Dick Knight: "I should hate to see the buildings go."

Mr. Knight goes public

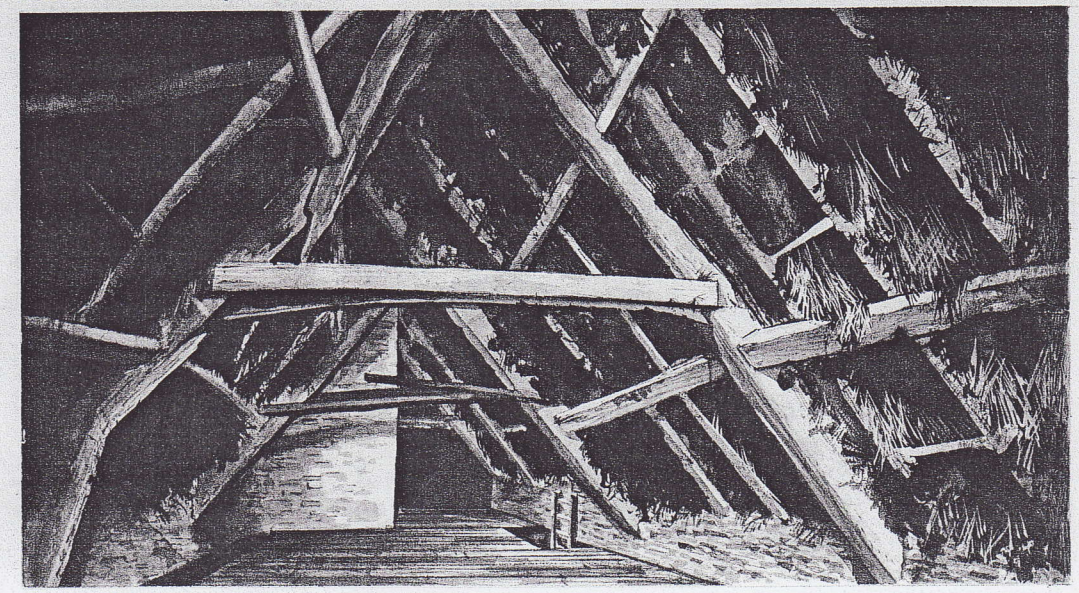
DICK KNIGHT is opening up his hay-barn to the public. Now before thoughts of rent-a-romp flood your mind, I add that this is business with education in mind.

The barn has been hailed by historians as one of the most interesting and unspoilt medieval longhouses in the country, and since the 1930s it has been visited by archaeological and educational groups.

Such a building needs expert care and maintenance, but the farming budget does not run to the sort of money this involves and grants are not easy to come by.

So Mr. Knight, whose barn, paradoxically, is the least striking feature of a farm where the house is a mass of "Gothic" turrets and battlements, will charge for entrance.

He is not expecting to make a large sum out of the entrance fees —not at 25p a time—but he is hoping that the move will help him attract grant aid.



The roof of the longhouse with its network of beams.

His county of Wiltshire already abounds in ancient and historic buildings and his home village, Marshfield, near Chippenham, is a prime example. Ninety per cent of the houses there have been included in the supplementary list of buildings of historic and architectural importance.

To qualify for grant aid a building has to be something special, and a Bristol museum director has said:

"This is one of the most remarkable groups of farm buildings of its kind in the country, combining a story of continuous occupation and architectural development from the 16th century, with surrounding earthworks which suggest that farming has gone on here from prehistoric and Roman times."

Yet Dick Knight says: "Grants may be available in theory, but not in practice. Apart from the fact that three generations of my family have farmed here, I should hate to see the buildings go."

He would also hate to lose a 19th-century dairy, cheeseloft and kitchen, obsolete as farm buildings, and also on the path to decay. Put the lot together though, and he has the makings of fine farm museum.

The domestic buildings are to be cleaned out and will hold a museum of farm and domestic articles.

