Centre for Archaeology Report 64/2004

# Tree-Ring Analysis of Timbers from the Roof of St Catherine's Chapel (South-East Transept), Wells Cathedral, Somerset

A J Arnold, R E Howard and Dr C D Litton

© English Heritage 2004

ISSN 1473-9224

The Centre for Archaeology Report Series incorporates the former Ancient Monuments Laboratory Report Series. Copies of Ancient Monuments Laboratory Reports will continue to be available from the Centre for Archaeology (see back cover for details).

# Tree-Ring Analysis of Timbers from the Roof of St Catherine's Chapel (South-East Transept), Wells Cathedral, Somerset

A J Arnold, R E Howard and Dr C D Litton

#### Summary

Fourteen samples from the roof of the south-east transept of Wells Cathedral, which houses St Catherine's Chapel, were analysed by tree-ring dating. This analysis produced a single site chronology comprising 12 samples with a combined overall length of 157 rings. These rings are dated as spanning the years AD 1169 to AD 1325.

Interpretation of the sapwood on the dated samples would indicate that the timbers they represent were felled in AD 1325. Such a date is very much in keeping with that assigned to the south-east transept on stylistic grounds, and is in keeping with documentary evidence suggesting work on St Catherine's Chapel was nearing completion in AD 1324. Two samples remain undated.

#### Keywords

Dendrochronology Standing Building

#### Author's address

Nottingham Tree-Ring Dating Laboratory, School of Mathematical Sciences, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD.

Many CfA reports are interim reports which make available the results of specialist investigations in advance of full publication. They are not subject to external refereeing, and their conclusions may sometimes have to be modified in the light of archaeological information that was not available at the time of the investigation. Readers are therefore advised to consult the author before citing the report in any publication and to consult the final excavation report when available.

Opinions expressed in CfA reports are those of the author and are not necessarily those of English Heritage.

## Introduction

Exactly when the construction of Wells Cathedral (ST 552 459; Figs 1 and 2) was begun is not absolutely certain, but work was certainly in progress by AD 1186. It is one of the first truly English Gothic churches, using the pointed arch throughout rather than the earlier round-headed Romanesque type. The main body of the church was largely complete by AD 1215, with the nave and the great west front, with its 400 niches, being finished thereafter. It was consecrated to St Andrew in AD 1239. The east end of the cathedral was remodeled in the fourteenth century and twin towers were added to the west front.

Of particular relevance to this report is the south-east transept at Wells which houses St Catherine's Chapel. On stylistic grounds the Chapel is assigned to the early-fourteenth century and, on the basis of documentary evidence, there is strong reason to believe that it was largely complete by c AD 1324. An examination of the roof over the Chapel, undertaken by Drs Jerry Samson and Warwick Rodwell, shows that it is clearly of one unified design and of a single build.

The Laboratory would like to take this opportunity to thank the Dean and Chapter of Wells Cathedral for allowing sampling. The Laboratory would also like to thank Dr Warwick Rodwell, consulting archaeologist, for advising on, and assisting with, the sampling, and to thank Mr Jerry Samson of Caroe and Partners for providing plans and drawings. We would also like to thank Michael Hayecroft, Clerk of Works, for his invaluable cooperation and assistance during sampling. Finally, we would like to thank the roofing contractors of Lee & Son, Roofing, of Oxford, for their help in the roof during sampling.

## Sampling

Sampling and analysis by tree-ring dating of the roof of St Catherine's Chapel were commissioned by English Heritage. The purpose of this was to establish a precise date for the roof construction and help understand the chronological development of this part of the cathedral complex. The results of this work would help inform grant-aided repairs to the roof of the cloister.

The roof consists of nine close-set common rafter frames with collars, the structure strengthened at frames 1 and 8 with tiebeams (though the tiebeam of frame 1 has long since been removed). Both tiebeams were also attached to the wall plates by short, slightly curved, horizontal struts or braces, but only those to frame 8 now remain. There are no purlins to this roof, and no ridge beam. An illustration of frame 1 is given in Figure 3.

