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Corrugated Iron in the Wychwoods

John A Bennett – March 2024

(This article was written to accompany an exhibition of photographs held in the Wychwoods Library in March 2024 depicting local examples of corrugated iron.)

Corrugated iron, sometimes affectionately referred to as “wriggly tin”, once ruled the world as a cladding material for many kinds of building: housing, factories, workshops, schools, churches, chapels, barns, and all types of farm buildings. Its ease of use, durability, and speed of construction were all factors in its success all over the globe.

There are now specialist groups who promote and write about corrugated iron with the enthusiasm of the newly converted. The material has been around long enough for examples to have acquired the patina of age and a picturesque aspect (figure 7) and has become a subject of nostalgia. There are even corrugated iron buildings that listed by Historic England as buildings of architectural and/or historical importance. And indeed, there are numerous corrugated iron appreciation groups across the Internet - for example, there is a very active group on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/corrugatediron/?ref=share>.

Corrugated iron was invented in the early 19th Century, with the first patent taken out in Britain in 1829. Soon afterwards, a French engineer obtained a patent in 1837 for galvanising it with a coating of zinc. Its heyday was in the period 1850-1950, a hundred years of world domination. It is not surprising then, to find that there were many interesting examples of buildings in corrugated iron across the Wychwoods, though most have now disappeared.

1. Tin Cottages



Figure 1: Kohima Cottages, photograph from the 1920s.

There was once a terrace of cottages clad in corrugated iron on the Lyneham Road in Milton-under-Wychwood. They have an interesting history.

These six one-bedroom cottages were built in 1893 by Caroline Rebecca Damant, the widow of Colonel Damant (1846-1879), who was killed, along with 35 of his troop, in Khonoma, Nagaland, India, in 1879 during a skirmish with local insurgents. The Damants had only married in May 1878, and this was her second widowhood. She was in India with her husband at the time of his death, and almost suffered the same fate (<https://whowaswho-indology.info/1468/damant-guybon-henry>). She adopted the name Kohima for the cottages and for her house (now called Heath House), which was built nearby. Kohima was the town in Nagaland where the Damants lived, and which had become the centre of colonial administration for the region. Mrs Damant apparently built the cottages to house other widows of British soldiers killed in this conflict, though it is not known how many of these widows ever took up residence. By 1900 the cottages were being used as convalescent homes for invalided servicemen from the Boer War.

Kohima house, the cottages and the stables were sold in 1908, after the death of Mrs Damant, and became rented accommodation. Flush toilets and mains water added in 1929. They were used as temporary housing after the second World War until, deemed unfit for habitation, they were finally demolished in 1978. The name Kohima is now preserved in the name of a bungalow that now occupies their former site on the Lyneham Road.

Old photographs (figure 1) show the cottages to be a rather charming terrace with a row of six front facing gables in three pairs. They have large casement windows which have an Arts and Crafts feel. The upper third of each window features a double row of small panes, with larger glazed panes below them. The cottages

also have brick chimney stacks with tall chimney pots, and their front doors are sheltered by a porch of trelliswork which carries climbing roses. However, in later photographs they seem to have lost some of this charm, and rust is taking hold (figure 2).



Figure 2: Kohima Cottages, Lyneham Road, Milton, photographed in the 1970s.

Agnes Hunt, lived at Kohima Cottages from 1957 to 1964 and has some pleasant memories of life there:

Arthur and I lived at No 4 Kohima Cottages from 1957 to 1964. We moved here when we got married on 1st June 1957. Arthur's sister Marjorie married to Bill Ricketts was already there and managed to get us No 4 when it became available.

There were 6 bungalows, while we lived there our neighbours were: Marge & Bill Ricketts, Flossie Ricketts, Mr & Mrs Ricketts, Mr & Mrs Hopkins and Maisy & Godfrey Pittaway.

The rent weekly was 4 shillings 4 pence collected by Mrs Kirby, who lived in Kohima House, and who I remember as a lovely lady who was concerned for our wellbeing. When Arthur was in hospital she would bring veg for me.

We enjoyed living there it was like its own little community sitting in the gardens with a cuppa, cigarette and chatting with Margie & Maisy. Mr Carpenter from Shipton shop used to call with newspapers, and we would buy our cigarettes from him also. If we only had one cig between us before Mr Carpenters visit, we (Agnes and Maisey) would split it in two and share.

Inside was clad with timber. There was a kitchen/sitting room with 1 bedroom, and there were adjoining doors between each bungalow (kept locked from both sides). There was a small coal fired range with an oven. We had electric lights and a galvanised copper to heat water.

