

# THE SEARCH FOR CHAMFER STOPS

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## Introduction

Medieval and Post-medieval buildings are generally constructed of squared timbers, with vertical timbers called posts and horizontal timbers called beams. Chamfers and mouldings were often cut on the corners of squared timbers to show higher status and to remove sharp angles to help prevent accidents! (Figure 1)

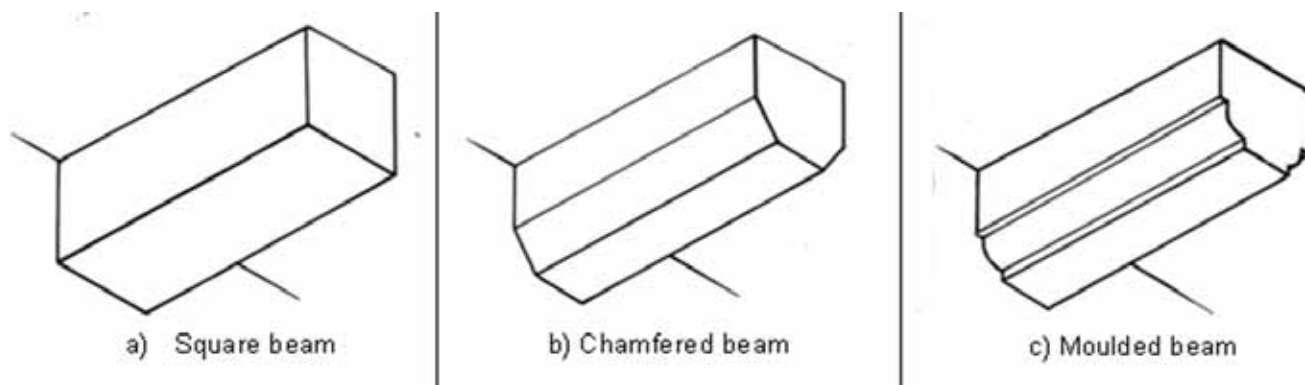


Figure 1: Square, Chamfered and Moulded beams

## What are Chamfer Stops?

While chamfers and mouldings on the edge of beams can continue right up to the wall (Figure 1, b & c), they more often terminated before the end of the beam, just short of the wall, with a plain or decorative carving called a chamfer stop. These decorative endings of chamfers and mouldings are often found on timbers such as ceiling beams and door posts, although chamfer stops can also be found on stone structures such as the jambs of doorways. Three common types of chamfer stops are shown below (Figure 2).

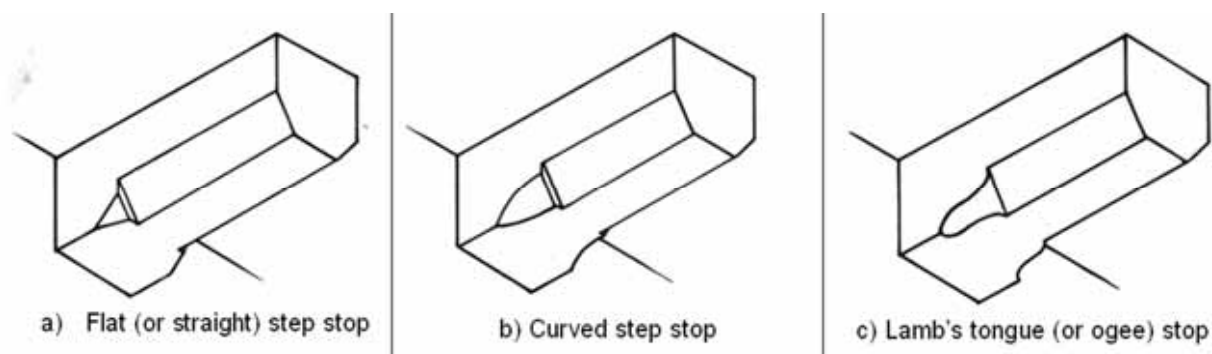


Figure 2: Three common types of chamfer stop.

