

Thirty years ago, Stanley Booth, the owner of Southfields produced a booklet about the restoration of Southfields. Chris Booth has given his permission for it to be reprinted in the Dedham Parish Magazine. Most of the original photos were monochrome, however using the latest Artificial Intelligence techniques provided by My Heritage we have coloured them. The factory referred to in this article was BX Plastics at Brantham. It subsequently became part of British Industrial Plastics and finally Storey Brothers.

John Goldsbrough



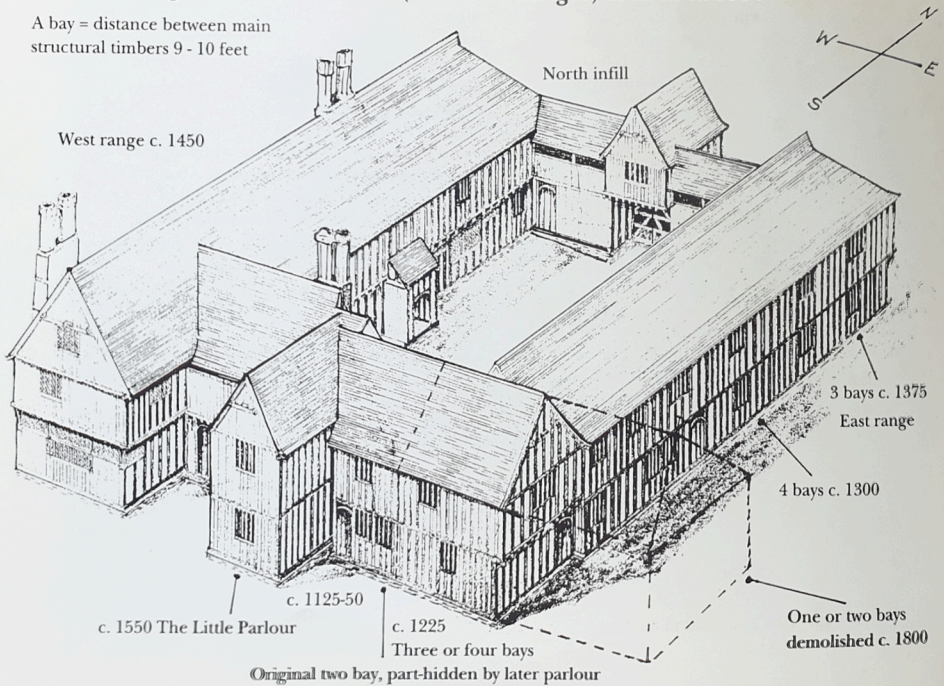
Introduction

Southfields, situated some 300 yards south of the Church and known at one time as The Bay and Say Factory, but in more recent years as The Flemish Cottages, is the most notable of Dedham antiquities. Built around a courtyard it was originally the residence and work places of a wealthy clothier. Although previously thought to have been conceived and built in its present quadrangular form, restoration has

shown that it evolved to that form by a series of extensions built over a period of at least two hundred years. Whilst variations of building around an interior quadrangle adapted for Keeps, Mansions, Colleges and Inns are familiar, the adaptation for business premises is unique and Southfields is the best preserved example extant in this Country of a medieval cloth factory.

Scale drawing of SOUTHFIELDS (Flemish Cottages) as at circa 1550

A bay = distance between main structural timbers 9 - 10 feet



Southfields belonged from early in the 15th century to the Webbe family, John Webbe and his son Thomas both being known as the founders of Dedham Church and whose tomb graces the north aisle. Their merchant's mark and their initials are on shields in the vaulting of the tower.

The last clothier at Southfields was a Henry Sida who went bankrupt for a sum of £1500 in 1744. Thereafter, c. 1800, the property was converted into ten tenements by the addition of brick and slate lean-to's and the insertion of chimney stacks, staircases and partition walls.

The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments 1922 described Southfields in some detail, graded it I and said the condition was good.

By 1952 when the property was acquired by the writer and restoration work started, much of Southfields was in a parlous condition.

