

Report and Documentary History for
**Pithouse, Trench Green, Mapledurham,
Oxfordshire**

Site Code: MDM-B

from

The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England

by

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Fig. 1. Composite view of the house taken in 1953, during renovation.

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Oxbow Books

MDM-B: PITHOUSE, TRENCH GREEN, MAPLEDURHAM, OXFORDSHIRE

Grid reference: SU 6872 7741

Survey Dates: 1992-2009

By: D. Miles

Illustrations:

1. View of the house in 1953
2. Ground floor plan and long section
3. Section of truss T2
4. Windbrace with nail
5. The house on the 1587 Blagrave map

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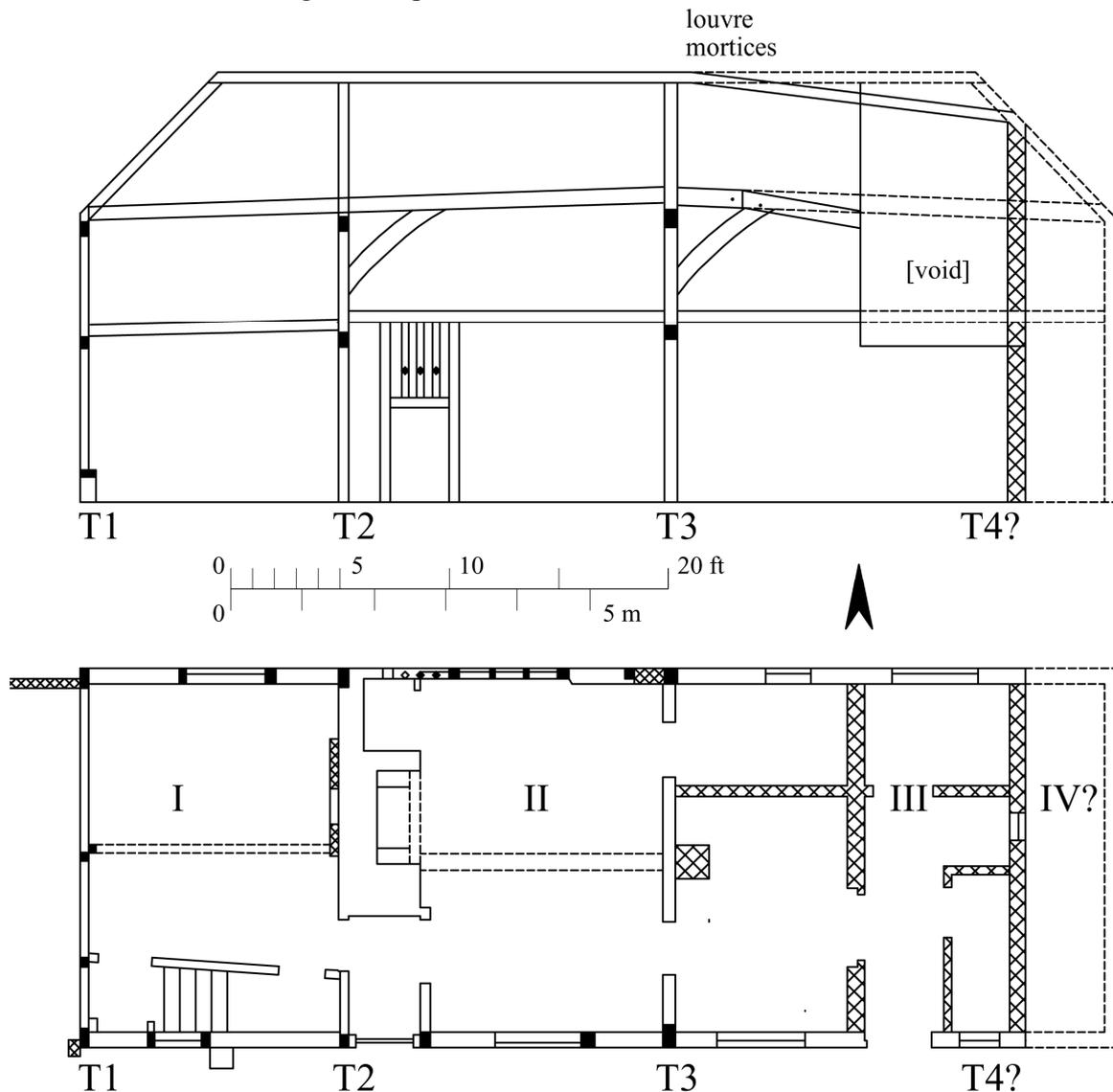


Fig. 2. Plan, showing truss and bay numbering, and long section (omitting most post-medieval features).

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

SUMMARY AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

PHASE 1: Pithouse derives its name from a large chalk pit situated down the hill from the house. It is a cruck-framed building of three bays, which still basically has the same plan as when originally constructed. The house was probably built in the summer of 1455, with one purlin felled in the Spring 1454 and the other timbers in Winter 1454/5.