## How are chamfer stops dated?

Tree-ring dating (dendrochronology) may provide precise dates for building timbers and so date chamfer stops. Date stones, inscribed dates (sometimes carved into beams, doorways or fireplaces), and documentary sources are also used to provide precise dates for buildings and thereby help to date the different styles of chamfer stops.

Tree-ring dating projects in Surrey and Shropshire have both shown the general sequence of chamfer stops runs from flat step to curved step to lamb’s tongue, before stops fell out of general use for decoration in the 18th century (1701-1800). In Surrey, flat-step stops appear to be almost the rule until the 1540s, at which point there is a change to curved-step stops (Figure 3). The curved-step stop gradually gave way to the more artistic lamb’s tongue (also often called scroll or ogee stops) from the 1570s.

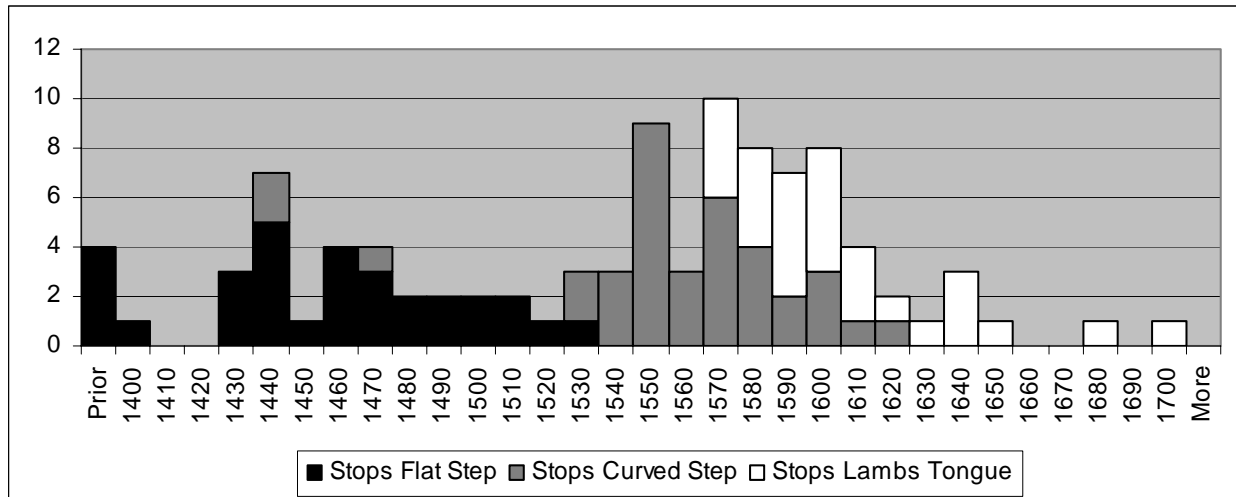


Figure 3: Tree-ring dates for the three common chamfer stops in Surrey. Source: (Wild and Moir 2013).

In Gloucestershire, the current position on the dating of the three most common stops is shown below (Figure 4). Flat-step stops are shown to be used up until the 1520s, while lamb’s tongue stops are increasingly used from the 1590s. However, the use of curved-step stops currently ranges from the 1410s to the 1670s and so does not appear to be a particularly useful feature for the stylistic dating of buildings.