The history of Southfields is a microcosm of the social and economic history of Dedham and the cloth industry in East Anglia over several centuries and this, together with its architectural features, makes it an historic monument.

The Restoration of a Mediaeval Factory.

The previous owner of Southfields, Sir Ralph Harwood, had started its restoration in 1935 by restoring the so-called Master Weaver's House on the South front and by laying on main services to the West range.

Previously one pump in the courtyard in a compartmentalised pantiled wooden building close by, now converted into a garage.

His plans were disrupted by the Second World War but he completed the restoration internally of a further cottage in the west range which I rented from him and which together with the rest of the property I eventually bought from Sir Ralph's executors.

When the restoration was started in 1952 Southfields looked and was, apart from the internally restored part of the west range, a rat infested slum.

To complete the restoration, bring seven cottages and the main residence, the Master Weaver's House, up to modern housing standards together with converting eight allotments into gardens and grounds in keeping, was to take some thirty years.

The main structural restoration work took about twenty years the time being determined largely by the presence of inherited sitting tenants and the fact that much of the actual practical restoration work was a hobby occupation.

With the state of the property at that time, much of it covered by the brick and slate appendages of circa 1800, it would have been impossible to draw up architectural plans for its restoration, and although a Grade I Listed Building this was fortunately accepted by the planning authorities.

In any event most of the work in the early days was demolition of the 19th century appendages, getting back to the original lines of the building and finding out the state of the underlying structure before plans could be made for further work.

When visitors looking round the property learn that I have carried out the major part of the restoration myself, particularly the carpentry, and indeed have directed all of it, invariably their immediate questions are "How did you learn all about it? Did you read up books or did you have some training in building work?" Or "Are you an architect?"

The simplest answer I give, and the truth, is that I learned about restoring timber frame property by the doing of it. Of course it was not all that simple since forty years ago there was nothing like the volume of information available to 'Do It Yourself' enthusiasts that there is today and definitely not on timber-frame buildings.

Certainly there had been much restoration of timber-frame buildings, with their peculiar fascination, throughout this century and nowhere more so than in this part of East Anglia where many such buildings, houses and hotels, bear testimony and are a memorial to the work of a Mrs Grace Faithfull Roper in the 1920s and 1930s.

It was she who helped and advised Sir Ralph Harwood in the first restoration at Southfields of The Master Weaver's House and whose approval of my own work was a very satisfying accolade.

Today when I read of the work over many years of a professional architect such as FBW Charles, who took a special interest in timber-frame buildings and who restored Much Wenlock Guildhall and many other similar buildings, I wonder at my youthful temerity in taking on Southfields.

Southfields - The Story of its Restoration.



East Front - 1952



East Front after restoration.

Reading his book "Conservation of Timber Buildings" 1984, and particularly the appendix entitled "An ethic for the conservation of timber structures" I am reassured to note that, although an amateur, I had followed the dictums of that ethic to the letter.

Having scraped the barrel as it were to buy the property I had no money to employ architects and builders although to have done so would have defeated the object of my giving myself a worthwhile hobby. Nor did I have any building experience, hardly any tools to speak of and an apparently mammoth task facing me.

On the credit side I was young and had plenty of energy, I was endowed with reasonable dexterity and patience, without which nothing is done well, and I could do it in my own time. There was in fact no other option but for me to obey the old adage and "make haste slowly"

and in retrospect the slow, enforced piecemeal approach was to prove to the advantage of sound restoration work.

At that stage of my apprenticeship, I knew nothing about the more erudite and controversial aspects of restoration such as "over-restoration", 'sympathetic restoration', 'to remove or not to remove plaster', the proper treatment of timbers and what is or was 'Suffolk Pink'.

They were to come much later, but, having lived in part of the property for eight years, I did have the strong conviction that under the awful brick and slate excrescences and in spite of the tumbledown appearance I had in my possession a 'silk purse' and not a 'sow's ear'.

