

Community Aspects of Community Medicine

**by Dick Squires (General Practitioner)
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I suppose the barn madness started in the early 1970s when my landlord said he was about to demolish the old thatched barn alongside our cottage as it had no further agricultural use. I pleaded with him and offered to repair it at my expense as I felt it would be a great loss and saddened me every time I bumped down the drive on my way home for lunch. He eventually agreed.

Before starting a rescue operation on a building it is most important to think, think, think about use. It is very rare that one can blast ahead and restore 'the unnecessary monument'. By thinking and writing down a list of uses for the building one also defines the level to which it is restored and any 'conservation surgery' which has to be performed. We decided that the main barn could be used as a workshop and store. The beautiful stable, formally occupied by carthorses could be turned into rough bunkhouse accommodation for any group who wanted to do a project in the countryside - a timber tent.

I spent two years getting up early restoring the timber framework, putting in floors, windows, a huge fireplace and of course both sides had to be re-roofed with corrugated iron on the barn and thatch on the stable roof.

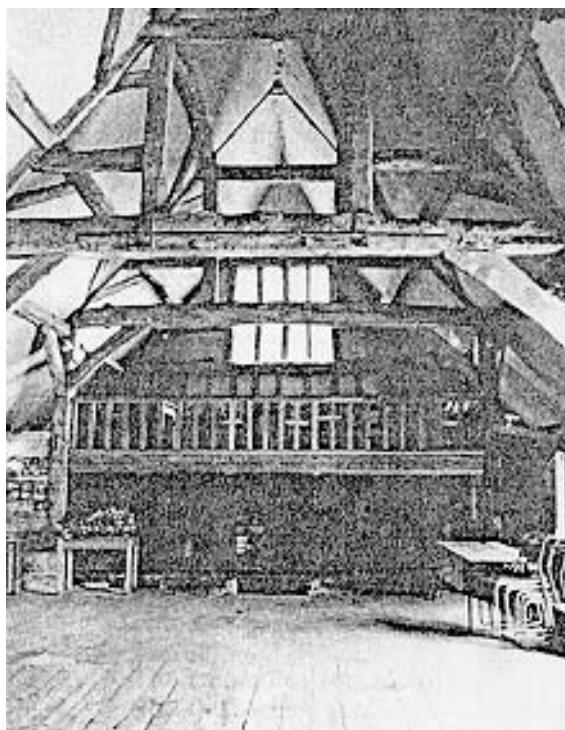


Fig. 1. Interior Lains Barn.

It was used for some years by groups of youngsters but it had its difficulties as it was situated in the middle of a working farm with the usual hazards such as hay bales, and

machinery. I had no secure tenancy and it was quite an anxiety being responsible for the behaviour of anyone who stayed there. On the other hand it gave me enormous experience in techniques of barn carpentry - splicing beams etc. It also made me realize that there was a great demand for a flexible low technology space of character which members of the community could use for meetings, barn dances, etc. We still use the stable end for the occasional groups who want to stay such as the conservation volunteers or the boy scouts. In the late 70's a huge and magnificent isolated barn with Victorian cow byres also became redundant. Part of the roof had collapsed and a tree had fallen across the cow byre. I had a fairly lengthy haggle with the owner, a pensions insurance firm, to acquire the building and restore it for the community. They eventually relented, and generously offered us the freehold with enough land for two car parks for a mere £1,500.

Now for the planning permission. I persuaded the council that this was the natural secondary use for barns; community meeting spaces and so surely no planning permission for change of use would be needed. Harvest suppers and barn dances have only recently had to be held in council civic halls. Once again before any work started, we spent about a year thinking, thinking, thinking about how it could be used - making a list of twenty totally different groups of people - how they would spend their evenings and in turn this dictated the fundamental amenities i.e. Elsans or flush lavs, do you insulate, is electricity needed, is heating needed, etc., etc.

