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Joseph Rogers

Independent Scholar, Author

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Photo Essay: Tithe Barns of Britain

JOSEPH ROGERS

Author of forthcoming title *Tithe Barns* by Amberley Books¹

<https://www.amberley-books.com/tithe-barns.html>

<https://thejosephrogers.wordpress.com/>

Scattered amongst the plentiful period cottages, pubs and castles of rural Britain stand many large, impressive, and aged barns. Farming, as in many parts of the world, formed the basis of society for thousands of years and remains an important industry even today. But in Medieval Britain it, along with religion, provided a framework for the concept that we know better today as taxation. Tithes – payments of one tenth of a farmer's produce - were outlined for the Christian world in the Bible: ‘...bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns...’ (*Deuteronomy* 14:22-29). These instructions were executed quite literally across northern Europe, particularly France, BeNeLux, Germany, and Britain with the construction of tithe barns. These barns specifically stored tithes paid to an ecclesiastical authority. Many of those that remain in Britain stem from the 12th to 16th centuries.

¹ Joseph Rogers is an English writer and author of the forthcoming title *Tithe Barns* by Amberley Books, 2021, to be released on 15th June 2021. It is the first book written about the general subject of tithe barns in over 20 years and is available for pre-order from both Amberley Books direct and most major book retailers.



Figure 1 The 'Tithe Barn' at Whitcombe, Dorset dates from the 18th century by which time the farm was no longer owned by the Church. Though tithe payments were made to private landowners, particularly following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century, there is little evidence to suggest that this barn ever stored tithes. Despite this, the barn is frequently referred to as 'The Tithe Barn.'

Over time, the subject of tithe barns has become tangled with those affected by changes in religion and society, war, technological advances, and the decline of farming in favour of other industries, all the time being diluted and confused with other non-tithe barns and more contemporary buildings using the term to falsely describe them. In fact, in many cases, buildings claiming to have been tithe barns have little evidence to



Figure 2 This impressive barn at Great Coxwell built c. 1230 features a typical layout for medieval barns seen across Britain. Two porches sit centrally opposite one another, with the east porch (visible, right) slightly higher on the incline than the west porch (not visible). The gable end entrance (visible, left) was added later to accommodate larger carts and machinery. Plenty of putlog holes can be seen along the length of the barn and at the gable ends. Photo: author.

suggest they ever were and in others, there is evidence suggesting they most certainly weren't. This aside, architecturally, they are all of great interest to historians, tourists, architects, and the wider public. Many features contained within the barns signify their status as wholly practical buildings, with defined purpose and though other medieval barns from the same period share these features, the tithe barn concept sometimes allows them to be interpreted in different ways, even if conclusive proof is lacking. It is important to note that a tithe barn cannot be identified simply by its



Figure 3 Though the tithe barn at Carlisle, in the north of England, has been modified extensively in the last hundred years, the thickness of the original wall can still be appreciated. Photo: author.

appearance or age. Its status as one is defined by its use.

Abbeys across Europe funded and constructed large barns to accommodate the produce farmed from both their own land (Abbey Barns and Grange Barns), as well as that offered as tithes. As the excerpt from *Deuteronomy* suggests, the ideal place to have them located was the centre of a nearby village or town and though this is certainly the case with many examples in Britain, others were kept firmly within grasp of the main abbey, church, or cathedral complex, requiring in some cases reasonable journeys to be made in offering or collecting tithes.

The primary function of any medieval barn was to provide the safe and secure storage of large quantities of farmed produce. Wheat, barley, and corn are some of the most common commodities mentioned in records of tithe payments, along with varied vegetables and livestock as well as honey and even fish, herbs, and flowers. In many cases, resulting barns were built wide, long, and tall, indeed as wide as physics would allow, with a flat, level floor and thick walls. Barns built in a cruciform layout, with two opposing porches, often made use of the floor in between for threshing and the porches were positioned to make use of an area's prevailing wind, so that the separating of the wheat and chaff could be managed better by those offloading produce. Much like storage facilities today, there was in some cases almost certainly a system in place for the arrival of full carts, offloading of goods and departure of empty carts, evidenced by the difference in height of opposing porches. Full carts would enter through the taller porch and exit empty through a shorter one without having to turn around in the process. Barns built on an incline may too have ensured that carts travelled in a downhill direction.