The house consisted of a two-bay hall serving as both hall and service with a chamber in the third bay. The central truss of the hall has a tiebeam, showing a stage on the development from a large two-bay hall with arch-braced collar to a more compartmentalised arrangement with the service being separated

from the hall proper by a closed partition above the tiebeam or 'mantel-beam'. The position of the smoke louvre is visible on the lower side of the central hall truss. The open truss has a type 'C' apex while the truss between the hall and the chamber has a type 'W' apex. An original window, now blocked, survives at the upper end of the hall. The chamber was probably open originally to the roof. The two end trusses, one having been removed in the 1950s, were half-hipped. The service bay is exceptionally long, and it seems probably that the removed end truss was set some feet within the original end of the house, with a short additional lean-to bay beyond it, although this cannot now be confirmed.

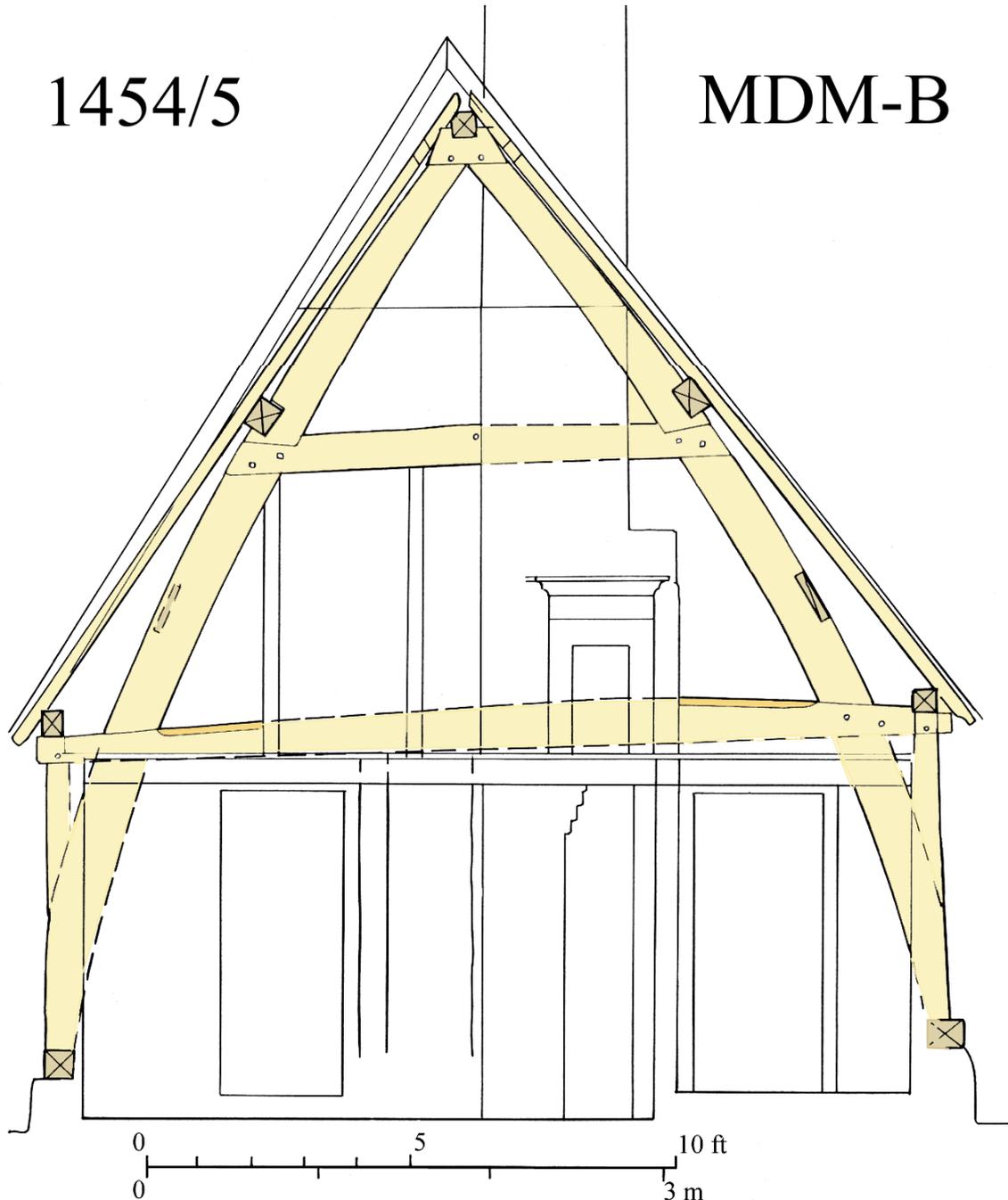


Fig. 3. Section of truss T2.

Fig. 4. Windbrace with heavy nail.

PHASE 2: Perhaps in the sixteenth century, the chamber was floored over, providing extra accommodation.

PHASE 3: During the seventeenth century the middle bay comprising the hall proper was floored over, and a new window inserted in the back wall. The original hall window would have been blocked up at

this stage. A chimney stack was built at the upper end of the hall (against T2) which served both the chamber end and the hall.

