

THE HERMITAGE,
17 UPPER SUTTON LANE,
LB HOUNSLOW

A LATE-MEDIEVAL TIMBER-FRAMED
HALL HOUSE AT HESTON



by

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Nature of Request

A recent fire caused the destruction of the roof of a late-medieval timber-framed hall house at The Hermitage, 17 Upper Sutton Lane, Heston, LB Hounslow. The house probably dates from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century and is an important survival of a once common but now rare type of smaller hall house in the Greater London region. Although the fire destroyed virtually the whole of the medieval roof frame, a post-fire assessment of the building showed that most of the original wall framing remained intact. A meeting was held to discuss the future of the building and options for its repair. Given the importance of the building and the urgent need to construct a new roof to replace the medieval roof, English Heritage offered to carry out an archaeological recording exercise and produce a set of measured drawings of the structure. It is hoped that the information will assist in the forthcoming repair of the building and the construction of a replacement traditional oak roof frame that will match the construction of the original medieval roof.

The following report and drawings were produced jointly by Richard Bond and Mike Dunn.

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1. Introduction

This report details the findings of an archaeological analysis of a timber-framed building undertaken by English Heritage at The Hermitage, 17 Upper Sutton Lane, Heston, in the London borough of Hounslow. The building is currently listed grade II and probably dates from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. The house is situated on the west side of Upper Sutton Lane, a little to the north of the Great West Road. It comprises two principal ranges aligned to produce a T-shaped plan, with later additions and extensions at its eastern (kitchen/service) end (*figs 14 & 15*). The range forming the bar of the T-plan forms the late medieval core of the building; it is aligned east-west and looks northwards onto a large garden running parallel with the road (*fig 13*). This range was extended to the east during the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century with a cat-slide roofed kitchen structure. The range was further extended and built upon during the early nineteenth century. To the south is a rear range aligned north-south, which probably dates from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. The exterior walls of both ranges are finished in roughcast cement render, and the northern elevation of the front range has mock timber-framing probably added in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

The building was listed in 1995, at which time it was occupied by a Mr Ostrowski, who had lived in the house since 1945. Following Mr Ostrowski's death, the property was sold by his daughter to its present owner, Mr Gurmit Singh Bhullar of Bellforce Development Ltd. When the house was inspected prior to its being listed it was found that, behind the mock-Tudor *cottage orne* exterior of the main east-range range, there stood a genuine late-medieval timber-framed hall house. This part of the building retained the low eaves line of the original house and a clasped-purlin roof with smoke-blackened timbers over the former open hall. Towards the west end of the roof, over what would have been the solar chamber, there survived the original lath and plaster partitioning for channeling the smoke from the hall up over the solar bay and out through an opening in the end of the roof (*fig 17*). The interior of the first floor retained some visible wall framing; however, on the ground floor only one or two timbers were exposed to view, with modern internal alterations and fittings somewhat obscuring the medieval plan (*fig 16*).

In June 2003 a fire at the house destroyed the whole of the roof of the medieval wing and the roofs of a late seventeenth or early eighteenth century south wing and early nineteenth century extension (*figs 19, 20 & 21*). The other buildings on the site, a group of mainly single-storey outbuildings of nineteenth century date, remained undamaged. Following the fire, the burnt roof timbers were removed from the building and stacked up in the garden in front of the house. Although one of the upper rooms had lost its floor (probably of eighteenth century date) and some of the timbers were badly charred in certain areas, the timber frame in general survived in a reasonably intact condition up to wall plate level (*figs 23 & 23*). Indeed it is somewhat ironic that the fire, whilst destroying the roof of the medieval house, led to the uncovering of many hitherto hidden features, including evidence of the position of doors and windows (*figs 25 & 26*).

Following discussions with the owner and the local conservation officer, it was agreed that English Heritage would carry out an historical analysis of the medieval structure. A measured survey was carried out of the timber frame, and with the aid of photographs taken before the fire and measurements taken from the burnt timbers salvaged from the building, a set of reconstruction drawings were produced showing how the medieval house may have appeared when it was first constructed. The house was recorded over a period of three days using a combination of hand survey, digital photography and annotated sketches and survey notes made on site. The measured drawings completed on site provided the basis for the production of a further set of computer-generated reconstruction drawings.

To support the analysis, a dendrochronology project was put in train aimed at establishing the date of construction of the medieval building. The building was visited by Robert

Howard and Alison Arnold of Nottingham University to assess whether or not the timbers would be suitable for dating by dendrochronology. A number of cores and slices were taken from the medieval timber frame, both from within the standing building itself and from the loose timbers that had been removed from the house and stacked up in the garden. However it was found that all the timbers were from fast-grown trees, with too few rings for dating by dendrochronology. Some of the timbers were found to be of elm, and so also could not be dated scientifically.

2. Historical Background

The Hermitage, 17 Upper Sutton Lane, Heston is a grade II-listed building incorporating a timber-framed open hall house of probable late fifteenth or early sixteenth century date. The house stands a short distance to the north of the Great West Road (the A4) and to the south of the parish church and medieval village centre of Heston (*fig 1*). The original house was a three-bay structure with a storied bay at each end, and a heated central bay open from the ground floor to the rafters (*fig 3*). Evidence before the fire of smoke-blackened rafters indicates that this bay was heated. The house had a clasped-purlin roof and wall framing with large, open panels and a pair of arch braces and central post in each bay (*figs 8, 9, 10 & 11*). Although it was clearly a well-built structure, the house was nevertheless quite a compact building, and smaller than a conventional 'hall with cross wings' house that may be regarded as the classic type of lesser gentry house of the late-medieval period in the south-east. On this basis it seems unlikely that the house was a manor house; however it is conceivable that it was a sub-manor house or the home of a wealthy tenant farmer. Its location on the outskirts of the village centre suggests it may have formed the core of a small farm estate with fields on the south side of the parish. As a farmhouse it would have looked out on a farmyard (perhaps where the present garden is now) and been surrounded by a typical assortment of farm buildings – a barn, granary, stables and other agricultural buildings.

A computer search of the Greater London Sites and Monuments Record suggests there are approximately four hundred listed timber-framed buildings in the Greater London Region as a whole, and only five in the London Borough of Hounslow itself (including the present building). In recent years a number of similar houses have been recorded in the London region. No.17 Dene road, Northwood, LB Hillingdon (listed grade II) is a three-bay house with a clasped purlin roof, but had a two-bay open hall with a storied bay at one end only. East End Farm Cottage, Pinner, in the London Borough of Harrow (listed grade II*) is again a three-bay house with a two-bay open hall, but it has a crown-post roof and a more conventional plan with the cross passage inside the hall (see *Buildings of England, London 3: north-west. p.287*). No.17 Gentleman's Row, Enfield, LB Enfield (grade II*) is a three-bay house with a clasped-purlin roof and, like The Hermitage at Heston, originally had a one-bay open hall occupying the middle bay of the building. On the other side of London, Addington House, Addington, in the London Borough of Croydon (grade II) also has a three-bay plan and clasped purlin roof, but like the house at Northwood it had a two-bay hall and a single storied bay at one end only. Addington House has a tree-ring date of c.1490.

