

NOTES

Cogmans Farm, Burstow: A Surrey Base Cruck

Introduction

Aisled halls are an uncommon type of medieval house; fewer than twenty are known in Kent, Sussex and Surrey, of which two are in the last¹. Quasi-aisles (ie aisles where the arcade post is replaced by a base cruck, thus avoiding the obstruction on the floor) are even less common, fewer than ten being known in the south-east counties and less than 100 in England as a whole.

Cogmans Farm (TQ 325 446) in Burstow parish in south-east Surrey is the first quasi-aisled hall to be found in Surrey. It is a late medieval house, formerly with an open hall, quasi-aisled on one side only. A significant length of the base cruck remains although not its joint with the tie beam. The end-jettied two bay upper end has hardly been altered but a considerable amount of rebuilding has occurred to the remaining part of the house.

Aisled halls were probably only erected by men of some local importance. Mercer has suggested that base-cruck halls usually seem to be of manorial status associated with important local economic enterprises.² The local importance of Cogmans Farm is attested by its position on a moated site and the quality of the original construction. It may not be without significance that Court Oak Lane runs nearby. So far no documentary evidence relating to its original ownership or use has been discovered although the house on the adjoining site, Old Hall Farm, dating from c 1700, may indicate the removal of both the occupants and name to the new house at that time.

Base crucks are generally considered to pre-date 1400 but the base cruck is the only feature at Cogmans to suggest so early a date, indeed features in the unaltered upper end, eg the dais beam profile (see fig 1) would not be inconsistent with a late 15th century date.

Detailed description

The upper end: Open halls are normally flanked by two storied end bays. The existence of the aisle however creates an area under the eaves on the upper floor of little or no use except for storage. Since at the very least this would be inconvenient in a room of any importance, some form of wing is desirable to avoid such a disadvantage. At Cogmans (fig 3) the two bay 'wing' is actually in line and of the same depth as the main range but not aisled. Its distinguishing feature is that the eaves are at full two storey height resulting in a higher ridge on a slightly different line to the main range. This end-jettied 'wing' is the most impressive part of the present house and is hardly altered; it is constructed of particularly good quality timber typified by the brackets supporting the jetty which project 40cm (16in) and are carved out of the same timber as the posts.

The first floor room is particularly impressive. An octagonal crown post 'c' with moulded cap and base sits on a heavy tie beam. The hollow chamfers to the tie beam continue via solid arch braces down the bay posts, terminating at floor level with particularly fine stops. Two windows can be identified in this room. A small one 'w' in the north wall has ovolo mullions and may always have been glazed. The main window is over the jetty but a modern window 'm' obscures all except an internal chamfer, at the head, with large broach stops. The panel below the window is made of solid timber rather than wattle and daub. This main window is set eccentrically on the east elevation to allow room apparently for a door 'd' at the north end, over the jetty. This would have given access to the same point in the room as the internal stair 's'.

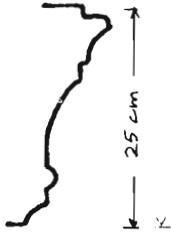


Fig 1 Profile of dais beam.

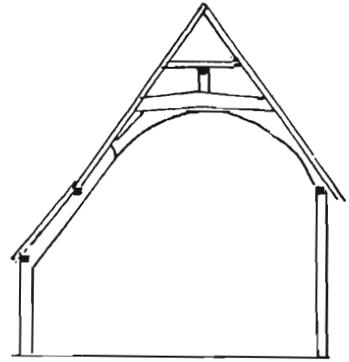


Fig 2 Base cruck truss Dunsters Mill House, Ticehurst.

