Anonymous Farmhouse, Middle-of-Nowhere, Suffolk.

A condition report on the historic carpentry.

Fig. 1: Anonymous Farmhouse from the south west.

Anonymous Farmhouse is a timber framed house from the second half of the 16th century, it is listed Grade II and the list description is as follows:

Farmhouse. C16 with C18 wing to rear. Timber framed; C19 red brick façade with white brick to the quoins and the window and door surrounds. Plastered gable ends, brick-cased to rear (including later wing). Roof of glazed black pantiles. 2 storeys and attic. 3-cell form, originally with cross-passage entry. 4 windows, C19 casements with a single horizontal glazing bar to each light; segmental arches. C19 6-panelled door and gabled open timber porch. Internal stack. Exposed framing internally, mostly at first floor level; in the rear wall an original arched doorway and a blocked window with cavetto mullions (ground floor) and 2 diamond-mullioned windows (first floor). In the hall the one visible storey post has a shaped head. The service rooms have been enlarged and the original partition wall lost. Newel stairs, the attic flight original.

I visited the property on 26th February 2013 to assess the condition of the historic timberwork prior to potential purchase.

Attic level.

The roof is of a simple clasped purlin variety with the addition of simple struts to the principal rafters just below the collar joints. The purlins have bowed over time and these bows have been packed out later to create a better line for the common rafters above. This actually accentuates the deflection and can make matters worse at precisely the wrong position but I noted no actual breakages.

Fig. 2 above: The clasped purlin roof looking north.

Fig. 3 below: Purlin runs with extra timbers packed behind to create a better alignment. Note also that the collar has been cut close to the rafters for easier access within the space.

Fig. 4 left: An additional strut has been fitted below the western purlin scarf to assist against deflection.

Fig. 5 below left: The eastern purlin scarf has a simple timber splint attached to assist against deflection. It has been fixed in place with hand-forged nails so I can only assume it has been in this position for some time without any major deflection. A strut would restrict access at this position given that the attic appears to have been used for accommodation since at least the early 20th century but probably before that time.

Fig. 6 above: One of the collars has detached from its mortice into the principal rafter. This appears to have been in such a position for at least twenty years when the plasterboard was cut around it.

Fig. 7 below: A truly vernacular collar has been retro-fitted for ease of access within this southern bay of the roof. It has been splinted above with a section of hand-forged iron wagon tyre for extra strength.

The first floor rooms.

Fig. 8 left: The first floor rooms are all accessed via a corridor that runs north to south along the building. At one end is the 17th century spiral staircase which also runs up into the attic level. The corridor is formed by a simple stud wall that has probably been inserted during the 19th century when the brick facades were added. The stair is also adjacent to bedroom 4 which is in the south-west corner of the frame.

Fig. 9 below left: Bedroom 4 retains its framed walls on the east side although on the west side only the wall plate remains. The eastern framing has a diamond mullioned window although the mullions themselves are modern insertions.

Fig. 10 above: The mullioned window sill has been lowered from its original position and the void mortice filled with a patch. This could have been a mistake or it could have been a change of mind by the original client. Equally it could have been a slightly later alteration but I suspect it was a change of detailing with a larger projection for the sill requiring it to be housed *into* the edge of the stud. The carpenters number *II* can also be seen.

Fig. 11 left: Exposed framing within the en-suite to bedroom 4. The timbering is in excellent condition.

Fig. 12 above: The eastern wall plate where it meets the south gable. Despite some evidence of insect decay the timber seems sound. The attic joists have drifted towards the edge of the plate in antiquity but this has been addressed (twice!) by nailing a simple ledge into place.

Fig. 13 below: Within bedroom 4 the floors are made up of wide oak boards but the edges have a simple painted softwood beading which suggests a small gap due to drift or decay.

Fig. 14 above: The 17th century staircase. The list description suggests that the attic flight is original but it is clear they have actually been altered and repaired over time. This also goes for the first floor to ground floor stairs but they seem no more or less "original" and certainly contain much early fabric that is built into place suggesting little has changed.

Fig. 15 below: Edge halved and bridled scarf joint to the eastern run of wall plate, typical of the 16th cent.

Moving north along the corridor the framing of the eastern wall is largely intact. It contains two good original windows complete with diamond mullions. The framing appears in very sound condition and although a brace has been removed half way along everything seems to be exactly where it should be.

Fig. 16 above: Diamond mullion windows in the east wall. These windows are above the central 16th century hall space and prove that the frame was floored from the outset which would suggest that the frame is post Reformation. In fact the mouldings to the tie beams and floor timbers would suggest a date towards the end of the 16th century. The jowl post originally had a brace from just above sill level that jointed into the underside of the tie beam. This has been removed, no doubt when the corridor was inserted in the 19th century.