From this evidence it would appear that the three-bay, two-cell house was a common house-type in the London region during the late-medieval period. Nevertheless the timber-framed buildings of the London region have attracted rather less attention than those found in other parts of the country, and in the absence of any comprehensive regional study it is somewhat difficult to say just how significant a survival the Heston house might be. The majority of the three-bay, two-cell houses recorded in the London region to date have all been situated on the north-west side of the capital. On the other hand, buildings of a broadly similar type have been recorded at places well outside Greater London – for example in Hertfordshire and the Wealds of Kent, Sussex and Surrey – suggesting that the house-type was prevalent throughout south-east England in the late-medieval period. As stated above, the houses are less likely to have been manor houses than the homes of prosperous tenant farmers. They were sturdy, compact little houses that, like the classic three- and four bay cruck house found in the Midlands, had their origin in the emergence of a new class of yeoman farmer in central and south-east England in the late-medieval period. On the outside, such houses looked rather like the cross wings of a conventional late-medieval hall house, however whether or not their designs had any influence on one another, is unclear. It is possible that, like its medieval cruck counterpart, the type had its origins in the peasant longhouse.

Alternatively such houses may have derived from the double-ended hall house, and simply represent a contraction of the late-medieval hall and cross wing plan.¹

¹ Bond, R. 1998

3. *Architectural Description*

The late-medieval house in Heston known as The Hermitage was a three-bay, timber-framed building aligned east-west with its main entrance front facing north. The house was subdivided by two internal cross frames extending for the full height of the building. The end bays were storied and the central bay was open from the ground floor to the roof. The central bay had an open hearth for heating and cooking. Smoke from the fire would have risen up into the roof space and exited through openings in the ends of the roof (*figs 2-11*).

As in all medieval houses, the house had an 'upper' and a 'lower' end. The 'upper' or socially superior end (in this case the west end) of the house was principally the reserve of the head of the household. The 'lower' end (in this case the east end) of the house was the service end where the food and drink for the household would have been prepared. Usually the ground floor of the service end was divided into two equally sized rooms: the 'buttery' (for making and storing ale) and the 'pantry' (for making and storing bread). This may have been the case at The Hermitage, however, any partitioning would have been non-structural; the undersides of the medieval ceiling joists in this bay show no evidence of structural partitions. Indeed, the presence of smoke-blackening on these joists seems to suggest that the room was not partitioned at all, and that smoke from the open fire on the floor of the hall was allowed to filter through the wide opening leading to the service bay. Above the ground floor service room(s) was an upper chamber which was probably used as a children's bedroom or as a second private chamber for the owner and his wife. This room would have been accessible via a staircase positioned in the south-west corner of the service bay. Although the staircase has long since disappeared, evidence of its existence can be seen in the ceiling joists in this area, which are cut back to allow for a trimmer beam.

In the middle of the house stood the hall. This was typically a large, open, communal space where the household would gather around the fire in the evening to eat and talk, and where in winter especially the servants and farm workers may sometimes have slept. In a typical medieval hall house the hall is of two bays; both bays are open to the roof, and between them there is an open roof truss. At The Hermitage, the hall took up two bays at ground floor level (the middle and west bays), however only the middle bay was open to the roof. The west end of the hall was ceiled over at first floor level and, just as the east end of the house, there was a chamber overhead. This was probably the 'solar' and served as a bedroom and private apartment for the owner. At the opposite end of the house, between the hall and the service rooms, an opposing pair of doorways provided access to the front and rear of the house. In the standard medieval hall house the entrance was at the lower end of the hall, and the area between the front and rear doorways was divided off from the rest of the hall by a screen (hence the term 'screens passage'). At The Hermitage, however, the cross entry was located not in the hall but in the adjoining bay, at the service end of the house. The cross passage area is ceiled by the floor of the upstairs chamber at the low end of the house and is therefore termed an 'undershot cross passage'. Somewhat unusually, there is no evidence at the Hermitage of the cross passage ever having been screened from the rest of the lower end bay.

The studs forming the sides of the former front and rear door openings have mortices in their tops for timber door heads. The west door post on the south (rear) side of the house has a through-mortice which seems to indicate a second door head on its the west side. It would be highly unusual for a medieval hall house to have had adjoining doorways in its rear wall, and the likelihood is that, if there was ever a second doorway leading into the hall, it was a later insertion. It is possible that the door leaf of the present front door standing inside the front entrance porch of the house is the original rear door of the medieval house. This oak door is decorated with raised carved panels of late medieval motifs including gothic flowing tracery and Tudor roses. Measurements taken on site confirm that the

dimensions of the door leaf confirm closely with those of the original door opening at the south end of the cross passage.²

As constructed, the east cross frame between the hall and the cross passage resembled the spere truss of an aisled or base-cruck hall house.³ At ground floor it comprised a large central opening flanked by two short, closed, sections (*fig 5*). The closed end sections, which encompassed straight braces set between the north and south posts and the cross rail, screened the front and rear doorways and helped shield the hall from draughts and cold air blowing in from outside. The wall posts forming the jambs of the central opening were chamfered and had a stepped, curved jowl that gave the corners of the opening a rounded profile. The curvature of the jowls matched that of the carved brackets that supported the first floor mid-rails of the west cross frame and west gable frame (see below).

As previously discussed, there is no evidence of the usual dividing wall between the cross passage and the service room(s) at the east end of the house. However, a plank-like section of timber wall between the present chimney stack and the north wall that may be a remnant of a later (sixteenth or early seventeenth century) replacement partition wall survived until recently.

Surviving evidence indicates that the hall was lit by a pair of windows, aligned one above the other, in its south (rear) side. A similar window arrangement probably existed on its north side. The windows had diamond mullions, the sockets of which are still faintly visible on the underside of the south elevation mid-rail. Remains of a groove adjacent to the diamond mullion sockets indicate the position of external horizontal-sliding shutters.

In the external walls all of the framing members – the wall posts, braces, central intermediate posts and intermediate studs – had their outer faces set flush with the exterior wall face. The spaces between the timbers were infilled, leaving the timber frame itself exposed to view on the outside of the building. The only exception to this was the wall on the north side of the house in the central bay. Here, the braces and posts were set back from the exterior wall face, and in front of them was a row of closely-spaced secondary studs with narrow lath and plaster panels infilling the spaces between them. The idea was clearly to create a close-studded effect and make the central hall bay stand out from the rest of the building (*figs 8 & 12*).

