

# An Account for Repairs to Clay Dabbin

by

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*Contemporary documents relating to the construction of vernacular buildings are rarely found and can shed a fascinating light on regional building practices. Mrs Bowick, who now lives in Kirkudbright, was sorting through a box of papers retrieved from her solicitor when she came across an account for work on a barn in Longburgh, dated 1779. Realising that this was of interest she and her daughter sent a copy to the writer. Her father, Major Calvert, had bought an estate in Shield in the 1930s, adding to it from time to time as land became available, in the hope of making a compact holding. He resided at Beech House (formerly Broadgate Villa) and his other daughter, Mrs Phillips, lives there still. The great majority of the estate papers are in the Carlisle Record Office.*

Longburgh is a hamlet a little to the west of Burgh-by-Sands, lying immediately adjacent to the salt marsh pastures. Shield is the southern extremity of Longburgh, and its name is a version of the Norse 'shieling', a hut for those tending cattle in their summer pasture. The far end of Burgh-by-Sands is more than a mile from the edge of its marsh, which extends nearly a mile further west. 'Such transhumance lasted longest and on a large scale on the Border wastes of north Cumberland, where it was associated with the use of summer shielings'.<sup>1</sup> 'Although not stated explicitly, it seems likely that such local stock movements involved taking milking cows away from the farm to particularly good pastures where they were just too far away to be milked directly from home'.<sup>2</sup> Until the middle of the eighteenth century all buildings on the Solway Plain, except for a handful of high status ones, were built of mud (clay and sand), with crucks, due to the shortage of wood and building stone. They are known locally as clay dabbins or clay daubins (Figs 1 and 2). Until the coming of the canals and railways, materials for vernacular buildings were seldom brought from more than about five miles away; they used whatever was to hand. Most of the Plain is covered with a layer of boulder clay many feet thick, relic of the Ice Ages, and it was not practical to dig down to the sandstone beneath. For building plinths, cobbles from the beach or from field clearances were used, sometimes supplemented by stone from Hadrian's Wall or from derelict church buildings after the Reformation. The walls are not clay brick (adobe) but are mass clay, with straw to take up shrinkage on drying.<sup>3</sup> Wood was also a scarce resource, and the crucks supporting the roof use the minimum of timber, often recycled. The thatched roofing was a by-product

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of grain production. Many cottages and farm buildings continued to be clay built until the late nineteenth century

There have been Robinsons in Longburgh since at least 1348, with several branches of the family in the parish of Burgh-by-Sands. Originally they would have been copyholders, i.e. descendants of the medieval villeins, but in 1924 copyhold was abolished. Major Calvert bought a Robinson estate in Shield in the early 1930s, and with the sale came the estate papers.<sup>4</sup> The paper discovered by Mrs Bowick appears to relate to a clay building and as such is an extremely rare document. These farmhouses and farm buildings were built communally, by the owner's neighbours and friends,<sup>5</sup> and repairs would have been carried out by himself and his family members. During the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries almost all of the thatched roofs were replaced by slate; previously this had been prohibitively expensive due to transport costs. By this time farms were larger but usually tenanted and employing their own labour. Paperwork would not often be necessary and what little there was might occasionally survive in family archives such as this one, which is probably only the third to come to light for clay dabbins. The others are Widow Benson's cottage<sup>6</sup> and another in Great Broughton; here we have the recorded decision of the churchwardens in 1851 not to maintain a cottage, which had been built chiefly of mud in 1831.<sup>7</sup>

The document is as follows:

1779

	£	s	d
Laid forth for Barn			
Payed for [? 70 foot of wood ?]	5	7	0
For 22½ B[ushels?] Lime	0	15	0
For 4 stone of Hair	0	6	8
Porch walling	0	7	6
Tom Stalker	0	11	8
Musgrave Lowthwaite for raft[er] and slat[e] nails	1	18	6
Rob. Folder for Willson slate	20	15	9
To Folder for slate of his own	3	7	1
To William Barns for 800 all But half a quarter of Lat[h]s	1	19	0
John Willson for Slating	4	3	0
To Wil[liam] Robinson	0	7	0
To Thomas Stordy for wood over porch	0	2	6
To Will Taylor for Crooks & loops	0	1	2
To Robert Hope for 60 yards Coping at 4d per yard £1			
[and] 31 yds Redgen at 9d per yard £1 3s 3d	2	11	0
Door case	0	8	0
The whole expense of Barn	42	12	10

On the reverse side of the paper is a receipt signed Robert Robinson, dated 1773:  
 Recd. May 8th 1773 from John Marks five pounds Seven Shillings in full of all demands £5 7 0 [signed] Robert Robinson



Fig. 1  
Moorhouse Farm Barn

Vernacular buildings of this period in this area tend to have very similar dimensions. Most are about six yards wide overall with bays ten feet long. There are no gable crucks or sill plates, and wall plates are unusual. The most common thickness for clay walls is about two feet. Where cart entrances have a 'porch', this is a 'cat-slide' extension of the main slate roof, not ridged. Therefore '31 yards of redgen' (ridging) suggests a building thirty-one yards long, and this is confirmed by '60 yards coping', as flat stones were commonly laid along the top of the side walls when the thatch on a clay dabbin building



Fig. 2  
Fairfield

was being replaced by slate, in order to spread the increased load. The difference in length can be accounted for by the fact that the ridging would cover the top of the gable wall, whereas the coping would just need to reach as far as the gable. There is no mention of bricks or stones to raise the side walls, so the raising must have been achieved with clay. This was necessary in order to give the lesser pitch required by slate.