Fig. 17 left: The east wall is to the left, the corridor partition to the right. The floor boards at right sit on the floor frame, running perpendicular to the joists. To the left there are floor boards running lengthways suggesting some infilling of damage or drift. This quite probably dates from the 19th century period of alteration and should be of no major concern.

Fig. 18 above: There has been some recent water ingress within bedroom 3. The source of this needs to be checked and assessed to ensure that any repairs were done well enough to prevent recurrence.

Fig. 19 below: A floor joist within bedroom 1 is of very poor section but I highlight it purely for interest. As it has been installed at the very edge of the floor frame it has basically taken no major load in its lifetime and thus it has performed adequately despite its obvious poor quality.

Fig. 20 above: The north-west corner between wall plate and tie beam. The wall plate has lowered in relation to the tie beam but given the 19th century plaster surfaces all around these timbers I would suggest that the drift predates that period, possibly by a long time. The north end of the wall plate has some insect damage but once again it is pretty firm to probing.

Fig. 21 below: Within bedroom 2/dressing room to bedroom 1. This partition is a mix of elm and oak and is in excellent condition. Much of it is original being the dividing wall between service chamber and hall chamber.

The rear service wing (first floor).

Adjacent to bedroom 1 there are steps down into a small two bay rear wing. This contains a shower room an airing cupboard and a bathroom. This area of the building seems to date from the late 16th/early17th century but its alignment (it partially blocks the cross-passage) suggests that it may have been dismantled from elsewhere and brought to this site in the later 17th century or possibly even as late as the 19th century.

Fig. 22 above: the service wing has a steel bracket fixed between the end of the wall plate and the wall frame of the main house. It also has steel plating of similar provenance within the bathroom space (Fig. 23 below). I can ascertain no dire need for these and can only suggest they have been fitted by someone more cautious! Within the bathroom are over the wall plate scarfs (see later image) but from outside they seem superfluous.

The ground floor.

Fig. 24 above: Spine beam jointed into the rail above the chimney stack in the sitting room. The chamfer stops suggest a date from the later 16th century; note also that the joists have previously been plastered over evidenced by the lath nails in the common joist as well as the line in the stain where the ceiling once was.

Fig. 25 left: At the southern gable end the spine beam has two extra supporting posts. Neither of these is original and they suggest that either the spine has problems or that the gable framing behind the plaster gives no support. I noted no problems with the actual spine beam so I can only suggest that the gable gives no support to the floor frame.

Fig. 26 above: Original mullioned window in the south east wall frame. This window is within the 16th century parlour chamber, the private family space of the occupants. It may have been glazed or at least contained a simple lattice (woven screen) or a fenestral (oiled cloth stretched on frames) along with shutters for security.

Fig. 27 below: The girding rail above the window has traces of an early red ochre paint scheme, probably 17th century or later as there are no traces on the joists; they had been lathed and ceiled over. Red was a very common colour scheme during the 17th century.

Fig. 28 left: Pamment and brick floors within the stairs lobby and the dining room appear largely undisturbed from their installation during the 19th century.

Fig. 29 below: The dining room contains Victorian details such as the fireplace surround and the built in cupboard both of which would have been painted originally. The cupboard space itself dates from earlier but the door and frame along with the fireplace surround date from the 19th century, presumably contemporary with the brick facades.

Fig. 30 above: Despite the Victorian refurbishment there are many original features still to be found within this building. The central storey post within what was the hall has remnants of fine moulding and evidence for a moulded shaft relief that has sadly been hacked off. The original hall oriel window sill still survives behind the sofa; the more recent window simply occupying the same space formed over 400 years ago. To the right of the clock is a chamfered door frame that would have led to the parlour in the original layout.

Fig. 31 below: The original 16th century sole plate is still in good order within the dining room.

Fig. 32 left: The current front door enters the west wall of the dining room via a small brick porch. The 16th century front door would have been directly to the right in this picture, behind the wall which possibly still retains some of the screen from what was the cross-passage or screens-passage.

Fig. 32 right: Within the study the remains of one of the service end door frames can be seen. The cross-passage marked the space between the more public *hall* space and the functional service end of buttery and pantry. Two doors would have been within this space each entering a self-contained space for the storage of wet (buttery) and dry (pantry) foodstuffs.

Fig. 33 above: The library is a relatively recent structure. It is built of brick and has no major carpentry visible.

Fig. 34 below: Within the library the 19th century brick gable can be seen, note the quality of the jointing; clearly it is of high quality and is in very good order.

