

Dedham Vale Society

Article: The Cottage

The Vale is dotted with them, both in open countryside and in the villages. At one time they would have been the abode of the smallholder or perhaps the specialist craftsman such as a weaver, carpenter, tanner or smith. The golden age of cottage-building was between 1550 and 1660, this period representing best our concept of the traditional English cottage, completely interwoven with the life of the countryside. The use of local materials assembled by local craftsmen resulted in the buildings having an appearance of being part of the landscape whether it be the oak frame locally or the stone of the Cotswolds. They were built to replace the mediaeval hovels but it must have required an income of some sort to pay for them which would mean that the poorest would remain living "on the heath". The purchase of trees, the laborious conversion to useable sizes, the thatch on the roof would have all cost money. Or was the timber obtained from common-land and the houses built by the community, much as the barns were raised, (and perhaps still are), by the Amish in America?



So many cottages throughout East Anglia have been treated abominably by their owners, yet still retain listed status. Windows and doors are anything but original type. The availability of cheap components without reference to the vernacular has resulted in the despoiling of so many cottages of which owners are no doubt very proud but which through ignorance have become monstrosities. More knowledgeable purchasers in the future could hopefully return them to their former appearance, removing the black paint from the beams, putting-back the correct windows and re-rendering in lime plaster.



There has always been a desire to change appearances. A photograph appears in Batsford and Fry's "The English Cottage", of the interior of one such in Suffolk in the 1930s. A woman sits by her fireside in a comfortable armchair, the walls of the room completely covered in stripe wallpaper which also covers the door which was obviously papered in continuum with the wall, a knife-cut made subsequently to enable the door to be used! It was also common practice in the mid-twentieth century to box-in beams with hardboard, and, of course in earlier times, the giant inglenooks had been infilled, sometimes several times as fashions changed, a new cooking-range appeared or simply to stem the draught!





Our modern way of life together with our multitude of possessions coupled-with the innate urge to build, create an overwhelming need to expand. Modest additions to cottages, when well-designed, have little impact and may even enhance the overall appearance. But cottages are not the place for experimentation in modern architecture as is currently occurring at a property in Lower Raydon. Nor should they be the basis for over-sized extensions. A scattering of real cottages still remain in the Vale but because they add so much to the landscape, their vernacular appearance should be sacrosanct.

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All cottage photos Polstead unless otherwise indicted



Cottage at Langham in the same family since 1918