

I have been reading the RMCS Journal and was very interested in the article "The Beckett Fishing Lodge" by R P Owens. There is a matter in which I should put the record straight.

The article notes that: "the roof has been renewed as the rafters are fairly modern and this was probably done around the time that the new Beckett Hall was built in the 1830's".

The roof was in fact renewed in 1950-51 when I was Commandant. The circumstances were as follows:-

When I arrived at Shrivenham, the roof was in a state of ruin and it was obvious that something would have to be done about it. We believed that the ruined roof was the original one. The roof was of considerable interest to our sappers as it comprised four trusses cantilevered on the walls, one at each corner and abutting on the central vertical post. (There may have been four more trusses in the middle of the walls but I have forgotten).

We had three choices:- to let the roof go to ruin, to patch, or to try to get the War Office to agree to a complete restoration. We chose the third and owing to the stout efforts of our Garrison Engineer, the District C.R.E. and the C.E. Southern Command, the War Office agreed to the restoration.

The old Cotswold tiles were removed and kept for re-use, the roof taken down and replaced in new timber exactly as it had been and the tiles replaced and added to as necessary. So the roof was restored to its original design and we were assured that it would last another 250 years.

The following points may be of interest, though after 25 years, my memory may be at fault.

The original timber was, I believe, oak, the replacement Columbian Pine.

The Central post is 13ft long.

The cost of the job was £1,500.

Details of the whole job should be in the Garrison Engineer's Records for 1950-57 if they still exist. It might be worth while looking them up.

We always understood that the lodge was used as a summer house and that it was called the 'China House' from a collection of valuable china collected and kept there in the 18th century by one of the Chutes who was a high dignitary of the Church.



In my time there was in the possession of the Vicar of Shrivenham, one Seymour - Metford, a history of the Parish written by one of his predecessors. He lent it to me and I found it most interesting and some of the above notes came from it. I took some extracts and put them in the library. Owens may well have seen it. If not, the present, Vicar might have it or perhaps Seymour Metford's daughter Elizabeth, who up to a few years was living locally. There was a lot of interesting information in it.

You probably know that an underground passage goes from the lake side of the China House, under the approach walk and comes out under the Hall. I believe it was closed to prevent children getting into it. I explored it and it was full of bats.

I am sorry to inflict all this on you but there is such a wealth of local history around "Scrivings Ham" that it seems sad that any should be lost.

Yours sincerely

Lt. General Sir JOHN ELDRIDGE





D.C.R.E., Shrivenham,  
Homelease Farm,  
Military College of Science,  
Shrivenham,  
Nr. Swindon, Wilts.

Tel: Shrivenham 313/314

Ref: DCRE. SH. 650/2

25th July 1949

Chief Engineer,  
Salisbury Plain District.

Subject:- China House - Beckett Hall, Shrivenham

The following report was requested by Major Wallace by telephone on 23rd July 1949.

1. The China House is a stone building 25 ft square, 18 ft high to eaves roofed with Cotswold slates in a square pyramid about 27 ft high. It stands on a stone faced platform, jutting into the lake, 35 ft square and 15 ft above water level. The water is only a foot or so deep but there is an unknown depth of mud below it. The roof extends on all sides so that the eaves are on a line in prolongation of the edge of the platform. (See rough sketch attached)
2. The building is in a book written by a former rector of Shrivenham, attributed to Inigo Jones. He quotes no authority, but some of Inigo Jones' more famous work is within 20 miles of here. Local tradition has it that the building, with the footbridge alongside it, is a copy of the "Willow Pattern Plate", thereby accounting for the name "China House". These two statements can scarcely both be true.
3. The building was originally used as a summerhouse. It was last used, some nine years ago, as an R.E. office. It is not now in use nor, as far as I know, is it earmarked for any purpose by the Military College of Science.
4. The building is structurally sound up to eaves level. The roof timbers are rotten, but to what extent cannot be fully ascertained until the roof is stripped. The work of re-roofing would be difficult because scaffolding would have either to be erected in the lake or by cantilever from the platform. The cost of the work would probably be about £400 but it is impossible to give an accurate figure until the full extent of the damage is known.
5. I would be reluctant to order this work on the Term Contractor for the following reasons:
  - (a) his labour force is scarcely sufficient for normal maintenance; which would suffer if this work were placed on him
  - (b) his workmen are not of the high standard of skill required in restoring old buildings
  - (c) although the W.D. Schedule includes the provision of scaffolding in its rates, this job includes very much more scaffold work than is normal and could only be executed at Schedule rates at a loss to the contractor

I suggest that a Measurement Contract under W.P.P. para 35 (1) is required for this work.

RES 28115

C.R.E.

J. Gillington

Major, R.E.  
D.C.R.E., Shrivenham.

JHG/FDF.