After discussion with Dr Rodwell, and in conjunction with the English Heritage brief, a total of 14 core samples was obtained from the available timbers. All these samples were taken from timbers which were believed to be integral to the structure of the roof, these timbers for the most part being common rafters and collars, with the remaining tiebeam at truss 9 also being sampled. The wall plates, which might have been sampled, were thought to be too decayed to provide worthwhile cores. Each sample was given the code WLS-C, (for Wells, site "C") and numbered 46 – 59 (samples WLS-C01 – C19 having been obtained from the east cloister roof, and samples WLS-C20 - C45 from the west cloister roof (Howard *et al* 2001, 2002)). The positions of these newly obtained samples are marked on plans made by Jerry Samson, reproduced here as Figure 4. Details of the samples are given in Table 1. In this Table, as in Figure 4, the frames are numbered from north to south with individual timbers being described on an east - west basis as appropriate.

#### <u>Analysis</u>

Each of the samples obtained was prepared by sanding and polishing and the growth-ring widths of all 14 were measured; the data of these measurements being given at the end of the report. The growth-ring widths of all 14 samples were compared with each other by the Litton/Zainodin grouping procedure (see appendix). At a minimum value of t=4.4, slightly below this Laboratory's usual minimum of t=4.5, two groups of samples could be formed. The first group comprises seven cross-matching samples which were combined to form site chronology WLSCSQ01(3). This site chronology has an overall length 156 rings. Site chronology WLSCSQ01(3) was then satisfactorily dated by comparison to a number of relevant reference chronologies for oak as spanning the years AD 1169 to AD 1324.

The second site chronology comprises two samples, having a combined overall length of 89 rings. This site chronology could not be dated.

All the ungrouped samples, plus the two grouped but undated samples, were all then compared individually with a large number of reference chronologies held at both the Nottingham Laboratory and by the Sheffield Dendrochronology Laboratory. Consistent dating results were indicated for five of these samples. These five samples were then compared with each other to a minimum value of t=3.5. This analytical process showed repeated cross-matching at consistent relative positions. Although the intra-site *t*-values are relatively low, they are maximum values and are above the statistically reliable minimum of t=3.5.

In addition, relatively low but again consistent, maximum, *t*-values were obtained between a number of the individuals of the two groups of timbers. Because of this analysis the seven samples in site chronology WLSCSQ01(3), plus the five additional samples cross-matched and dated in further analysis, were combined with each other to form site chronology WLSCSQ02(3). This has a combined overall length of 157 rings, the relative positions of the 12 cross-matching samples being shown in the bar diagram Figure 5.

Site chronology WLSCSQ02(3) was compared with a series of relevant reference chronologies for oak, indicating a series of satisfactory cross-matches when the date of its first ring is AD 1169, and a last measured ring is AD 1325. Evidence for this dating is given in the *t*-values of Table 2.

## Interpretation

Analysis by dendrochronology has produced a single site chronology of 12 samples with a combined overall length of 157 rings, these being dated as spanning the years AD 1169 to AD 1325. Three of these samples, WLS-C50, C53, and C56, retain complete sapwood. This means that they have the last ring produced by the trees they represent before they were felled. In each case the date of the last measured ring is the same, AD 1325. This is thus the felling date of the timbers represented. The amount of sapwood, and the relative positions of the heartwood/sapwood boundaries, on the other dated samples is highly indicative of timbers with a single felling date, and it is almost certain that all the other dated timbers were felled in AD 1325 as well.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis reported upon here thus shows that a number of the sampled timbers in the roof of St Catherine's Chapel date to the early-fourteenth century, a group of 12 timbers being felled in AD 1325. Such a date would coincide closely with that generally assigned to the south-east transept on stylistic grounds. This date would also agree with that intimated from the documents suggesting that work on the Chapel was nearing completion in AD 1324.

