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The Dower House, Bayham Abbey, Little Bayham, East Sussex Tree-Ring Analysis of Timbers

Alison Arnold and Robert Howard

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Summary

Dendrochronological analysis undertaken on 45 samples taken from the north and south-wing roofs of this building resulted in the construction of a number of site sequences, only two of which could be dated.

The first, BAYASQ01, contains five samples, all from the south-wing roof, and spans the period AD 1298–1373. All of these samples are believed to have been felled in AD 1380–1405. The second, BAYASQ02, contains two samples, again from the south wing, and spans the period AD 1469–1550, with these samples thought to have been felled in AD 1560–85.

Prior to the tree-ring analysis being carried out, the south wing was thought to date to the first quarter of the eighteenth century, with a large number of the roof timbers being reused. It is now known that this roof contains timbers of the fourteenth/early fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. No timbers from the eighteenth-century phase of construction have been identified.

Unfortunately, no timbers from the north-wing roof have been dated. This part of the building remains dated on documentary and structural grounds to the second half of the eighteenth century.

Keywords

Standing Building Dendrochronology

Author's Address

Nottingham Tree-Ring Dating Laboratory, 20 Hillcrest Grove, Sherwood, Nottingham, NG5 1FT. Telephone:0115 9603833. Email:alisonjarnold@hotmail.com, roberthoward10@hotmail.com

Introduction

Lying immediately to the west of the ruined Premonstratensian Abbey, on the Kent-Sussex border, is the Grade II* listed post-medieval Dower House (TQ649365; Figs 1, 2, and 3). The estate has been in the hands of the Camden family since it was purchased from Ambrose Browne by Sir John Pratt in AD 1714. The Dower House was the local residence for the Camden family until a new mansion was built to the north-west of the ruins in AD 1870. This new house was called Bayham Abbey House and the old house became known by its present name.

The Dower House comprises two parallel wings aligned north-south, with a further wing aligned east west at the northern end (Fig 4). The house and the ruined Abbey are now within the guardianship of English Heritage.

Whilst work was being undertaken on some of the roofs, English Heritage commissioned Archaeology South-East to produce an interpretative survey of the affected roof areas. This survey was carried out by David Martin and Simon Knight in November 1999. The description of the building and north and south-wing roofs below are taken (in an abridged form) from this survey (Archaeology South-East 1999).

Building Description and suggested Development

The structural evidence indicates the earliest surviving work within the mansion to be the central section (south wing). This Period A work dates from *c* AD 1700 (most likely subsequent to the acquisition of the site by Sir John Pratt in AD 1714) and consisted of a symmetrically-fronted terminal-chimney house, probably with a two-storeyed central porch (porch now destroyed). There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that this initial house incorporated some form of now-destroyed rear (western) service area, probably in the form of a rear lean-to outshut.

Relatively soon after the construction of the initial house, probably during the second quarter of the eighteenth century (Period B) the house was enlarged by the addition of the north wing. Although a date between AD 1725 and AD 1750 seems most likely for this extension, a date around AD 1760 would not be entirely out of keeping. It too incorporated a symmetrical façade, though in this instance with deep cant-sided bay windows, hipped roof terminals and rear stacks.

The house was further remodelled and extended during the closing years of the eighteenth century and opening years of the nineteenth century, this work almost certainly having been carried out by the second Lord Camden, probably between AD 1799 and AD 1814. The extensions were not carried out in a single phase, but during two – perhaps three – separate building campaigns. The first of these (Period C) was the extension of the original period-A house southwards and to a greater height. The next, and quite separate addition, was the demolition of the rear section of the Period-A part and its replacement by a second two-storeyed wing constructed parallel to the original house. This Period D work, which dates from *c* AD 1800, but is probably early-nineteenth century, shows constructional variations between its northern (Period D2) and southern (Period D1) ends which may indicate that in itself this addition is of two phases, though these constructional variations may reflect nothing more than differences in the internal layout of the attic rooms. The northern part includes a short contemporary wing set at right angles and extending out westwards.

North and South-wing Roofs

The roof over the initial house (Period A or south wing) is framed in five bays with the end trusses incorporated into the internal faces of the end gables. It is of standard staggered-butt-purlin construction with collar trusses and no ridgeboard. Much of the material is reused from a medieval structure and a considerable proportion is soot stained. Nailed-on collars between the trusses support the plastered ceilings of the attic rooms, whilst inset slightly

from the eaves are nailed-in ashlar pieces (effectively studs) which support low lath-andplaster partitions forming the side walls of the attic rooms. Between the ashlar pieces and the ceiling the soffits of the common rafters are masked by lath-and-plaster skeelings. The attic rooms – almost certainly originally three in number with the central room the smallest – appear always to have been lit by a series of three dormer windows incorporated into the eastern roof slope.

