

CHESTERFIELD AND DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

Observations on Listed Building Application CHE/22/00111/LBC

Dunston Hall, Dunston Road, Chesterfield:

Conversion of outbuilding into function room

Introductory

- 1 In 2021 the owner of Dunston Hall, Mr D.A. Harrison, carried out a number of alterations to Dunston Hall, a grade II listed building, without first obtaining listed building consent. The local planning authority later granted retrospective listed building consent for the alterations and also gave consent for a change of use for the Hall from a private residence to a wedding venue with overnight accommodation.
- 2 This further application for listed building consent, which on this occasion Mr Harrison appears to have made in advance of starting building operations, concerns one of the two ranges of outbuildings behind the Hall, both of which are listed grade II. The range which is the subject of this application (Historic England list entry no. 1088312) is aligned north–south to the west of the mansion; the other range (list entry no. 1052282) runs west–east to the south-west of the Hall. The two meet at the south-west corner and together form a continuous L-shaped range of mostly single-storey buildings.
- 3 Although the current application concerns only the north–south range, the Heritage Statement submitted as part of the application indicates that at a future date Mr Harrison proposes also to bring the west–east range back into use, and for this reason the Statement considers both ranges. Whereas the north–south range appears to form a single structure, the west–east range consists of two parts. The Statement describes the north–south range as Building A, the eastern half of the west–east range as Building B, and the western half as Building C. We have used the same means of identification here, and our statement also discusses the whole of the L-shaped structure, since we consider this to be essential to an understanding of its history and importance.
- 4 The Heritage Statement is written in very poor English, which in places is difficult to understand. The account of the history of Dunston Hall given at the beginning of the document is unadulterated nonsense and for this reason we have included a summary of its history, drawing on new academic research

undertaken for a future publication by the Derbyshire Victoria County History Trust. The description of the building itself, which forms the second half of the report, is of some value, especially when accompanied by the architect's drawings, but falls far short of the detailed examination by a suitable qualified and experienced buildings archaeologist which a structure of this importance merits before any restoration work begins.

- 5 The application also includes a Technical Note on the present state of the roofs of the various components of the L-shaped range (and in fact also the walls). This is useful, but at the same very worrying. Both halves of the building are clearly in very poor condition and in places appear to be at imminent risk of collapse. For this reason, the Civic Society committee is prepared to support Mr Harrison's application to restore Building A, subject to conditions which we have set out later in this paper. At the same time we hope that he will bring forward proposals as soon as possible to restore Buildings B and C. We would be very unhappy to see these two other buildings left to decay to the point where, at least in the eyes of the owner, they had to be demolished as a matter of public safety.
- 6 Dunston Hall and the two ranges of outbuildings were listed in 1977, when much less was known about historic farm buildings, and the use of cruck-framing north of the Trent, than is the case today. Fifty years ago any cruck-truss tended to be regarded as 'medieval', whereas it is now accepted that this method of construction continued in the East Midlands, especially for non-residential buildings, until after 1600. One way in which this revised chronology was established was by the use of dendrochronology to date medieval and post-medieval timbers, a technique that was in its infancy in the 1970s. As far as we know, none of the timbers at Dunston Hall have been dated in this way and we consider it essential that this should be done. This, we believe, would confirm some of the suggestions we make in this paper and demonstrate what we consider to be the exceptional importance of Building A and Building C.
- 7 We do not believe that the present listing status of the two ranges of outbuildings ('Grade II Group Value') accurately reflects their importance; rather it reflects what historic buildings investigators thought about old farm buildings half a century ago. We would draw the Council's attention to the closely parallel case of Brampton Manor, a nearby house of similar date and origin to Dunston Hall, where a barn, dated by dendrochronology to c.1600, is a scheduled monument. Last year, the Civic Society asked Historic England to re-inspect the barns at Dunston Hall with a view to upgrading their protection to that of a scheduled monument. Historic England refused to take

any action (beyond correcting one clerical error in the listing text) and, as far as we know, their staff did not even visit the property. For this reason we consider that the existing listing text for the two ranges is of little or no value and should not be taken into account by the local planning authority when considering the current listed building application.

Dunston Hall: an outline history

- 8 The property known in recent times as Dunston Hall was built c.1600 on a previously unoccupied site on the south side of a road that then ran from Littlemoor in Newbold village to Four Lane Ends in Upper Newbold. This road is represented today partly by Dunston Lane and (west of the junction of that road with the modern Dunston Road) partly by Dunston Road. There was another house on the north side of Dunston Road almost opposite the present Dunston Hall, which confusingly was also known as 'Dunston Hall'. This later became Dunston Old Hall and appears to have been completely demolished in the eighteenth century.

- 9 Dunston Hall was built by Richard Milnes, the son of William Milnes of Ashford in the Water in the Peak District. Richard was a lead merchant and wholesale ironmonger. He initially lived in Chesterfield, where he was mayor in 1626, and, like many successful local merchants, moved in later life to a newly built country house just outside the town. A number of such houses survive in the countryside between Chesterfield and the south-western outskirts of Sheffield. Milnes chose a traditional design for his new house. Dunston Hall was originally a three-storey 'high house' with two principal rooms on each floor. This structure can be seen embedded in the northern end of the present mansion, which assumed its present form in the 1820s. Largely unaltered examples of similar high houses can be seen locally at Cutthorpe Old Hall and Barlow Woodseats, as well as further afield. By contrast, Richard's contemporary (and fellow lead and iron merchant), Godfrey Watkinson, chose a more modern design for his new house at Brampton (i.e. what is now known as Brampton Manor). This also dates from c.1600 but has a symmetrical front elevation, divided into three large gables, an arrangement found in several other local houses of similar date and size.