I had one other potential asset in having access to a pool of skilled craftsmen in my business. I use the word potential deliberately because craftsmen do not part easily with the skills and



The Courtyard before restoration - 1952

tricks of their trades, especially to amateurs, and although I was the 'Boss' I had to earn my spurs and meanwhile much tact and diplomacy was necessary to get their help and advice.

In the event this asset was to prove invaluable and several years after starting the restoration I earned my spurs. On scaffolding borrowed from the factory which I ran I tackled the plastered gable at the gate room, the room over the double doors giving entrance to the courtyard.

The plaster, much patched and showing all the signs of having allowed the ingress of water, had to be removed which I did to reveal a frightening spectacle of rotted timber and joints. I

brought down our foreman builder to see it and he visibly paled but was reassured when I told him that all I wanted was the loan of his two best 'chippies' for a fortnight and I would instruct them.

When eventually I got them they too were taken aback but under my guidance soon got into the swing of their first restoration work. The end result of a major structural job greatly pleased them and certainly myself.

My stock went up on the factory and I was no longer the enthusiastic amateur. Incidentally, I was meticulous about paying for any labour I used as for any and all materials purchased through the factory.



Courtyard after restoration.

When actually working there was one very important discipline I had to apply to myself which was to keep my eye and my thoughts on the immediate task I had set myself and not to look at or think about the job as a whole. It would have been too discouraging.

An early task was to find a source of raw material, that is old oak studs, the vertical timbers, oak mullions for windows and if possible old oak boards for floors and for the doors which I knew would be needed.

It proved to be a long long telephone trail, from woodyard to woodyard to carpenters and joiners, large and small, before I struck gold. And what a mine it proved to be over the next few years. I found myself half a mile down a cart track, off the main road, at the edge of a large wood knocking at the door of a solitary house. I'd been told that a retired builder lived there and that he might be able to help me.

He answered the door and somewhat diffidently I explained who I was and what I was about. Equally diffidently, it seemed to me, he took me out to a clearing in the wood and my eyes boggled at what I saw.

A huge pile of old oak beams, studs and mullions in a bewildering assortment. At that stage I had no idea what I wanted or was likely to need but fortunately he realised my predicament and said that he would like to come and see for himself what I was about. He did so the very next evening and after his inspection said what I dearly wanted to hear, and I remember his exact words today, "When you know what you want come and help yourself and we'll talk terms later".

Later never came for he was an enthusiast for restoration work, made regular visits of inspection, approved of my work and never charged me, being, as he said, happy to see the old oak being put to good use. For several years I made

regular trips to that wood to return with two or three studs sticking out of the boot of my car, or some mullions that needed cleaning up and working to my requirements.

My first job on the property was to give my growing family more living space, a prime reason for buying it, by incorporating the next door cottage.

A relatively straightforward matter it seemed but in my ignorance and quite unwittingly, I was throwing myself into the 'deep end' as I was to learn. The work involved breaking through on the ground floor; inserting a doorway and door; removing a dividing wall upstairs, removing the stairs on my side and boarding over the stair well.

Once more I was on the raw material trail for I needed old oak boards for both door and flooring, also of course wrought iron hinges and door furniture and if possible hand made nails and door studs, for I wished to do the job properly.

I eventually tracked down a pile of what appeared to be wet, mouldy, rotten boards and was told that I could have them to get them out of the way. I was already learning some of the tricks of the trade for I carried around with me a small sharp probe and I knew those boards were not rotten.

Nor were they as elbow grease and bees' wax were to prove. As to wrought iron I was to find a truly Dickensian establishment in London with elderly assistants in khaki overalls, celluloid collars and steel rimmed spectacles but giving the kind of service of a bygone era and seemingly knowing where every item of an incredible range of hardware was stored.

As for hand made nails "certainly, Sir, follow me" and up four flights of rickety stairs he took me to find an elderly man working at a forge on the top floor making all kinds of wrought iron

products with his apprentice making the kind of nails I wanted.