Between the hall and the solar (west) end stood a second internal cross frame. As has been mentioned, the lower part of the cross frame was left open to give a two-bay hall arrangement on the ground floor (*fig 7*). At first floor a partition wall on the line of the cross frame divided the solar chamber from the upper part of the central (open) bay. The cross frame was closed up to collar level, and between the collar and the saddle of the open gablet a short sloping section of infilling provided a ceiling for the solar chamber and kept it free of the smoke rising into the roof space from the open hall. The first floor chamber would have been accessible via a staircase set along the south wall of the west part of the hall. A mortice hole in the mid-rail of the south wall indicates the position of a trimmer joist for the staircase.

The mid-rail of the west internal cross frame was supported on a curved timber bracket at each end. These were morticed and pegged to the inner faces of the wall posts of the cross frame. Empty mortices in a corresponding position in the inner faces of the corner posts of the west gable cross frame indicate that there were matching brackets at the west end of the ground floor hall. These curved brackets were more decorative than structural, and were meant to add distinction to the 'high end' of the house.

² The door leaf was recently removed from the house for safekeeping.

³ E.g. compare with Headstone Manor, LB Harrow, an early fourteenth-century aisled hall. The house had an undershot cross passage located in a low end cross wing. See Harris, R., 1989; and Martin & Martin, 1999.

The house had a clasped-purlin roof with straight collars and diminished principal rafters (*figs 5 & 7*). The collars were fairly slender and crude, and there appear not to have been any struts framed in between the collars and tie beams. Over the hall the roof framing included curved windbraces between the principal rafters and purlins. The windbraces were morticed and pegged to the principal rafters and probably nailed to the backs of the purlins. In addition to providing structural support to the roof structure, the wind braces were also decorative, and served to reflect the higher status of the roof over the hall. The feet of the rafters sat in triangular-section housings cut into the tops of the wall plates, and were pegged. The wall plates had edge-halved scarf joints, which support a late fifteenth or early sixteenth century date for the house.

Empty dovetail joints in the wall plates indicate that there was a once a 'floating' tie beam spanning the central (hall) bay. Since the wall plates are original to the building, and not reused timbers, it follows that this tie beam was an original feature of the house. It is likely that the tie beam carried principal rafters and a collar originally and had the same form as the intermediate roof trusses in the two end bays. The hall truss was not situated over the exact centre of the central bay, but slightly off-centre, nearer the west end of the bay and the upper end of the house (*figs 9 & 11*).

The first major alterations to the building appear to have been carried out during the second half of the sixteenth century. By this time the medieval hall arrangement clearly no longer suited the occupants, and the open hall was ceiled over to create a first floor chamber, and a large chimney stack was inserted into the undershot cross passage (*fig 4*). Such improvements were typical for the period, when throughout the country open halls with hearths on the floor were swept away in favour of storied accommodation and heating through chimneys. Where the hall was of sufficient height, such as that at The Hermitage, a ceiling was inserted and a chimney positioned in the former cross passage. In other cases, the hall was demolished and replaced by a new two-storey range with integrated chimneys.

The inserted ceiling in the hall at The Hermitage consists of a chamfered bridging beam fitted in between the cross frames of the lower and upper ends of the hall. Fairly substantial joists are tenoned into the bridging beam and run parallel to the cross frames. The ceiling was subsequently provided with a skin of lath and plaster, probably during the eighteenth century (*fig 2*).

The insertion of a chimney entailed significant alterations to the interior elevation of the lower end of the former hall. The former wide opening between the hall and the cross passage was mostly filled in by a timber framed chimney stack, which was later rebuilt in brick and provided with a smaller brick hearth. Part of the original timber-framed chimney survives, however, including the hearth opening, which was formed by two posts into which a bressumer beam is pegged. The bressumer beam is formed to display a very slight four-centred arch. Between the bressumer beam and the mid-rail of the cross frame is a built-in cupboard, which may be contemporary with the chimney stack. At the back of the north post for the hearth opening is an empty mortice hole, which indicates the position of a horizontal timber that formed part of the timber frame of the north side of the chimney. A putative corresponding mortise hole in the south post is hidden and inaccessible behind later brickwork. The existence of a former timber-framed chimney stack and hearth is significant, as, due obvious fire hazards, timber framed chimneys were systematically reconstructed in brick from the late sixteenth century onwards, and thus those that survive must be considered rare.

The size and position of the inserted timber-framed chimney stack raise some questions as to its use. It seems unlikely that it was used as a principal kitchen hearth, as it has only a single opening which faces a high status part of the house. In this context it seems likely that the cat-slide extension at the lower (east) end of the medieval house – the construction of which entailed the removal of the original medieval timber-framed east end wall – was built as a kitchen. A substantial hearth survives intact in the north-east corner of this extension, and the heavy-sectioned timbers of the extension would be consistent with late-sixteenth

century work.

The access arrangements to the building during this period have not been established.

The seventeenth century saw substantial changes to The Hermitage, primarily in the form of a large extension to the south of the original medieval house. This extension took the form of a two bay, two-storey timber-framed wing. Little of this original timber-framed structure survives apart from the wall plate along the east elevation. Fragmentary surviving areas of brickwork consisting of soft red bricks in lime mortar set in English bond may have provided the infill around the original timber-framed structure.

The late seventeenth or early eighteenth century saw substantial changes to The Hermitage, primarily in the form of a large extension to the south of the original medieval house (*figs 14, 20 & 21*). This extension took the form of a two-storey wing with a large sitting room at ground floor level and bedrooms in the first floor and within attic space in the mansard roof. The wing is constructed of London stock brick, but this may represent a later re-facing. Changes to the original house during the eighteenth century were also significant, and included replacement of the original wattle and daub panels with brick, extending the west end of the original timber frame structure by nearly a metre and rebuilding the gable wall in brick with an integral chimney. The sixteenth-century timber-framed chimney stack was also altered at this time, if not earlier, with the insertion of an arched brick opening within the original timber-framed hearth.

The early years of the nineteenth century saw further alterations to The Hermitage that were to provide the building with its fundamental character and appearance up until the recent fire. Both the medieval core of the building and the post-medieval south wing were remodeled in the *cottage orne* style, which saw the use of artfully 'rustic' features such as thatched roofs and roughcast elevations to reflect the cult of the picturesque popular in England at the time. It is likely that, in addition to the large 'Gothick' casement windows and roughcast elevations, The Hermitage was provided with a thatched roof for the first time during this period (*fig 13*). The existing layout of the south wing with a large sitting room at ground floor level and bedrooms in the first floor and within attic space in the mansard roof reflects the substantial rebuilding of the structure at this time.

Further developments on the site occurred during this time or slightly later, including the building of a stock brick and slate roof extension at the east end of the building and the associated garden outbuilding directly to the north (*fig 15*).

The rustic appearance of The Hermitage was expanded upon throughout the twentieth century with the introduction of imported antiquarian features, *faux* Tudor interior paneling and exterior mock timber frame planks nailed onto authentic medieval timbers.