- 10 Dunston Hall remained the property of the Milnes (later Smith Miles) family until recent times. The property was modernised and extended in the 1820s. A new two-storey range was added to the south of the original high house, and the two sections unified by a front elevation carried up to a common eaves-line. At the same time a small park was created around the mansion and the farming activities which would have been a feature of the Hall from when it was built were moved a short distance to the south-west, where a new

Dunston Hall Farm was built.

- 11 Changes of this sort are a common feature of many gentry houses in the late eighteenth century or early nineteenth, as owners wanted a garden and landscape park, rather than a farmyard full of animals and implements, next to their home, since they were no longer directly involved in farming. Commonly, this sort of transformation meant that older farm buildings were swept away. At Dunston this did not happen and a range of farm buildings that appears to be (at least in part) contemporary with the building of the house c.1600 survived. It is this survival which is unusual and makes the buildings that are the subject of the current planning application unusually important.

The farm buildings of c.1600

- 12 We believe that the farm buildings to the rear of Dunston Hall incorporate substantial remains of what was once probably a U-shaped range surrounding a farmyard, with the Hall at its north-eastern corner. The main evidence for this conclusion is the survival of what appear from the architect's sections to be four cruck-framed trusses (lettered A–D) in Building A. A fifth section shows a later roof truss (E) and the sixth truss shown on the plan is not illustrated in the sections, presumably because it is either modern or inaccessible. The Heritage Statement also refers to the survival of cruck trusses in Building C, and to evidence that at the northern end of Building A there was once a return marking the start of a range running east towards the Hall. It is in fact possible that there were once farm buildings on the fourth (eastern) side of the yard, south of the Hall, completing a quadrangular layout. This cannot be demonstrated from surviving remains, since the extension to the Hall of the 1820s now occupies that area. Although these suggestions can only be speculative, it is clear that what survives at Dunston today represents at least a third of a large range of farm buildings probably contemporary with the Hall.
- 13 The surviving remains have clearly been altered since they were first built, most obviously by the building up of the walls in stone and the replacement of what were probably originally thatched roofs. As well as the loss of buildings that may once have stood on the northern and eastern sides of the farmyard, part of the southern range has been completely rebuilt. Building C, as described in the Heritage Statement and Technical Note, appears to date from 1713, the date on a keystone over one of the entrances, alongside the initials 'R.M.G.D.'. This must refer to Richard Milnes, who succeeded his father George Milnes in 1671 and died in 1729. The two other initials are probably those of Richard's son George and his daughter-in-law Dorothy

(Newham). George and Dorothy may have lived at Dunston after Richard bought a second house at Aldercar in south-east Derbyshire in 1703, which became his main home in his later years. Building C has conventional roof trusses made up of tie-beam, principal rafters and collars, which appear from photographs in the Technical Note to be consistent with an early eighteenth-century date of construction.

- 14 The survival of substantial remains of such an extensive range of cruck-framed farm buildings associated with a well-documented gentry house is important, since so often such buildings have been swept away when the main house has been rebuilt or a modern home farm built. It would be unwise to claim that the buildings at Dunston are unique, but they appear to be the largest range of this type anywhere in north Derbyshire or south Yorkshire. More than fifty years ago the late Mrs B. Bunker, in a pioneer single-handed survey which has yet to be superseded, located some 80 cruck-framed farm buildings in this area, but none had more than two or three surviving trusses.¹ At Dunston (which Mrs Bunker was not aware of) there are at least four (in Building A) and apparently others in Building C. The buildings at Dunston are therefore clearly of regional, if not national, importance. For this reason we consider it essential that they be fully recorded before any alterations are permitted. At the same time, it is important that they are brought back into use to ensure their future.

The current application

- 16 The Civic Society committee's considered view is that this application should be granted, subject to certain conditions:
- Before any building work begins, the applicant should be required to commission and pay for a detailed survey of all three surviving buildings, undertaken by a suitably qualified and experienced buildings archaeologist, whose appointment must be approved by the county council's archaeology officer. The survey would include much more detailed drawings than those prepared for the planning application, and the budget should include the cost of publishing a report on the findings in the *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*.
 - The applicant should also be required to commission and pay for dendrochronology dating of sample beams from each of the three

¹ B. Bunker, *Cruck Buildings: an opinion as to their origin and dating arising from a study of existing and recently demolished cruck buildings in north Derbyshire and south Yorkshire* (published by the author, c.1970).

buildings, the details to be specified by the county council's archaeology officer.

- If the county council's archaeology officer so determines, the applicant should be required to pay for limited excavation of some floor areas in the hope of establishing the original use of different parts of the building.
- If, in the course of work on Building A, remains of archaeological interest are discovered, further recording work should be undertaken at the applicant's expense on lines specified by the county council's archaeological officer.
- While proceeding with the restoration of Building A, the applicant should be required to carry out emergency first-aid repairs to Buildings B and C, on lines recommended by his own consulting engineer (ECS Ltd) and agreed with the county council's archaeology officer, to ensure the survival of the buildings until a scheme for their restoration can be brought forward.

16 We also recommend that the Borough Council press Historic England to inspect the buildings with a view to increasing their level of protection to scheduled monument status.

Philip Riden
Chairman
Chesterfield and District Civic Society

10 March 2022