

The Old Rectory, King Edward Place



Until recently, all the accounts and descriptions of this Grade II listed building stated that it dates from the 16th century. This information is taken from the National Heritage List for England on the Historic England website, which describes the building as:

Helmets Ltd Registered Office, High Street

Grade II listed. C16 timber frame, cased in red brick early and late C19. Circa 1970 addition. Gable-ended range of 2 bays with steep-pitched plain tile roof. C17 red brick chimney stack on centre of E side.

A recent report has revealed that the building is much older than this¹.

Thomas Noblett, Manager of Helmets Ltd, bought the house privately from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1929 and later converted it into Helmets Ltd Head Office, named it 'Moat House', and developed the factory buildings around it. Helmets Ltd left in 2002 and, after a few more years as offices and then standing empty, with an arson attack in 2008, the building was bought as a private house in 2011.

When the new owners applied for a change of use of the building, a detailed investigation was commissioned from Archaeological Solutions Ltd.

This report concludes that the building that is visible today is the remnant of an early 14th or late 13th century house that has been much modified over the years. It was originally a substantial hall house with wings at each end; one of these wings is all that is left and is the core of the existing house which has later additions, particularly on the east and west sides.

Analysis reveals that the external walls conceal a well-preserved early 14th century timber-framed structure, once a component of a larger medieval building. The crown post roof is intact and was originally jettied to the south as one of a pair of cross-wings flanking a hall range. Surviving in its original form until the mid-19th

¹ This article is based on an article that summarises the report. Collins, T., Prosser, L., & Higgs, K., (2016) *Building recording of The Old Rectory, King Edward's Place, Wheathampstead* Hertfordshire Archaeology and History Vol. 17 2009-2015, pp. 165-172. Published by the Hertfordshire Archaeology Editorial Committee on behalf of the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society and East Hertfordshire Archaeological Society.

century, the building was subsequently sold and reduced in size to its existing footprint.

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Structural and map evidence confirm that the study building is a remnant of this former house, which was pulled down in the mid-19th century, leaving a single cross-wing to serve as the core of a new dwelling.

Collins, T. et al (2016)

The article goes into considerable detail about the surviving medieval timber framing, including the crown post in the roof which “can be dated with some confidence to the early 14th century or even slightly earlier”. It is well worth reading.²

When was the original building part-demolished?

Remarkably, a survey of the building in 1718 survives. This transcribed extract gives a taste of that document.

The Parsonage House is of Timber rough cast & Tiled The Hall 24 foot square eleven feet high seel'd no room over it paved with square brick with a new Chimney & the room new wainscoted & painted. Little Parlour twelve foot Long 8 foot wide high eight foot & a half newfloored with Deal. Kitchin thirteen feet wide fifteen long nine foot high new paved with white brick; a small scullery by with a little closet. A small room under the Kitchin stairs. Great Parlor 15 foot wide, 22 foot long nine foot high floored with deal. Study next the great Parlor 13 foot and a half wide 18 foot long 7 f: high floord with deal. A Small Room by with a little Closet in it on the left hand of the Stairs. Under the stairs a Small Cellar. The larger Cellar by the narrow Stairs 9 f: wide and ten f: long. Pantery over it of the same dimensions new floord with Deal. A Little Place for Small Beer 6 f; w: and 8 l: nine f: high.

Following more detail of the rooms in the house, the document continues:

All within a mote supplyd from the River Lea hardly running round the said house etc. Within which Mote is one larger Garden of 27 pole round a small Court Yard and 4 lesser gardens fenced with paling. The Moat is bounded on the South side with the great Yard of the Parsonage on the west side with a close or meadow behind the

² There is a copy in the SAHAAS library.

Barn of the Parsonage, On the East side with l4 feet and half into the Gardens or backsides of Eleanor Street...³

The 1841 Tithe Award Map shows the rectory as a substantial building with projecting wings but, in the 1879 Ordnance Survey map, the building is much smaller, suggesting that the part-demolition took place between those dates. George Pretyman was Rector of Wheathampstead-with-Harpenden from 1814 to 1859 and we know that he built himself a new rectory⁴ during that time. It is reasonable to conclude that either he or the new occupants of the old rectory did the part-demolition.

The moat described in the 1718 document was still there well into the 20th century until it was filled in to make space to extend the Helmets Ltd factory buildings.

The land by the river was a marsh and flooded in the winter, and was divided from the rest of the property by the 'moat' so-called, a loop of water like a mill-lead which drained back into the river at the northeast corner. Dammed and widened in those early years, it provided a jolly, if rather muddy, swimming pool: later, the pitiless logic of expansion caused it to be filled in and the riparian land reclaimed with many tons of spoil excavated from the bank at the back of Cromwell Works.

The Story of Helmets Ltd 1924-1984

Collins et al.(2016) conclude:

It is likely that the whole building with hall and cross-wings was constructed in a single phase, perhaps shortly after the setting up of the rectory manor at the end of the 13th century ... The presence of an early 14th century timber frame is a significant survival for Wheathampstead; perhaps its oldest secular building.

³ Where was Eleanor Street? The description suggests that it may have been roughly where the private road to King Edward Place is today.

⁴ Pretyman's rectory was demolished in the 1960s and the site is now Old Rectory Gardens. The current rectory is therefore the third in the sequence.