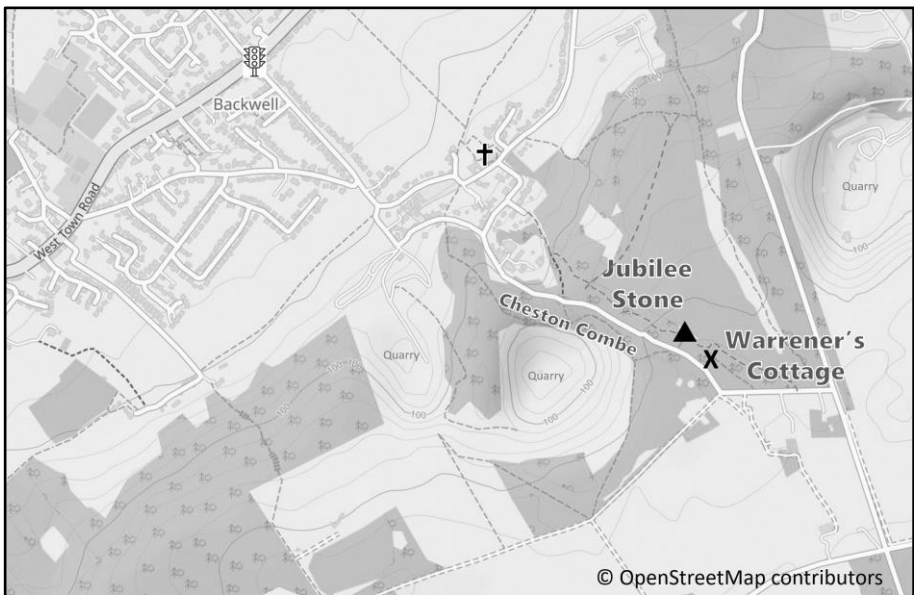


JUBILEE STONE WOOD'S WARRENER'S COTTAGE, BACKWELL

by Peter Speight

Introduction

The remains of a warrener's cottage can be found on Backwell Hill, Broadfield Down. The site is located at Grid Reference ST678498 within the boundary of Jubilee Stone Wood Nature Reserve, which is owned and managed by the Backwell Environment Trust (BET). The land today is covered predominantly with broadleaf woodland.



Historical Background

In the Middle Ages, the possession of a rabbit warren was a great status symbol for the wealthy man as it was an important source of food and fur. Rabbits were classified as 'game' and a warren could not be established without the express permission of the King.

The right to free warren on Backwell Hill was granted to Sir Richard de Rodney on the 10th June 1318 by order of King Edward II. References from a survey of the Manor of Backwell in 1709 record that the warren covered an area of 3 furlongs by 1½ furlongs (approximately 600 x 300

metres) and would consequently have had the potential to process large numbers of rabbits each year.

The warren appears to have been in continuous use until about 1812 when the introduction of the Enclosure Act divided the area of the warren into fields which were subsequently allocated to Court Farm, Backwell. After this date, the fields were most likely used for other agricultural purposes and the warren was abandoned commercially.

The Warrener's Cottage

Warreners were appointed to protect and harvest the rabbits, and it was common for the Lord of the Manor to allocate suitable accommodation nearby for the warrener.

The first written references to the warrener's cottage date from the 1780s in the Bailiff's accounts, and include payments for repairs after a severe storm in 1786.

23 Apr 1780	Moses Horler, thatcher, for elm used at the Warren House (and Court and Coles farms) 12 dozen and 2 sheaves	£4 17s 4d
13 May 1781	Moses Horler, thatcher, for laying up elm at the Warren House (and Court and Coles farms) for spars etc	£2 14s 4½d
19 May 1783	Moses Horler for work and materials at the Warren House	7s 2d
1 Feb 1786	Wm. Sams for glazing windows broke by high wind	8s 4d
2 Mar 1786	Moses Horler for repairing thatch Josias Garland for repairing walls	8s 0d 15s 4d
23 Jun 1786	Betty Hasle for 20 bushell lime	5s 0d
24 Nov 1786	Thos. Winscombe carpenter at the Warren Lodge	3s 4d
7 Sep 1810	The Steward at Longleat sent notice to Garland, warrener, to quit the cottage and rabbit warren	

