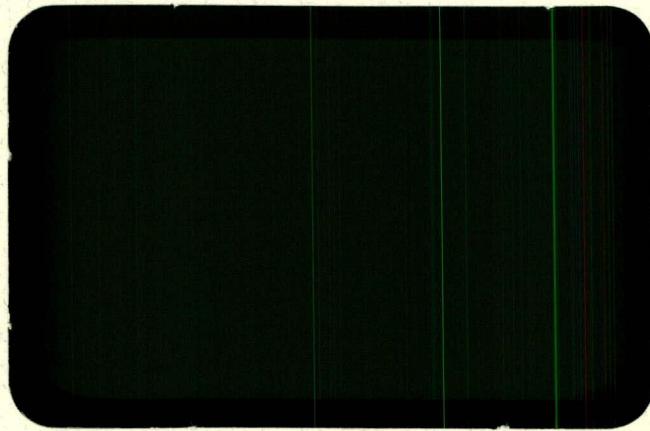


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**Observations during repairs to
Umberleigh House
Atherington
Devon**

Observations during repairs to Umberleigh House, Atherington, Devon

OS Ref. SS 593 246

Report K600

Grade I listed building

The Brief

Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants are contracted to record the masonry of the front (south) wall of Umberleigh House whilst the historic information was exposed during repairs which involved replacing the plaster on the front. This did not involve measured drawings. It is a photographic record backed up by notes and limited documentary research of secondary sources. Whilst colour photographs are used to illustrate this report Keystone have archival monochrome negatives of the same subjects. The house was visited on 19 May 1999.

Historic Background

The early history of this ancient settlement is described by Cresswell (1938 *passim*)¹ and in manuscript notes in the hands of the owners, Mr and Mrs Andrews, and produced by Graham J. Maynard, dated 23 March 1999. By tradition, first recorded by Risdon, King Athelstan built a palace and chapel on the property. In 1086, the date of the Domesday Book it was owned by the Convent of the Holy Trinity in Caen. In 1171 a Hercules de Solenys was lord of the manor of Umberleigh and it later passed from the de Solenys family to the de Champernouns by marriage. Around 1260 Jane Champernoun married into the de Willington family and it was to stay in their hands for nearly two hundred years. Lady Jane Champernoun (as she styled herself retaining her maiden name) was responsible for rebuilding or refounding the chapel in the late 13th century.

c1424 Isabel Willington married a William Beaumont and then, c1463, Joanna Beaumont married John Basset and the Bassets remained the owners up until c1840 when the estate was acquired by

¹ Beatrix Cresswell (1938) 'Umberleigh Chapel', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, Vol.70, pp.433-439.

the Andrews family. In the early 15th century the place had been rented out but John and Joanna Basset made their home at Umberleigh, as did their descendants it seems.

The House

Umberleigh House is a large house with a basic L-plan. The main block is on a rough east-west axis facing south to the approach drive. The greater part has a particularly fine late medieval roof of eleven relatively close-set trusses. The principals are cruck-like with short curving feet down to large spreader plates along the wall tops. They have flat collars and are archbraced (moulded with hollow chamfers to soffit rolls). They carry three sets of threaded purlins, all with small roll mouldings to their lower edges, and with some of the three tiers of curving windbraces still with similar mouldings. Because the bay length is so short there is only one windbrace to each tier in each bay so that each bay is a mirror of its neighbours.

The roof indicates that the building dates back to the late medieval period and that it was probably an open hall house. However the house below was extensively refurbished in the early 19th century and no features earlier than that date can be seen in the main block. A large kitchen and service block projects at right angles to rear of the east end. The surviving original features (the roof structure, the stair balusters and other joinery detail) can be dated stylistically to the second half of the 17th century and therefore might well be part of a major modernisation of the whole property carried out in 1674 according to the date plaque recently discovered on the front wall of the main block (see below). The rear service range was less affected by the early 19th century modernisation than the rest of the property.

A short distance to rear of the main block the south wall of the late 13th century chapel survives, now incorporated into 19th century outbuildings. It contains a stone ashlar doorway and evidence of two lancet windows.