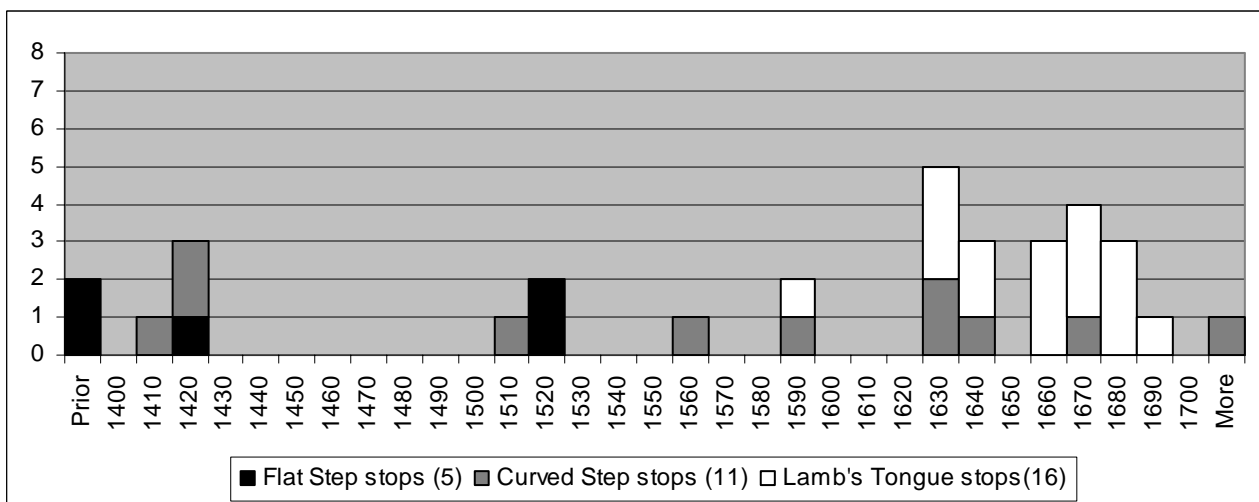


Figure 4: Dates for the three common chamfer stops in Gloucestershire (total numbers shown in brackets).

### Why search for Chamfer Stops?

Often, one of the most surprising aspects revealed by the tree-ring dating of buildings is how suddenly fashions changed. Time and again, a style of construction or decoration can be seen to have been dropped in favor of a successor within a generation. The identification of particular styles of stops in a wide range of dated buildings might therefore help identify whether types of chamfer

stops may be helpful in the stylistic dating of other buildings, both in particular counties and regionally. The more data that is collected from different regions, the more likely it is that the dating of historic structures can be better-informed by this stylistic evidence.

One problem in the study of chamfer stops has been that some of the larger county-level projects have neglected to record stops or have recorded them without describing their character. Even today, historic building records and heritage statements while routinely identifying that chamfer stops are present, often do not state their type. Another problem has been the huge variety of types and variations of stops and their different names, which have tended to vary from region to region. This has probably been one of the main limitations for their study in the past. However, with the availability of digital photographs, 3D software, databases and the internet, a detailed study of stops is now much more viable.

### Some additional types of chamfer stop

Developing date ranges for stylistic features in Gloucestershire is in its initial stages, and so here we list some of the other known and named types across the country. As stated by Jones and Smith (1971), it remains the case that many stops are known by a variety of names and some of the more complicated ones defy description. Where multiple names have been identified, here generally the most descriptive name has been used. The pyramid stop is a very recognisable stop (Figure 5, a) which was formerly thought to be early, but now appears to have quite a wide date range (Figure 6).