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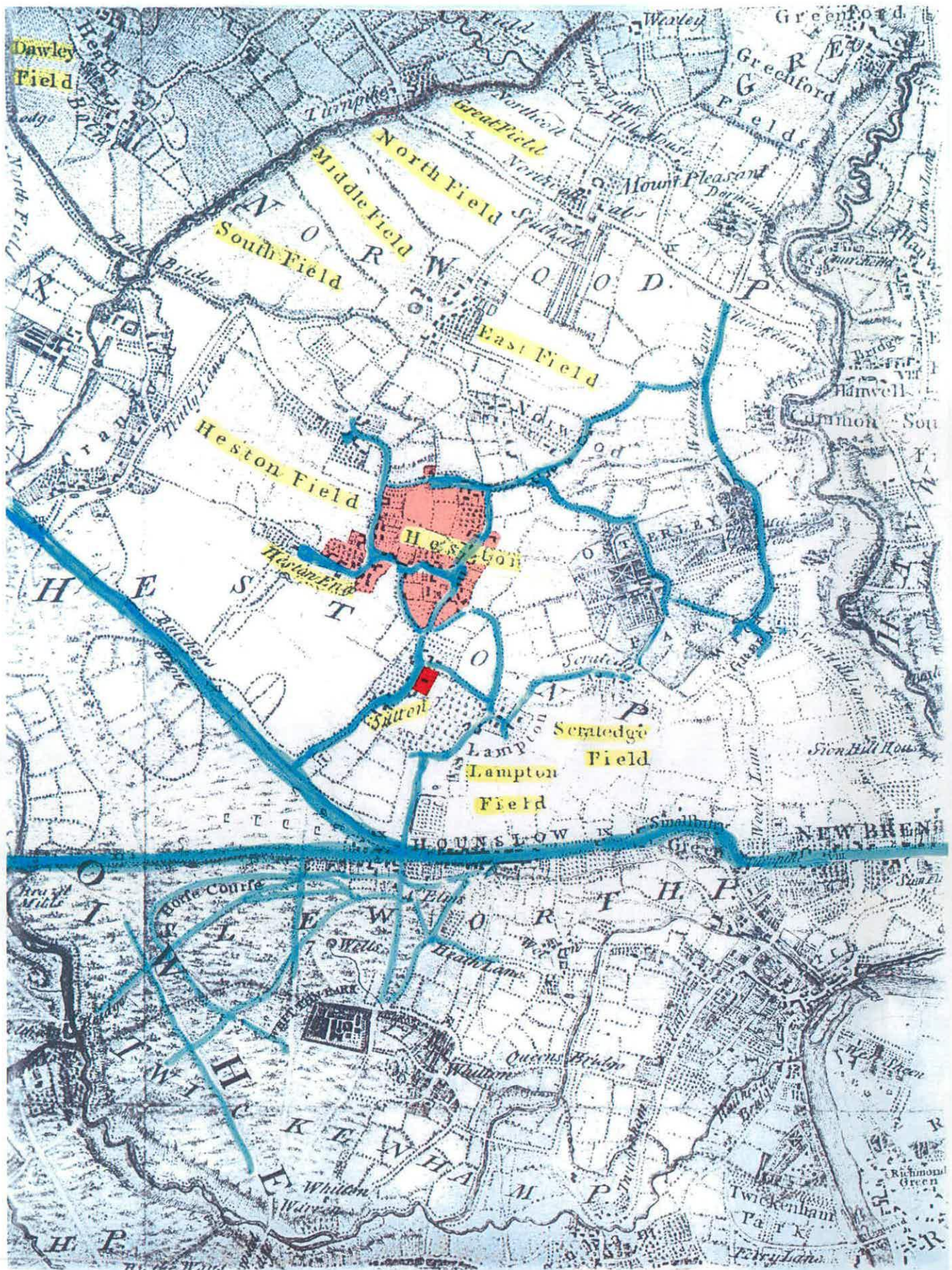


Figure 1 Extract from John Roque's map of Middlesex, published 1754

The site of The Hermitage is shown in red to the south of the medieval village centre of Heston (shaded pink)

