

## An exploration of the Ashdown Forest Centre Barns

The three barns making up the Ashdown Forest Centre were erected for the Conservators in 1981 by a local firm specialising in recycled old timber buildings, yet little is known of their provenance. A recent visit by timber-frame buildings expert Dr Annabelle Hughes shed more light on their origins and surprisingly revealed that the Education Barn is something of a fraud, made up of wood which probably came from a variety of buildings, and with timbers aligned differently from the purpose for which they were originally fashioned. For example, 'birdsmouths' - V-shaped slots designed to support rafters at eaves height, appear in a vertical pillar and posts with empty mortises are used internally despite signs of external wear.



Happily, the other two barns are totally authentic, very old and Wealden. The Information Barn, currently four bays, may have been a threshing barn. These had a large pair of central doors either side so that the chaff could blow away. The higher beam over the current central window shows where the doors would have been, as do the mortises placed 'doorside' on adjacent roof braces. The left-hand corner of the northern end sports a rootstock, where the tree trunk has been placed upside-down, so that the fatter, root end provides enough material for the

complex jointing needed. There are examples of scarfing, where two beams are cut with a step at the end so that they can be joined together to run a longer distance.

This barn is sizeable and probably originally belonged to a West Sussex farm of at least 100 acres. There is no ridge board – a beam along the apex of the roof - instead rafters are pegged at the apex to keep them in place, suggesting that the barn predates 1750, but as it also features butt purlins – horizontal longitudinal beams in the roof - it was probably built after 1650.

The Admin Barn, four/five bays, is probably older. Wind-bracing in the roof to prevent it racking - straining out of shape - and other pointers, suggest a date between 1650 and 1700. Of great interest is the close-studding – the upright timbers which can be seen beside the stairs. These run the full height of the building, a distinctively Kentish or at least eastern Wealden feature. At the western end, the tie beam across the roof space has been carefully prepared to fit into a supporting upright beam, but this is no longer present. The barn in its current form has a mixture of braces, original curved ones in some parts, but where these would have impeded the building's current use as offices, they have been replaced by knee braces, essentially bits of tree which have grown into a conveniently right-angled shape, just one example of repairs and alterations made to both barns over the years.



Further pictures which clarify some of the features described can be seen at <http://www.ashdownforest.org/enjoy/history/AshdownResearchGroup.php>

Pam Griffiths - Ashdown Forest Research Group