When work started we used the same technique I had evolved. Getting young volunteers to help with some of the repetitive work such as battens and tiles, trench digging, concreting floors, plaster board, and nailing up new lap board. There were many jobs such as electric wiring, plumbing, drains etc., which do need the expert but one can save huge sums of money if one:

1. Picks up the unfortunate tradesman during a surgery consultation after you have successfully treated his chest infection and negotiate a charitable rate.
2. Make sure everything is lined up for him when he arrives to do the job on a Sunday morning - i.e. the footings of the wall have been done, the bricks are stacked out and the spot boards are loaded with 'muck'. We used a system of OMCS financing, old mother commonsense, The rules:
 1. No, dear, you can't have it till you can afford it.
 2. If you borrow money, they will want it back - and more.
 3. If you are offered something always say yes, you never know when it might come in handy.

Using this method we moved at a slower speed with a fair degree of "botchupism" but we did not get into the trap of borrowing vast amounts of money to have the work done by a building firm and any profit generated by lettings would be soaked up to 'servicing the loan'. As soon as the roof of the main barn was water-tight we were hiring it out for barn dances. We were amazed that people found it quite an adventure coping with primitive facilities - at first the lavs were a pair of Elsans in the back of an old horse box, then we upgraded to a wash house, a milk churn of water, a saucepan to scoop into the washing-up bowl and an open window to empty the bowl after hand washing. At one time the 'gents' consisted of an old lavatory pan which was connected to a fertilizer sack which was connected to a long plastic pipe which trickled into the woods. A young lad at the barn dance who was relieving himself was overheard saying "I reckon I am going to get that red head by the end of the evening". Unknown to him the red head was squatting on an Elsan in the 'ladies' the other side of a tarpaulin so a voice replied, "No you're bloody well not". The barn dances generated funds to connect the mains water and septic tank, so gradually the facilities improved.

Our funds were further boosted by a grant from the Queens Silver Jubilee Trust which helped schemes where 'young people were involved in projects which benefited the

community'. One particular lad came to us, a 15 year-old school boy/Venture Scout who coped with all our book keeping. In one year he had to balance about £16,000 which gave him excellent 'real life' financial problems. He now has a job as an accountant with an insurance firm. In 1981 he persuaded us to enter the Shell Better Britain Competition. There were well over 1000 entries but we came through to the final and eventually won. The £1,000 prize presented by Michael Heseltine was spent on more building materials. We spent in the region of £20,000 as we had some large items which we could not wriggle out of, for example:

Connecting electricity from nearest farm	£2600
Heater and ducting	£2000
Plaster board and insulating	£3000
60ft. of patio doors	£3000

I think one of the chief reasons why the barn works well is because we are interested in all its four differing aspects.

1. The agricultural archaeology, the reasons why farm buildings were put together as they were.
2. The building, restoration aspect, i.e. how the lighting heating system works, how the windows are installed.
3. The community aspect, all the differing groups that can use it.
4. The financial aspect, using Robin Hood financing. The firms and larger organisations donate more for their evening than the playgroups, girl guides and parent-teachers groups who are raising money for their organisation.

My heroes are Patrick Geddes, the late Victorian town planner who invented the phrase 'conservation surgery' and was fascinated by the inter-relation and interaction of all the factors which make up a community - he was responsible for Outlook Tower in Edinburgh; Schumacher who understood the huge economic value of appropriate technology and 'study of economics where people matter'; Akbar who built the Hall of Audience at Fatipur Sikri and used to creep in and listen to a group of people gathered together discussing a common interest; John Seymour, who refers to OMCS financing; and of course David Attenborough who is the great master of communicating an often very complicated idea with such clarity, continuity and economy of words.