Fig. 35 above: The kitchen is a separately framed structure that was probably built in the early 17th century as a stand-alone kitchen wing. It partially blocks the cross-passage rear door and so may not have been built here until the cross-passage became redundant but it has also been heavily altered. It has an additional area of floor joisting that has been added, possibly within what was formerly a smoke bay. It has also been clad with brick, possibly at the same time as the front and rear as the rear façade stops *against* this wing on its south face.

Fig. 36 below: Joisting within the kitchen wing is heavily sooted; this is quite common given its original use.

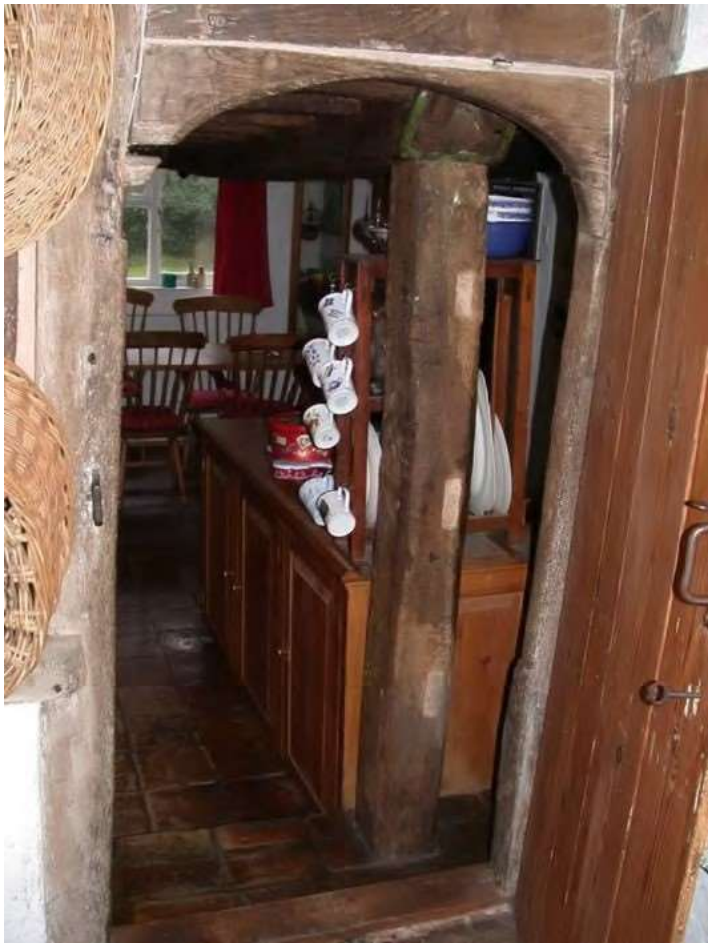

Fig. 37 above: Iron straps secure the floor rail into the brick walls. It is possible that the frame was brought here during the 19th century and assembled from a late 16th/early 17th century kitchen wing with other alterations to form the present building.

Fig. 38 left: Whenever the kitchen wing was built here it seems likely that the cross-passage had become redundant. The cross-passage was a plan form that had been in use since the medieval period but during the 17th century most are replaced by the lobby-entry plan. The position of this supporting post, formed from a re-used timber, would not permit normal use of the passage.

Fig.39 left: An almost complete survival of the rear door. It has a four-centred arched head and the surrounding frame is heavily chamfered.

Fig. 40 below: Care and repair. The brick floor within the old service end has many undulations formed by heavy foot traffic over time. It has been carefully repaired with pamments and the whole floor seems largely untouched from the time it was first laid. Many such floors have been raised and re-laid over concrete to the detriment of surrounding timber fabric.

Fig. 41 above: There is evidence of water ingress at first floor level on the north gable. There may have been problems where the lean-to roof abuts the earlier gable and the flashings should be checked for effectiveness.

Fig. 42 below: The list description states that the service partition has been lost but quite clearly it has not. Many list descriptions are inaccurate and this is a good example I'm afraid. The studs below form the dividing wall between buttery and pantry and are clearly pegged into the joist above which suggests original fabric.

The exterior.

Fig. 43 above: Anonymous Farmhouse from the south east. Both brick facades can be seen to be separate with presumably the original framing largely surviving beneath. The black glazed pantiles are very typical of south Norfolk and the Waveney Valley region of north Suffolk.

Fig. 44 left: the brick quoining of the front elevation with Woolpit whites and local soft reds. The white brick detailing would have cost more and has only been used on the front elevation for economy. The render between the two facades seems to be cement based but is in reasonable condition.

Fig. 45 left: Spalling to the brickwork on the western elevation. This is likely to have been caused over time by higher moisture levels brought on by the adjacent planting. Some small sections have been repointed with strong cement mortar and this should not be repeated as it will merely accelerate the recession of the softer bricks. Only soft lime based mortars should be used if any repointing is deemed necessary.