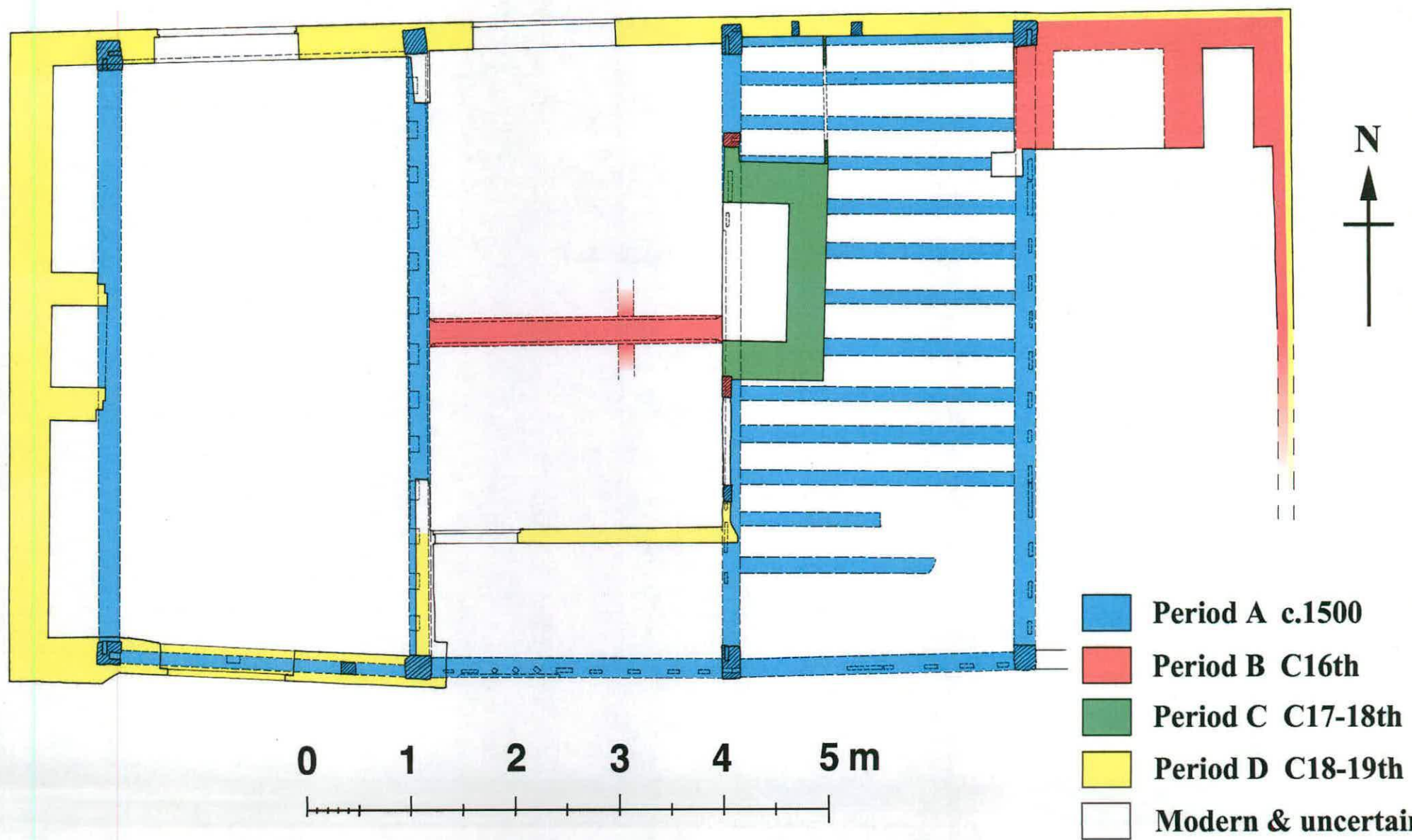


Figure 2 Ground plan of the late-medieval house as existing

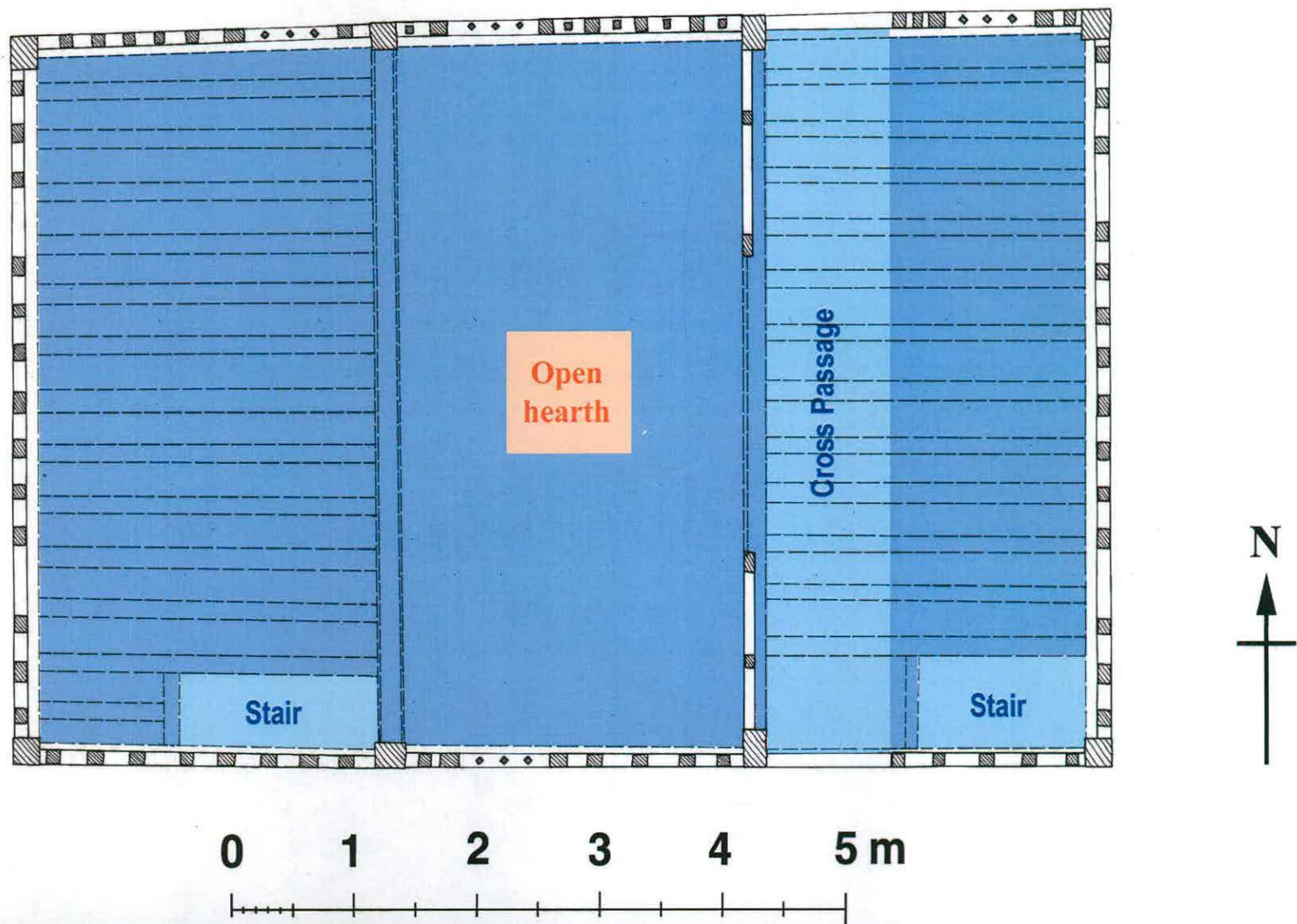