The preservation of crops in particular was important and in the days before refrigerators and preservatives could only be achieved by natural means. Putlog holes, which facilitated the construction of these large buildings through woodwork framing and scaffolding, were often left open to allow air to pass through the barn, keeping things fresh inside. Though the lack of sunlight and cool interior offered by the thick



Figure 4 Much adorns both the interior and exterior of the Abbey Barn at Glastonbury built *c.* 1340. This barn stored produce farmed directly from the Abbey itself and so is not thought to be a tithe barn. The opening at the roof's apex is possibly an 'Owl Hole' though no proof for this as its intended purpose can be found. Photo: author.



Figure 5 Dunster Tithe Barn, on the edge of Exmoor National Park, was likely built around the 16th century on the site of a predecessor (or predecessors) from as early as the 11th century. Photo: author.

walls would have promoted a cool atmosphere (something that can be appreciated when visiting such a barn on a hot summer's day), a gentle breeze would prevent stagnation. Vermin too was an important thing to prevent and though putlog holes might have allowed smaller birds to fly in and catch rats and mice, it has been suggested that larger holes near the roof's apex in some barns, in addition to being decorative, may have been made to allow owls in, keeping vermin levels to a minimum. The term 'Owl Hole' is sometimes used to describe these. Barns without such features, like the impressive and popular example at Bradford-on-Avon in Wiltshire, may have instead been used in conjunction with cattle farming for fodder, where vermin were less of an issue.

Decoration and presentation were certainly considerations when building these medieval barns and the outward appearance of many is both a result of this and the methods and materials available across Britain. Author S. E. Rigold, in describing medieval barns in Kent for the county's Archaeological Society in 1967, expanded on the concept that wooden barns, found particularly in eastern England were easily erected and dismantled in line with changing trends and jurisdictions, whereas stone tithe, abbey, and manor barns found in Somerset, the Cotswolds, and Wales were built by more powerful establishments with longevity in mind. Of course, with Mendip, Cotswold, and Welsh quarries being so prominent and abbeys sometimes securing the use of royal woodland, the availability of these materials too undoubtedly had a say in

the matter. Decorative features were employed on many examples of tithe barns or abbey barns. Though thatch was common on most to cover the roof (often subsequently replaced following damage or fire), tiles were also used and in the case of some barns were arranged in patterns. Finials at each gable end sometimes appeared in the form of an animal or symbol and carvings of beasts, saints, or religious figures can be seen both inside and out of the most exuberant examples. Though wholly practical structures, like the later railway stations of Victorian Britain, much was done to decorate medieval barns appropriately.

Equally, recycling material from elsewhere is documented in the construction of some barns. Those that remain today from the 15th or 16th centuries may have been built on the site of a 12th or 13th century predecessor, using some of its timber and stone. In some cases, barns were built from the rubble of other, unrelated buildings and in more recent centuries this process has been turned on its head with medieval barns themselves being demolished and / or recycled into houses, schools, pubs, and even churches. One such barn from Bradenstoke Priory in Wiltshire was even boxed up and shipped to California in the late 1920s and remains in storage even today. As with other medieval buildings in Britain, theories of ship timbers being recycled in the construction of barns float around without anything certain in the way of evidence to prove them.

Figure 6 The former tithe barn at Midsomer Norton, Somerset is now the town's Church of the Holy Ghost and was converted with help from Giles Gilbert Scott, more famous for his work on the iconic British red telephone boxes and Battersea Power Station in London. Photo: author.



Regional tithe barns and abbey barns sometimes had distinct styles that were indicative of a particular abbey or monastery. The 1991 essay *The Somerset Barns of Glastonbury Abbey* by C.J. Bond and J.B. Weller describes in detail the specific style of the four remaining 14th and 15th century 'Glastonbury Barns' at Pilton, West Pennard, Doultling and Glastonbury itself. All four have consistent features that even today's onlookers can recognise from the outside and though each varies in size, this 'Glastonbury style' is a clear sign of who built them. Similarly, barns built by Gloucester's St Peter's Abbey at Hartpurpy and Frocester share features in their

appearance. It has been suggested that in these examples and that of Cerne Abbey in Dorset and St Augustine's Abbey in Bristol, that the same high-quality craftsmen (or teams of craftsmen) were in part responsible for a style being replicated, albeit not exactly, across a number of barns. It has also been suggested that some of these skilled craftsmen were recruited from the continent, France in particular.