The Period B, or north wing, roof is a sturdily built fully hipped staggered-butt-purlin roof (Fig 5) framed in three bays, the short central bay coinciding with the centrally placed entrance and staircase area. In keeping with the likely construction date during the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the hipped terminals do not incorporate high-set collars at their apex, though there is a central jack rafter. Heavier common rafters are included above the level of the purlins to coincide with the apex of the hips. Both hips incorporate return butt purlins, again a feature typical of the period. Both hips were designed from the outset to incorporate a central dormer window. As with the period-A roof, the attic rooms were designed from the outset to have plastered ceilings and skeelings with ashlars supporting low plastered side walls. The partitions dividing the two attic rooms from the stair area have been modified so as to allow the doorways to be moved northwards away from the head of the stairs.

Valley rafters are incorporated where the period-B roof intersects with the northward extension to the period-A roof. This allowed the construction of new in-built flues against the earlier period-A chimney and gable so as to serve the addition.

Objectives of the tree-ring analysis

Sampling and analysis by tree-ring dating was commissioned and funded by English Heritage. It was hoped that the results would help inform the future conservation and management of the building. Dating the primary roof timbers of the north and south-wing roofs would provide dates for their construction. Additionally, it has been suggested that the reused timbers within the south-wing roof might be from the east end of the former Abbey Church. Therefore, by gaining a date for these it was hoped to potentially provide dating evidence for the roofing of the church.

Acknowledgements

The Laboratory would like to thank John Meadows, of the English Heritage Scientific Dating Section, and Richard Morrice, Historic Buildings Inspector from their Guildford office, for their on-site advice and assistance with access. As noted above, the description of the building and of the two roofs is taken from the Archaeology South-East survey (Archaeology South-East 1999), as are Figures 4 and 7–10). Additionally, John Meadows, and Cathy Tyers of the Sheffield Dendrochronology Laboratory, were very helpful during discussions throughout various stages of this work. Mick Worthington of the Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory kindly ran some of the data against the reference material held there.

Sampling

Initially, 32 core samples were taken from timbers of this building. Each sample was given the code BAY-A (for Bayham) and numbered 01–32. Fourteen of these were from the northwing roof (BAY-A01–14) and 18 from the south-wing roof (BAY-A15–32). Initial analysis pointed to the site being potentially more complex than originally thought and so following discussions with English Heritage it was agreed that the investigation should be extended and the Laboratory returned and took a further 30 samples (BAY-A33–62). The position of all samples was noted at the time of sampling and has been marked on Figures 6–10. None

of the timbers sampled in the north wing showed any sign of reuse. In contrast to this, many of the timbers within the south wing showed obvious signs of previous use, such as smoke blackening and/or carpenters marks which did not appear to fit with the extant roof. Whether the sample displayed any of these characteristics or not was noted at the time, and this and further details relating to each sample can be found in Table 1.

Analysis and Results

Seventeen of the samples (nine from the north roof and eight from the southern roof) had too few rings to make secure dating a possibility and these samples were rejected prior to measurement. The remaining 45 samples were prepared by sanding and polishing and their growth-ring widths measured; the data of these measurements are given at the end of the report. These samples were then divided into those from the north and those from the south roof and samples from each group compared with the others within it by the Litton/Zainodin grouping procedure (see appendix).

South-wing roof

At a least value of t=4.5, nine samples formed three groups. Firstly, five samples matched each other and were combined at the relevant offset positions to form BAYASQ01, a site sequence of 76 rings (Fig 11). This site sequence was then compared with a large number of relevant reference chronologies for oak, indicating a consistent match when the date of its first ring is AD 1298 and of its last measured ring is AD 1373. The evidence for this dating is given by the *t*-values in Table 2.

Two samples matched and were combined at the relevant offset positions to form BAYASQ02, a site sequence of 82 rings (Fig 12). This site sequence was found to consistently match the reference chronologies at a first-ring date of AD 1469 and a last-ring date of AD 1550. The evidence for this dating is given by the *t*-values in Table 3.

Two further site sequences, BAYASQ03 and BAYASQ04, containing two samples each (Figs 13 and 14), could not be matched against the reference chronologies and are undated.

Attempts to date the remaining ungrouped samples from the southern roof by individually comparing them against the reference chronologies were unsuccessful and these samples are also undated.

North-wing roof

At a least value of *t*=4.5, 17 samples formed three groups. Firstly, six samples matched and were combined at the relevant offset positions to form BAYASQ05, a site sequence of 69 rings (Fig 15). Five samples matched and were combined at the relevant offset positions to form BAYASQ06, a site sequence of 80 rings (Fig 16). Finally, six samples matched and were combined at the relevant offset positions to form BAYASQ07, a site sequence of 73 rings (Fig 17).

These three site sequences were then compared with the reference material but unfortunately, no secure match could be found and all remain undated. Attempts were then made to date the ungrouped samples by individually comparing with the reference material but again this was unsuccessful and these samples are also undated,

Interpretation

Analysis of 45 samples taken from this building resulted in the construction of several site sequences, only two of which could be successfully dated.

