



Photo showing the giant oaken "crucks" made from the natural curve of England's precious timber

CRUCK BUILDINGS

By B. Bunker

In the following, the fine heritage of early cruck buildings that still exist is viewed from an important angle which, so far as the writer is aware, has been hitherto overlooked. An area covering North Derbyshire and South Yorkshire is considered – an area previously within the powerful Anglian kingdom of Mercia and its northern neighbour, Northumbria. In the case of every cruck building it is obvious that the site was carefully and logically chosen as the place on which to “raise” the building.

Originally when raised each was a timber building with a thatched roof; and the lumber was oak. Our Anglian forbears hailed from a land where there was a long tradition of

the use of lumber; they were skilled builders of boats which could sail the oceans safely.

We shall see that most of the cruck buildings in our area show evidence that when raised they had five sets of great oaken crucks, and some obviously had as many as seven sets. A considerable weight of carefully selected oak timber was needed for the raising of each of these impressive buildings, for in addition to the timbers of the great crucks themselves, massive ridge trees and purlins were needed with their carefully placed “ties” (ridge-ties, purlin-ties and wall-ties). Strong cured wind-braces were used to secure the purlins to the backs of the crucks. Long, straight lengths of oak rested on the ends

of the wall-ties, and were pierced with mortice-holes into which the wall-timbers would be “sprung” from the timber base-plates, which in turn stood on a very low stone wall only a foot or so in height, resting on the ground.” The base-plates had mortice-holes in their upper side for receiving the spars “sprung” from the wall plates. The heavy slabs on which rested the base of each great cruck consisted of one or more suitably shaped stones, either just inside or in the same line as the low base wall. From the ridge-tree down to and over, the purlins were the rafters and smallest timbers to which the thatch was secured.

There were two doorways, facing each other, with a hard floor,

perhaps of stone, between them. This was the threshing floor (or so it has been named over the centuries), with the wide, double "threshing-door" on one side and the smaller "winnowing-door" exactly opposite.

A GREAT DEAL OF MATURE, suitable oak was needed for the raising of a cruck building with five or more sets of crucks which would be capable of supporting the whole building throughout the centuries. No saw marks are seen on any of the crucks and their associated timbers, and no nails at all were used—just squared, heart-of-oak pegs were strongly driven into round holes to secure the heavy, suitably "halved" timbers.

Each cruck building would have a length of at least 70 feet, a width of at least 16 feet and a height of at least 18 feet. These seem to have been the basic requirements of our area's cruck buildings.

Logically sited, the building was surrounded by the necessary good, agricultural land, and its own small hamlet. Professor Haverfield (to whom Robinson pays tribute in his "Illustrated History of England") states that the early English, with their known dislike of towns, were naturally not great builders. Even the early churches were of wood. It was not until the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042) that there was much stone building and this was largely due to the influence of his Norman upbringing, was chiefly confined to churches, and was a rude imitation of the Norman style of stone building.

THE DWELLING OF A THANE consisted of a one-storied wooden building, comprising the hall (the general eating, living and sleeping apartment), with a separate room

(sometimes called the "bower") for the women and children, and the kitchen and storehouses, etc. In the middle of the hall was the fire, and the smoke went out by a hole in the roof.

Such was the type of the important building in each little "township", as described by Professor Haverfield.

In the mid-11th Century it gradually became fashionable to construct stone buildings, a fashion necessarily slow in spreading over the country, but intensified after 1070.

The early, sturdy cruck buildings had been raised to last; and they did. but long before the Norman invasion of 1066, it was no longer possible to make unrestricted search for oaks suitable for raising a great cruck building.

AFTER KING CANUTE (1016-35) it became increasingly difficult to get the great mature oaks essential for the "raising" of a traditional cruck building.

In his "Timber Building in England" F. H. Crossley emphasizes that long before the coming of the Normans oak trees were very valuable, the owner of an oak forest was a wealthy man. By the 12th century, oak trees were carefully guarded by their owners, and every oak tree was known. Gifts of oak trees to religious houses, etc., were made by royalty, the gift usually consisting of whole tree trunks. Obviously, the op-

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portunity to choose and fell oaks for one's own use had disappeared by the seventh century, unless one happened to be a fortunate forest-owner.

THE FOLLOWING QUOTATIONS come from several supporting sources:

1) Writing in "Antiquity" XXII (1948), in an article: "The Development of the Cruck Framework", James Walton stresses his view that the complex cruck framework is a unique feature of English peasant architecture.