The traditional local (staple) thatch roofs did not require laths, as their pegged, cleaved oak rafters were laid with a mark/space ratio of about one to one and an under-thatch of turf divots laid like tiles. Taken together with two items for slates and one for rafter and lath nails, we clearly have a building receiving a new slate roof. However it is not a complete rebuild or new build, as the only walling item is a small amount of stone or brick (not specified) for the porch. The clay dabbins were not built straight onto the soil, as this would have caused failure from rising damp; instead they were mounted on a low stone plinth, usually cobbles. Here there is no mention of stone for the wall, which would have incurred transport costs. In fact the items for lime and hair imply a clay building being re-rendered, as in this area stone and brick were usually left untreated. The small amount for wood makes it appear likely that the old principals (or more likely crucks) were being reused. The item 'wood over porch' must be the material for its roof timbers. As the usual bay length was about ten feet, we appear to have a nine-bay clay

barn which is being re-rendered with lime plaster, given a new slate roof to replace its former thatch and also a new cart entrance.

A barn thirty-one yards long would require 280 rafters each of seven feet at sixteen-inch centres, or 372 at twelve-inch centres. It is difficult to read the other item for wood, £5 7s, but even if we take this to be cubic feet rather than linear it would not be sufficient. Clearly some of the old split oak rafters must have been reused. The price seems expensive, as Ben Browne of Troutbeck (Westmorland) paid only nineteen shillings for 108 rafters eight feet long in 1730.<sup>8</sup> A barn of these dimensions (thirty-one by six yards,) would need about eight and a half tons of country (not the best quality) slate. This would have cost 16s 8d per ton at the quarry at Troutbeck in 1757,<sup>9</sup> so clearly transport, probably by packhorse, was very expensive. After 1831 the tax on slate carried by sea was lifted, and Welsh slate became a cheaper, though to our eyes less visually attractive, alternative.<sup>10</sup> As regards the labour costs for slating, we know that this was nine shillings per rood at Appleby in 1716<sup>11</sup> and thirty-two shillings at Windermere in 1829.<sup>12</sup> Allowing for the roof slope, a barn of thirty-one by six yards would need about 204 square yards of slate, which at seven by seven yards to a Cumberland rood would be 4.17 roods. At £4 3s this works out at about £1 a rood, a reasonable average between the two previous figures. Some 788 laths cost £1 19s, approximately five shillings per hundred; this compares with three shillings a hundred at Troutbeck in 1730. A price of eight pence a bushel would be remarkably cheap, since at Skirwith Hall it was 1s 2d, in 1773-4<sup>13</sup> for lime from the farm limekiln. Perhaps transport was not included, or perhaps the reading of 'Bushels' is an error. Also at Skirwith, they used a stone of hair for every two bushels of lime, a stronger mix. However this was a stone building with lime mortar, whereas the Longburgh barn was clay and would have required only a lime render, with possibly also some lime plaster for torching under the slates. The hair at Skirwith cost 1s 4d a stone and at Longburgh it was 1s 8d, reasonably close. 'Crooks and loops' were door hinges for the double doors under the new cart entrance. The item 'Door Case' must be the dressings for the new cart entrance: this would have been dressed stone as it was supplied by the Robert Hope who provided the stone coping and ridging. There is no suggestion of installing a loft or a half-loft, as the only nails mentioned are rafter and lath nails for re-roofing, proportions not specified. At Troutbeck in 1730 lath nails were 2s 2d per thousand.

Most of the clay buildings existing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have now disappeared, and it was not found possible to identify the barn in question among the standing buildings. A search of the Inland Revenue 1910 Land Tax records also proved fruitless, as by that time most of the Robinson properties had been sold.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTES

CWAAS = Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society

1. Winchester, A., *Landscape and Society in Medieval Cumbria* (1987), 91.
2. *Ibid.*, 95.
3. Jennings, N., *Clay Dabbins: Vernacular Buildings of the Solway Plain* (2003), 66.
4. Cumbria Record Office (Carlisle) DX548.
5. Jennings, *op. cit.*, 145.
6. Grainger & Collingwood, *Register & Records of Holm Cultram* (1929), 240.
7. Bridekirk Parish Papers, Cumbria Record Office (Carlisle) PR 65/35.
8. Tyson, B., 'Some Traditional Buildings in the Troutbeck Valley', *CWAAS*, second series, lxxxii (1982), 151-76.
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10. William, E., 'Peasant Architecture in Carnarfonshire', *Transactions of the Caernarvonshire Historical Society*, 43 (1982), 105.
11. Tyson, B., 'Two Appleby Houses in the 18th Century ...', *CWAAS*, second series, lxxv (1985), 193-218.
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13. Tyson, B., 'Skirwith Hall and Wilton Tenement ...', *CWAAS*, second series, lxxxi (1981), 93-112.