Copies to:- On reverse

2/3



COMMANDER  
ROYAL ENGINEERS  
28 JUL 1949  
SOUTH MIDLAND

Headquarters,  
Salisbury Plain District,  
Bulford, Wilts. 2

BULFORD 3171 Ext 201/2

CE SPD 5101

27 July, 49.

C.R.E., South Midland ✓

SUBJECT: China House - Beckett Hall, Shrivenham

Reference DCRE. Shrivenham letter SH. 650/2 dated  
25 Jul 49 addressed to this office, copy to you.

1. If you are satisfied that the T.C. is not capable of executing the repairs without seriously affecting his present commitments, you may proceed by measurements contract under the terms of W.P.P. para. 35 (i).
2. It is pointed out, however, that if the estimated value of the contract work exceeds £500, there is little hope of your obtaining a Starting Date for some considerable time. You may however proceed with the preparation of contract documents and in the event of your estimate exceeding £500 you should report the matter to this office so that starting date procedure can be put into operation as soon as possible.
3. Draft contract documents should be submitted to this office for technical check prior to printing.

ACCEP CRB Noted 2	REFERENCE ↓
FILE 4052	

*H. Davey*

Colonel,  
Chief Engineer,  
Salisbury Plain District.  
(H. DAVEY)

HD/LR

Copy to: C.R.E., North Wilts.



3  
7 South Parks Road,  
Oxford.

Oxford 48615

CRE/SM/4052

2 August 1949

D.C.R.E., Shrivenham

Subject:- China House - Beckett Hall, Shrivenham

Reference your 650/2 of 25th July 1949 and our conversation on site.

1. This is to confirm that it is agreed that the roof should be made good as it exists, the final roof to look the same as the original.

2. Please ask the T.C. if he wishes to undertake the work. If he does not I will prepare a measurement contract for the work.

4.

C. H. R. SMITH,

Lt. Colonel. R.E.,  
C.R.E., South Midland

CS/DS



COMMANDER  
ROYAL ENGINEERS  
- 9 AUG 1949  
SOUTH MIDLAND

D.C.R.E., Shrivenham  
Homeleaze Farm,  
Military College of Science,  
Shrivenham,  
Nr. Swindon, Wilts.

4.

Telephone: Shrivenham 313/4

Reference: DCRE.SH/650/2

5 Aug 49

C.R.E.,  
South Midland.

Subject:- China House - Beckett Hall

With reference to your CRE/SM/4052 dated 2 Aug 49.

1. T.C. does NOT wish to undertake the work. Could you please prepare a measurement contract.
2. On closer inspection it appears that the principal roof members are sound but that all the roof boarding is rotten. The inner domed ceiling is completely rotten and does not, in my opinion, require replacing. May provision please be made in the contract for a normal flat plaster ceiling.
3. I am advised by a man with considerable practical experience at this type of work that special scaffolding reaching out over the lake will be necessary.
4. Messrs. R. E. Spooner would like to tender for this work. I have made it clear to them that they may not, if successful, take labour away from T.C. work for this job.

*Q.S. Action ph. 8/24/49*

ACTION ENC.	REFERENCE
JHG/TFT	3.
FILE	
4052	

*J. Gillingham*  
Major, R.E.  
D.C.R.E., Shrivenham.



2.

CHINA HOUSE, BECKETT HALL, MILITARY COLLEGE OF SCIENCE

The building is a stone walled structure with timber roof covered by Welsh quarried slates. Roof overhangs a 5' wide stone flagged balcony all round and any scaffolding used will have to be cantilevered out.

The work to be carried out is the re-roofing of the building and certain subsidiary works as under:-

1. Strip slates from roof and carefully stack serviceable slates for re-use. Unserviceable slates to be replaced by contractor.
2. The principal members of the roof are of oak. When roof covering is completely stripped these will be carefully examined to determine their soundness.
3. Strip all remaining timber work and ceilings in roof. This will be of scrap value only.
4. Re-roof with new timber and make up any deficiencies in slating. Replace zinc hip covers - renew where necessary. Provide and fix approved cover tile at junction of hips.
5. Construct new ceiling in lathe and plaster work on new timber joists. Metal lathing to be used. This applies also to soffit of overhanging roof.
6. Make good guttering giving fall from all sides to N.W. corner with discharge dropping into lake.
7. Make good soffit of overhang all round and renew fascia board and moulded wood cornice.
8. Remove all interior fittings of building including cupboards, stoves and partitions.
9. Take up existing stone slab flooring of building and replace with red quarry square tiling.
10. Redecorate throughout.
11. Take up balcony stone flooring and relay with 2" fall to outer edge all round.
12. Replace existing u/s balcony guard rail by new iron post and 4 rail balustrade 3' high.
13. Return all produced material to R.E. Store and leave site clean and tidy.