LATER PHASES: In 1953, the east end truss (T4) was removed and the house reduced in length by a few feet.

STRUCTURAL FEATURES

PHASE 1: Trusses T1, T2 and T3 have halved matched blades. The blades of T1-T3 are visible externally, as are several studs; the cruck studs are carried on V-housings. A big face-peg is visible on the south blade of T3. The position of T4 has been inferred from the remnants of the footings for this end of the house. The bay lengths, west to east are 11ft 7in, 14ft 9in and 20ft 0in (to the end of the house), with the exceptionally long bay III perhaps including a short lean-to beyond the final truss. The original door position cannot be located, but appears not to have been in bays I or II; a position just to the east of T3 can be suggested. Much of the original sill beam survives in bays I and II.

Truss T3 is the open truss, although it has no arch-braces or chamfers. It has a tiebeam and a collar, with wattle and daub infilling between them, much like Three Chimneys, Mapledurham (MDM-C), built three years later. On the service or lower side of this truss, the position of the smoke louvre is still visible; a set of inclined mortices part way down from the ridge received the corner framing of the louvre. The open truss has a type 'C' apex whilst the truss between the hall and the chamber has a type 'W' apex. The two end trusses, (one removed in 1953), were half-hipped (type 'V'); the north purlin rests on the collar of T1, in a cut-out in the blade. Of the suite of windbraces, only two survive, on the north side in bays II and III. That in bay II has an extraordinarily large wrought iron nail driven into it (Fig. 4). Unusually, the windbrace pegs have been left projecting.



Fig. 4. Windbrace (east side of truss T2), viewed edge-on, showing the large nail driven into it.

At the upper end of the hall, a diamond-mullioned window still survives, half above and half below the inserted seventeenth-century floor; the right hand two lights are visible below and the left hand two above; measurement reveals that the original window was of four lights, measuring about 80 cm wide by 85 cm high, set between two studs.

PHASE 2: The chamber was probably floored over in the sixteenth century, although the ceiling beam is now concealed.

PHASE 3: A fireplace and chimney were inserted at the upper end of the hall, probably in the early to mid-seventeenth century. The fireplace lintel is very rough, but is hidden behind an apparently original fascia board with shallow moulded edges, carrying a possibly original mantel shelf. The hall was probably ceiled at the same date, with a chamfered ceiling beam with scroll stops. Some original joists have small chamfers; their north ends are carried on a chamfered half-beam. In the north wall, adjoining the original window is a seventeenth century casement window with two lightly-moulded mullions. Somewhat later, a chamber fireplace and chimney was also inserted, built of neat combined brick and flintwork.

The present lobby entrance between bays I and II was presumably inserted at this period, as its position would seem unsatisfactory if associated with the hall window.

LATER PHASES: In the nineteenth or early twentieth century the lower end bay was altered, with a ceiling inserted and a chimney inserted on the site of the open hearth, serving a kitchen. Perhaps at this date, a narrow doorway was cut to the west of T3 (later blocked).

In 1953 the house had deteriorated to the point where the hip end truss of the lower end had to be demolished and a brick wall was built a few feet further in. At the same time a lean-to extension was formed at the chamber end for a wood-store. The thatch was removed from the roof and the original roof structure was cocooned in a new tiled roof structure built above the original rafters.

DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

The documentary history has not been extensively investigated, although the Mapledurham estate archives undoubtedly contain much information about the house. It is clearly shown on the 1587 Blagrave map of the Mapledurham estate, when it was in the tenure of John Illway (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. View of Pithouse (the right-hand house) on the Blagrave map of 1587 (at Mapledurham House, reproduced with the kind permission of Mr J.J. Eyston).

DENDROCHRONOLOGY

For dendrochronology abbreviations see page facing Introduction.

Sampling Comments: Six samples were obtained through coring by D. Miles in 1992.

TREE-RING SAMPLE RECORD AND SUMMARY OF DATING

Sample Code	Sample Location	Total Rings	Sapwood Rings	FMR Date	LHR Date	LMR Date	Date Cat
MDM9.01	North purlin bay I	30	6 C	—	—	—	—
MDM9.02	Cruck, T2, north blade	74	14 C	1381	1440	1454	1
MDM9.03	North wallplate, bay II	28	9 C	—	—	—	—
MDM9.04	Cruck, T3 (combined, both blades)	83	14 C	1372	1440	1454	1
MDM9.05	South purlin bay II	62	22¼C	1392	1431	1453	1
MDM9.06	Cruck, T1 combined, both blades)	115	19 C	1340	1435	1454	1

Site sequence MDM9: (composed of samples 02+04+06), 115 rings long dated 1340-1454 with t-values of 5.77 (Ceely House, Aylesbury), 5.07 (OXON93), 5.00 (126 High Street, Oxford), 4.86 (Kitchen, Corpus Christi College, Oxford), 4.46 (EMID), 4.28 (Upper house Farm, Nuffield).

Felling dates: (samples with last measured rings complete to bark): MDM9.02, MDM9.04 & MDM9.06, Winter **1454/5**; MDM9.05 late Spring/early Summer **1454**.