The work proceeded slowly but surely, the doorway, the door, removing the stairs and putting in the floor joists but then I met my first problem. The external wall adjacent to the stairs was brick up to first floor level, as with several places in the property, with an oak beam (a bressumer) resting on it and stud work rising from it to the roof.

The oak beam was rotten and there was no option but to remove it leaving some six or eight feet of wall hanging like a curtain from the roof, secured only by the pegs holding the top tenons of the studs in place. Trimming the feet of the studs and fitting an oak beam to meet them and hold them firmly was a task that took me nearly a fortnight, for which I took my holiday, praying each day that there would be no strong winds to get under the curtain of wall.

Years later, with very much more experience, I realised that for my first job I had run into and tackled successfully one of the most difficult pieces of restoration work I was likely to meet. I received a quite unexpected bonus for my efforts, however, in the shape of Cyril, a tenant and builder's labourer, who either impressed or taking pity on me volunteered his services.

In the first few years a very large part of the work was demolition rather than restoration both externally and internally.

When the property was converted into cottages circa 1800 there was little or no regard for conservation as we think of it today and aesthetic considerations were of little account.

The conversion, from a purely functional point of view, was however well thought out with the addition of the brick and slated lean-to structures, the insertion of chimney stacks, staircases and ceilings on the upper floors which

had previously been open to the rafters (solars).

Most of these additions I was to remove but at the time they were introduced they provided a greatly improved standard of housing for those villagers lucky enough to get a tenancy, in spite of one water pump for all and earth closets.

Above all, by the use of a variety of wrought iron bolts, strappings and stirrups the timber frame was made secure, the property almost certainly prevented from falling into ruin and saved for future restoration.

I find it of interest to reflect that it was the owner of a large Georgian house some three hundred yards away who carried out the conversion in order to house his gardeners and outside servants.

Sir Ralph Harwood had to buy that house, which he immediately sold off, to gain possession of Southfields which he considered the more important and which has now recovered something of its former glory. The actual knocking down of the brick walls was relatively easy since the old builders used no cement in their mortar and a supply of clean 'old reds' was obtained which in the future were to provide all the garden paths and walls I ever needed.

The moving and stacking of them and getting rid of all the associated brick rubble was a mammoth task but Cyril came to the rescue. With all his village contacts he was able to provide teenagers willing and anxious to earn extra money at the weekends and who were not frightened of hard work.

They seemed to enjoy most stripping out the inside of the cottages in spite of the dust and dirt, for the amount of match-board and other combustible materials that came out of each one provided some memorable Guy Fawkes bonfires. Oak does not burn easily but I

Southfields - The Story of its Restoration.

shudder to think what would have happened with all that soft wood about.

I am frequently asked whether I have had any financial assistance by way of grants in the conservation of Southfields since it is generally known that grants are available for the restoration of Grade I listed buildings. I have not received a penny by way of grants for the simple reason that I never asked for one although there was to be an unexpected and somewhat ironic twist to this.

From a purely financial point of view it would have paid to have sold off the cottages individually after restoration and there was nothing to prevent me doing that it I had so wished.

Pride of possession, after all the work and care put into the property, the thought of what might happen under divided ownership and the important consideration that I have not needed to realise the capital have fortunately dictated otherwise.

The National Trust, the County and other bodies concerned with the preservation of Inheritance Property such as Southfields were and are equally concerned about keeping undivided ownership but as things stood my heirs could have been forced to sell part to pay capital transfer taxes.

Aware of what is called Conditional Exemption from such taxes for stately



North side before restoration - 1952

Southfields - The Story of its Restoration.

homes and the like I pursued the matter with the Inland Revenue to find that had I had a grant or if the property had qualified for a grant it would have been prima facie exempt from capital transfer tax.

So now I had to apply to the Historic Buildings Council for a grant that I did not want and was unlikely to get. Fortunately my dilemma was appreciated by the Commission and in due course I received a letter from the Department of the Environment as follows:-

Southfields, Dedham

The New Cases Committee of the Historic Buildings Council considered your application at their last meeting and have agreed that "Southfields" is a building of outstanding interest for the purpose of Section 4 of the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953.