It is perhaps worth noting that, judging by the *t*-values of the cross-matches between some of the samples, some timbers appear to be from a small group of trees all growing fairly close to each other. Indeed some beams may be derived from the same tree, with samples WLS-C46 and C48 cross-matching with each other with a value of t=9.2. Similarly, samples WLS-C51 and C54 cross-match with each other with a value of t=9.9. It is thus possible that the dated material in site chronology WLSCSQ04(3) represents only four or five trees.

Other material, particularly the timbers represented by samples WLS-C49, C50, C51, C52, and C56, is probably from a different source or sources. The timbers represented by these samples tend to have wider, and thus fewer, rings.

Two samples, WLS-C47 and C59, remain undated. Both samples have sufficient rings for satisfactory analysis, and neither of them shows any abnormalities to their growth patterns which might make cross-matching and dating difficult. It is possible that the timbers represented are from different sources again making them, in effect singletons. Individual, single, samples are often more difficult to date.

### Bibliography

Arnold, A J, Howard, R E, and Litton, C D, forthcoming *Tree-ring analysis of timbers from New Inn House, 7 Wotton Road, Kingswood, Gloucestershire,* Centre for Archaeol Rep

Bridge, M, 1988 The Dendrochronological Dating of Buildings in Southern England, *Medieval Archaeol*, **32**, 166-74

Groves, C, Hillam, J, and Pelling-Fulford, F, 1997 Dendrochronology in Excavations on Reading Waterfront sites 1979-1988 (eds J W Hawkes and P J Fasham), Wessex Archaeol Rep, **5**, 64 – 70

Howard, R E, Laxton, R R, Litton, C D, and Simpson, W G, 1988 List 27 no 4 - Nottingham University Tree-Ring Dating Laboratory results, *Vernacular Architect*, **19**, 46-7

Howard, R E, Laxton, R R, Litton, C D, and Simpson, W G, 1992 List 44 no 19a/b - Nottingham University Tree-Ring Dating Laboratory results, *Vernacular Architect*, **23**, 51 – 6

Howard, R E, Laxton, R R, and Litton, C D, 2001 Tree-ring analysis of timbers from the East Range of the Cloister, Wells Cathedral, Somerset, Centre for Archaeol Rep **49/2001** 

Howard, R E, Laxton, R R, and Litton, C D, 2002 *Tree-ring analysis of timbers from the roof of the West Range of the Cloister, Wells Cathedral, Somerset, Centre for Archaeol Rep* **51/2002** 

Laxton, R R, and Litton, C D, 1988 An East Midlands Master Tree-ring chronology and its use for dating vernacular buildings, University of Nottingham, Dept of Classical & Archaeol Studies, Monograph Series, III

Tyers, I, and Groves, C, 1999 unpubl England London, unpubl computer file *LON1175*, Sheffield Univ

Table 1: Details of samples from the roof of St Catherine's Chapel, Wells Cathedral

Sample no.	Sample location	Total rings	*Sapwood rings	First measured ring date	Last heartwood ring date	Last measured ring date
WLS-C46	Collar, frame 2	131	h/s	AD 1169	AD 1299	AD 1299
WLS-C47	West rafter, frame 3	73	13C			
WLS-C48	Collar, frame 3	97	17	AD 1224	AD 1303	AD 1320
WLS-C49	East rafter, frame 4	63	15	AD 1259	AD 1306	AD 1321
WLS-C50	West rafter, frame 4	73	18C	AD 1253	AD 1307	AD 1325
WLS-C51	Collar, frame 4	111	h/s	AD 1194	AD 1304	AD 1304
WLS-C52	East rafter, frame 5	79	h/s	AD 1241	AD 1304	AD 1319
WLS-C53	West rafter, frame 5	83	32C	AD 1243	AD 1293	AD 1325
WLS-C54	Collar, frame 5	129	h/s	AD 1172	AD 1300	AD 1300
WLS-C55	East rafter, frame 7	109	19	AD 1204	AD 1293	AD 1312
WLS-C56	West rafter, frame 6	62	24C	AD 1264	AD 1301	AD 1325
WLS-C57	West rafter, frame 7	99	no h/s	AD 1192		AD 1290
WLS-C58	West rafter, frame 8	72	18c	AD 1253	AD 1306	AD 1324
WLS-C59	Tiebeam, frame 8	50	14		*****	

