

The Latimer Pumphouse

By Donato Cinicolo, 2026

Most English villages have a central, focal point: a pond, a green, a pump and occasionally a pumphouse. Some of these are quite basic whilst others are very ornamental. Latimer has a beautiful little building which houses the old village pump. The latter has a pagoda roof covered with petal-shaped tiles sitting on curved rafters, a bit like an upside-down boat. The four main posts are of oak, chamfered along each edge, sitting on limestone plinths. Very elaborate carved decorations adorn the beams which support the roof.

Over recent years, the finial had rotted and fallen off (luckily kept by a caring villager) and had been capped by a flat piece of oak. This too had rotted and was covered in moss. Some of the roof tiles were missing or broken. The paint was flaking all over the frame; oak buttresses, which had been added to help support the four main posts, were rotten and not touching the ground. The Staffordshire blue bricks edging the quarry tile floor were loose and uneven. It was at this point that Latimer Parish Council asked me to examine and repair the pump house.

One could have gone all out and stripped off the tiles and re-hung them; the years of paint could have been stripped off to bare wood; the quarry tiles could have been re-laid; the two cement plinths which replaced broken stone plinths could have been replaced with new stone plinths, but this would have meant lifting the entire building off its bases with a crane. In short, the cost would have run into the tens of thousands of pounds. I suggested a practical repair and overhaul which would preserve the building as it is. This seems to me what other craftsmen would have done in the past.

When I was given the old finial, which was carved in lime wood; it was in a sorry state. The base had rotted away and I had to make a new bottom. After a lot of sanding and filling, plus six layers of paint, it looked as good as new and was placed back on the roof apex.

A small pagoda roof, although very pretty, presents many problems:

- a) The roof hips can be covered by bonnet tiles (like a ladies' hat), ridge tiles (half round) or by lead flashing. In the case of the Latimer building none of these methods have been used; all of these would have looked too clumsy and out of scale. Instead, the tiles along the hips have been cut to shape and cement mortar used to fill the gap. The trouble is that one ends up with tiny tile fragments along the edges which cannot be fixed by nails and have to be 'torched' in with mortar. In due course, frost and bird damage leads to bits falling off and water getting into the roof structure.
- b) The tiles in a curved roof have a very steep angle near its apex but a very shallow angle near the roof edges. Clay tiles need an angle of 40-50 degrees in order to act efficiently. Therefore, the tiles along the edges are sitting almost horizontally, and, as such will allow frost and snow to sit on them and de-laminate or break them.
- c) Traditional roofs would have been made of tiles hung with pegs on timber battens nailed to rafters. This would have provided good ventilation, essential for roof

spaces. Then along came roofing felt and this was used under the battens in order to provide another level of waterproofness. The trouble with this was that ventilation disappeared and condensation formed on the underside of the felt, all leading to problems in the roof. In due course, breathable membrane came along (as in modern roofs) and the problem was solved. The Latimer pump house has a plastic membrane under the battens, but as the roof space is open to the elements, it's perfectly capable of keeping the water out in case of broken tiles.

The timber frame, a mix of pine and oak, is generally in good condition but had had many layers of paint, some of which was peeling or flaking off. I removed the loose stuff, filled in the various gaps and holes and painted an undercoat and satin finish top coat. The buttresses, which seem to be a later addition, were probably added to help stabilise the building also needed work. I had to replace some rotten oak (using parts of a 100 year old oak table I had kept for such purposes) in places.

The quarry tiled floor, a patchwork mix of red and blue quarry tiles also needed some work. The bricks along the edges have shifted and moved but were generally sound. I had to refix some and redo some grouting.

The sandstone sink has had some cracking but I was able to fill the gaps.

I have lived in my cottage (built in about 1650) for over forty years and have had to repair and maintain it, and as such have had to learn about wattle and daub; lime mortars; oak timbers and clay tiles. It has been a great help that my father was a builder and my father-in-law an architect. Crucial to all of this was the love of wood instilled into me by my woodwork teacher Mr Harding at secondary school. In repairing and restoring old buildings one learns a lot about how they were built and the care and love which previous craftsmen bestowed on their work. I think it was John Ruskin who said that we should love and respect old buildings since they were wrought by our forefathers' hands.