With an eye to attractions, Dick Knight will clean the barn and use

One of the original cruck beams, installed when the longhouse was built.

by SALLY SMITH
Photographs by
KEITH HUGGETT

it to house calves—"if antiquity won't pull 'em in, pretty, young animals might."

Renovation of the domestic buildings is already well under way. The family have found window frames designed to hold slats, presumably to beat the window tax. There is a pretty Victorian range and a huge bread oven. The old shallow stone sink is there, with its stone soakaway, as are the beer and washing coppers—the former three times the size of the latter.

"This was a great beer-making district," said Mr. Knight, "there is even a lead pipe to take the beer down into the cellar.

"We have been busy collecting old kitchen, beer-making and dairy equipment. It is amazing how much old stuff has accumulated over the years. Our friends and relations have discovered a whole lot more.

"If they prove popular, my wife, Mary, and daughter, Natalie, will demonstrate crafts like spinning and corn dolly-making."

Both Mr. Knight and his wife are keen amateur historians and attend classes in agricultural history, but the longhouse is obviously Dick Knight's first interest. Watch him stroke one of the sturdy roof beams, and listen as he speaks of the tight-fitting mortice and tenon joints.

"The workmanship is marvellous. How they managed it I can't imagine. The main roof beams and cross-beams were made so that they could be slotted in all at once—and all done with hand labour.

"The cruck beams were cut from the side and branch of a tree so that the natural angle formed the angle of the roof. Then they were hand-sawn vertically so that left and right members matched to form a natural arch. Each one was numbered so that the builders knew exactly the order they should be arranged. Numbers were cut deeply for one side, lightly for the other.

"The whole building was made from wood. And how it has lasted—even the wooden pins in the mortice and tenon joints. Beautiful workmanship.

"The longhouse is unusual in that it was not converted to domestic use. It may not be much to look at, but what makes it so important to the historian is that it is now almost exactly as it was when it was built.

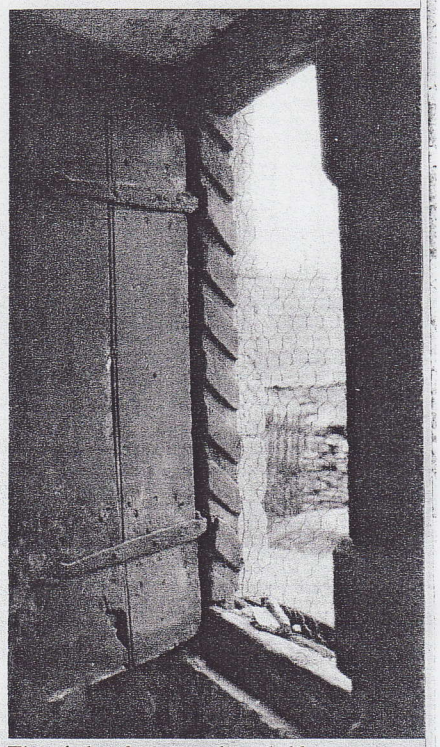
"It was designed to accommodate both animals and humans, with a chimney breast and passage separating them. It is difficult to date the building exactly. The fireplace is of the 1550s type, but my guess is that the building is a lot older. Certainly people lived here for hundreds of years; I often find flints and bits of pottery."

A philistine covered the thatched roof with corrugated iron about 60 years ago—unwittingly saving the thatch underneath, which is still tied in place with stalks of old man's beard.

"We are not aiming at the charabanc tripper," said Dick Knight. "We want to open three days a week, but we are hoping to attract historians and schools doing integrated studies. I shall be taking visitors around the farm."

"We hope it will work," added his wife, "but even if it doesn't the plan is giving us a lot of interest. During the past year something just to take your mind off prices, the poor harvest and continual rain, has been a blessing."

The Knights hope that the barn and their other exhibitions will be completed in time to open for the Spring Bank Holiday (May 24).



The window frames made to hold wooden slats.