Fig. 46 below: Anonymous Farmhouse from the west. Note the area of different tiles in the lower centre of the roof. It would be worth trying to ascertain why this was done and when. Any issues can then be reviewed for effectiveness.

Fig. 47 above: Anonymous Farmhouse from the east. The relatively modern conservatory is a little tired in places and was not examined in any detail by us. It could easily be repaired and redecorated to give another decade or more of use.

Fig. 48 below: Edge halved scarf joint in the wall plate of the kitchen wing. This joint tallies with the steel plates inside the bathroom yet they appear sound and in good order. Joint evidence suggests this is its second roof.

Fig. 49 left: Cracked and filled render to the northern end of the eastern wall. This section has no brick façade as it was hidden from public view around the back. It seems to be mostly lime render but has been filled where it has cracked over time. This section could be raked out, filled with lime and redecorated for relatively little money.

Fig. 50 below: The northern gable *seems* to have a cement based render above the newer lean-to roof that covers the library. Some water ingress was evident below so this section should be checked for effectiveness although of course the water stains could pre-date the current render and flashings.

The barn.

Fig. 51 above: The barn from the south west. The brick infill is relatively modern and over time will allow water ingress. It would be wise to eventually consider removing it and re-boarding or rendering this section.

Fig. 52 below: Inside the barn looking east. The late 16th century barn frame is in excellent condition.

Fig. 53 above: Much of the barn has relatively intact early boarding. This should be preserved and maintained as much as possible.

Fig. 54 left: The northern porch to the barn is of a later date, probably the 17th century. Note the decorative sections to the posts where the girding rails meet.

Fig. 55 above: The eastern gable of the barn frame from inside. The historic infill panels (wattle and daub) have been patch repaired with a pink gypsum plaster; this isn't ideal but it has at least helped keep the panels in place. In time it would be good to rake the gypsum out and repair with clay daub with a chalk based plaster skim.

Fig. 56 left: The clasped purlin roof with queen struts between tie beam and principal rafter is essentially the same design as the house. It appears to be in excellent order and has suffered no major loss or distress over time that I could see.

The former maltings.

Fig. 57 above: The maltings from the south west. Some areas of the brickwork, particularly this gable end, have been patched with cementitious mortar but essentially it is in good order externally.

Fig. 58 below: The maltings from the north east.

Fig. 59 above: The east gable has some spalling to the brickwork as well as evidence of mason bees.

Fig. 60 below: The softwood trusses within the first floor area of the maltings have iron “king posts” supporting the long (imported colonial?) pine tie beams. Despite some light surface rust they seem in excellent order.

Fig. 61 above: The trusses contain some historical interest despite their relative newness and industrial design. Painted initials and (below, Fig. 62) race-knife markings all add interest to an otherwise utilitarian design.

Fig. 63 above: One of the trusses has splints attached, presumably there is a problem with the tie beam underneath them but I could not see what this might be. The splints appear to have been there some time so my *guess* is that they are doing their job adequately.

Fig. 64 left: In the ground floor area of the former maltings there is some separation of the brick courses at the north-west corner. Although this looks dramatic it is relatively easily to remedy although the cause will have to be investigated to ensure that the problem is not ongoing. It is worth pointing out that there is much paint inside the detached courses which does at least suggest it has been like this for some time with no further dramatic effect.

Fig. 65 above: Although this is merely plywood infilling to the north gable it does illustrate very well the effects of high moisture levels in timber, even engineered timbers such as plywood. Fungal decay has set in and is causing much degradation to the plywood. Even some small sections of softwood laid on the floor nearby had large blooms of fungal growth forming on them.

Fig. 66 below: Although these rails enter the masonry they appear sound at their ends. Given that they are softwood this is the crucial detail to maintain and so far they seem fine despite the nearby moisture levels.

Anonymous Farmhouse is an excellent example of vernacular architecture from the 16th century. It contains much of historic interest despite the large changes made to the building during the 19th century. The ancient buildings on this site have inevitably suffered some small areas of decay over time. Inevitably there are some areas where modern materials have been employed but nothing too pernicious. I noted nothing that appeared in imminent danger of failure and I would suggest that the building is eminently habitable in its current condition. I should point out that these are my own considered opinions, albeit based on almost 25 years of work in the conservation of ancient timber buildings. I have tried to be objective, I have tried to be accurate in my descriptions but much of the structural fabric is hidden from view and a single visit is a short time to become acquainted with a building of such age and complexity. If you find that this report raises any questions please don't hesitate to let me know and I will try to clarify any points and be as helpful as I can.

Rick Lewis, Traditional Oak Carpentry Ltd. 4th March 2013.