The Front Wall

The south front is largely the result of the major early 19th century refurbishment (Plate 1). It appears wholly Georgian in appearance. It is plastered with a symmetrical 5-bay centre section between short projections each end. The centre section has hornless 6/6-pane sashes with a pair of French windows at the right (east) end. The central doorway is a 6-panel door under a fanlight with radial glazing bars and has a large Tuscan porch. The cast-iron gutter along the eaves has cast lion's head masks over the joints. The left (west) projection has a 2-window front of similar 6/6-pane sashes and includes a 20th century door to left. The right projection is semi-octagonal in plan and its main three facets are blind.

When the plaster was stripped the exposed masonry contained evidence of an earlier front. Basically the main block and probably the left (west) projection are earlier than the early 19th century whilst the semi-octagonal projection to right was added at that time. There was no obvious evidence for the late medieval origins of the main block except perhaps at the right end where the masonry contained a couple of putlog holes. It seems that the greater part of the main block was rebuilt or refaced for a 2-storey symmetrical 4-window front of 1674 (dated by plaque).

The masonry of the main block is coursed blocks of dressed local schist laid to courses and bonded in a clay mortar pointed with a gritty buff-coloured lime mortar. There is a clear break between the main wall and the top 400mm or so which is plain rubble. Evidently the wall was raised in height in the early 19th century (Plate 7). Here and there there are traces of limewash on the older masonry.

The Plaques. The wall contains two Beerstone plaques (Plates 4 & 5). They are small and set high in the wall, one between each of the end two windows. The left (west) one is somewhat defaced but enough remains to show a shield on an angle showing the Basset arms with either de Willington or Beaumont arms. The right one has the Basset arms with the initials IB (John Basset) and the date 1674.

The central doorway is believed to have been in the same position since the late medieval period. The large doorway itself could not be examined since it was hidden by the early 19th century casing and porch. However about 1m each side there was a discrepancy in the coursing of the masonry indicating some vertical feature. This is most obvious on the left (west) side (Plate 3). This appears to represent the making good after the removal of a porch, probably the ornamental early 16th century one now at Watermouth Castle, Ilfracombe (see discussion).

The ground floor windows. Whilst these now contain early 19th century sashes and the French windows they have clearly been adapted from earlier window openings. They have flat arches of dressed stone voussoirs and, directly below, is a blocked slot, presumably from a timber lintel from the original (that is to say late 17th century) window (Plate 6). The openings are filled with brick to accommodate the sash boxes.

The First Floor windows. Only the outer four windows are late 17th century openings. The centre one was cut in in the 19th century (see Plate 11). All rise to the original wall top where they were given timber lintels. The older ones were narrowed a little to accommodate the early 19th century sashes (Plate 10).

The west projection. As far as can be seen this part probably dates from the late 17th century since the stone coursing runs continuously from the main block to the projection (Plate 8). The two first floor sash windows date from the early 19th century but appear to be occupying older openings like those on the main block. The ground floor level contains a door and another 6/6-pane sash but both are clearly 20th century insertions. There is here an area of blocking between the two indicating a wide opening under a large oak lintel, presumably a wide late 17th century window. Directly above the lintel there is a horizontal band of limestone ashlar (including one block of Hamstone). It has a rough face and includes some brick packing as if it once projected from the wall, maybe as a projecting hoodmould.

The eastern projection is a full height canted bay (Plate 9). It was clearly added against the masonry of the main block. The masonry is mostly local stone rubble and is bonded in a gritty lime mortar containing flecks of lime (like that on the main block wall heightening). The masonry also includes some reused blocks of Hamstone and limestone and at least one shows a moulding. Originally it had a large ground and first floor window to each of the three main faces. These are now blocked. The ground floor ones had flat arches of dressed voussoirs not unlike the late 17th century ones on the main block, whilst the first floor ones have low segmental arch heads made of brick.

Other features. There is a disturbance in the masonry immediately to left (west) of the French window (Plate 2). It includes a patch of late 19th century - early 20th century brick but the blocking is earlier. It is however later than the late 17th century since it extends further east from the voussoirs of the arch over the existing French window. It was also cut in and still has a series of timber needles along its top edge. The explanation of this blocking remains a mystery. It has no real shape. It might simply be an area of probably 18th century repair or maybe it represents the blocking of some feature like a niche or recessed seat.