الاستعادية المحالي والمحالية المحالية والمحالية والمحالية والمحالية والمحالية والمحالية والمحالية والمحالية وال

\*h/s = the heartwood/sapwood boundary is the last ring on the sample

and the second second

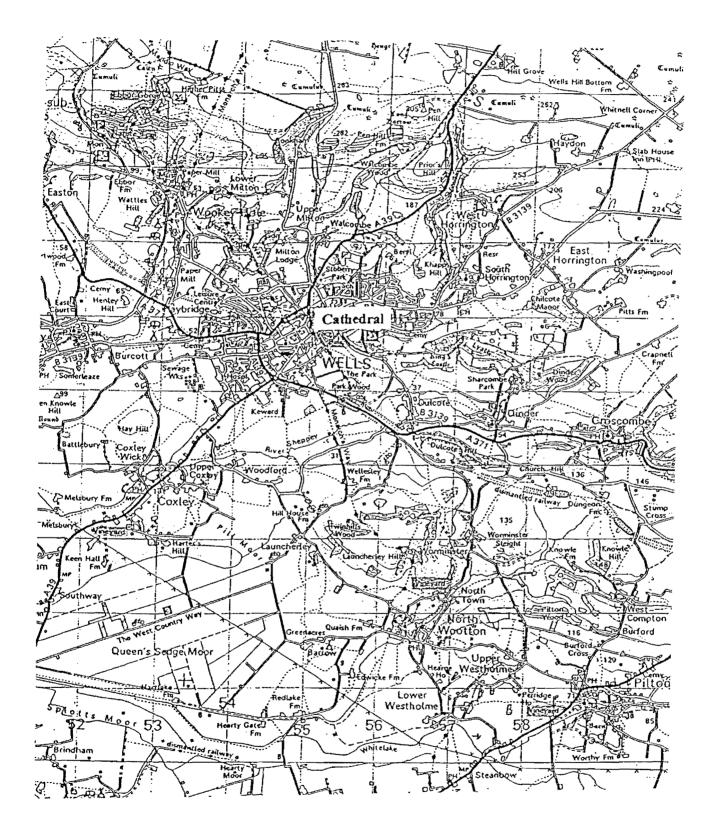
C = complete sapwood retained on sample. The last measured ring date is the felling date of the timber

c = complete sapwood retained on timber, all or part lost from core in sampling

# Table 2: Results of the cross-matching of site chronology WLSCSQ02(3) and relevant reference chronologies when first ring date is AD 1169 and last ring date is AD 1325

