

Earth, cob, or MUD as it is known in Leicestershire, is the oldest and most widespread of building materials in the world, but very little is now found in Britain. It has been superseded by brick and stone. Ecologically sound, it is (was) cheap, efficient and if well maintained exceedingly strong. Once there was much in the Harborough area; today there are still many mud structures around in the villages of Harborough district and in Northamptonshire. It is found in cottages, walls, outbuildings and farmyards. Recent investigations by HADES (Harborough and Daventry Earth Structures Group) are revealing many more structures in the area.

MUD STRUCTURES IN THE HARBOROUGH AREA

Rosalind M Willatts



The mud or earth structures today are remnant features in a now affluent area. Mud walls are found around churchyards, farmyards and gardens; they are also found in outbuildings, farm buildings, the occasional cottage or part of a cottage, and as infill panels for timberframed buildings. Complete buildings are rare, one such being a field hovel in Gilmorton recently restored by a member of the group. It retains its hipped thatched roof and the monolithic mud

walls now have a limewashed mud plaster. Another, on the village green at Guilsborough is a large shed with thatched hipped roof; its mud walls are a bright orange colour derived from the iron in the local 'kealy earth'.

Mud is locally found in three ways: as complete buildings including cottages and walls; as remnant parts of older buildings that have been repaired or substantially rebuilt in other materials; and as infill panels of timberframe buildings both externally and internally. The only example of mud in Market Harborough at present known to the writer is in an internal timberframed cross wall in Aldwinkles yard behind Church Street. But there are many examples in both Great and Little Bowden.

How old are mud buildings?

The material of mud is impossible to date, unless other artifacts are embedded in it by accident. But the style and form of the building or the assumed age of adjacent development can give clues. The mud churchyard wall at Great Bowden was totally rebuilt in 1987. The vicarage at Little Bowden is dated 1626 so its mud garden walls are unlikely to be older, may be the same age, or perhaps later. From nails and other artifacts found in the Kates Hill Barn at Billesdon the mud barn would seem to be about 300 years old. The timberframed Fargate farmhouse at Tur Langton would appear to be mid/late seventeenth century; some of its infill panels are in mud, though most have been replaced by brick. It would be reasonable to assume that all the panels were once of mud. Attached to the farmhouse is a two-storeyed bay totally in mud to which is attached an eighteenth century shed in brick. The mud section could have been added some time after the main house was built, or it could have been erected at the same time for a subsidiary function such as for animals or storage.

How is mud used in building?

There are three main methods of using mud:

- Making it into large unfired bricks; this method is used in South Norfolk where it is called Clay Lump;
- Pise or rammed earth or shuttering; the puddled and mixed mud is rammed into shape between shuttering;
- By use of lifts; the puddled clay is placed in layers of about 300 – 500mm and allowed to dry out before the next lift is added. A layer of straw is placed between the lifts which are subsequently trimmed. This is the method in use in the Harborough area. The lift lines can generally be seen if the wall is looked at carefully.

Some mud buildings and walls in this area are left untreated, others are covered with a fine mud plaster and then covered with several coats of limewash. Dwellings are never left in the natural state but have a render of some sort; some buildings have been disguised behind a brick skin. (In South Norfolk non-dwellings were painted with a black tar wash.)

What sort of buildings are constructed of mud?

In general the mud buildings of the Midlands were erected, or have survived, as lower status buildings; they were the dwellings of the ordinary people, the outbuildings attached to other cottages and yeoman houses (as at Fargate farmhouse, Tur Langton or at The Homestead, Tugby); farm buildings and walls. Very many of these have fallen into disrepair, been patched up with other materials or have decayed. Bits of mud in outbuildings are quite common, as at Great Bowden in Station Road and Nether Green. In Main Street Theddingworth there is a mud cottage where the front and part of the gables have been clad in brick: an outbuilding here has a mud wall, only visible internally, because it has been clad in brick and it is the brick wall that fronts the road.

An example of a replacement mud outbuilding is at Tudor Cottage, Back Lane, North Kilworth. An old photograph in the Harborough museum shows a thatched single storey mud side addition. Today this addition is in brick; it may be that some mud is still retained internally. Its hipped thatch roof is a give-away that this was (is) a mud building.

Whole (or almost whole) subsidiary buildings in mud are found at the Hovel in Gilmorton and in the little slaughterhouse lairage attached to the west churchyard wall at Laughton. The hovel is particularly interesting as a survival of a building type that must once have been widespread in the local area. It is small, perhaps 3m x 7m open at one end, with three



HOVEL AT GILMORTON RESTORED IN 1996.

walls of mud and a hipped thatched roof. A hipped roof is structurally more stable than building up pointed gable in mud. Its use was as a field shelter for animals. (Open fronted brick or stone field shelters of the nineteenth century are still readily found across the local

landscape) This little building was used for general storage and was not carefully maintained. In 1987 its existence was threatened by proposals to develop its field with houses. In the event houses were built on the adjacent land and the hovel was spot-listed as a building of special architectural or historic interest. In 1996 a new owner of the field and hovel had it repaired and re-thatched: the roof structure was tied into the mud walls with steel rods, the mud repaired – it had a few cracks and had been worn away in parts by rubbing – the walls were covered with a mud plaster and limewashed. Once again this building is used for sheltering animals.

What do mud buildings look like?

LAUGHTON CHURCH WALL.