Site sequence BAYASQ01, contains five samples and spans the period AD 1282–1373. All of these samples have the heartwood/sapwood boundary ring. This ranges in date from AD 1362 to AD 1373, which is consistent with a single felling. The average of these dates is AD 1365, allowing an estimated felling date to be calculated for the five timbers represented to within the range AD 1380–1405. All of these samples were taken from timbers which showed signs of previous use.

Site sequence BAYASQ02 contains two samples, and spans the period AD 1469–1550. Only one of these samples (BAY-A20) has the heartwood/sapwood boundary ring. This gives an estimated felling date for the timber represented within the range AD 1560–85. The second sample (BAY-A60) has a last-measured ring date of AD 1534 which means it is not impossible that this timber was also felled in AD 1560–85. Both of these samples are from common rafters in the southern roof. Although neither of these timbers showed any obvious sign that they were reused, sample BAY-A20 was from a timber which had lots of old nails in it, in contrast to many of the timbers around it.

All felling date ranges have been calculated using the estimate that 95% of mature oak trees from this area have 15–40 sapwood rings.

Discussion

Tree-ring analysis has successfully dated seven timbers from the south-wing roof. Five of these were felled in AD 1380–1405 and two in AD 1560–85. The five earlier timbers show obvious signs of reuse and at least one of the sixteenth-century timbers has indications that it may also have been used previously.

On the basis of the use of staggered purlins and other structural details, a date in the late seventeenth or (more likely) early part of the eighteenth century had been suggested for the south wing, making it the earliest surviving part of the building. It is now known that the roof contains timbers from both the fourteenth (or very early fifteenth) and the sixteenth centuries. No timbers have been identified from the late seventeenth or eighteenth century, so the analysis has neither confirmed nor refuted the expected date of construction.

With a further two undated site sequences and 15 ungrouped samples, it may well be the case that more than the two identified fellings are represented within the timbers of this roof. Indeed there is great variation in the length of ring-width sequences of these samples (the shortest having too few to be deemed worth measuring and the longest having 211 rings) which may support the idea that timbers of various fellings/sources have been utilised during the construction of this roof. This may have attributed to the poor grouping and lack of successful dating.

On documentary and structural grounds the north-wing roof had been dated to the second half of the eighteenth century. It is unfortunate that, despite the production of three site sequences, no timbers from the north-wing roof were dated during the analysis. The fact that the samples formed three separate groups, as well as the two ungrouped samples, may again indicate a number of different fellings/sources are represented within the timbers of the roof. However, in contrast to the timbers of the south-wing roof, all of the samples have similarly short ring-width sequences, with the longest sample (BAY-A08) having only 73 rings, and nearly 80% of the measured samples having fewer than 60 rings. This shortness of ring-width sequences in itself would have hindered grouping and successful dating.

It is disappointing that none of the north-wing roof timbers have been dated nor any of the timbers considered primary to the construction of the south-wing roof. In addition to the potential difficulties in dating timbers from several sources/periods mentioned above, another likely reason for this lack of dating could be the period from which this building is thought to

date. It has long been acknowledged that there is a distinct scarcity of reference chronologies covering the post-medieval period in the south-east of the country. Thus the dating of buildings of this period, from this part of the country, is problematic. An English-Heritage-funded project designed to combat this problem has gone some way to alleviating this difficulty but it is still an area where reference chronologies are limited.

Perhaps, it is of consequence then, to note that although only seven timbers have been securely dated at Bayham, tentative dates were found for a number of the other sequences. However, the statistical evidence for these dates was weak, and therefore they remain unproven, despite both the Sheffield and Oxford Laboratories kindly running the data against their reference material. It is hoped that at some point in the future, when further post-medieval reference chronologies are available, some of the undated Bayham Abbey material will be successfully dated.

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Sample	Sample location*	Total	Sapwood	First measured	Last heartwood	Last measured		
number		rings**	rings***	ring date (AD)	ring date (AD)	ring date (AD)		
Northern Win	Northern Wing (roof)							
BAY-A01	North upper rafter, frame 2, bay 1	49	14C					
BAY-A02	North lower rafter, frame 3, bay 1	57	11C					
BAY-A03	North lower rafter, frame 4, bay 1	51	08					
BAY-A04	North upper rafter, frame 5, bay 1	46	15C					
BAY-A05	South lower rafter, frame 5, bay 1	64	h/s					
BAY-A06	South upper rafter, frame 5, bay 1	68	16					
BAY-A07	South purlin, east hip to truss 1	45	h/s					
BAY-A08	Purlin, east hip	73	19C					
BAY-A09	North stud 1, truss 2	54	05					
BAY-A10	North upper rafter, frame 3, bay 3	54	h/s					
BAY-A11	South upper rafter, frame 3. bay 3	60	10					
BAY-A12	North upper rafter, frame 4. bay 3	66	12C					
BAY-A13	South purlin, west hip to truss 2	NM						
BAY-A14	North-west diagonal rafter	NM						
BAY-A33	North lower rafter, frame 5, bay 1	57	03					
BAY-A34	North lower rafter, frame 6, bay 1	55	03					
BAY-A35	Joist frame 6. bay 1	NM						
BAY-A36	North upper rafter, frame 3, bay 1	NM						
BAY-A37	North lower rafter, frame 8, bay 1	NM						
BAY-A38	North purlin, east hip to truss 1	48	02					
BAY-A39	North lower rafter, frame 10, bay 1	NM						
BAY-A40	North lower rafter, frame 11, bay 1	46	15C					
BAY-A41	North principal rafter, truss 1	NM						
BAY-A42	South principal rafter, truss 1	NM						
BAY-A43	North principal rafter, truss 2	48						
BAY-A44	South principal rafter, truss 2	51	h/s					
BAY-A45	Collar, truss 2	55	01					
BAY-A46	North purlin, truss 1–2	NM						
Southern Wing (roof)								
BAY-A15	East principal rafter, truss 15 ®, cm	57	h/s					
BAY-A16	West principal rafter, truss 15 ®, cm	51	h/s	1314	1364	1364		