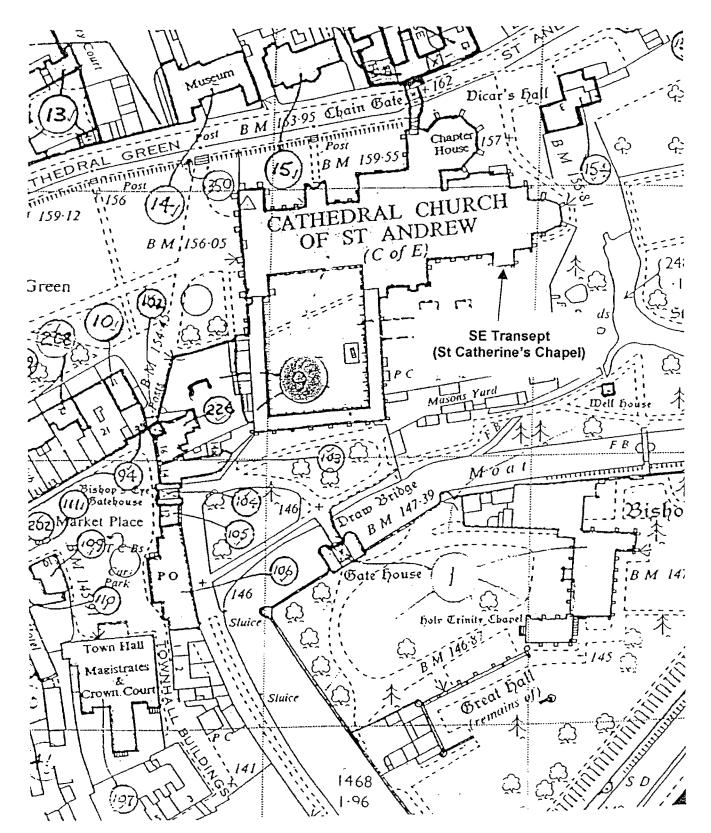
Reference chronology	Span of chronology	<i>t</i> -value	
Southern England Reading waterfronts, Berks New Inn House, Kingswood, Glos Chichester Cathedral, West Sussex East Midlands England, London	AD 1083 - 1589 AD 1160 - 1407 AD 1191 - 1519 AD 1173 - 1295 AD 882 - 1981 AD 413 - 1728	9.7 8.9 8.2 8.1 8.0 7.9	(Bridge 1988) (Groves <i>et al</i> 1997) (Arnold <i>et al</i> forthcoming) (Howard <i>et al</i> 1992) (Laxton and Litton 1988) (Tyers and Groves 1999 unpubl)
Cross Keys Inn, Leicester	AD 1104 – 1309	7.3	(Howard <i>et al</i> 1988)





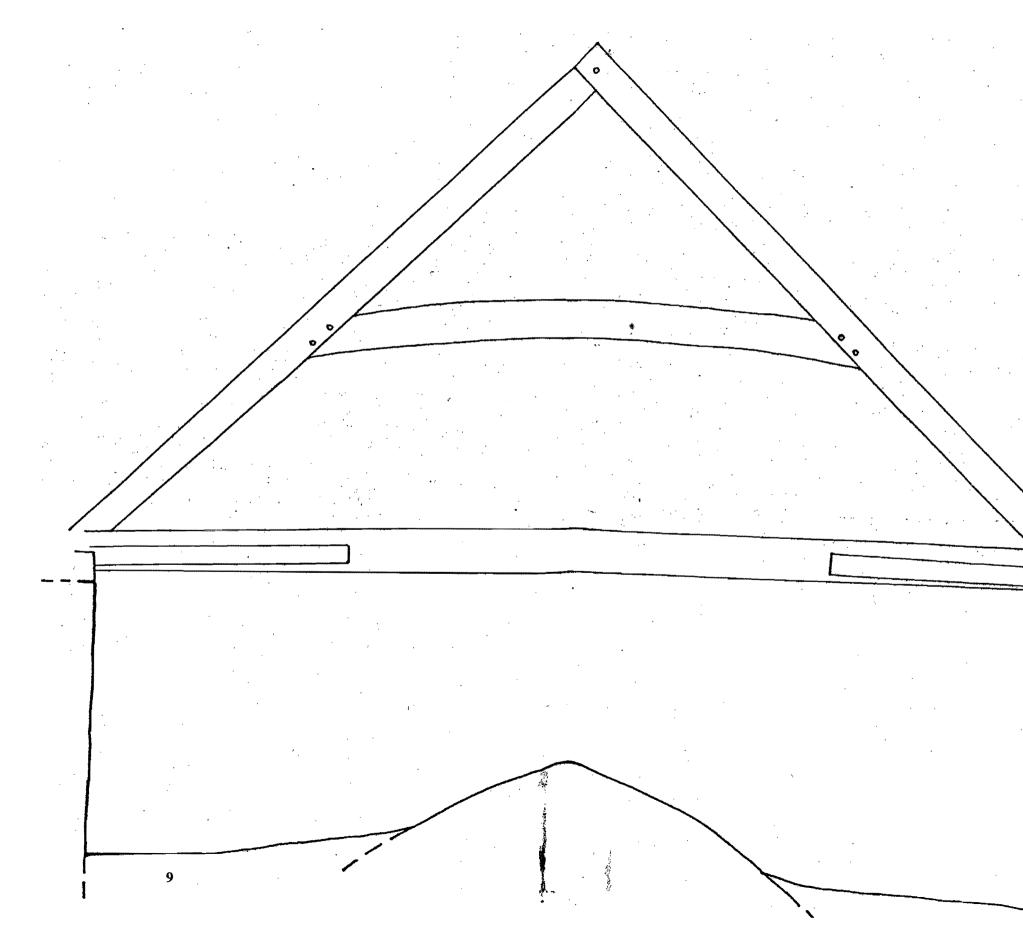
© Crown Copyright and database right 2013. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100024900