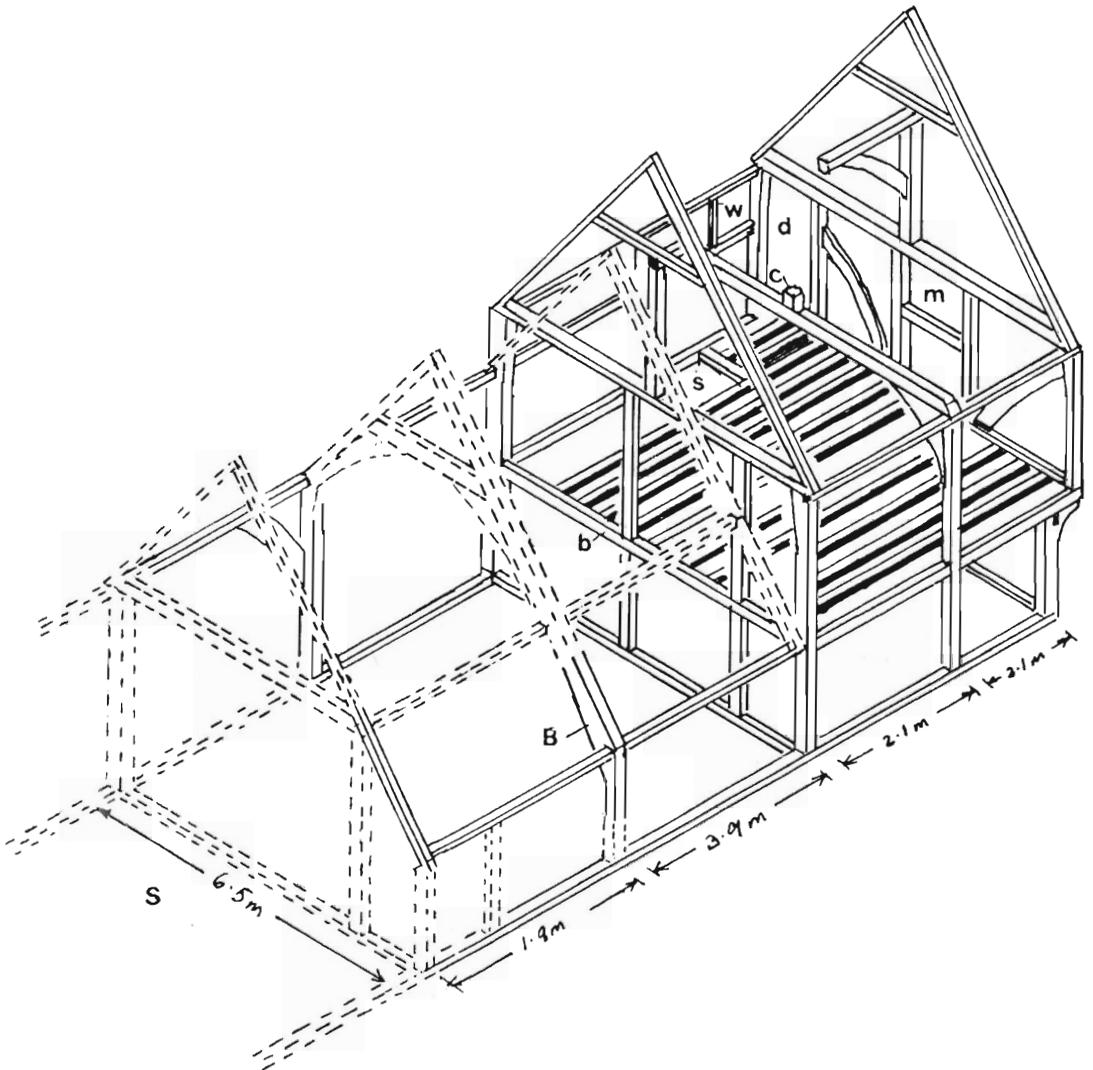


Fig 3 Isometric sketch of Cogmans showing extant principal features before insertion of smoke bay and floor.

An external door also occurs in a similar position on the ground floor.

The moulded dais beam 'b' to the open hall is an integral part of the 'crosswing' structure.