Table 1: Details of tree-ring samples from The Dower House, Bayham Abbey, Little Bayham, East Sussex

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BAY-A17	East rafter 1, truss 15–16	86	h/s			
BAY-A18	East rafter 6, truss 14–15	101	h/s			
BAY-A19	East rafter 3, truss 14–15	128	h/s			
BAY-A20	East rafter 2, truss 14–15	67	05	1484	1545	1550
BAY-A21	West rafter 2, truss 14–15	92	h/s			
BAY-A22	East lower rafter 7, truss 13–14 cm	NM				
BAY-A23	East principal rafter, truss 13 ®	62	h/s	1302	1363	1363
BAY-A24	West principal rafter, truss 13 ®, sm	54	04	1313	1362	1366
BAY-A25	Collar, truss 13 ®	NM				
BAY-A26	West rafter 5, truss 12–13	52	10C			
BAY-A27	West common rafter 1, truss 13–14 sm	NM				
BAY-A28	East principal rafter, truss 12 ®, cm, sm	52	h/s	1322	1373	1373
BAY-A29	West principal rafter, truss 12 ®, cm	66	h/s	1298	1363	1363
BAY-A30	Collar, truss 12 ®	211	h/s			
BAY-A31	West rafter 1, truss 11–12	77	04			
BAY-A32	East purlin, truss 11–12 ® sm	68	h/s			
BAY-A47	West purlin, truss 15–16 ®	NM				
BAY-A48	West rafter 1, truss 15–16	57	h/s			
BAY-A49	East lower rafter 2, truss 15–16 ®	140	01			
BAY-A50	Collar, frame 4, truss 15–16	53	h/s			
BAY-A51	East lower rafter 4, truss 15–16 sm	90	06			
BAY-A52	Collar, frame 4, truss 11–12	NM				
BAY-A53	West upper rafter 2, truss 12–13	NM				
BAY-A54	Collar, frame 1, truss 12–13	49	16			
BAY-A55	West upper rafter 1, truss 12–13 sm	NM				
BAY-A56	East purlin, truss 12–13 ®	52	h/s			
BAY-A57	Collar, frame 2, truss 12–13	82	15			
BAY-A58	Collar, frame 3, truss 12–13	61	h/s			
BAY-A59	Collar, frame 6, truss 12–13 ®?	80	h/s			
BAY-A60	East rafter 3, truss 15–16	66		1469		1534
BAY-A61	West principal rafter, truss 14 ®, cm	NM				
BAY-A62	South valley rafter west, truss 14–15	67				

* = ® = reused, cm = carpenters mark, sm = smoke blackening; **NM = not measured ***h/s = the heartwood/sapwood ring is the last ring on the sample, C = complete sapwood retained on sample, last measured ring is the felling date

Table 2: Results of the cross-matching of site sequence BAYASQ01 and relevant reference chronologies when the first-ring date is AD 1298 and the last-ring date is AD 1373

Reference chronology	<i>t</i> -value	Span of chronology	Reference
England, London	4.7	AD 413–1728	Tyers and Groves 1999 unpubl
Kent	5.0	AD 1158–1540	Laxton and Litton 1989
Rectory Park (wing), Horsmonden, Kent	5.3	AD 1313–1426	Laxton and Litton 1989
Lower Newlands, Teynham, Kent	5.3	AD 1278–1366	Laxton and Litton 1989
Barbican/Gatehouse, Warwick Castle	5.1	AD 1310–1503	Howard 1995 unpubl
Wells Cathedral, E range roof C1 - 19	5.0	AD 1279–1451	Howard <i>et al</i> 2001
Cowden, Kent, St Mary Magdalene	4.9	AD 1254–1377	Howard et al 1999

Table 3: Results of the cross-matching of site sequence BAYASQ02 and relevant reference chronologies when the first-ring date is AD 1469 and the last-ring date is AD 1550