Figure 3 Ground plan of the late-medieval house as constructed

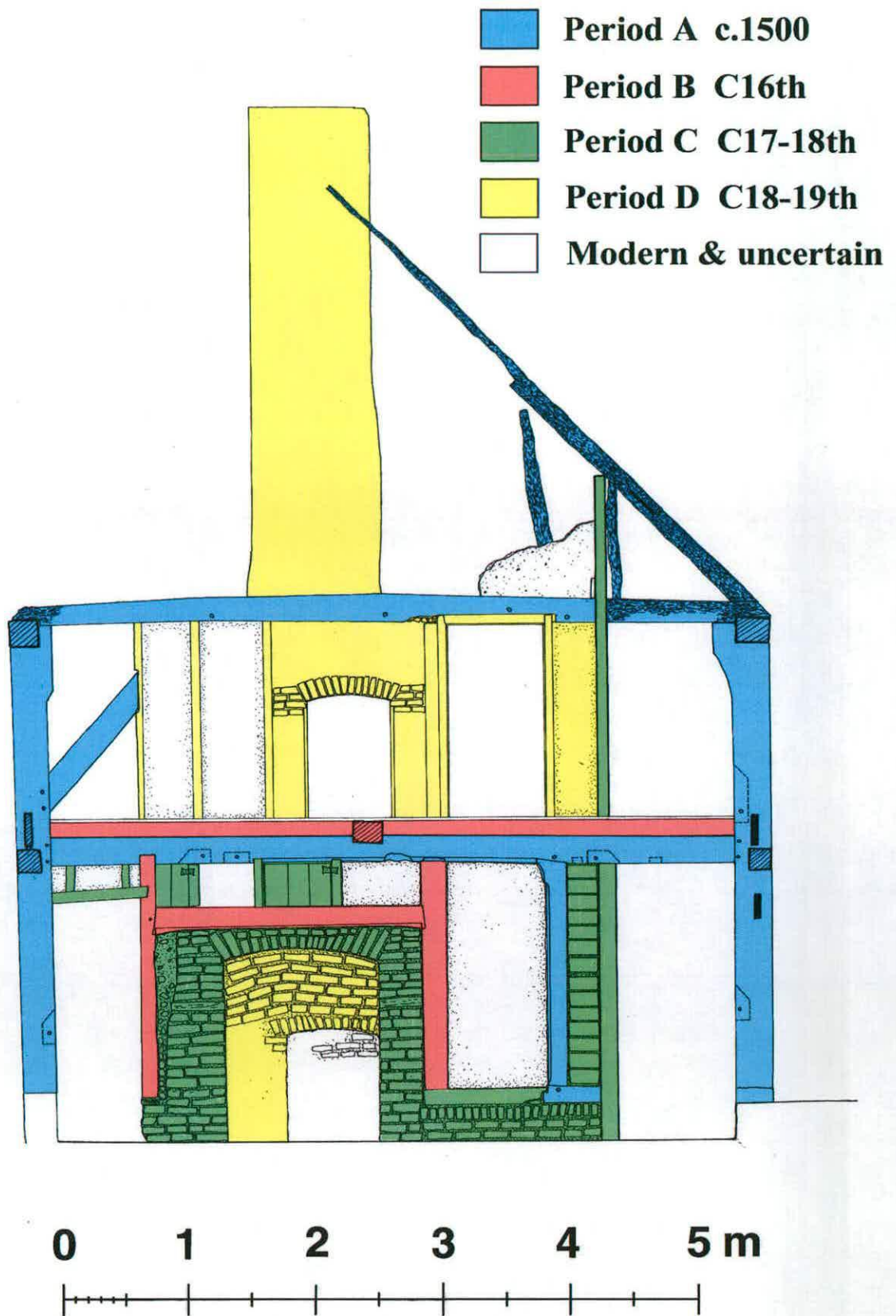


Figure 4 West elevation of east intermediate cross frame