This and the voluminous file to which it belongs will be needed in due course of time by my executors. As to the reasons for my not applying for grants they were many and varied. In the first place I had no idea of what I was likely to encounter in the way of structural problems when I took away



North side after restoration.

the brick and slated appendages of 1800 and none of my several architect contacts had any real knowledge of timber frame buildings.

It would have been impossible to submit the kind of plans and estimated necessary to obtain a grant and it was extremely unlikely that I would have been accepted as the 'builder'.

However, by the time I got round to rerooting the property nine years later (the seven year 'gamble' of my architect friend and Building Society Director) I was able to finance it myself which well satisfied by streak of Yorkshire independence.

Incidentally, no large Building Society, then or today, would have lent money on the property as it then was although the monies involved were miniscule relative to its value today.

With regard to the future, maintenance and upkeep of the property is no greater than that of modern property. My early judgment of the basic soundness of the structure has been fully justified with any lingering doubts completely dispelled by the hurricane of October 1987.

With the many mature trees felled in the grounds and all around, Southfields lost but a few tiles broken by a television aerial, whilst throughout the property internally there was not a sign of hair cracks in the plaster; the best 'tell-tale' of any movement of the structure.

With proper maintenance there would seem no reason why Southfields should not survive for hundreds of years to come.

Along with the restoration of the building went the reclamation of the



South Front - 1963

gardens and grounds around Southfields for, if the property was in a dilapidated state when purchased the grounds were even worse. There had been eight allotments and an old orchard of which four allotments and the orchard were used to some degree or other by sitting tenants.

There was an abundance of rusting bed ends, chicken wire and household debris, and much was overgrown and derelict. The task in fact was as daunting as was the restoration of the building.

It was to be eight years before the transformation off the courtyard, the most interesting feature of Southfields, was completed. The paths, steps and retaining walls which were put down over thirty years ago have stood the test of time and are exactly as they were laid from my stock of old red bricks from my earlier demolition work.

With many tons of topsoil for lawns the restoration from cinder and ash paths and flourishing nettle beds was completed to give a finishing touch to the restoration of the courtyard.

Planning the gardens on the south side as they are seen now was quite a different matter, but the piecemeal acquisition of the allotments proved to be advantageous in that each allotment as it became available could be planned into the whole.

The different levels and low retaining walls have worked in so well that it is difficult now to visualise the separate allotments. The garden in fact evolved to its present form and everything that can be seen, other than the Scotch pines on the periphery, has been planted in the past thirty years. The hurricane of 1987 seemed disastrous at the time with 20 mature trees down.

However, with replanting and the increased light and air the garden took on another lease of life.

Stanley Booth 1917-1997

I remember vividly the state of the Flemish Cottages in the 1950s, but cannot add more to my father's story of their restoration, save to say he was unfailingly supported by my mother, whose considerable skills with furniture and décor played no small part in the restoration of the village's most important medieval building.

However, there is another restoration story of equal importance – Castle House, home of the Sir Alfred Munnings Art Museum. During clearance of personal effects from Castle House after Lady Munnings' death in 1971, a tiny green notebook was found, empty except for a single pencilled note written by Lady M: "Stanley Booth, looks like the right stuff". It was obviously written before she recruited him as an original Trustee to set up the Trust to preserve Sir Alfred's collection. Years later she subsequently rewarded his efforts with the gift of a Munnings landscape.

After Lady Munnings' death and under my father's chairmanship, Castle House was completely renovated to work as the gallery you see today and the substantial collection of paintings in the house professionally valued by Sothebys.

My father then archived Munnings' considerable output, now worldwide, and then wrote a beautifully illustrated book focusing on 100 paintings that highlighted Munnings' productivity and remarkable versatility.

The Flemish Cottages and Castle House stand today as my father's legacy to the village.

*Chris Booth
Master Weaver's House
October 2023*