

Cradlers, Leatherhead: a 14th century timber-framed house

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Introduction

The house known in the late Middle Ages as Cradlers stands on the north side of Leatherhead High Street (nos 33–5), on one of a series of burgage-like crofts which bear the marks of medieval planning.¹ Its descent as a copyhold of Thorncroft manor can be traced from 1527; and it was presumably one of the unidentifiable villein tenements in the town which appear in Thorncroft court rolls from the 1270s onwards.

In 1975 a historical and architectural account appeared in the *Proceedings of the Leatherhead and District Local History Society*.² Stripping of the frame during refurbishment in 1985–6 has, however, revealed several new features, notably passing-braces in the walls and a *trait-de-jupiter* scarf-joint which together suggest a date in the 13th or 14th century. The unusual plan-form of the building can also be better understood. In view of its importance, full re-publication seems justified. This account is, however, confined to the original timber-frame, as the 17th and 18th century work (mostly now destroyed) is fully described in the 1975 paper.³

The timber frame (figs 1, 2)

The building consists of (a) the east range, of three bays, at right-angles to the street; and (b) the west range, of one bay aligned on the street. Since they are separately framed it cannot be proved that the two ranges were built together; but their framing is so similar, notably in the passing-braces, that contemporaneity seems almost certain, and will be assumed for the rest of this discussion.

The east range is jettied over the street at its south end, and runs back along the side of a narrow passage called Brickbat Alley. The framing of the outer walls is fragmentary, but can largely be reconstructed from the evidence of mortises and halvings:

East side wall (Dl–Al): main posts, wallplate, rails, fragments of sill, occasional studs, braces. There were two passing-braces in the north bay, but one ordinary arch-brace in each of the other two bays.⁴ The wallplate is in two lengths, jointed with a *trait-de-jupiter* scarf. This wall retained a small fragment of possibly original daub infill: very hard, and including crushed flint.

North end wall (D–Dl):⁵ main posts, central post, tiebeam, rails, two arch-braces.

West wall of north bay (D–C): main posts and rail, with halvings and mortises for two passing-braces and two ground-floor studs.

Of the two transverse walls, B–Bl (between the central and south bays) has a first-floor open truss with arch-braces;⁶ below was a partition containing a brace. The truss between the central and north bays (C–Cl) was closed on both floors by partitions containing braces; on each floor was a doorway at the west end of the partition.

The central and south bays of this range are floored with longitudinal common joists, their inner ends tenoned into the bearer on truss B–Bl; the north ends rest on the bearer on truss C–Cl, and the south ends form the jetty. Part of the floor was displaced by the 17th century stack, but fragments remain of a stair-hole against the north wall of the central bay. A bearer spans the north bay longitudinally; its south end rests on the bearer on truss C–Cl, while its north end is tenoned into the central post of the end wall and supported by a small bracket. In its west face, but not in its east face, are the mortises and sawn-off tenons of transverse common joists.