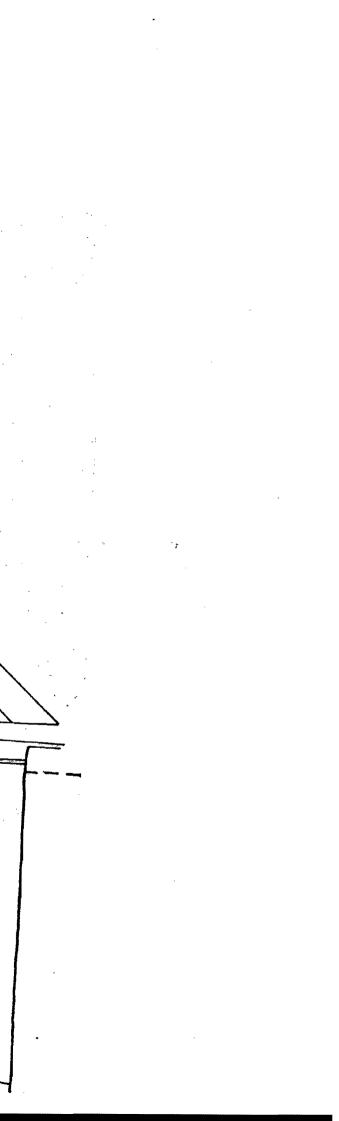




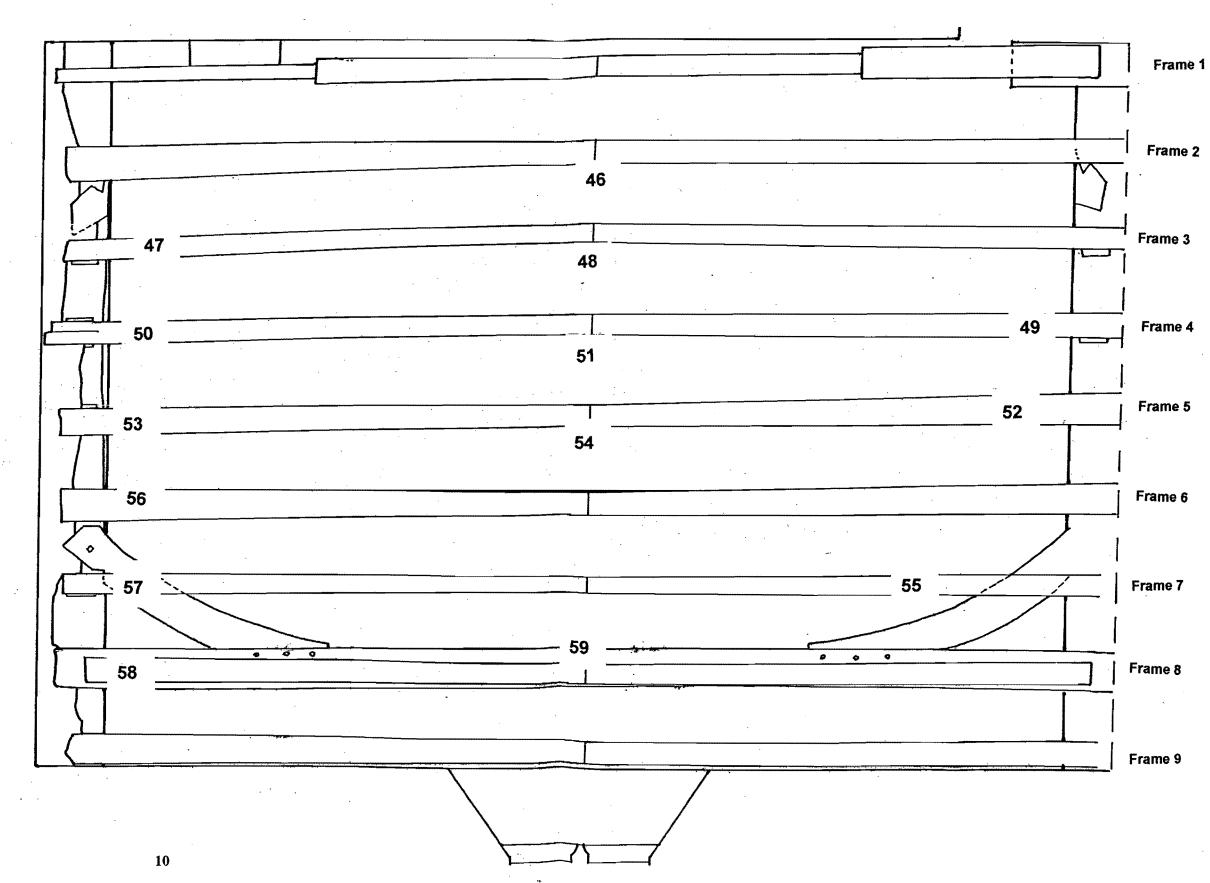
© Crown Copyright and database right 2013. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100024900

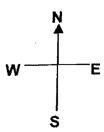
# Figure 3: Illustration of frame 1 (viewed from the south looking north)





# Figure 4: Roof plan to show location of timbers sampled





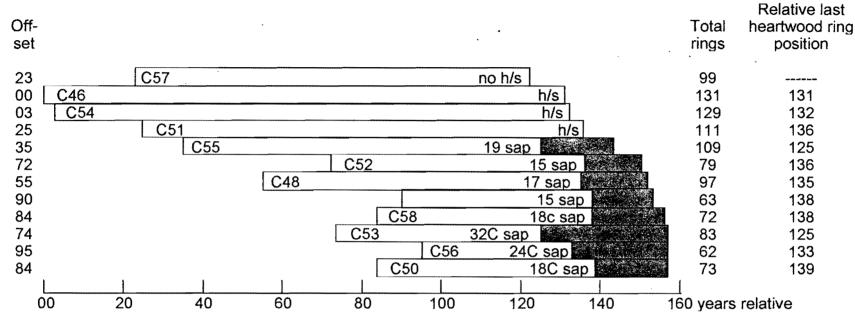


Figure 5: Bar diagram of samples in site chronology WLSCSQ02(3)

White bars = heartwood rings, shaded area = sapwood rings

h/s = heartwood/sapwood boundary is last ring on sample

C = complete sapwood is retained on the sample, the last measured ring date is the felling date of the timber

373 297 529 356 264 240 282 341 291 374 321 396 270 344 287 332 248 172 222 229 255 400 407 296 115 157 143 97 64 84 69 51 69 73 73 132 164 197 185 204 110 165 167 154 261 177 164 67 155 176

.