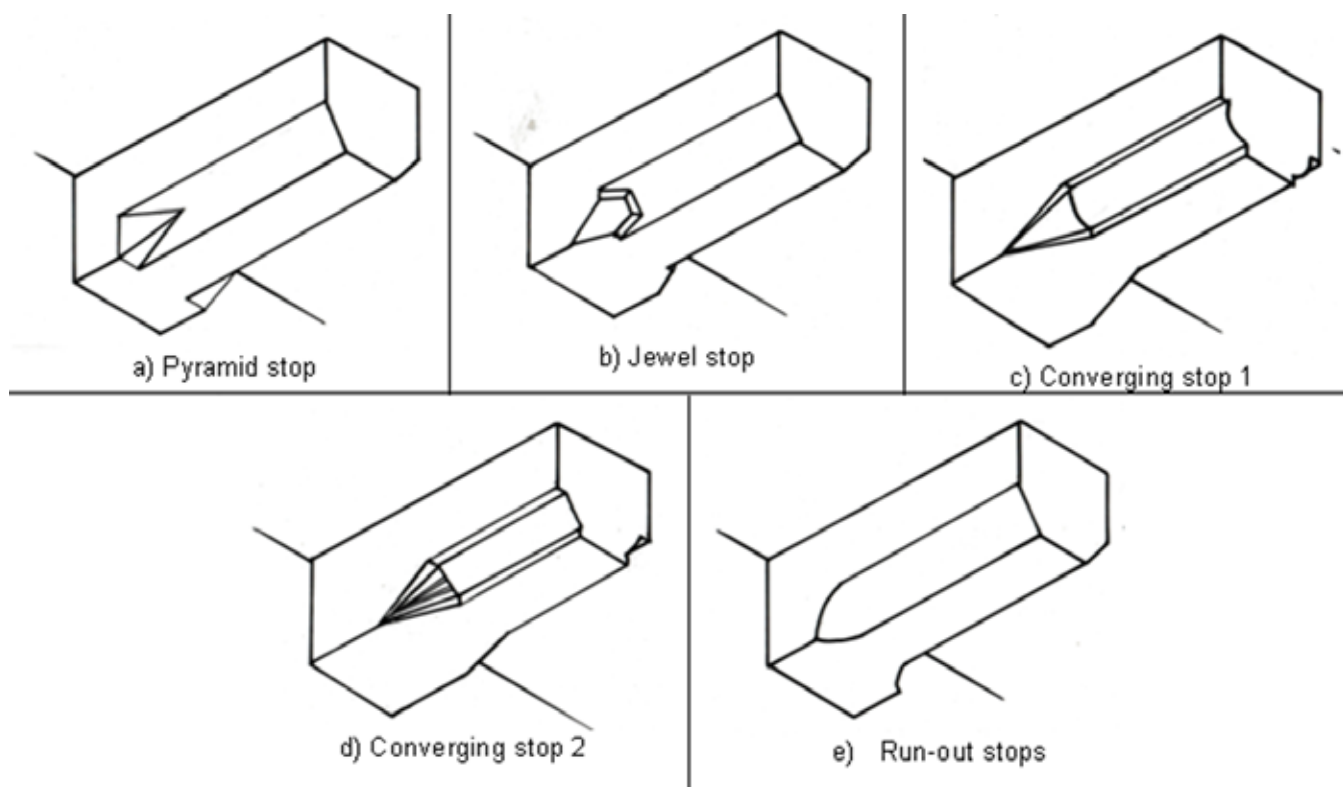


Figure 5: The Pyramid, Jewel, Converging chamfer and Run out stops.

While the jewel stop is mentioned on Historic England listings of buildings, no previous illustration of this type has yet been identified and thus this illustration is likely to change. Many different types of converging stop occur (just two are shown in Figure 5) but here the different types have all been grouped together. Most of the converging stops recorded to date are found in Gloucestershire and

the current known examples show a useful tight dating range from the 1620s and to the 1690s. The run-out stop is very widely used at all periods, and so, unfortunately, these are not a useful dating feature.