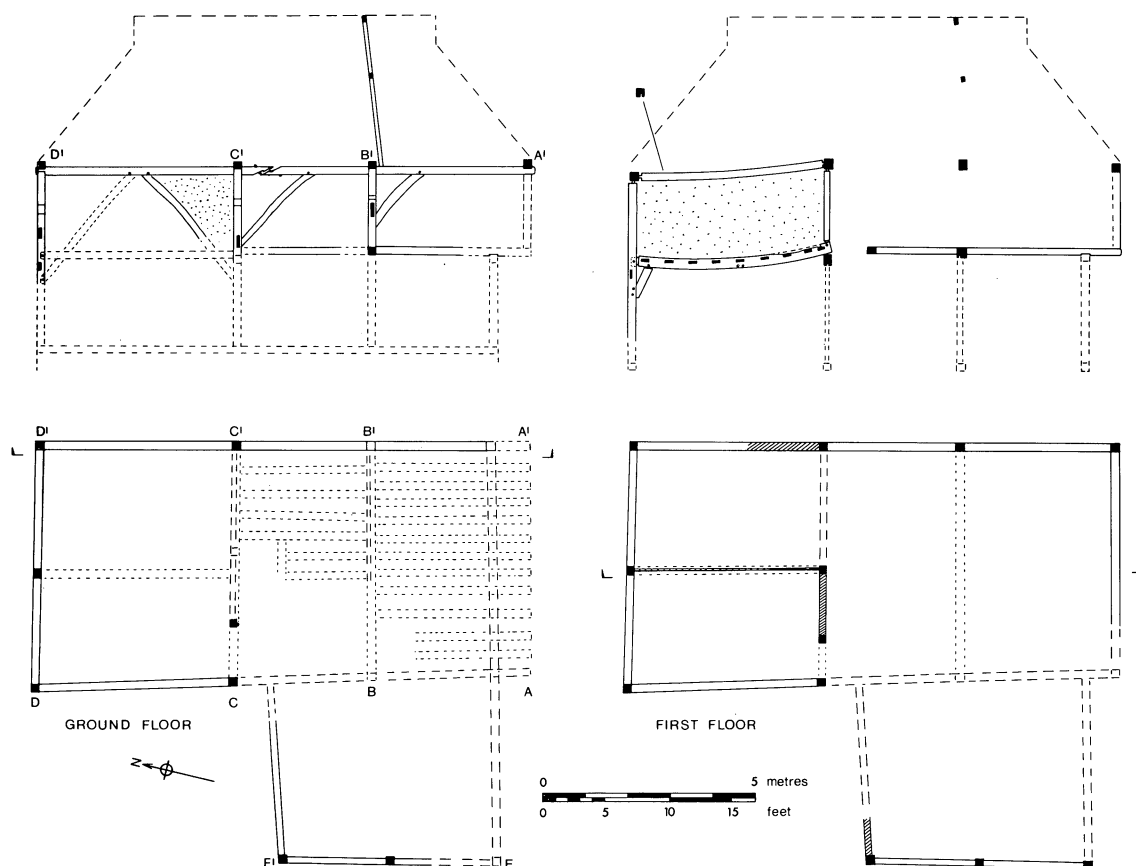


Fig 1. Cradlers, Leatherhead: plans and long sections of original fabric. The left-hand section is an internal elevation of the east wall: that on the right corresponds with the section-line on the first-floor plan

An eaves-height longitudinal timber, its ends tenoned into the tiebeams on trusses D–D1 and C–C1, ran directly above the bearer; its soffit was grooved for a continuous first-floor partition, at the south end of which was a post tenoned above into tiebeam C–C1 and below into the end of the bearer. The soffits of the bearer and of the west wall-rail, the first-floor timbers in the east half of the bay and the ground-floor timbers throughout the bay are all smoke-blackened.

Of the west range all that remains is the west wall E–E1 (tops of main posts, central post, tiebeam, rails, two straight passing-braces halved across the rails, groundsill), and fragments of the north wall (curved arch-brace from north-west corner post to remnant of wallplate,⁷ with short length of rail below). Smoke-blackening was observed on these latter fragments. The 1975 report⁸ mentions peg-holes for the framing of a lost bay extending further west. In fact, scraping in 1986 revealed that these were an illusion; in the absence of any mortises in the west faces of posts E and E1, and of a doorway in the wall between them, it must be concluded that the building always ended here. There is no trace of a medieval floor, and when one was inserted in the 17th century the walls had to be raised by 60cm. In its original form, then, this range consisted of a single, roughly square, open bay.

Both roofs were rebuilt in the 17th or 18th century, incorporating many re-used and smoke-blackened rafters. In the east range one original couple survives, over truss B–B1. It comprises two rafters, halved and pegged at the apex, and a collar jointed to the rafters with dovetail halvings.⁹ It is heavily sooted, and shows no sign of the cleaner patch on the soffit of the collar