Reference chronology	<i>t</i> -value	Span of chronology	Reference
England, London	5.8	AD 413–1728	Tyers and Groves 1999 unpubl
Southern England	5.0	AD 1083–1981	Bridge 1988
Stonepits Manor, Seal, Kent	6.3	AD 1445–1542	Arnold <i>et al</i> 2003
Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottm	6.2	AD 1445–1551	Howard et al 1994
Chiddingly Place, East Sussex	5.7	AD 1324–1576	Arnold and Litton 2003
Walmer Castle, Kent	5.5	AD 1396–1523	Howard <i>et al</i> 1997
Sandiacre Tithe Barn, Derbys	5.3	AD 1427–1611	Howard 2004 unpubl
The Forge, Church St, E Hendred, Oxon	5.5	AD 1379–1521	Alcock <i>et al</i> 1989



Figure 1: Maps to show the location of Bayham Abbey, East Sussex



Figure 2: Map to show the location of The Dower House



Figure 3: The Dower House, taken from the north-east



Figure 4: Outline plan showing the sequence of development of the house as suggested by the roof structure (Archaeology South-East)



Figure 5: The north-wing roof



Figure 6: Sketch plan of the north-wing roof timbers, showing the location of samples BAY-A01–14 and BAY-A33–46



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Figure 7: Section C–C (truss 13) looking south, showing the location of samples BAY-A23–5 (Archaeology South-East)



Figure 8: Section D–D (Truss 14) looking south (Archaeology South-East)



Figure 9: Long section Z–Z looking west, showing the location of samples BAY-A16, BAY-A21, BAY-A26–7, BAY-A29, BAY-A31, BAY-A47–8, BAY-A55, and BAY-A61–2 (Archaeology South-East)



Figure 10: Long section, looking east, showing the location of samples BAY-A15, BAY-A17–20, BAY-A22, BAY-A28, BAY-A30, BAY-A32, BAY-A49–54, and BAY-A56–60 (based on Archaeology South-East)







Figure 12: Bar diagram of samples in site sequence BAYASQ02



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

Figure 13: Bar diagram of samples in site sequence BAYASQ03



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

Figure 14: Bar diagram of samples in site sequence BAYASQ04



h/s = the heartwood/sapwood boundary ring is the last ring on the sample C = complete sapwood retained on sample, last measured ring is the felling date

Figure 15: Bar diagram of samples in site sequence BAYASQ05



h/s = the heartwood/sapwood boundary ring is the last ring on the sample C = complete sapwood retained on sample, last measured ring is the felling date

Figure 16: Bar diagram of samples in site sequence BAYASQ06



h/s = the heartwood/sapwood boundary ring is the last ring on the sample C = complete sapwood retained on sample, last measured ring is the felling date

Figure 17: Bar diagram of samples in site sequence BAYASQ07

Data of measured samples – measurements in 0.01mm units

25

95 94 89 82 69 67 52 101 90 78 96 91 64 83 64 78 61

APPENDIX

Tree-Ring Dating

The Principles of Tree-Ring Dating

Tree-ring dating, or *dendrochronology* as it is known, is discussed in some detail in the Laboratory's Monograph, 'An East Midlands Master Tree-Ring Chronology and its uses for dating Vernacular Building' (Laxton and Litton 1988) and, Dendrochronology; Guidelines on Producing and Interpreting Dendrochronological Dates (English Heritage 1988). Here we will give the bare outlines. Each year an oak tree grows an extra ring on the outside of its trunk and all its branches just inside its bark. The *width* of this annual ring depends largely on the weather during the growing season, about April to October, and possibly also on the weather during the previous year. Good growing seasons give rise to relatively wide rings, poor ones to very narrow rings and average ones to relatively average ring widths. Since the climate is so variable from year to year, almost random-like, the widths of these rings will also appear random-like in sequence, reflecting the seasons. This is illustrated in Figure 1 where, for example, the widest rings appear at irregular intervals. This is the key to dating by tree rings, or rather, by their widths. Records of the average ring widths for oaks, one for each year for the last 1000 years or more, are available for different areas. These are called master chronologies. Because of the random-like nature of these sequences of widths, there is usually only one position at which a sequence of ring widths from a sample of oak timber with at least 70 rings will match a master. This will date the timber and, in particular, the last ring.

If the bark is still on the sample, as in Figure 1, then the date of the last ring will be the date of felling of the oak from which it was cut. There is much evidence that in medieval times oaks cut down for building purposes were used almost immediately, usually within the year or so (Rackham 1976). Hence if bark is present on several main timbers in a building, none of which appear reused or are later insertions, and if they all have the same date for their last ring, then we can be quite confident that this is the date of construction or soon after. If there is no bark on the sample, then we have to make an estimate of the felling date; how this is done is explained below.

The Practice of Tree-Ring Dating at the Nottingham Tree-Ring Dating Laboratory

1. Inspecting the Building and Sampling the Timbers. Together with a building historian the timbers in a building are inspected to try to ensure that those sampled are not reused or later insertions. Sampling is almost always done by coring into the timber, which has the great advantage that we can sample *in situ* timbers and those judged best to give the date of construction, or phase of construction if there is more than one in the building. The timbers to be sampled are also inspected to see how many rings they have. We normally look for timbers with at least 70 rings, and preferably more. With fewer rings than this, 50 for example, sequences of widths become difficult to match to a unique position within a master sequence of ring widths and so are difficult to date (Litton and Zainodin 1991). The cross-section of the rafter shown in Figure 2 has about 120 rings; about 20 of which are sapwood rings – the lighter rings on the outside. Similarly the core has just over 100 rings with a few sapwood rings.