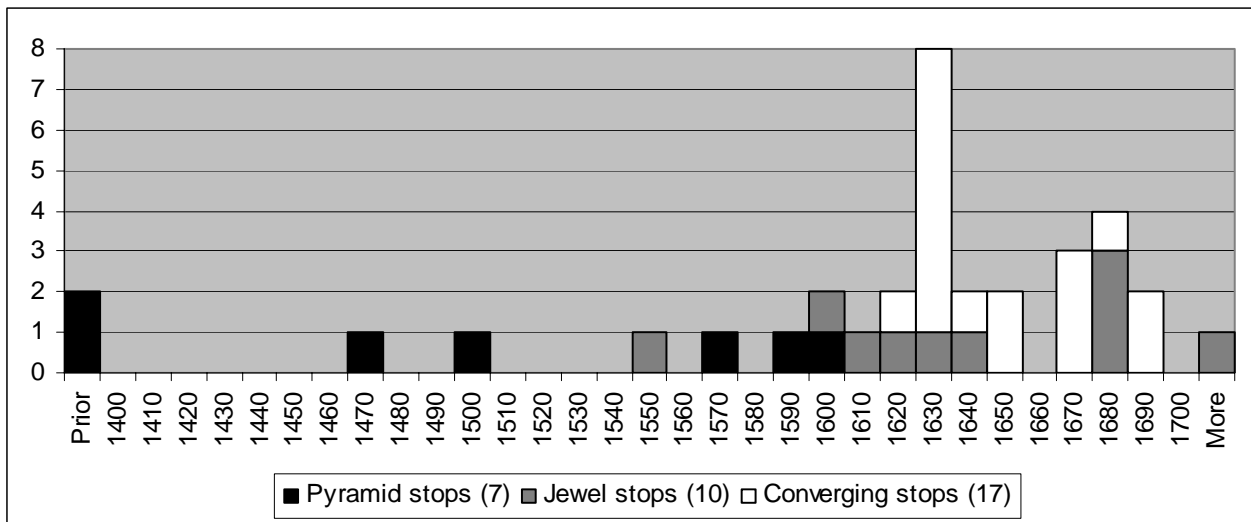


Figure 6: Dates for Pyramid, Jewel and Converging Stops (total number shown in brackets).

### Chamfer stops probably of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century

Further examples need to be identified but the following chamfer stop types (Figure 7) appear to have been widely used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1601-1700).

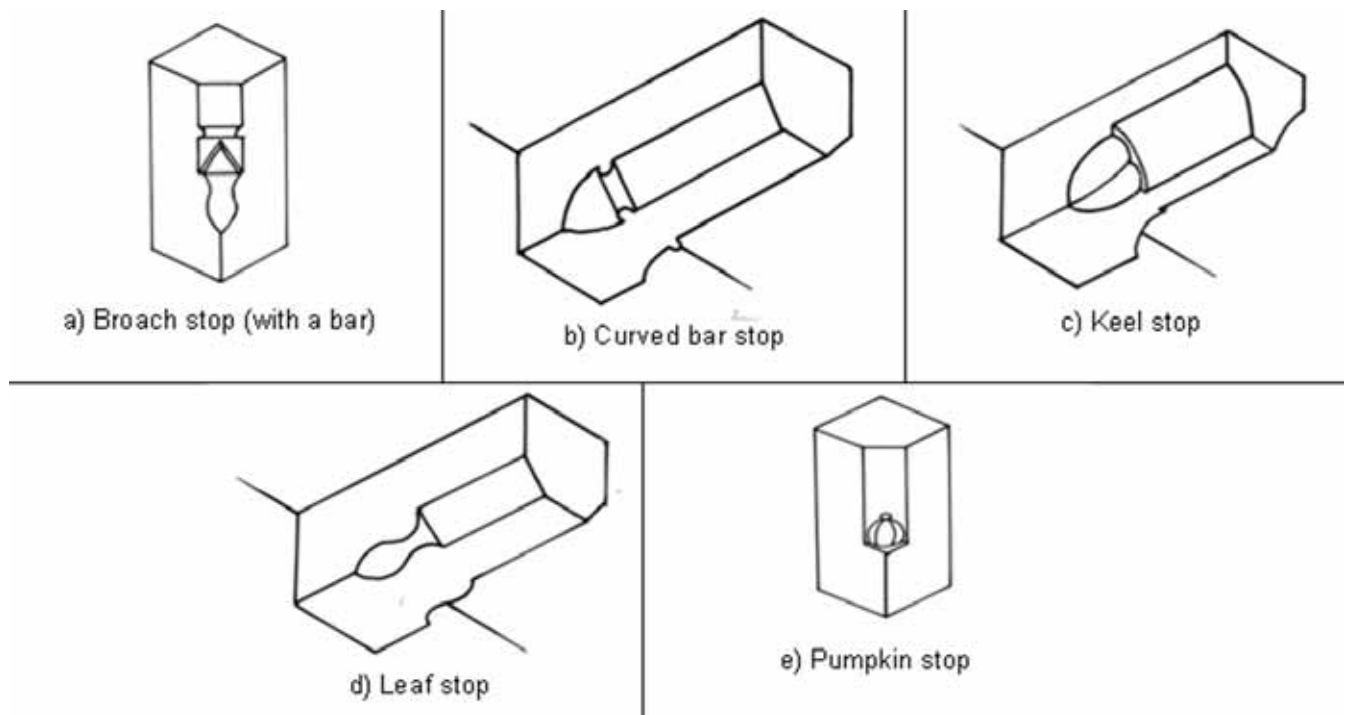


Figure 7: The Broach, Curved bar, Keel, Leaf and Pumpkin stops.