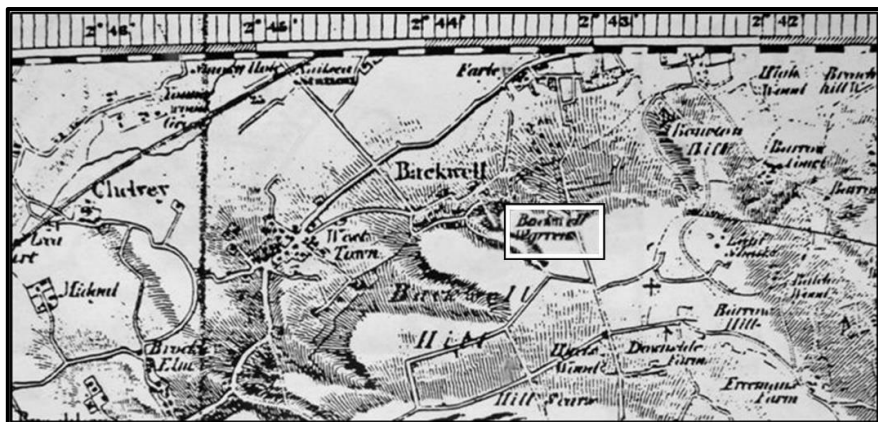
The ruins visible today show that the cottage would have originally covered an area of 45 square metres. With the adjacent walled garden on the south-eastern side, the plot covered about 1200 square metres, or just over quarter of an acre. The interior of the cottage measures 7.0 metres x 4.1 metres. In addition to the main building, a porch was added to the south-eastern wall and an outhouse on the north-western wall. Both these additions are thought to have been added after the main structure was completed, as their stonework is not 'keyed in' to the main building. The existing stonework would suggest that the remaining walls visible today are not of 14th century origin, but more likely to have been constructed in the 18th century. The cottage was extensively repaired during the 18th century.

It is likely that the cottage would have been a two-storey structure built of limestone blocks extracted from the local bedrock and made watertight with a thatched roof. The presence of pennant sandstone tiles and clay pantiles would suggest that these were used to roof the porch and outhouse. The warrener would have used the ground floor as a workshop to process the rabbits whilst using the upper storey as his living accommodation. When not working, this arrangement would have enabled him to keep a watchful eye out for both predators and poachers approaching the warren. The large adjacent garden would have allowed the warrener to grow his own produce and possibly keep farm animals, enabling him to be relatively self-sufficient.

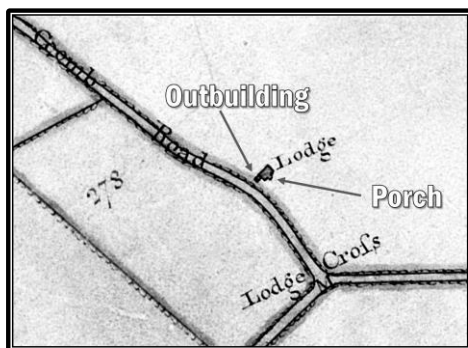
After the warren was abandoned, the cottage was still lived in up until 1843, after which it fell derelict sometime between 1843 and 1882.

Historical Records

Backwell's warren was included on the Ordnance Survey map of 1815.



The cottage appeared in pre-enclosure maps as the 'Lodge', with indications of extensions to the main building.



A survey of the manor of Backwell in 1812 records the cottage as 'Warren House':

Landowner: The Marquess of Bath

Occupier: John Sperrin

364 The Warren House

278 Allotment of the Hill, late part of the Warren

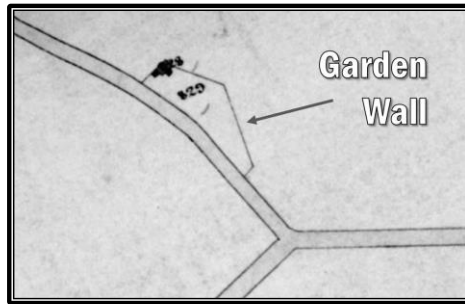
A record of the Tithe Award of 1843 and the corresponding Tithe map showing the extent of the garden:

Owner: The Marquess of Bath

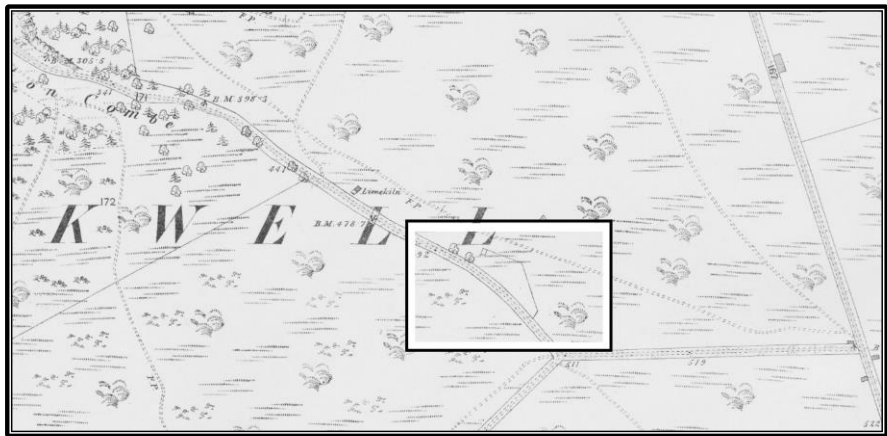
Occupier: Mary Sperrin

828 Warren House

829 Garden on the Hill



The cottage and garden were also recorded on the 1844 - 1888 Ordnance Survey map.



700th Anniversary Excavation

In anticipation of celebrating the 700 year anniversary in June 2018, BET volunteers started excavating around the outside of the cottage. Up to this time the only sign of the cottage was a rectangular raised mound in the grass, with no stonework visible.