Dating and Discussion

Umberleigh House is one of the most interesting ancient manor houses in North Devon from an historic point of view. What remains is essentially the much-altered house of the Basset family along with the remains of a late 13th century chapel. The Bassets acquired the estate c1463. The house still has a particularly fine late medieval roof. The Bassets were undoubtedly responsible for a major rebuilding of the house with its arch-braced roof. However the roof is clean from end to end indicating that the hall must have been heated by a fireplace in a chimneystack. An open hearth fire might not be expected so early as the 1460s and 1470s. Therefore the roof suggests that the house was rebuilt in the early 16th century.

The porch, now removed to Watermouth Castle, Ilfracombe, is dated 1525 according to Cherry and Pevsner.² This porch is said to come from Umberleigh House. Watermouth Castle was built for the Basset family in 1825-6 and so there is no real reason to dispute the tradition. Moreover the historian Lysons, writing between 1806-22, states 'The ancient mansion has been long ago pulled down. The porch only remains.'³ Thus, it seems that the porch remained here up until the early 19th century when the Bassets took it with them to their new house at Watermouth Castle. Moreover there was evidence in the front wall for the making good after the removal of the porch during the early 19th century refurbishment of the house. It had apparently stood there since 1525. Its position confirms the site of the lower end cross passage of the late medieval hall house as suggested by the roof. Perhaps the 1525 date provides a date for the roof too.

The porch was an impressive showpiece of exceptional quality (Plates 12, 13 & 14). Projecting forward and square in plan it has a richly carved outer doorway of limestone ashlar. It has a tall outer arch with a segmental arch head rising over the two-centred entrance arch with tympanum above. The entrance arch with keystone the spandrels and the upper reveals of the outer arch are densely carved with rosettes, flamboyant spirals and other motifs. The tympanum contains the Royal arms flanked by two versions of the Basset arms. The segmental arch rises to a limestone parapet decorated in the same style as the entrance arch and with crocketed finials rising from the corners.

The porch was apparently retained during the major 1674 refurbishment which can be identified from the date plaque. It is interesting to note that the John Basset (married to Susanna Bluett) of the plaque inherited the estate in 1673 (note of G. Maynard). The existing front largely dates from the period, at least in exterior appearance. The house was two storeys by this time but the presence of the late medieval porch explains why there was no first floor window over the front doorway.

² B. Cherry and N. Pevsner (1989) *Devon: The Buildings of England*.

³ D. & S. Lysons (1806-22) *Magna Britannica* Vol.6, part 2, pp.18-19.

The Andrews bought the estate from the Bassets in 1840. It seems that they moved into a newly modernised house with the Basset porch removed to Watermouth Castle. The features of the early 19th century refurbishment are wholly consistent with a date in the couple of decades before 1840, particularly the full height canted bay and the cast-iron lion's mask joints on the gutter.

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Sandi Ellison input the text.

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Plate 1 The south front of Umberleigh House with the plaster stripped off.

Plate 2 The eastern half of the main block front.



Plate 3 The vertical join to west of the front door is believed to represent the making good after the removal of the early 16th century porch.

Plate 4 The western wall plaque.

Plate 5 The eastern wall plaque.



Plate 6 The head of a late 17th century window opening altered for the early 19th century sash.

Plate 7 The wall top was raised in the early 19th century.



Plate 8 The western projection, probably dating from 1674, with 20th century ground floor door and window.

Plate 9 The early 19th century canted bay with blocked windows.



Plate 10 The first floor sash right of centre is in a window opening of 1674.

Plate 11 The first floor centre sash was inserted in the early 19th century.



Plates 12,13 & 14 The Basset porch at Watermouth Castle and details of the high quality carved decoration. In the tympanum the Tudor Arms are flanked by two versions of the Basset arms. It is dated 1525 and indicates that Umberleigh House must have been one of the finest manor houses in north Devon. The entrance porch was an exceptional showpiece.



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