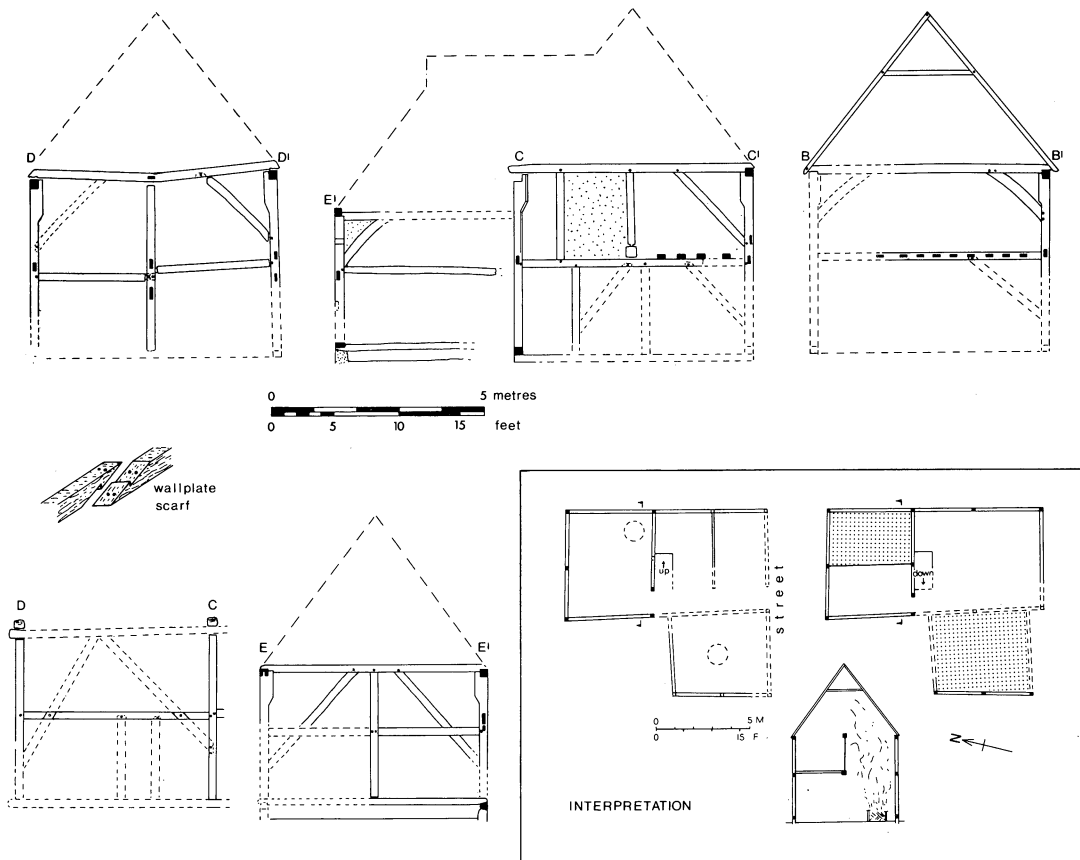


Fig 2. Cradlers, Leatherhead: cross-sections of original fabric (corresponding with letter codes on fig 1), with interpretative plans

which would have been left by a collar-purlin. Hence this was probably a simple coupled-rafter roof without longitudinal stiffening.

Plan

The salient features of the internal arrangements, as far as they can be reconstructed from observations in 1985–6, are:

- 1 The west range was a single square room, open to the roof and with smoke-blackening from a fire.
- 2 On the ground floor, the south and central bays of the east range formed two separate rooms, divided from each other and from the north bay by transverse partitions; the partitions (C–Ci certainly, and B–Bi by inference) had doorways at their west ends.
- 3 The upper floor of the same two bays formed one large chamber, spanned by an open truss, which was divided from the north bay by a transverse partition with a doorway at its west end.
- 4 The north bay of the east range formed a single square ground-floor room; it was floored over on its west side but not on its east side, which was left open to the roof. The small upper chamber thus created was partitioned off from the open half-bay. The ground-floor of the

whole bay, and the half-bay which remained open above, show blackening from an open fire.

The main peculiarity of the house is that it appears to have had a separate kitchen or second hall. In medieval vernacular buildings this is most unusual, though other cases have been recognised in Surrey farmhouses.¹⁰ A possible interpretation at Cradlers is a separation between commercial and private: the west range, fronting the street, was a tavern, brewhouse, workshop or merely a shop with a fire to keep it warm, whereas the north bay was the occupants' private hall. If no such commercial use is involved, it must be assumed that the west range was the main hall and the north bay a servants' hall or kitchen.