To ensure that we are getting the date of the building as a whole, or the whole of a phase of construction if there is more than one, about 8 to 10 samples per phase are usually taken. Sometimes we take many more, especially if the construction is complicated. One reason for taking so many samples is that, in general, some will fail to give a date. There may be many reasons why a particular sequence of ring widths from a sample of timber fails to give a date even though others from the same building do. For example, a particular tree may have grown in an odd ecological niche, so odd indeed that the widths of its rings were determined by factors other than the local climate! In such circumstances it will be impossible to date a timber from this tree using the master sequence whose widths, we can assume, were predominantly determined by the local climate at the time.

Sampling is done by coring into the timber with a hollow corer attached to an electric drill and usually from its outer rings inwards towards where the centre of the tree, the pith, is judged to be. An illustration of a core is shown in Figure 2; it is about 15cm long and 1cm diameter. Great care has to be taken to ensure that as few as possible of the outer rings are lost in coring. This can be difficult as these outer rings are often very soft (see below on sapwood). Each sample is given a code which identifies uniquely which timber it comes from, which building it is from and where the building is located. For example, CRO-A06 is the sixth core taken from the first building (A) sampled by the Laboratory in Cropwell Bishop. Where it came from in that building will be shown in the sampling records and drawings. No structural damage is done to any timbers by coring, nor does it weaken them.

During the initial inspection of the building and its timbers the dendrochronologist may come to the conclusion that, as far as can be judged, none of the timbers have sufficient rings in them for dating purposes and may advise against sampling to save further unwarranted expense.

All sampling by the Laboratory is undertaken according to current Health and Safety Standards. The Laboratory's dendrochronologists are insured.



Figure 1: A wedge of oak from a tree felled in 1976. It shows the annual growth rings, one for each year from the innermost ring to the last ring on the outside just inside the bark. The year of each ring can be determined by counting back from the outside ring, which grew in 1976.



Figure 2: Cross-section of a rafter showing the presence of sapwood rings in the left hand corner, the arrow is pointing to the heartwood/sapwood boundary (H/S). Also a core with sapwood; again the arrow is pointing to the H/S. The core is about the size of a pencil.



Figure 3: Measuring ring widths under a microscope. The microscope is fixed while the sample is on a moving platform. The total sequence of widths is measure twice to ensure that an error has not been made. This type of apparatus is needed to process a large number of samples on a regular basis.



Figure 4: Three cores from timbers in a building. They come from trees growing at the same time. Notice that, although the sequences of widths look similar, they are not identical. This is typical.

- 2. **Measuring Ring Widths**. Each core is sanded down with a belt sander using medium-grit paper and then finished by hand with flourgrade-grit paper. The rings are then clearly visible and differentiated from each other with a result very much like that shown in Figure 2. The core is then mounted on a movable table below a microscope and the ring-widths measured individually from the innermost ring to the outermost. The widths are automatically recorded in a computer file as they are measured (see Fig 3).
- 3. *Cross-matching and Dating the Samples*. Because of the factors besides the local climate which may determine the annual widths of a tree's rings, no two sequences of ring widths from different oaks growing at the same time are exactly alike (Fig 4). Indeed, the sequences may not be exactly alike even when the trees are growing near to each other. Consequently, in the Laboratory we do not attempt to match two sequences of ring widths by eye, or graphically, or by any other subjective method. Instead, it is done objectively (ie statistically) on a computer by a process called cross-matching. The output from the computer tells us the extent of correlation between two sample sequences of widths or, if we are dating, between a sample sequence of widths and the master, at each relative position of one to the other (offsets). The extent of the correlation at an offset is determined by the *t*-value (defined in almost any introductory book on statistics). That offset with the maximum tvalue among the *t*-values at all the offsets will be the best candidate for dating one sequence relative to the other. If one of these is a master chronology, then this will date the other. Experiments carried out in the past with sequences from oaks of known date suggest that a *t*-value of at least 4.5, and preferably at least 5.0, is usually adequate for the dating to be accepted with reasonable confidence (Laxton and Litton 1988; Laxton et al 1988; Howard et al 1984-1995).

This is illustrated in Figure 5 with timbers from one of the roofs of Lincoln Cathedral. Here four sequences of ring widths, LIN-C04, 05, 08, and 45, have been cross-matched with each other. The ring widths themselves have been omitted in the *bar-diagram*, as is usual, but the offsets at which they best cross-match each other are shown; eg the sequence of ring widths of C08 matches the sequence of ring widths of C45 best when it is at a position starting 20 rings after the first ring of C45, and similarly for the others. The actual *t*-values between the four at these offsets of best correlations are in the matrix. Thus at the offset of +20 rings, the *t*-value between C45 and C08 is 5.6 and is the maximum found between these two among all the positions of one sequence relative to the other.