Hall: Old photographs indicate that the aisle extended for the full length of the main range: in recent years however a two storey extension has been built out from the aisle side of the two end bays (i.e. the service bay 'S' and the lower hall bay). This has largely obliterated constructional details but not affected the base cruck. At a rather earlier date, probably in the 17th century, the roof above arcade plate level (but not below) has been replaced by a side purlin structure using older smoke-blackened rafters but clean purlins. These rafters are rather smaller in section than those of the original roof, of which short lengths over the aisle remain. The tie beams to this range are much inferior to those of the upper end and were replaced probably at the same time as the rafters.

The evidence of the nature of the original hall roof is negative. It was not a crown post. The original smoke blackened partition between the hall and upper end still exists, the end crown post to the upper end is visible from the hall side but there is no indication of crown post or collar purlin for the main range. Since the main range and upper end ridges are not in line there is no possibility of one crown post being used for both roofs. It seems likely therefore that the hall roof was of coupled rafters, probably with no longitudinal member.

The base cruck 'B' and arcade plate (which is not original) is largely hidden by cupboards. About 2m (6ft) of the base cruck remains, from 1m above the ground to just below the arcade plate. The cruck has been cut off next to the arcade plate but lack of mortices for braces in the extant section suggest that it may have been connected originally to the collar, rather than to a tie beam, in a similar manner to Dunsters Mill House, Ticehurst, a late example (fig 2).

The north wall of the hall has been largely rebuilt in recent years. Since it is in line with the original wall of the 'crosswing' no aisle is likely to have existed this side.

Later History

The first major change appears to have been the insertion of a floor in the upper bay of the open hall and the construction of a smoke bay in the lower one. The intermediate tie with one end framed into the base cruck still exists. The centre part of the tie is now lost (if indeed it has not been cut off) within a late chimney stack but there is little doubt that it was framed into the girder of the inserted floor. The underside of the tie is morticed for a short partition, probably only about 1.2m (4ft) long from the aisle wall. The hearth side of the tie shows evidence of smoke blackening. The chamfered square section joists of the inserted floor suggest a date no earlier than the second half of the 16th century.

The insertion of the chimney stack, with four hearths, into the smoke bay probably took place in the 17th century although there is no direct evidence. This is also the most likely period for the reconstruction of the roof and the low end. The decision to retain the lower part of the base cruck can perhaps best be explained by the fact that it avoided disturbing the inserted intermediate tie and the associated floor to the hall. The reason why it should have been necessary to rebuild the roof is not so obvious considering the quality of the extant cruck and other timbers. The upper end is heated by a brick chimney, probably a 19th century addition.

Discussion

The main interest of the building lies in the dating of the base cruck. There is a conflict of possibilities: whilst the base cruck would not normally be expected to post date 1400³, the upper end 'wing' would locally be dated to the late 15th or early 16th centuries. The most likely alternatives are either

- i) the 'wing' is a late addition, replacing an earlier bay making separate dates tenable, or
- ii) both base cruck and 'wing' are co-eval, suggesting probably a late 15th century date.

Much depends on the evidence for rebuilding the 'wing'.

Arguments in favour of a common date are:

- i) the comparable quality in terms of scantling and fineness of cut of the base cruck with the timber work to the 'wing';
- ii) the hall dais beam being integral with the 'wing' structure rather than with the hall: in view of the quality to be expected of base cruck halls it is odd that any rebuild did not start beyond the end of the hall rather than include the end;
- iii) the precise fit of 'wing' to hall with no indication of reframing.

Against this may be cited

- i) conflict between the generally recognised dates for the main characteristics of each part;
- ii) the physical possibility of rebuilding such an upper end.

Such evidence probably cannot be conclusive either way although on balance it would seem that a common date late in the 15th century is most likely.

Little can be said about the use of the building in the absence of documentary evidence, except to remark that its quality is consistent with Mercer's theories on manorial status and economic use.

1. Old Court Cottage, Limpsfield (*SyAC*, 63, 130-7); Forge Cottage, Dunsfold (*Vernacular Architect*, 6, 19-27)
2. Mercer, E, 1975 *English vernacular houses*, 99-101
3. *ibid*, 100

PETER GRAY.