The door positions, at the west ends of the partitions in the east range, suggest a north-south passage entered under the west end of the jetty. Unfortunately these arrangements are also ambiguous: the passage could have been either a conventional cross-passage (hall to the west, services to the east in the south and middle bays), or a link between workshop (west range), shop (south bay), service (middle bay) and hall (north bay). Perhaps the use which best reconciles these interpretations is as an ale-house, with buttery and pantry serving both the public hall on the street and the private hall behind. The building occupies a main frontage, and Leatherhead seems to have had several shops and hostelries before its 16th century decline.¹¹

Date

The most diagnostic feature is the *trait-de-jupiter* scarf, a form characteristic of 13th and early 14th century carpentry.¹² The passing-brace, too, is an archaic form of construction,¹³ rendered obsolete in houses by the perfection of the standardised timber frame during the later 14th century. Occurring together, they make a date after c1360 unlikely. This conclusion is reinforced by the apparent absence of a collar-purlin and crownposts in the coupled-rafter roof.

There are, on the other hand, several features which reflect the rapid innovations in structural carpentry c1250–1320: (a) the floors in the east range have common joists tenoned into bearers, and form a jetty; (b) the walls have proper groundills on raised flint footings; (c) the ends of the braces have mortise-and-tenon joints, not lap-joints; (d) the braces in the open truss and the north wall of the west range are curved, and of flat section; (e) the main posts have jowls; and (f) there are no dragon-ties to reinforce the corners, such as occur in many of the earliest Surrey houses. These are marks of a carpenter moving towards the stereotyped late medieval technology, and could scarcely occur together before the early 14th century.

Thus the likely date-range centres on the years c1320–60. To find a house of this age, size and quality on a villein/copyhold tenement is interesting, though not necessarily surprising. In Surrey the drift from a peasant to a yeoman society long anticipated the Black Death,¹⁴ and on other Leatherhead manors prosperous villeins can be identified who had achieved effective emancipation by c1300.¹⁵ Thorncroft's seigneurial policy was more strict and conservative,¹⁶ but even here there were tenants who, if of unfree status, were economically more than peasants. The first occupant of Cradlers must have been a well-to-do farmer, perhaps with living-in servants, an innkeeper, a shopkeeper or a tradesman. It was in this social context, in these decades, that a permanent yet genuinely vernacular timber-framed architecture emerged in southern England.

NOTES

1 For the topographical context see J Blair, in E Vardy (ed), *History of Leatherhead* (forthcoming)

2 W J Blair, 'Cradlers', Leatherhead (33/5 High Street), *Proc Leatherhead Dist Local Hist Soc*, 3.9, 1975, 298–312

3 It need only be added here that the 17th century brick chimney-stack (removed 1985) had large ground-floor fireplaces facing west and east. It was built to serve the ground-floor only; the two upstairs fireplaces, again facing west and east, were added in the 18th century and served by flues built against the original faces of the stack, which tapered inwards

4 The 1975 drawing (Blair, op cit in note 2, fig 2) shows another brace in the east wall, over the jetty. Both this and the corner post are now known to have been secondary

- 5 This wall had subsided severely and was jacked up in 1985; the drawing shows it in its former state
- 6 The surviving brace is illustrated: Blair, op cit in note 2, pl IIa
- 7 This assemblage (unfortunately removed 1985) is illustrated: Blair, op cit in note 2, pl IIb
- 8 *Ibid*, 299
- 9 The rafters and collars are illustrated: Blair, op cit in note 2, pl 1d; for the dovetails (one of which is fitted to a waney edge), *ibid*, 300
- 10 I am grateful to Miss Joan Harding for this and other information
- 11 See Blair, op cit in note 1
- 12 See especially C A Hewitt, *English historic carpentry*, 1980, 263–4; C R J Currie, Scarf-joints in the North Berkshire and Oxford area, *Oxoniensia*, 37, 1972, 178–9
- 13 J T Smith, The early development of timber buildings, *Archaeol J*, 131, 1974 (1975), 246–50; J M Fletcher, The Bishop of Winchester's medieval manor-house at Harwell, Berkshire, and its relevance in the evolution of timber-framed aisled halls, *Archaeol J*, 136, 1979 (1980), 182–6
- 14 See J Blair, *Landholding, church and settlement in early medieval Surrey*, SyAS Res Vol, forthcoming
- 15 Blair, op cit in note 1
- 16 *Ibid*