It is standard practice in our Laboratory first to cross-match as many as possible of the ring-width sequences of the samples in a building and then to form an average from them. This average is called a *site sequence* of the building being dated and is illustrated in Figure 5. The fifth bar at the bottom is a site sequence for a roof at Lincoln Cathedral and is constructed from the matching sequences of the four timbers. The site sequence width for each year is the average of the widths in each of the sample sequences which has a width for that year. Thus in Fig 5 if the widths shown are 0.8mm for C45, 0.2mm for C08, 0.7mm for C05, and 0.3mm for C04, then the corresponding width of the site sequence is the average of these, 0.55mm. The actual sequence of widths of this site sequence is stored on the computer. The reason for creating site sequences is that it is usually easier to date an average sequence of ring widths

with a master sequence than it is to date the individual component sample sequences separately.

The straightforward method of cross-matching several sample sequences with each other one at a time is called the 'maximal *t*-value' method. The actual method of cross-matching a group of sequences of ring-widths used in the Laboratory involves grouping and averaging the ring-width sequences and is called the 'Litton-Zainodin Grouping Procedure'. It is a modification of the straight forward method and was successfully developed and tested in the Laboratory and has been published (Litton and Zainodin 1991; Laxton *et al* 1988).

4. Estimating the Felling Date. As mentioned above, if the bark is present on a sample, then the date of its last ring is the date of the felling of its tree. Actually it could be the year after if it had been felled in the first three months before any new growth had started, but this is not too important a consideration in most cases. The actual bark may not be present on a timber in a building, though the dendrochronologist who is sampling can often see from its surface that only the bark is missing. In these cases the date of the last ring is still the date of felling.

Quite often some, though not all, of the original outer rings are missing on a timber. The outer rings on an oak, called *sapwood* rings, are usually lighter than the inner rings, the *heartwood*, and so are relatively easy to identify. For example, sapwood can be seen in the corner of the rafter and at the outer end of the core in Figure 2, both indicated by arrows. More importantly for dendrochronology, the sapwood is relatively soft and so liable to insect attack and wear and tear. The builder, therefore, may remove some of the sapwood for precisely these reasons. Nevertheless, if at least some of the sapwood rings are left on a sample, we will know that not too many rings have been lost since felling so that the date of the last ring on the sample is only a few years before the date of the original last ring on the tree, and so to the date of felling.

Various estimates have been made and used for the average number of sapwood rings in mature oak trees (English Heritage 1998). A fairly conservative range is between 15 and 50 and that this holds for 95% of mature oaks. This means, of course, that in a small number of cases there could be fewer than 15 and more than 50 sapwood rings. For example, the core CRO-A06 has only 9 sapwood rings and some have obviously been lost over time – either they were removed originally by the carpenter and/or they rotted away in the building and/or they were lost in the coring. It is not known exactly how many sapwood rings are missing, but using the above range the Laboratory would estimate between a minimum of 6 (=15-9) and a maximum of 41 (=50-9). If the last ring of CRO-A06 has been dated to 1500, say, then the estimated felling-date range for the tree from which it came originally would be between 1506 and 1541. The Laboratory uses this estimate for sapwood in areas of England where it has no prior information. It also uses it when dealing with samples with very many rings, about 120 to the last heartwood ring. But in other areas of England where the Laboratory has accumulated a number of samples with complete sapwood, that is, no sapwood lost since felling, other estimates in place of the conservative range of 15 to 50 are used. In the East Midlands (Laxton et al 2001) and the east to the south down to Kent (Pearson 1995) where it has sampled extensively in the past, the Laboratory uses the shorter estimate of 15 to 35 sapwood rings in 95% of mature oaks growing in these parts. Since the sample CRO-A06 comes from a house in Cropwell

Bishop in the East Midlands, a better estimate of sapwood rings lost since felling is between a minimum of 6 (=15-9) and 26 (=35-9) and the felling would be estimated to have taken place between 1506 and 1526, a shorter period than before. (Oak boards quite often come from the Baltic and in these cases the 95% confidence limits for sapwood are 9 to 36 (Howard *et al* 1992, 56)).

Even more precise estimates of the felling date and range can often be obtained using knowledge of a particular case and information gathered at the time of sampling. For example, at the time of sampling the dendrochronologist may have noted that the timber from which the core of Figure 2 was taken still had complete sapwood but that none of the soft sapwood rings were lost in coring. By measuring into the timber the depth of sapwood lost, say 2 cm, a reasonable estimate can be made of the number of sapwood rings lost, say 12 to 15 rings in this case. By adding on 12 to 15 years to the date of the last ring on the sample a good tight estimate for the range of the felling date can be obtained, which is often better than the 15 to 35 years later we would have estimated without this observation. In the example, the felling is now estimated to have taken place between AD 1512 and 1515, which is much more precise than without this extra information.