There was a communal shed in garden for everybody to use where they stored their pushbikes, garden tools, prams, motorbikes, tin bath, wheelbarrows etc. The tin bath would be taken into the bungalow and filled with water from the copper for use, then water was ladled out after use.

Heating was basic, just the heat from the range!

There was an outside WC and a coal shed.

There was a garden, and an allotment where we grew all types of vegetables. The brook was at the bottom of the garden.

Whilst there both children were born early, Karen in 1962, followed by Carole in late 1963. We moved as Doctor Gordon Scott said that the environment was not good for a young family, and he managed to get us a council house on The Sands, also with two young children in a small space we were rather cramped.

The gentleman living in the house didn't want to move to one of the bungalows in The Sands, so we all: Arthur, Agnes, Karen & Carole, moved to a bungalow at No 9 The Sands.

2. Tin Chapels

There were once two Church of England chapels in the Wychwoods area clad in corrugated iron. They were often called the "iron church" or "tin chapel". At the time they were built they were more often known as "Mission Church" or "Mission Room". One was situated on Fiddler's Hill in Shipton (figure 3) and the other at Lyneham. (figure 4).

The Shipton church is the earliest, built in the mid-1880s, and apparently christened St James, though this name seems to have been rarely used. It was usually referred to as the Mission Room. By this time corrugated iron had become such a ubiquitous material that "kit" buildings were made available, including mission churches such as these, though it is not known whether this example was actually from a kit.

Fiddler's Hill and Upper End were considered remote from the Shipton parish church of St Mary's, and the Baptist cause had built their own chapel nearby in 1861, on what is now called Chapel Lane in 1861. Subsequently, it was felt there was a need to bring the Church of England to this area. This need was demonstrated for example, in an Oxfordshire newspaper article from 1883 which not only reports efforts to raise funds for this "outpost" church, but also illustrates some of the motives:

"Two concerts were given by the Shipton Choral Society on Thursday, the 15th November [1883] . . . Amongst the audience were the Hon. Mrs Brassey, and Lady Clanmorris, Mrs Waller, Mr C Samuda and party, Mrs Carter, the Misses Rice, and some of the clergy from the parishes near, who, by their presence, aided the building fund of the new Mission-room of St James' which is sadly needed in a part of this parish, where most of the labourers cottages are situated, the distance being three-quarters of a mile from the Church." (The Witney Gazette, 24th November 1883)

Thus, the purpose of this 'Mission room' was almost certainly to bring the influence of the Church of England to this isolated corner of the village, and to counter the spread of nonconformist sects such as the Baptists. This church had outlived its purpose by the late 1930s. It was used to store clothing in the Second World War under the "Bundles for Britain" scheme, whence it became known, rather irreverently, by local residents as "the moth hall".

In 1952 it was put up for sale and bought by the indefatigable local GP Doctor Gordon Scott (1905-1986) for £100 (WLHS Archives HD005.022). It then became an occasional youth club on into the 1960s, finally being demolished in 1970s. The church bell that once called people to worship is now in the possession of the Wychwoods Local History Society <https://wychwoodshistory.uk/the-small-tin-church-little-ben-rings-back/>



Figure 3: The Mission Room, Fiddlers Hill, Shipton, circa 1930.

Another local “tin chapel” was built in Lyneham in 1907. The Lyneham school room had been licensed for Anglican services since it was built in the 1860s. Nevertheless, nonconformist groups also gained ground in Lyneham and a nonconformist chapel was opened on the edge of the village in 1881. The school was itself modernised in 1907 making it no longer suitable for worship and so it was decided to build a new church. Land was donated by Earl Ducie and the “Iron Church”, dedicated to St Michael and All Angels was built (figure 3). This church was supplied by John Harrison and Co, of Camberwell (figure 4), specialists in corrugated iron construction (VCH, vol XIX, p. 182). It was demolished in 1976 to be replaced by a bungalow.



Figure 4: St Michael and All Angels, Lyneham, photograph from circa 1970.

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Figure 5: Advertisement for John Harrison and Co, 1912, the suppliers of the Lyneham Tin Church.

3. Working Tin

In the later 19th Century corrugated iron became particularly prevalent in the Wychwoods, as elsewhere, for agricultural buildings and workshops. It must also have replaced the thatch on many a local barn. A lot of this corrugation has now been lost (figure 6), but there is still much surviving in the region.



Figure 6: Derelict corrugated barn at Lower Farm, Upper Milton, before reclamation of the site in the 1980s.

Examples can be found locally at High Lodge Farm in Milton and tucked away in many corners of the villages. Survivors can be found (figure 7). A few of these surviving examples are at Groves Yard, off the Shipton Road. Mid-20th Century aerial photographs of the Groves site show a sea of corrugated roofs. These roofs have now largely been supplanted by box profile metal roofing sheets, the more wordy and less characterful offspring of corrugated iron.



