisley Parish Perambulations of 1822 & 1856 both mention a Stove house at Chalford: "...through the Bell garden ... the old brook crosses the canal by the Stove house." (1822) "...the Bell garden, passes under the road and canal and continues with the brook down by Spring Mills and by the front of the Greyhound Inn, the brook still continuing to be the boundary to the Stove House." (1856) There was also mention of one at Avening, but the reference is lost to me. Ed.)

R E F E R E N C E S

- (1) GSIA Newsheets Nos. 39 & 40.
- (2) GRO D 677, though the figure 2 is not clear.
- (3) VCH Vol XI p 299.
- (4) "The Garden at Bodnant", N.T. publication.
- (5) Woodchester Tithe Apportionment Plan, 1838. GRO D 2219/3/10.
- (6) "A History of Woodchester", (1972), Rev. W.N.R.J. Back.
- (7) L.F.J. Walrond, in "The Cotswolds - A New Study", ed. C. & A.M. Hadfield.
- (8) Mrs. B. Mills, letter "The Round Tower", Stroud News & Journal.
- (9) Mr. C. Fuller, quoting Arthur Twisden Playne, "The Wool Stove" letter to Stroud News & Journal, 2 April 1981.
- (10) "The Woollen Industry of South-West England" (1971), K.G. Ponting.
- (11) "Wool Drying Stoves along the Painswick Stream", by Colleen Haine, GSIA Journal 1981.
- (12) Mr. R.M. Warner, "The Wool Stove, Frogmarsh", letter to Stroud N. & J. 26 March 1981.
- (13) Blue print of Plan by Mr. Rice, GRO D 67/276.
- (14) S/3742/C & S/LBC/388 22 Jan. 1981.
- (15) S/3742/D & S/LBC/388A 12 Nov. 1981.