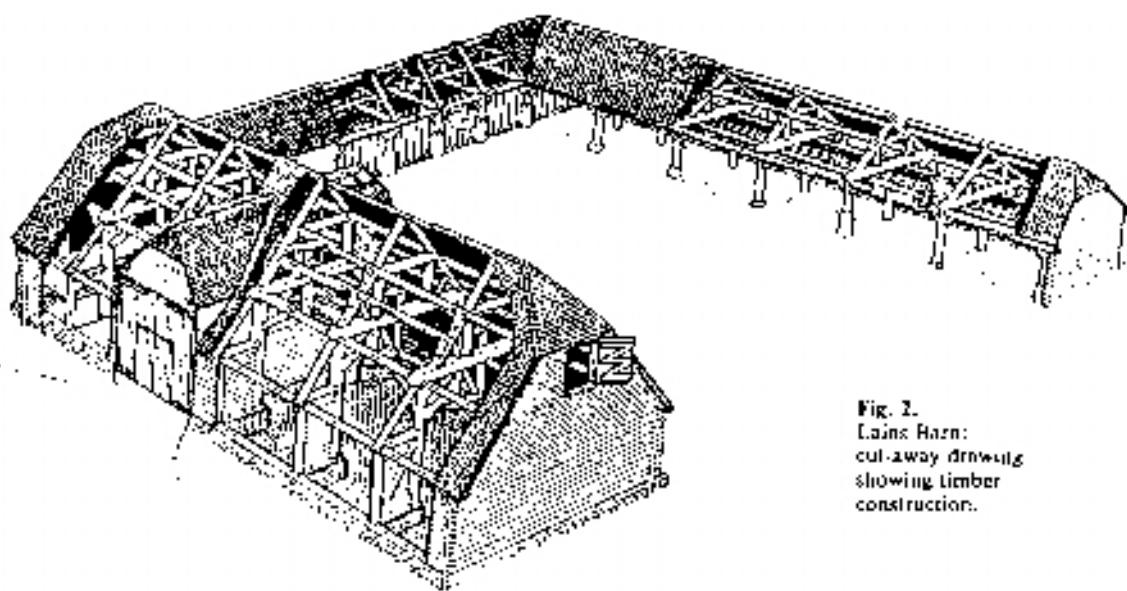


Fig.2 Lains Barn: cut-away drawing showing timber construction.

Anyway the barn is in full swing, at the moment. It has been used for all the 20 different ways we had predicted before we started. It was used by 29,000 people last year - 26 weddings alone and already this year there is barely a Friday, Saturday or Sunday evening free till next Christmas. Barn dances, antique fairs, concerts, 50 architectural students sleeping on the floor for £1 a night or firm parties for the John Radcliffe. We even do some of the catering ourselves and put money into a rotating building fund. We have a wonderful rota of helpers who turn up for the catering functions. One helper has her hair permed any weekend when she is in the kitchen for a wedding, Occasionally I prescribe a stint on the washing up rota instead of Valium for patients at the surgery who are depressed and feel that life has no meaning.

Lains Barn has had a lot of publicity as it is a fairly hot controversial subject, both voluntary community work and the future of redundant farm buildings. It was used as an example in the Montague Report, on new uses for old buildings, a chapter on Found Space by Sherban Cantacuzino's new £25 book on 'Saving Buildings', Philip Howard in the Times, Gillian Darley in the Financial Times, Marcus Binney in the Country Life and in the Telegraph. Not to mention The Peoples Friend, Slimmers Weekly, Pulse and Current Practice!

It does provide a varied life style. I remember one day last Christmas I was on the roof mending the tiles till it was dark, I then jumped down, washed my hands and carved the turkey, then had to do the cabaret for the firm party dressed as a vicar as the proper Vicar had failed to turn up and I ended by rodding out the drains because everyone had eaten so much Christmas pudding.

As for the other projects we have on the boil. We have established a Community Museum Centre in the middle of Wantage which is now running - having cost in the region of £150,000 to build. The barn continues to help with its finance. We have also just bought four more barns which we hope to dismantle and re-erect on the Ridgeway as a bunkhouse. We have full planning permission but we are negotiating for finance at the moment. We hope to start this summer. We also run a barn in France which we bought in the mid sixties. I have to cope with endless letters from people writing for suggestions how they can stop the barn in their village from being demolished. This often provides a very pleasant expedition for my half-days to make a domiciliary visit and send in a report full of suggestions of which nobody ever seems to take any notice.



Fig. 3. Vale and Downland Museum Centre, Wantage.

Why does one do it? I think when one has been in general practice for twenty years it is very easy to find the job becomes more monotonous with repetitive surgeries and ‘fit ins’. I know that I need some long-term project to keep me inspired when I wake every day. It is lucky when something about which one feels inspired can be of use to the community as well. Although at times it does provide conflict, like when a woman came to the barn, nine o’clock one morning, just as I was changing out of my jeans and asked to be examined on the trestle table as she reckoned she could be seen quicker at the barn than in the Health Centre. Or another day when a country gentleman turned up for my evening surgery, my loyal receptionist said “Dr. Squires has been called out on an urgent visit”. “Nonsense,” the old chap said, “I saw the bugger on the roof of his barn as I drove into Wantage”.

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