



WALSHAM

History Group

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THE OLD BAKERY

(EMMES 1722) WALSHAM LE WILLOWS

A 2022 Guide by R W Barber

The Old Bakery mirrors the construction of a medieval three-celled building, built largely of clay lump, which is a sort of breeze block 18”/24” x 8” x 4” used in the 18th and 19th centuries as

a major structural building material as timber became scarce. It is made of puddled clay, straw, hair and manure, fashioned into blocks and dried. Houses had to be plastered and painted, brick or stone faced, and farm buildings painted with tar, all to keep the clay lump dry and avoid crumbling under damp conditions. The Old Bakery is faced on the street side with white Woolpit brick and with undressed flint on the other three sides, under a pantile roof.



This was at the time when oak building timber had become scarce, between a known survey of 1695 and a conveyance of 1722, when it is described as a “tenement called ‘Emmes’ lying together with one cottage”. This cottage is that of Margaret Block, recorded in 1695, which is of traditional medieval timber frame construction under a thatched roof, and now called The Bakehouse.

Early owners of the Old Bakery (Emmes) include a Joseph Barker. His will of 1753 identifies his commercial interest in Finningham Fayre through a collection of boards, trestles and poles, and advice to his widow to “keep sufficient stuffs for Finningham Fayre”. His son, John Barker, was killed by his horse while travelling from Norwich to New Buckenham in 1763 and was buried in Swardestone Churchyard. He left a stepdaughter, Sarah Curtis whose family unsuccessfully pursued an interest in the estate 50 years later in 1813. This required Sam Lock, Clerk to Walsham Parish Council to confirm the burial of John’s first wife at Walsham, and John Thump the Churchwarden of Swardeston, John France the Minister at New Buckenham, and widow Mary Townsend of New Buckenham to confirm John’s second marriage to widow Curtis, but that he had no issue by her.

William Darby, in 1814, purchased “all that messuage called ‘Emmes’ and one cottage standing together”. He was a miller and baker owning Walsham Mill in Wattisfield Road and several other properties. He seems to have overreached himself, is declared bankrupt, and four lots: The Bakery, Bakehouse, Clive Cottage and Clive House were auctioned at Walsham’s Blue Boar Inn on 8th December 1848 by order of the mortgagee, Mr Hustler Lowe of Reading, who sought to recoup loans totalling £1100.00

By 1875 John Kenny of Scoulton and Elizabeth, his wife of Houghton St Giles, both in Norfolk, had acquired the thatched cottage, William Darby’s bake office and established their own bakery business. They obviously did well and in 1916 acquired ‘Emmes’ next door, creating a larger home and a shop separate from The Bakehouse. The Kenny’s bakery business continued until the death of William Kenny in 1963.

Soon after, Mid Suffolk District Council approved a change of use from commercial to residential. Eric and Lavinia Pepper bought the bake office, now The Bakehouse, in 1965 and Bill and Sabrina Peat purchased ‘Emmes’, the Old Bakery in 1971. In 1973 they also purchased 45 feet of the back garden of Clive Cottage, alongside the stream, for £250.00 which allowed the owner, Sally Vasey to rethatch her cottage roof. This purchase explains the highly unusual layout of the Old Bakery garden in that it seems to narrow to almost nothing before opening out to the right to adjoin the garden of The Beeches and the grounds of the Memorial Hall.

Near the house, the Old Bakery garden has a huge quantity of small clinker from bakery ovens. There is also a single line of buried bricks or foundations running east – west across the southern end of the house, close to the yew tree stump and in line with the rear of the small enclosed garden plot of The Bakehouse. This must be part of earlier outhouses clearly visible on the 25 inch to the mile Ordnance Survey Plan of 1904, now demolished and the rubble pushed to the river wall with a covering of gravel. While trying to create a rose garden here in 1990 I came across a buried stable floor of white Woolpit bricks stinking of horse urine. The bricks I raised form my serpentine path fronting the roses; others lay deep under the south west corner of the garage. Surface brick and flint were fashioned by me into a low wall allowing an element of terracing to the slope of the land.