Figure 7: Corrugation on an outbuilding adjacent to Cottage Barn in Fifield, photographed in 2010.

A ubiquitous corrugated iron farm structure was, and still is, the so-called Dutch barn. This is a barn with a curved roof structure of corrugated iron supported on tall stanchions. Examples can still be seen locally in Fifield (figure 9) and there is a prominent example on the Lyneham side of the Shipton to Chipping Norton Road, about 1 mile outside Shipton (figure 8). Many of these structures could also be ordered off-the-peg, as it were, and figure 10 illustrates a quotation from 1932 for the supply of a Dutch barn by Elwell's, a noted supplier of corrugated iron in Oldbury.



Figure 8: Dutch Barn, off A361, near Lyneham.



Figure 9: Dutch Barn, Fifield.

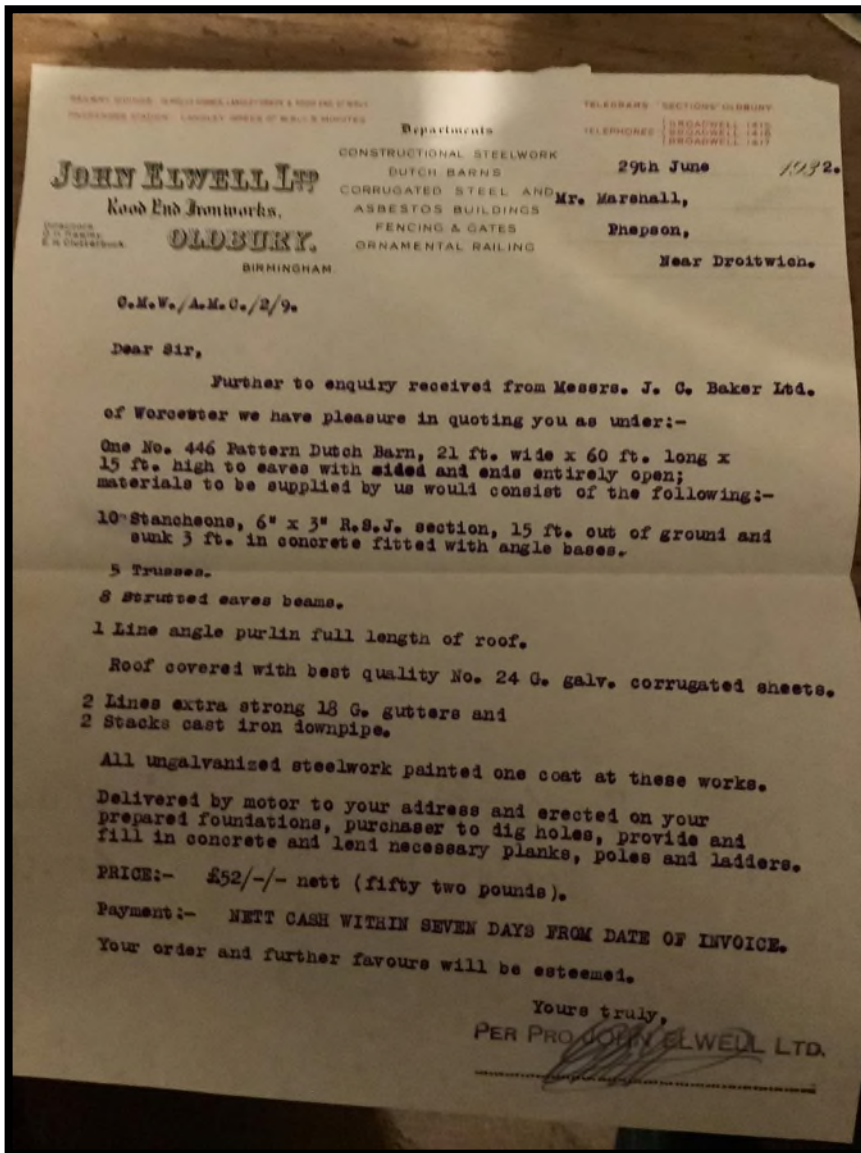


Figure 10: A Quotation for a "446 pattern" Dutch Barn from Elwell's of Oldbury.

Corrugated iron has come back into fashion in recent years. Contemporary architects see it as a functional no-nonsense material that has modernist credentials. Figure 11 shows a Dutch Barn in Long Compton that has been converted to residential use, the whole dwelling now clad in a sleek covering of black corrugation. It shows the continued versatility of this simple invention. Corrugated iron seems here to stay.



Figure 11: Converted Dutch Barn at Long Compton, photo courtesy of The Modern House (www.themodernhouse.com).