

## A Renovators Tale - HollyTree Cottages, Narrow Lane



HollyTree Cottages is a large “T-plan” house where much of the construction probably dates from the 17th Century but also includes a 19th Century stockings’ shop addition to one end. The property, bought as three cottages (Nos 44, 46 and 48 Narrow Lane), was extensively renovated as a single dwelling over the period 1997-9. These renovations confirmed that the house, at one stage, comprised four not three separate cottages that were constructed in four separate phases of development, probably over a period of a century or so. No 46 (the part of the property that runs parallel to Narrow Lane) was, at some stage, extended to create the fourth dwelling. This extension was performed sympathetically and so it is extremely difficult to see that

looking at the outside of No 46. However internally it is apparent that what was originally the gable end wall has clear signs of weathering on the side that would have been the external face. Furthermore it is clear that the original main oak beam supporting the first floor has been cut diagonally and a matching beam inserted to support the first floor of the new extension. Once all the modern rendering was removed from the gable end wall it revealed that the structure is box timber framed, in-filled with cobbles and plastered, although this is now the only visible evidence of those origins.



The oldest dwelling is that part of the house fronted by the street-facing gable end (No 44). This building is two storeys but was once a single storey structure (plus cellar) and incorporates an inscription “AC 1666” carved above the

leaded light window in the gable end. This is rather confusing as one might assume that AC is a reference to the Latin “ante Christum” - after Christ, however it is more likely that AC are the initials of the original builder or carpenter and 1666 presumably the date of the completion of the original building (the year of the Great Fire of London).



Although initial inspection suggests that house No 48 is the more recent part of the current building it was clear from the renovations that its roof structure was built after No 44 but before No 46. However the bricks used in both No 44 and No 46 are similar - hand made 2 inch (depth). During renovations

several bricks with dog paw print impressions were collected - presumably as a result of bricks laying in the open prior to firing.

The part of the property to the rear of what was No 44 was originally No 48 and interestingly the roof space of this house was once a dovecote, as evidenced by the numerous gaps and ledges arranged in the brickwork of the gable end to the rear of the house. This presumably provided an additional source of food for the residents.



The first and second floors of the entire property are solid lime ash – a composite material made from lime kiln waste mixed with gypsum. Locally grown reeds are laid across the timber joists to support the lime ash before it hardens. This type of flooring is confined mainly to the limestone belt of the Midlands.

The house retains several of its original oak stair cases. One of these (in No 44) underwent repair during the renovation. Carefully concealed within its bottom step was a fragment of mole skin, a piece of coal, a boy's boot and a girl's shoe. These were almost certainly deliberately placed at the threshold to the top floor, probably during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most likely to ward off evil spirits or bad luck. Needless to say that the current owner put them back before the repair was completed!

Much of the original large garden to the rear was an orchard but now forms Cottage Gardens Close. During renovations outside the house a deep well was uncovered. This well (now capped over with stone flags) is stone lined and circular in plan. When tested it proved to be 29 ft deep to the water level below.



There clearly are underground rivers flowing down both Narrow and Wide Lanes as there are several wells evident in people's gardens here. There is also a more recent large Victorian era underground water reservoir under the rear patio, built of brick with a vaulted roof, which takes much of the rainwater drainage from the main house roof, and provides water for the garden and pond in summer – very eco friendly! There is also a separate small building at the rear of No 46 that was originally used as a laundry room – the old brick built “copper” with a small fireplace underneath was still there when the property was purchased in 1997.



The deeds with the current owners only go back to 1882 when the then owner John Widdowson (a frameknitter) sold all four dwellings to William Widdowson (a framesmith). That conveyance refers to a previous single occupation by a

Thomas Dean. Mrs Dalgarno (who, with her husband, ran a “hair tonic” business from Hathern in the 1930’s) was resident in No 44 in 1943. In the 1882 conveyance the house was referred to as being located in “The Haw Lane” – not Narrow Lane, and as once being a single residence. There is rumor that this house was called Hawthorn House - presumably a reference to its location.