The features described thus far can be applied to most medieval barns, especially those built by the Church and it is worth repeating the notion that tithe barns cannot be defined by their appearance. However, some trends and styles do lend themselves more toward the tithing concept even if conclusive evidence to back them up is sorely lacking. Apotropaic symbols have long been debated as to their use and meaning and though convincing arguments are put forward for warding off the Devil or providing a template for measurements in woodwork (the latter being argued in great detail for a display at the Cressing Temple Barns in Essex), their use in medieval barns is unclear. To accompany these, etchings of names and dates have left some to speculate (notably those involved with the tithe barn in Shroton, Dorset) that such markings, where accompanied by dates and names, might have been records of tithe payments. There is little else to suggest this is the case. In addition, the location and size of some barns themselves promotes the idea that multiple farmers and citizens required its use, with large barns at the centre of towns and villages adding to the argument that such candidly communal barns must have been used for tithe storage.



Figure 7, 8 Pilton Barn, whose tithe storing past is much disputed, and Glastonbury Abbey Barn were both constructed by Glastonbury Abbey in the 14th century. Photo: author.



Figure 9 Merriott Tithe Barn is located directly opposite the parish church in the centre of the village and is now used as a community hall. Its age is uncertain but records of a tithe barn in Merriott date from 1325. Photo: author.

Naturally, over the years, almost all medieval barns in Britain have seen some alteration or modernisation and these features and additions themselves are of interest. 18th and 19th century advances in farming technology, notably threshing machines and traction engines, meant that medieval barns still in use on working farms (and thankfully there are a handful that are) were modified to accommodate running belts, tractors, and later electricity with aged woodwork and thatch often replaced with new



Figure 10 The Grange Barn (built to store produce farmed from an outlying grange) at Coggeshall is located above and at the edge of the present-day village. It would have also stored tithes for Coggeshall Abbey. It was built c. 1240 to a high standard, with both its size and position intended as an expression of wealth, despite the abbey itself accumulating significant debt. Photo: author.

beams and tiles. The Commutation of Tithes Act of 1836 saw all tithe payments converted to cash and though by then most tithe barns were being used to store other things useful to farmers, this effectively made the concept of a tithe barn redundant.

Partitioning of the vast interiors, building of mezzanine floors and even total demolition became common during late 19th and early 20th centuries. Extra windows, doors and chimneys are notably evident on those converted to homes and alternative businesses.

It is perhaps surprising, given the many fascinating aspects and details contained within medieval barns that they are not held in the same regard as Britain's churches,



Figure 11 The 14th century tithe barn at Fitzhead is still owned by the Diocese of Bath & Wells but is now used as a village community venue. The addition of a chimney and absence of some buttresses and cart entrances show that it has been some time since it was used regularly for agricultural storage. Photo: author.



Figure 12 Tithe House at Stanton Long in Shropshire dates from around the 17th century and features brick and weatherboarding rather than stone. It is now a private dwelling. Photo: author.



Figure 13 Tithebarn House, on Tithebarn Street in Liverpool city centre was built in 1980 and is photographed here prior to its recent facelift. The actual tithe barn from 1524 has long since disappeared. Photo: author.

railway stations, castles, or pubs, despite there once being one in almost every town and village. Their lasting legacy takes the form not only of substantial assets in today's property market, but also in the wedding industry where many are used as rustic, period venues. Where tithe barns have been lost to development, such as in Liverpool and Preston, roads, schools, and pubs bear the name 'Tithebarn' (sometimes written as one word) as a reminder of their place in that settlement's past. Whether intact, converted, in ruin or extinct, tithe barns are a gentle reminder of Britain's historic reliance on agriculture, not just for food and trade, but as an important part of society. 🐾