While there are currently too few dated examples to show date ranges, the known dates of the following chamfer stop types are shown in brackets:

- Broach (1634, 1638, 1642, 1648, 1668, 1709, 1881)
- Curved bar stop (1604, 1642, 1653, 1673, 1678)
- Keel (1602, 1633, 1676, 1721)
- Leaf (1604, 1644, 1718)
- Pumpkin (1594, 1642)

### **Additional embellishments**

Many of the examples of stops described here can also have embellishments such as added nicks, notches, steps (a raise in level from the plane of the chamfer or moulding), flats (unmoulded sections of plain chamfering), bars (projecting rounded mouldings across the width of the chamfer). It is suggested that additional embellishments are recorded after the more common type that the chamfer stop resembles. For example a 'lamb's tongue stop' can be recorded as 'lamb's tongue stop with bar', or 'lamb's tongue stop with bar and nick'.

Another very decorative embellishment that is also sometimes used are incised lines and curves cut into the surface of the stop to enrich it, as shown on the chamfer stop below (Figure 8). Following the convention described above, the chamfer stop below might be described as: curved bar stop with incised decoration.



Figure 8: A particularly ornate chamfer stop previously undefined, but described here as a: Curved bar stop and incised. Source: © Historic England, Patricia Payne, image reference DP187931

### **New Chamfer Stops**

Not all stops are shown here and some may yet to be discovered and named. There are also some types of stop best described as 'transitional', which can be confusing. Where a stop is not recognised it should normally be classified as an 'Undefined stop', though every attempt to describe its character in detail, and to photograph it so that it can be recognised would be welcomed. During the initial recording of buildings for the Gloucestershire Dendrochronology Project in the parish of Newent a previously undefined stop was identified, which we have now called a 'Spear stop' (Figure 9).

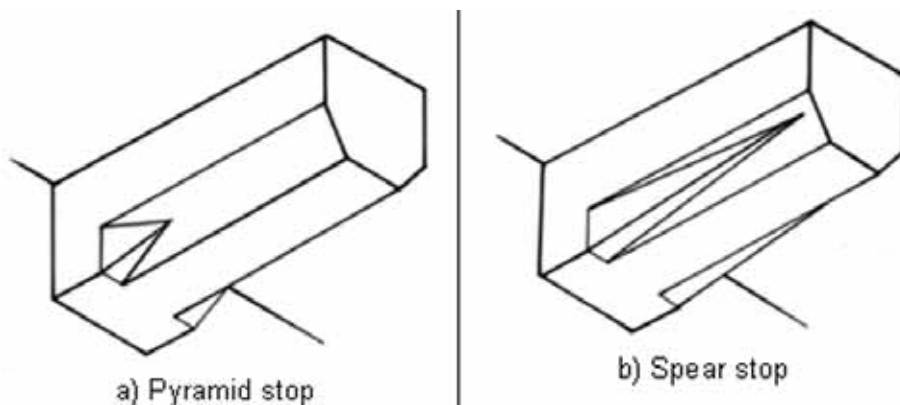


Figure 9: The pyramid stop compared to a spear stop.

The spear stop is much longer than a pyramid stop. All the examples located so far are over 20cm long and have only been recorded in Newent (Figure 10a). However, we have also located a number of embellishments to the standard spear chamfer stop including a spear stop with incised bar (Figure 10b) and a spear stop with ball terminal (Figure 10c). The Gloucestershire Dendrochronology Project has recently tree-ring dated an example of a spear stop to 1590, while a spear stop with ball terminal has a documented date of 1668.



Figure 10: Photographs of the Newent ‘Spear’ chamfer stop together with embellished types.