After seeking advice from Vince Russett, North Somerset County Archaeologist (now retired), accumulated soil was carefully removed and the stone walls of the cottage were revealed.

The old maps suggested there had been a construction on the side of the cottage, most probably an entrance porch, and this was successfully uncovered, complete with a flagstone floor.



Open Day Celebrations, 10th June 2018

The maps also indicated that there had been an outbuilding on the road side of the cottage. This was gradually revealed and was found to have

a cobbled stone floor. In the middle of the floor was a large stone plinth which might have been the base of a work bench.

Even more exciting was the discovery of a second outbuilding on the corner of the cottage. This was not on the map and was probably a later addition. It had a further stone structure attached which may have been external stone steps to an upper level. There have been suggestions that this outbuilding may have been used as a dairy, being on the cooler north side of the cottage.

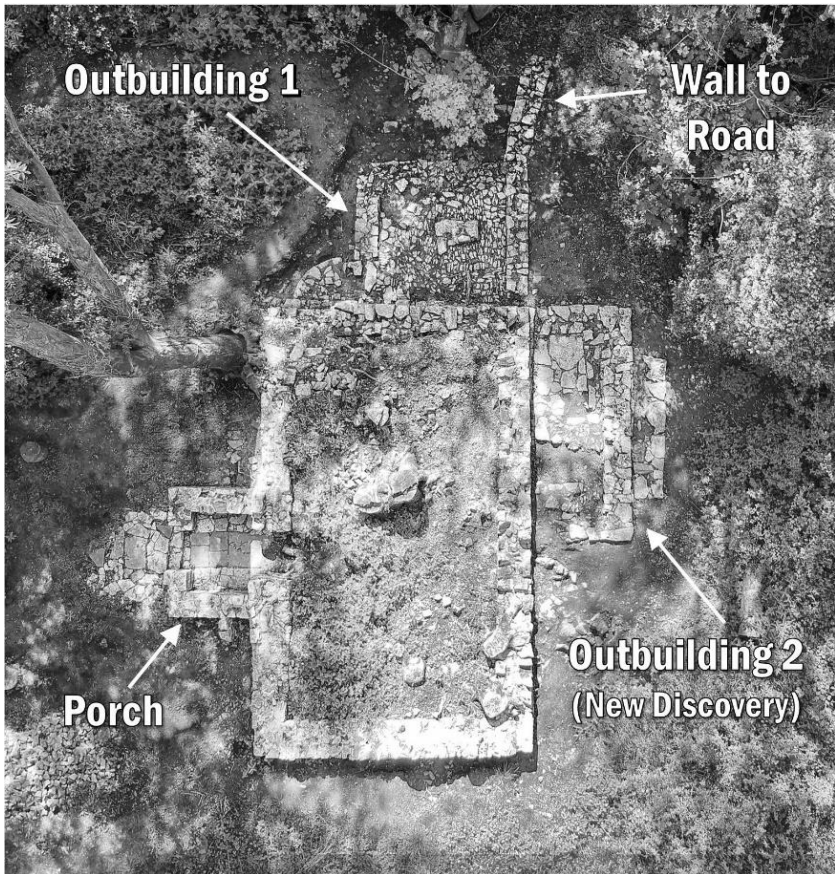
Unfortunately several large ash trees were growing inside and close to the outside of the cottage with their roots causing significant damage to the walls and floor. Between 2017 and 2019, six of these trees were felled as part of the wider felling on the reserves of ash trees suffering from ash dieback disease and becoming unsafe. The six stumps were treated with herbicide to stop any additional root damage to the cottage structure.



Felling trees growing the cottage, February 2019

During the excavation, soil was carefully sieved and pieces of pottery and glass recorded. Some Nailsea pennant sandstone roof tiles were found which suggested that the outbuildings had stone roofs rather than thatch.

In September 2018, the tops of the walls were re-pointed using hydraulic lime mortar to protect the exposed structure.



Aerial view of the Warrener's Cottage, September 2019

The excavation involved the removal of several tons of fallen stone. This was used to rebuild dry stone walling along the line of the original garden wall. The impressive new wall can be seen in this photo taken during the removal of felled ash trees using logging horses.



BET intends to excavate the interior of the cottage when resourcing permits. Because of the archaeological importance of the structure, a ‘Written Scheme of Investigation’ has been prepared which has been approved by the County Archaeologist. It is hoped that the interior may reveal additional finds and provide more clues as to how the warrener and his family lived. However, as the cottage was occupied by other tenants for more than 30 years after the warren ceased to exist, any findings are likely to originate from this later period. Nevertheless the excavation could shed further light on how the cottage was constructed and how it was used by the warrener.

In the meantime, BET regularly clears the site of invasive undergrowth to allow visitors to admire the ruins of this rare example of a warrener’s cottage in the county.

Backwell Environment Trust

Website: backwellenvironmenttrust.org

Sources

- *The History of Backwell Hill Wood 1800 - 2007*, Stuart Peachey, 1st edition 2007
- *A Short History of Backwell*, Norma Knight, July 2010.
- *Survey of the Manor of Backwell*, Longleat Archives, WMR, Box 20, Item 35.