Even if all the sapwood rings are missing on a sample, but none of the heartwood rings are, then an estimate of the felling-date range is possible by adding on the full compliment of, say, 15 to 35 years to the date of the last heartwood ring (called the heartwood/sapwood boundary or transition ring and denoted H/S). Fortunately it is often easy for a trained dendrochronologist to identify this boundary on a timber. If a timber does not have its heartwood/sapwood boundary, then only a *post quem* date for felling is possible.

- 5. Estimating the Date of Construction. There is a considerable body of evidence collected by dendrochronologists over the years that oak timbers used in buildings were not seasoned in medieval or early modern times (English Heritage 1998 and Miles 1997, 50-55). Hence provided all the samples in a building have estimated felling-date ranges broadly in agreement with each other, so that they appear to have been felled as a group, then this should give an accurate estimate of the period when the structure was built, or soon after (Laxton *et al* 2001, figure 8 and pages 34-5 where 'associated groups of fellings' are discussed in detail). However, if there is any evidence of storing before use or if there is evidence the oak came from abroad (eg Baltic boards), then some allowance has to be made for this.
- 6. Master Chronological Sequences. Ultimately, to date a sequence of ring widths, or a site sequence, we need a master sequence of dated ring widths with which to cross-match it, a Master Chronology. To construct such a sequence we have to start with a sequence of widths whose dates are known and this means beginning with a sequence from an oak tree whose date of felling is known. In Fig 6 such a sequence is SHE-T, which came from a tree in Sherwood Forest which was blown down in a recent gale. After this other sequences which cross-match with it are added and gradually the sequence is 'pushed back in time' as far as the age of samples will allow. This process is illustrated in Fig 6. We have a master chronological sequence of widths for Nottinghamshire and East Midlands oak for each year from AD 882 to 1981. It is described in great detail in Laxton and Litton (1988), but the components it contains are shown here in the form of a bar diagram. As can be seen, it is well

replicated in that for each year in this period there are several sample sequences having widths for that year. The master is the average of these. This master can now be used to date oak from this area and from the surrounding areas where the climate is very similar to that in the East Midlands. The Laboratory has also constructed a master for Kent (Laxton and Litton 1989). The method the Laboratory uses to construct a master sequence, such as the East Midlands and Kent, is completely objective and uses the Litton-Zainodin grouping procedure (Laxton *et al* 1988). Other laboratories and individuals have constructed masters for other areas and have made them available. As well as these masters, local (dated) site chronologies can be used to date other buildings from nearby. The Laboratory has hundreds of these site sequences from many parts of England and Wales covering many short periods.

7. *Ring-width Indices.* Tree-ring dating can be done by cross-matching the ring widths themselves, as described above. However, it is advantageous to modify the widths first. Because different trees grow at different rates and because a young oak grows in a different way from an older oak, irrespective of the climate, the widths are first standardized before any matching between them is attempted. These standard widths are known as ring-width indices and were first used in dendrochronology by Baillie and Pilcher (1973). The exact form they take is explained in this paper and in the appendix of Laxton and Litton (1988) and is illustrated in the graphs in Fig 7. Here ring-widths are plotted vertically, one for each year of growth. In the upper sequence of (a), the generally large early growth after 1810 is very apparent as is the smaller later growth from about 1900 onwards when the tree is maturing. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the lower sequence of (a) starting in 1835. In both the widths are also changing rapidly from year to year. The peaks are the wide rings and the troughs are the narrow rings corresponding to good and poor growing seasons, respectively. The two corresponding sequence of Baillie-Pilcher indices are plotted in (b) where the differences in the immature and mature growths have been removed and only the rapidly changing peaks and troughs remain, that are associated with the common climatic signal. This makes cross-matching easier.

t-value/offset Matrix



Figure 5: Cross-matching of four sequences from a Lincoln Cathedral roof and the formation of a site sequence from them.

The *bar diagram* represents these sequences without the rings themselves. The length of the bar is proportional to the number of rings in the sequence. Here the four sequences are set at relative positions (*offsets*) to each other at which they have maximum correlation as measured by the *t*-values.

The *t*-value/offset matrix contains the maximum *t*-values below the diagonal and the offsets above it. Thus, the maximum *t*-value between C08 and C45 occurs at the offset of +20 rings and the *t*-value is then 5.6.

The *site sequence* is composed of the average of the corresponding widths, as illustrated with one width.



Figure 6: Bar diagram showing the relative positions and dates of the first rings of the component site sequences in the East Midlands Master Dendrochronological Sequence, EM08/87



Figure 7 (a): The raw ring-widths of two samples, THO-A01 and THO-B05, whose felling dates are known. Here the ring widths are plotted vertically, one for each year, so that peaks represent wide rings and troughs narrow ones. Notice the growth-trends in each; on average the earlier rings of the young tree are wider than the later ones of the older tree in both sequences.

Figure 7 (b): The *Baillie-Pilcher* indices of the above widths. The growth-trends have been removed completely.

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