as existing

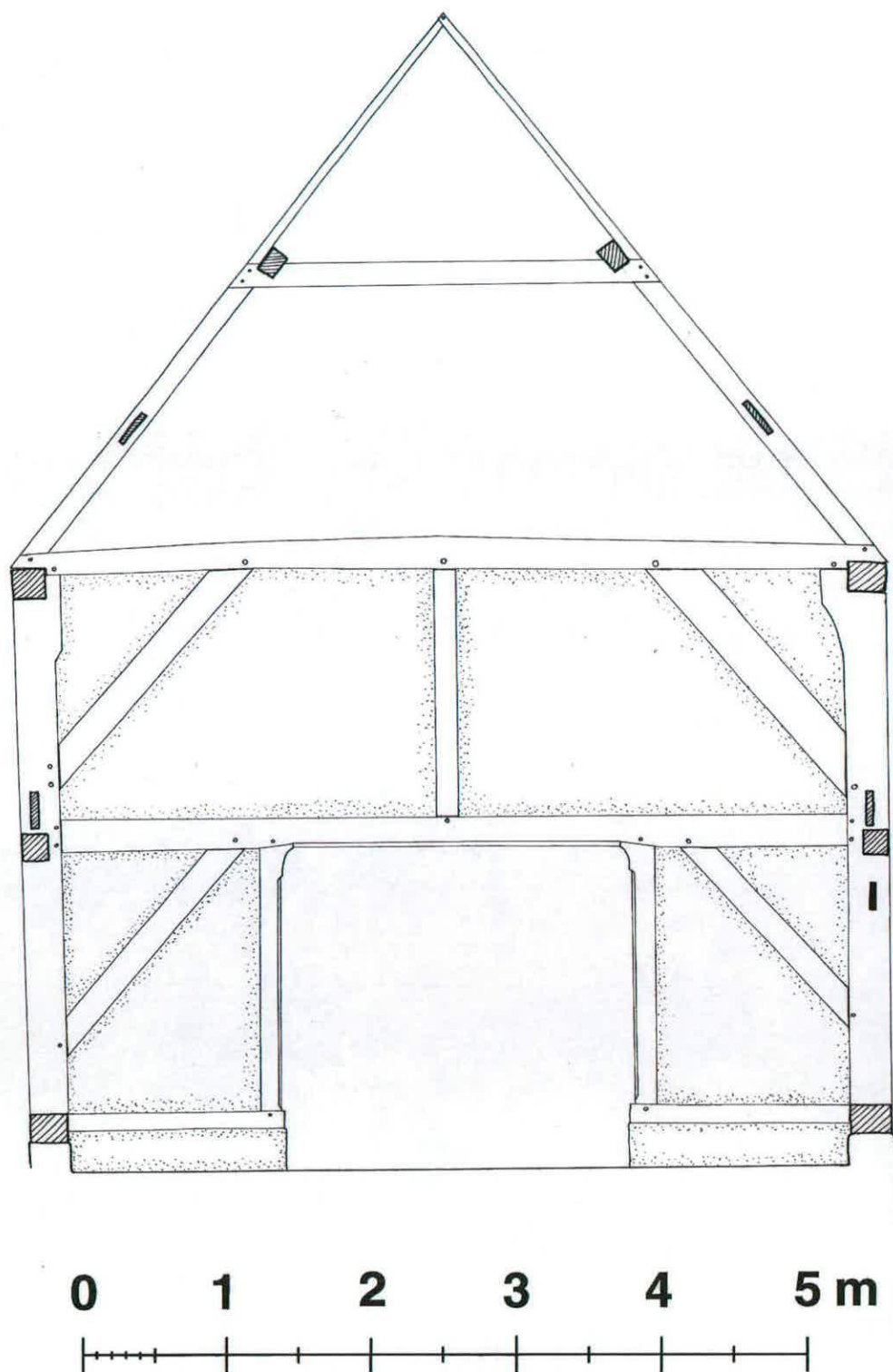
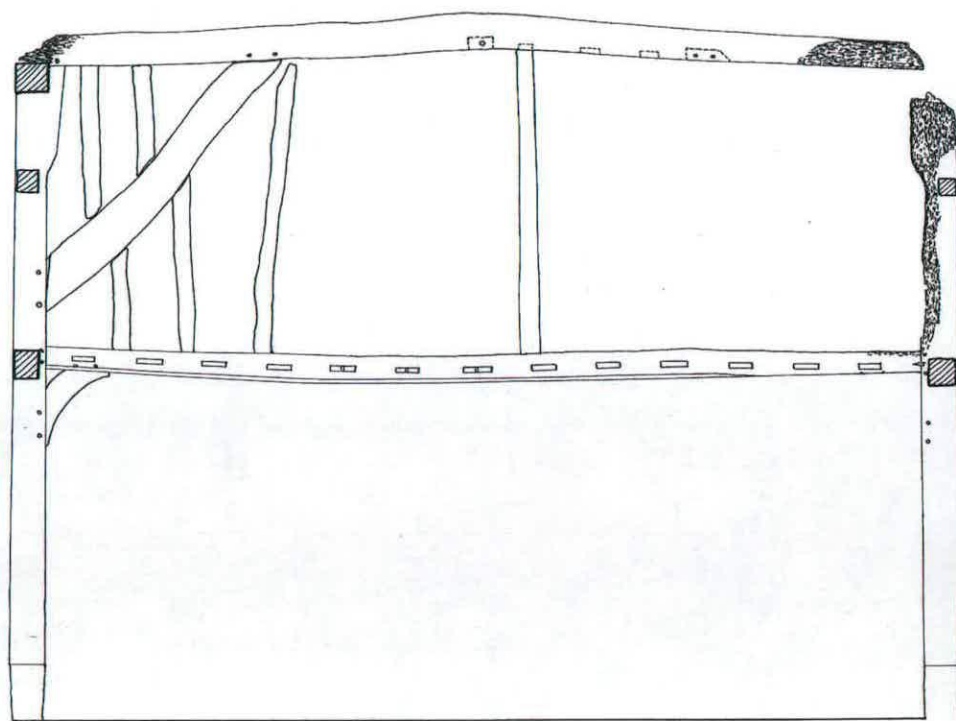
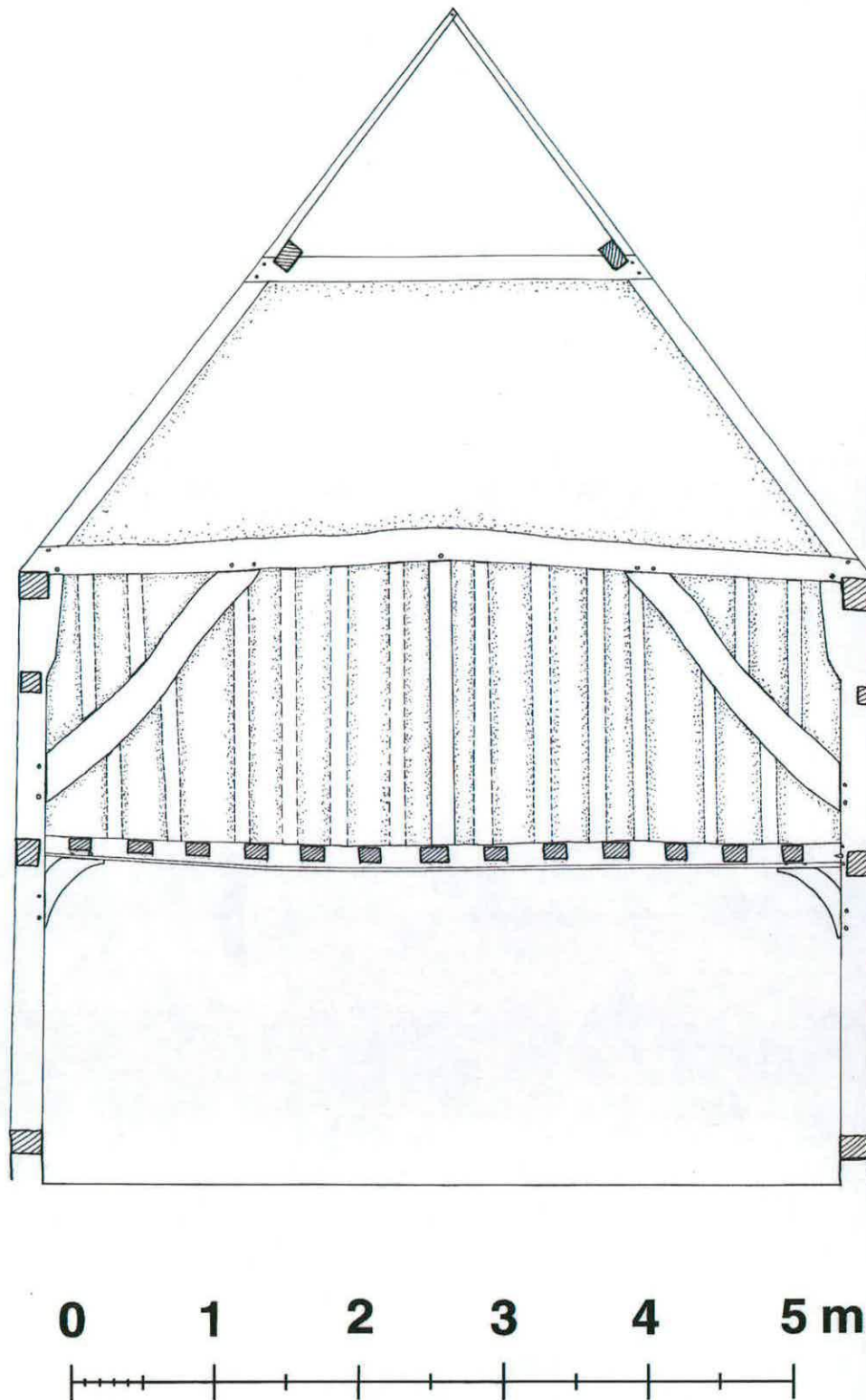