### Getting Involved

The recording of chamfer stop types is a neglected aspect of building recording, but one which could prove a useful addition in the stylistic dating of buildings. Most previous work on chamfer stops was undertaken before the routine use of tree-ring dating. Now with over 4000 tree-ring dated building phases in U.K. sending a photograph of your chamfer stops (Figure 11) has the potential to match it to a date. Furthermore, many buildings have date stones or their dates inscribed upon timbers and can thus be dated with some confidence. The more data we have, the better chance we have of refining our understanding of the use of the different chamfer stops at different historic periods and in different regions.

The recording of stops can be done in your own home and this research has the potential to help in the dating of buildings, not only locally, but also nationally. So, please get involved by sending photographs of your chamfer stops and any dating evidence such as date stones or inscribed dates, together with the building address to: the Gloucestershire Building Recording Group Secretary (e-mail: [marymatthews04@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:marymatthews04@hotmail.co.uk)). All contributions will be acknowledged.

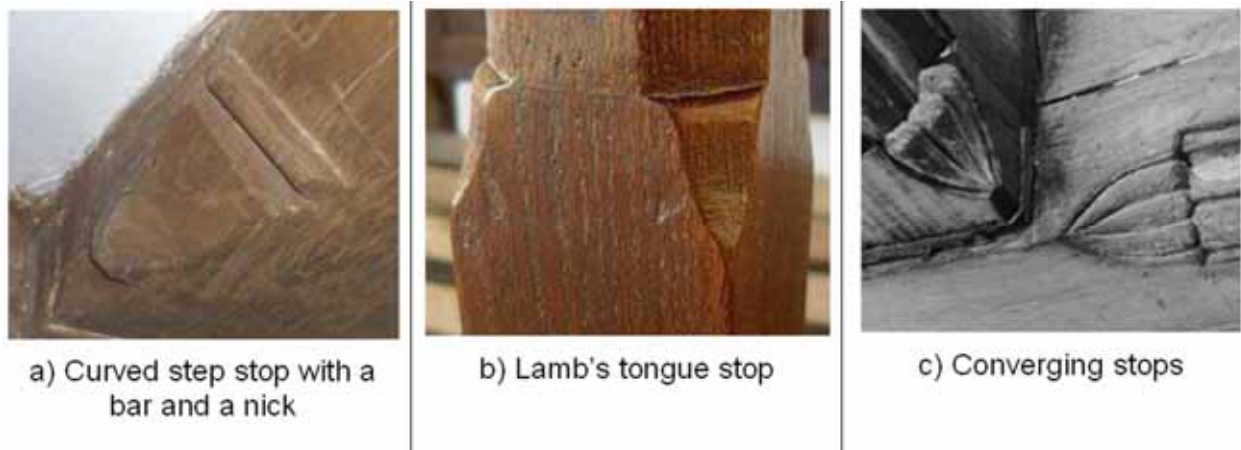


Figure 11: Some photographs of chamfer stops

### Further reading

The location and exact dates of all the stops discussed here are freely available through searching the Building Archaeology Research Database (BARD), located at [www.buildingarchaeology.com](http://www.buildingarchaeology.com) (Moir *et al.* 2012). To additionally help in identification an illustrated glossary of many building terms including chamfer stops types is also available from the BARD web-site. A more comprehensive list of chamfer stops types is shown in *Fixtures and Fittings in Dated Houses* (Alcock and Hall 1994)

### References

Alcock, N W, and Hall, L, 1994 *Fixtures and fittings in dated houses 1567-1763*, York (Council for British Archaeology) Council for British Archaeology Practical Handbooks in Archaeology No 11.

Jones, S R and Smith, J T, 1971 Chamfer-Stops: A Provisional Mode of Reference, *Vernacular Architect*, **2**(1), 12-5.

Moir, A K, Wild, R, and Haddlesey, R, 2012 An Internet-Accessible Building Archaeology Research Database (BARD), *Vernacular Architecture*, **43**, 1-6.

Wild, R and Moir, A K, 2013 Key dating features for timber-framed dwellings in Surrey, *Vernacular Architecture*, **44**, 46-61.