Another outhouse; carriage outhouse or shed existed behind the present kitchen where a wide entrance is indicated by a newer brick infill between worn/rounded brickwork. Here, Jim Kenny recalls the garaging of the Morris van used to make bread deliveries around the village, including Hilda Finch’s shop at Four Ashes. She purchased bread from the Kenny’s at 4 1/4d a loaf and sold it for 4 1/2d per loaf. This rear part of the present house, together with the kitchen, has a two feet high base plinth of mostly flint supporting the upper walls, probably of late Georgian or early Victorian age given the details in the papers for the 1848 auction. The area was single storey, for the line of

an early ridged roof is apparent in the high wall of the bedroom created above the kitchen. The clay lump, stud and plaster composition of part of this rear portion of the building was extended in 1972 by David Studd, for whom there is a delivery note from Clarkes of Walsham for '1000 plain flettons'. This single storey area was reconfigured again in 1978 to provide a new bathroom, sitting room with a new hearth and chimney and bedroom, as a granny annex, together with an outdoor fuel store. This has now, in 2022, been simplified into a single space of about 24" by 14" overlooking the garden to the south and west; a family room or geriatric bed sitting room perhaps?

The conservatory, built by Farrow and Sons in 1990, floored with square brick pavers reclaimed from Ringshall and cleaned by myself with Nitromors, houses a fine Black Hamburg grapevine, planted by the Guthries or Hartleys

between the departure of the Kenny's in 1963 and the arrival of the Peat's in 1971. The early lean-to corrugated plastic roof covering the grapevine disappeared in an unexpected storm of 1977.

The front and earliest part of the house has undergone least change. Most obvious is the small extension on the left as observed from The Street with its large shop window and door – check the adjacent brick infill – which replaced one of the six identical front facing windows in the early 20th century and for which there is photographic evidence. This, until 1963, was the baker's shop overseen by Dorothy Kenny. Prior to the purchase of the bakery in 1916 and the creation of this spacious retail shop outlet, the Kenny's bakery shop operated from the right hand side of the timber framed Bakehouse as seen from The Street, the existing bay window being the display area.



John Kenny who arrived there in 1876, with a young family, lived and operated a bakery with all its attendant working resources and ran a shop within the very restricted confines of The Bakehouse itself until the developing business allowed him to expand next door. The Bakehouse ovens and storerooms set up by William Darby were still next door in The Bakehouse, the timber framed thatched building.

Jim Kenny, John's grandson, recalls a bread oven of 8' depth and similar width requiring the use of the long handled wooden peel or shovel, still hanging on a beam in the Bakehouse kitchen, to place and withdraw breads from the oven. Jim remembers clambering over the top of the oven to explore the large beamed space above where the hams were hung to be smoked over smouldering wood shavings.

Percy Byam was a lifelong assistant baker together with youngsters like Kenneth Hubbard and a Ronnie Rice from Finningham. And it was Percy who suggested that Jim went to bed with a rope tied to his leg and the end left hanging out of the bedroom window so that Percy could easily wake Jim up in the early morning with a sharp pull on the rope. Some heavy scorching of wallpaper in Kenny's bedroom cupboard recalls the day when William Kenny's pipe caught fire in his jacket pocket, hung up while he had a mid-morning catnap, and requiring the hasty requisition of Nunn's stirrup pump from across the way for

firefighting. William was the son of John and the father of Jim. Once the shop was set up away from the ovens bread and cakes were carried through the house to the shop via still existing, but covered over doorways, and the floor bricks, showing excessive wear along this route.

It seems that the original house had a spiral staircase built on the south side of the central chimney stack. The space now forms an 'L' shaped middle room. The aspiring William Darby, 1814 – 1848, was probably the one who moved the parlour fireplace from its central position backing on to the living room chimney, to the west wall backing on to The Bakehouse thereby allowing a new, visible, more convenient staircase to be inserted opposite the overly impressive front door at a time when ostentatious statements regarding one's home were paramount. The provision of a smart street façade of white Woolpit brick is likely to date from this time. Its late addition is indicated by the existence of double sills to windows. The inner oak sill belongs to the original clay lump structure of 1695 – 1722. The lower outer sill of stone forms part of the later brick façade. William Darby was an ambitious man who borrowed heavily from Hustler Lowe and spent heavily until his bankruptcy in 1848.

Interesting families have lived here over a period of three hundred years, each contributing unique layers of history to this village property, which is of absorbing interest.

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