2) In an article: "The Saxon House: a Review and Some Parallels" ("Medieval Archaeology", Vol. 1. 1957), Radford writes: "One of the most intractable studies concerns the dwellings of the Anglo-Saxons. It is generally agreed that they were of wood and that no example survives above ground. Beyond this the student must rely on incidental references in the literature and on the scanty data provided by excavation."

3) In "Medieval Archaeology", Vol. 111, 1959, "Notes and News" responds "The Vernacular Architecture Group Conference at Caerleon", stating: "V. R. Webster described Leicestershire cruck houses, which are of cruder construction than those further west. He maintained that they appear to be of medieval or sixteenth century date rather than later."

6) J. T. Smith's article in "Medieval Archaeology", Vol. VIII, 1964, "Cruck Construction: a Survey of the Problems" rejects the Germanic origin for cruck construction. He argues that distribution evidence strongly suggests a Celtic origin.

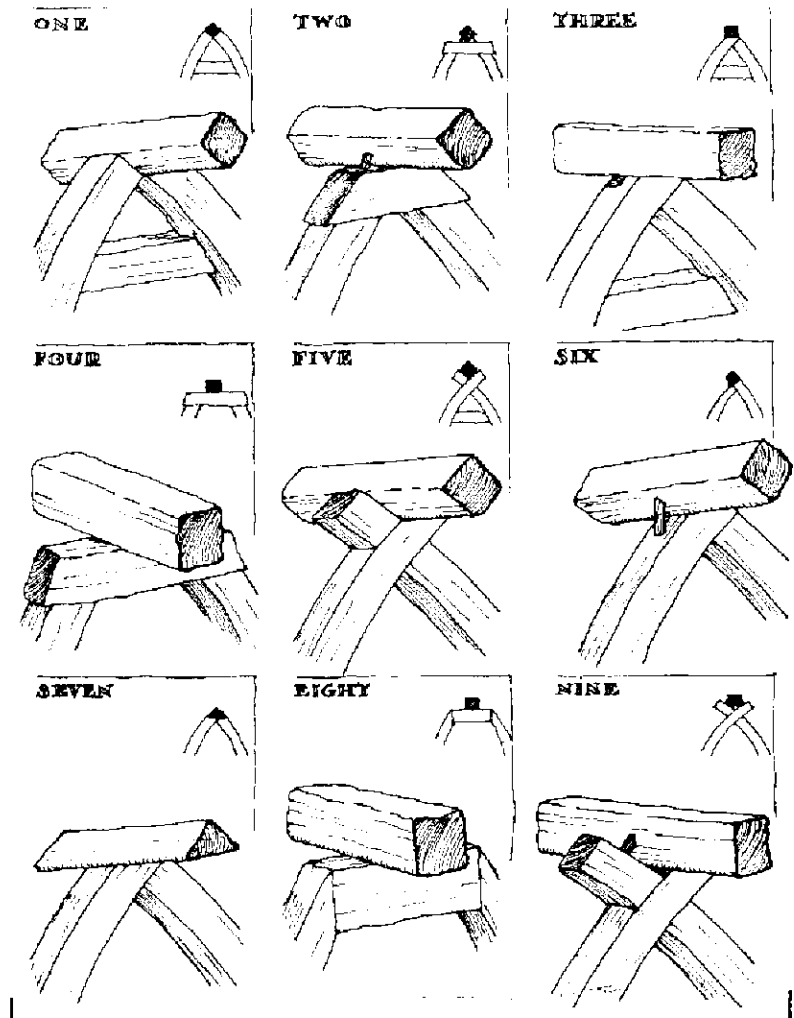
7) In an article: "The Origins of Cruck Construction - A New Clue" ("Medieval Archaeology", Vol. XII, 1908), Keith Brannigan gives an interpretation of a "cruck" building at Ladmer in Buckinghamshire. He

dates the long-ago completely demolished building as of the 4th or 5th century A.D., describing it as a rectangular timber-framed building, identifiable by black soil marks in the chalky subsoil, 20 ft. below present ground level. He claims that the cruck structure had two parallel trenches and five pairs of post holes alongside the trenches, facing each other. Mr. Brannigan states: "There can be no doubt that the features described above represent the remains of a simple timber building which featured cruck con-

struction."

Our own approach to the subject is simple. The buildings and sites must tell their story. ■

This article, reprinted from "Cruck Buildings" by B. Bunker provides background for another article I have asked permission to reprint, describing in detail the erecting of a cruck building -Ed.



Various methods of supporting the ridge pole in cruck buildings in North Derbyshire and South Yorkshire, England (by B. Bunker)

