



Houses on the Forest Edge



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Introduction

In October 2015 the Ashdown Forest Research Group held its first exhibition at the Ashdown Forest Research Centre, Wych Cross.

The topics covered by the exhibition reflected the diverse nature of the group's interests: local families affected by the Great War; the barns of the Ashdown Forest Centre, their use, history and construction; traditional forest occupations; the development of turnpike roads around Ashdown Forest; and houses on the forest edge.

We have now taken the exhibits that were shown for each topic (photographs and accompanying text) and compiled them into booklets.

The present booklet concerns houses on the forest edge. Prepared by Vivien Hill, it focuses on the development of housing in the late nineteenth century that took place on the northern edge of Ashdown Forest in the Highgate area of Forest Row.

Pavilion Cottages



Three cottages built by Job Luxford in the 1890s show how it was still possible to encroach on the edge of Ashdown Forest. The land was probably just inside the then boundary.

It was now cheaper to bring in Welsh slates for roofing than to use local handmade tiles. Each cottage had a well in the kitchen and a privy in the garden. Pavilion Cottages were built as two up, two down workers' dwellings and would give a small but steady return for rent. The long gardens allowed the tenants to grow food.

In 1909 they were sold and shortly after a cottage was built at each end of the row. In this case documentary as well as architectural and word-of-mouth proof exists of these changes.

Oak Tree Cottage



A wholly Arts and Crafts build using local stone Oak Tree Cottage demonstrates how an area previously considered only suitable for the labouring classes changed its character. The higher land around London was now considered “bracing” rather than bleak and middle class families could build larger houses than could be afforded in the capital. The house looked out onto the heathland of the forest yet the railway station at Forest Row gave access to London and the coast.

There have been some alterations to the house, the front door has been moved and the weatherboarding on the gable may be an addition. The windows surrounds are stone with one exception, now framed in oak. This bedroom was originally open to the air as was the first floor gallery behind. The son of the house had tuberculosis and fresh air was considered a possible cure.

Arts And Crafts Style



This long, rectangular window shows typical Arts and Crafts design, a contrast to the Victorian Gothic style of the mid nineteenth century. Admitting plenty of light these windows also displayed the owner's wealth and grasp of contemporary trends.

Laura House



Job Luxford built this house in 1890 for his sister Laura. These photos show the differing west and north sides of the house, the west side having the front door and the north the service door.

Many Luxford houses built nearby were intended for workers employed at the nearby hoopyard, the broomyard or working at other jobs connected to the forest. In contrast Laura House would advertise Luxford's ability to build desirable middle class housing and his skill in making use of a sloping site. The style is neither out of date or very

fashionable for its time, a safe design that could tempt future clients.

There is a well in the kitchen and a water storage cistern in the garden. The windows and fireplaces were supposedly re-used from a demolished London house. Luxford was known to re-use building materials when constructing other houses in the area.



Hillview



“Hillview”, a group of three pairs of cottages, was constructed by Job Luxford about 1912. As originally built these had two rooms downstairs, two on the first floor and two, slightly smaller rooms, in the roof space.

The back room on the ground floor was generally the kitchen, a ground floor outshot being originally part of the building too. These outshots were small single storey buildings attached to the kitchen extending a few feet into the

garden. At Hillview, as was common, a ventilated larder, accessible from the kitchen occupied half of this outshot. In the other half was the privy, also ventilated but accessible only from outside. This was considered an improvement on an earth closet right at the end of the garden.

There was a well, or wells, for the six Hillview dwellings but the present site is unknown. A water supply was laid about 1909 in the centre of Forest Row but mains water to Highgate arrived much later.

Many of the houses of this type have now turned one bedroom into a bathroom and extended the kitchen, demolishing the outshot in the process.

Bryle House



This house has been built in “rat-trap bond”. The bricks are set on edge and here the pattern is more distinct as the iron in the local clay has vitrified in the kiln to show dark headers. The brick tax had been abolished by the 1850s and demand for bricks of all qualities had increased, this house is dated 1857.

Setting the bricks on edge

reduces the number needed for a single skinned wall but weakens the construction, an inner skin connecting with the headers which project inwards gives a partial cavity wall.

Bryle House has a later extension exactly matching the original bond.

William Wells and the 1851 Census

The 1851 census was the first clearly organised and centralised census in Britain. William Wells was one of the enumerators for the parish of East Grinstead. Forest Row and Highgate, then a separate hamlet, were both in the administrative district of East Grinstead.

Enumerators needed to be literate, educated and able to organise the details they collected. They also needed to be considered trustworthy both by the local population and by the parish administration. William Wells had a wheelwright's workshop in Forest Row with several employees, he was well known in the community, had strict religious principles and appears to have been both respected and well-liked. His exact route around the village can be traced by reading the census returns.

On the forest edge, in the Highgate area, Wells collects details from many households but the addresses are often given as "on the forest", showing his knowledge of the local area and the absence of what we now regard as normal, i.e., a "proper" address.

This highlighted how the area changed between 1851 and the beginning of the twentieth century. Researching later censuses shows how the character of both local occupations and local houses changed. As roads improved and the railway arrived, and later, the golf course developed, the proportion of agricultural and forest labourers declined and more varied occupations are recorded.

The original dwellings are far more difficult to trace. Labourers' cottages were not usually well constructed. Local builders could buy a row of cottages, demolish them and build a more substantial row, such of these that have survived show improvements and extensions. Other, more sturdy houses, were re-fronted in a more fashionable style either by a speculative builder or by a wealthier owner. Quite possibly old cottages were demolished entirely and the site used for a new house built in the latest style. The new, comparatively wealthy, owners would provide a variety of jobs for the local people. Employment all year rather than agricultural work would have been welcome.

1851 was the first year in which a majority of British people were urban rather than rural, sparking a nostalgic love of the countryside later in the century. This area of the forest edge may reflect the changes in society, architecture, communications and employment taking part in the rest of the country.

Rural Housing for the “Respectable Working Classes”

Concerns about living conditions for the rural working classes at the beginning of the twentieth century had led to a competition, arranged by Lawrence Weaver of “Country Life” magazine. This invited designs for suitable rural dwellings for future building. Country Life published all the designs, including judges' remarks. The need for ventilation for larders and earth or water closets was noted but judges deplored the usual solution of having these facilities next to each other. By the time of publication, after the First World War, projected costs given with each design had increased threefold, the will to increase rural dwellings seems to have decreased and many of the designers had been killed in the war.



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