Mud buildings need a good hat and a good pair of boots both of which are important to keep the structure dry. For walls the 'hat' can be of thatch (Laughton churchyard) or slate (Crox farmyard Tur Langton) or of pantiles (Great Bowden and Foxton churchyards). Sometimes a temporary repair has been made with corrugated iron as on the churchyard walk at South Kilworth and the Berries farmyard at Swinford. The 'boots' are a plinth of river cobbles or stone. The walls of mud buildings are 500 – 600mm thick, often slumped at the

FOXTON CHURCH WALL 1998.



bottom, with uneven walls and rounded corners. One way to tell a mud dwelling is to measure the width of the window reveals. Old brick walls at 230mm are much thinner. Where are mud buildings found locally?

The use of mud is found on the lias clays, even in villages which have extensive use of stone for building, such as Great Easton, Great Bowden, Hallaton and Billesdon. Mud as a building material had a lower social status so would appear to have been confined to subsidiary buildings and the homes of the poor. The distribution of mud buildings today is perhaps more of what has survived rather than what once existed.

It is not always easy to see or find examples of mud, especially if the walls are hidden inside later structures, as with a shed on the Main Street at Theddingworth. In Harborough District, mud is known to be in the following parishes:

Ashby Magna, Billesdon*, Blaston, Foxton*, Gilmorton, Great Bowden*, Great Easton, Hallaton, Husbands Bosworth, Kimcote, Kibworth Beauchamp, North Kilworth, South Kilworth*, Laughton*, Leire, Little Bowden, Saddington, Scraftoft, Slawston, Smeeton Westerby, Swinford, Theddingworth, Tugby, Tur Langton.

(* denotes churchyard wall)

In adjacent Northamptonshire mud is known to be in:

Ashby St Ledgers, Barby, Bugbrooke, Braunston, Clipston, Creaton Crick, Creaton, Cold Ashby, East Farndon, Flore, Guilsborough, East Haddon, West Haddon, Kilsby, Kilsingbury, Naseby, Ravenstone, Thornby, Yelvertoft.



SELECTED VILLAGES WITH MUD BUILDINGS. THE AREA COVERED BY HADES IN LEICESTERSHIRE AND NORTHAMPTONSHIRE: THE NORTHAMPTONSHIRE VILLAGES ARE MAINLY ABOVE 150M AND ON THE LIAS CLAYS AND SANDS LYING ON TOP OF THE JURASSIC LIMESTONE: THE LEICESTERSHIRE VILLAGES ARE MAINLY ON THE LOWLANDS OF THE LOWER LIAS CLAYS.

A number of the local mud structures are listed in their own right; other listed buildings may include sections of mud. Being listed has often prevented their destruction, and encouraged their repair. A derelict mud barn at Billesdon (opposite the Old School in the churchyard) has recently been successfully converted to a dwelling; many walls have been substantially rebuilt or repaired (the churchyard wall at great Bowden and the wall at Crox Farmyard, Tur Langton – on the corner of the B 6047 Road and Main St). Although some buildings are protected by listing, others are not. A mud cottage in Gilmorton is not listed, neither is the humble slaughterhouse lairage by Laughton's mud churchyard wall.

Historical evidence for the use of mud locally

William Cobbett visited Leicestershire on 26 April 1830 and in 'Rural Rides'¹ describes cottages in the villages just south of Leicester 'Look at these hovels made of mud and straw; bits of glass ... merely stuck in the mud wall' No mud is found there now. In 1792 John Mastin, vicar of Naseby, in his **History of Naseby**,² described the village as 'built principally' with a 'kind of kealy (as a lump of congealed fat) earth dug near it... excellent of its kind and the best calculated for building... walls built with this earth are exceedingly firm and strong, and, If kept dry, are said to be more durable than if build with soft stone or indifferent bricks.' He goes on to describe some walls as being over 200 years old with a lime mortar lined to look like stone, and others having an annual coat of cow dung. Eighty years later an improving landlord replaced almost all of these by estate cottages in brick. Thus have many mud buildings been lost.

HADES is hoping to make systematic surveys of the local villages to record the surviving mud structures. If you are interested, or are aware of buildings in mud, especially those not easily seen from the road, or from the outside of the buildings, please contact HADES.

1 Cobbett W, **Rural Rides**, New Edition with notes published in 1853 by A Cobbett.

2 Mastin J, **History of Naseby**, 1792.

HADES members are prepared to talk to groups and to lead walks around villages to show and explain mud structures. If you want advice on the treatment of mud walls and structures contact HADES or, for Harborough district, Rosalind Willatts on 01858 821147.

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The views expressed are her own.

Mr A Goode, A J Goode Conservation, Slawston, Leicestershire who is a founder member of HADES loaned the photographs and additional information. He is currently undertaking detailed research into Lime Ash plaster floors.

Structural geriatrics



MUD COTTAGES AT
GREAT BOWDEN 1849.



'These old cottages,'
he said, 'are always moving.
Old plasters breathe, stretch
like blankets (quick lime
and tallow they were) over
bulging lath, and keep
their bonds with the old
cell plates; and what gets wet
gets dry and no harm done.

Looking after them
is like tending animals.
You can't give orders.
No use sheathing them
in cement. Armour-plating
a sheep, I call it.
Patch when you must, with
the old stuff New grafts won't take.
They die in the end,
like you and me. But
there's no call to strangle them.
It's not natural.'

Geoffrey Vickers

MUD BARN WALL AND TIMBER
BEAM INCORPORATED INTO A
MODERN STRUCTURE AT
GREAT BOWDEN JULY 2000.