Figure 5 West elevation of east intermediate cross frame
as constructed



**Figure 6 West elevation of west intermediate cross frame
as existing**



**Figure 7 West elevation of west intermediate cross frame
as constructed**

**The Hermitage,
Heston,
LB Hounslow**

**External elevation of
north (front) wall
of late-medieval
house as
constructed**

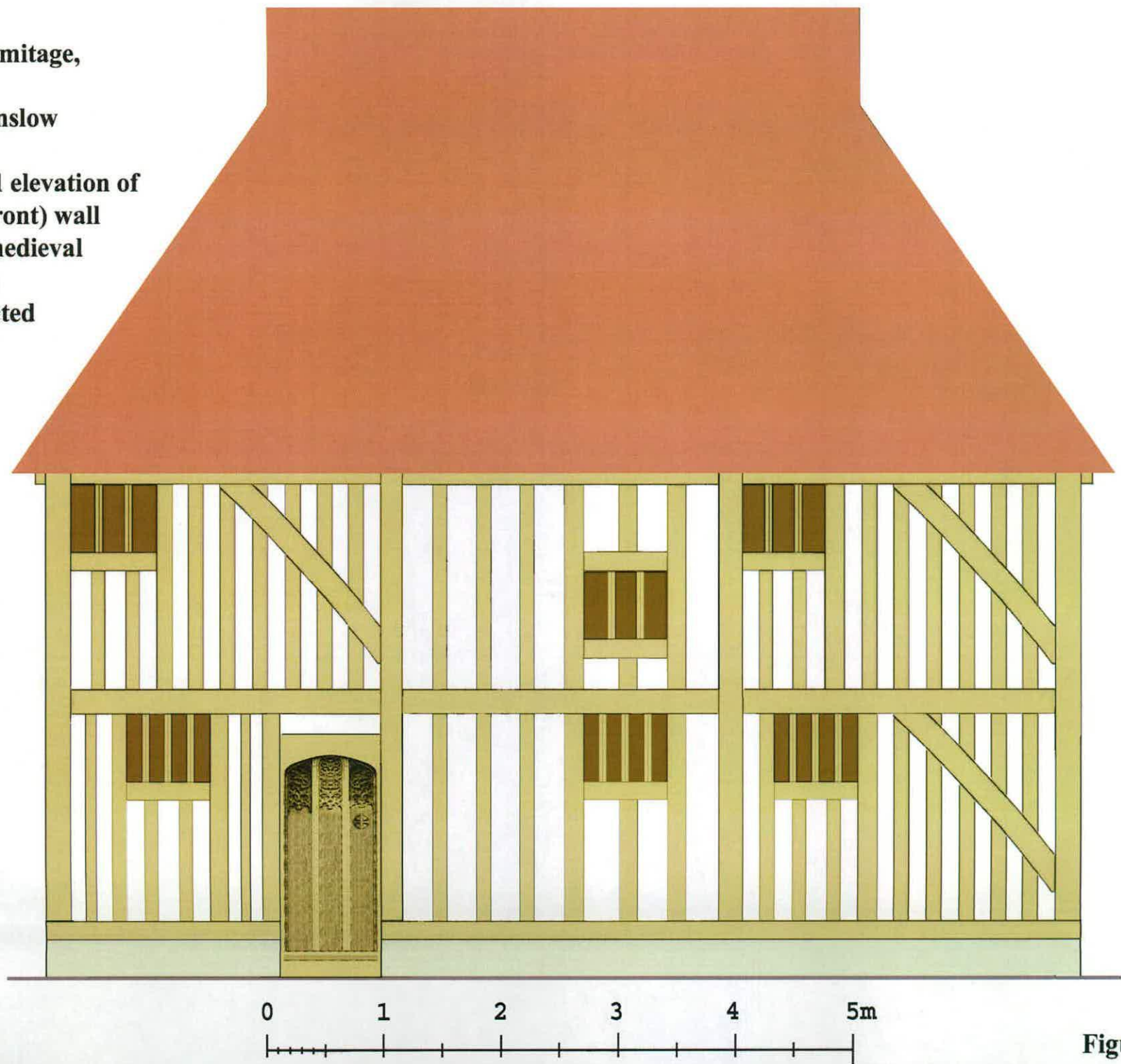


Figure 8

**The Hermitage,
Heston,
LB Hounslow**

**Internal elevation of
north (front) wall
of late-medieval
house as
constructed**

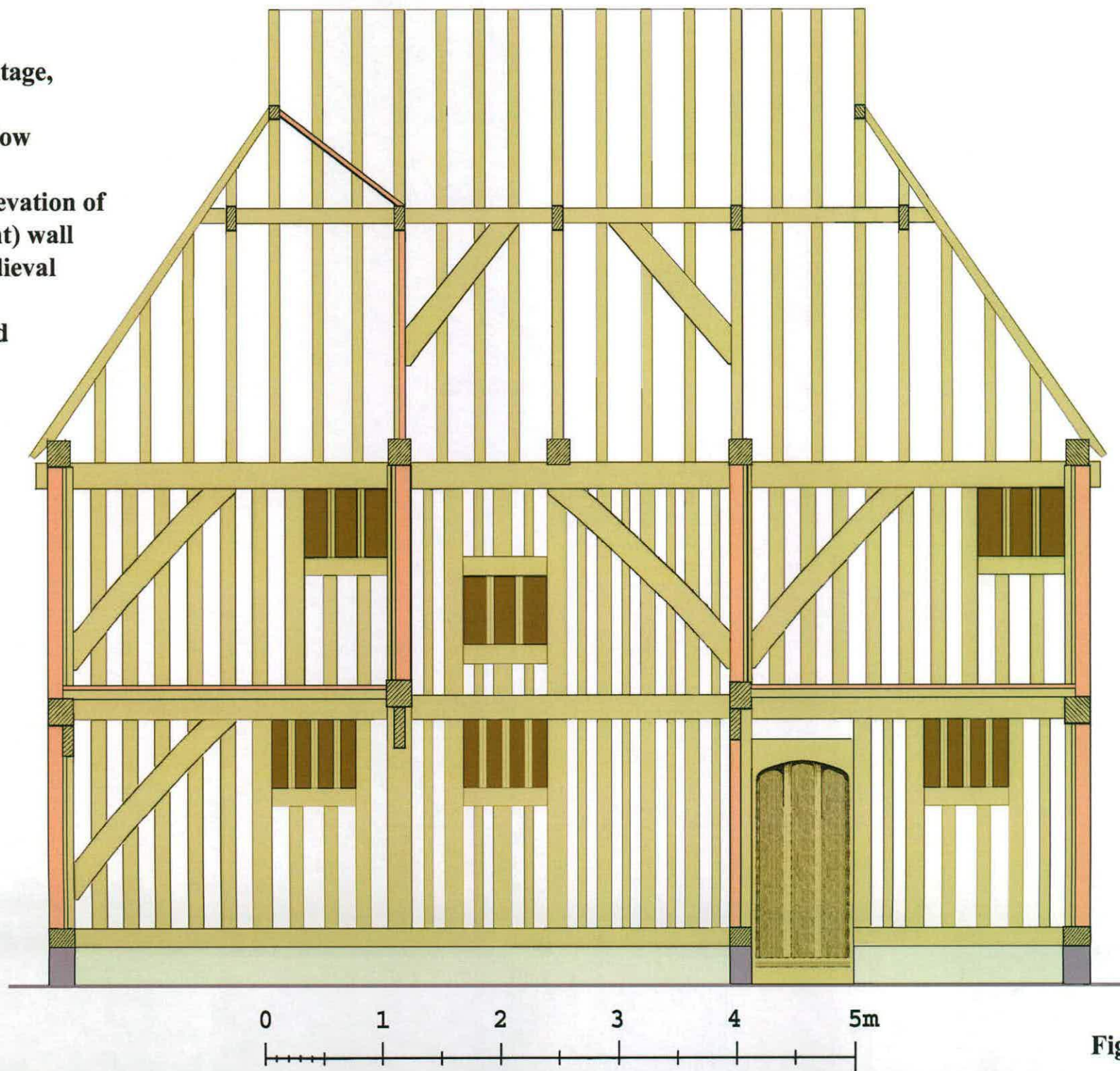


Figure 9

**The Hermitage,
Heston,
LB Hounslow**

**External elevation of
south (rear) wall
of late-medieval
house as
constructed**

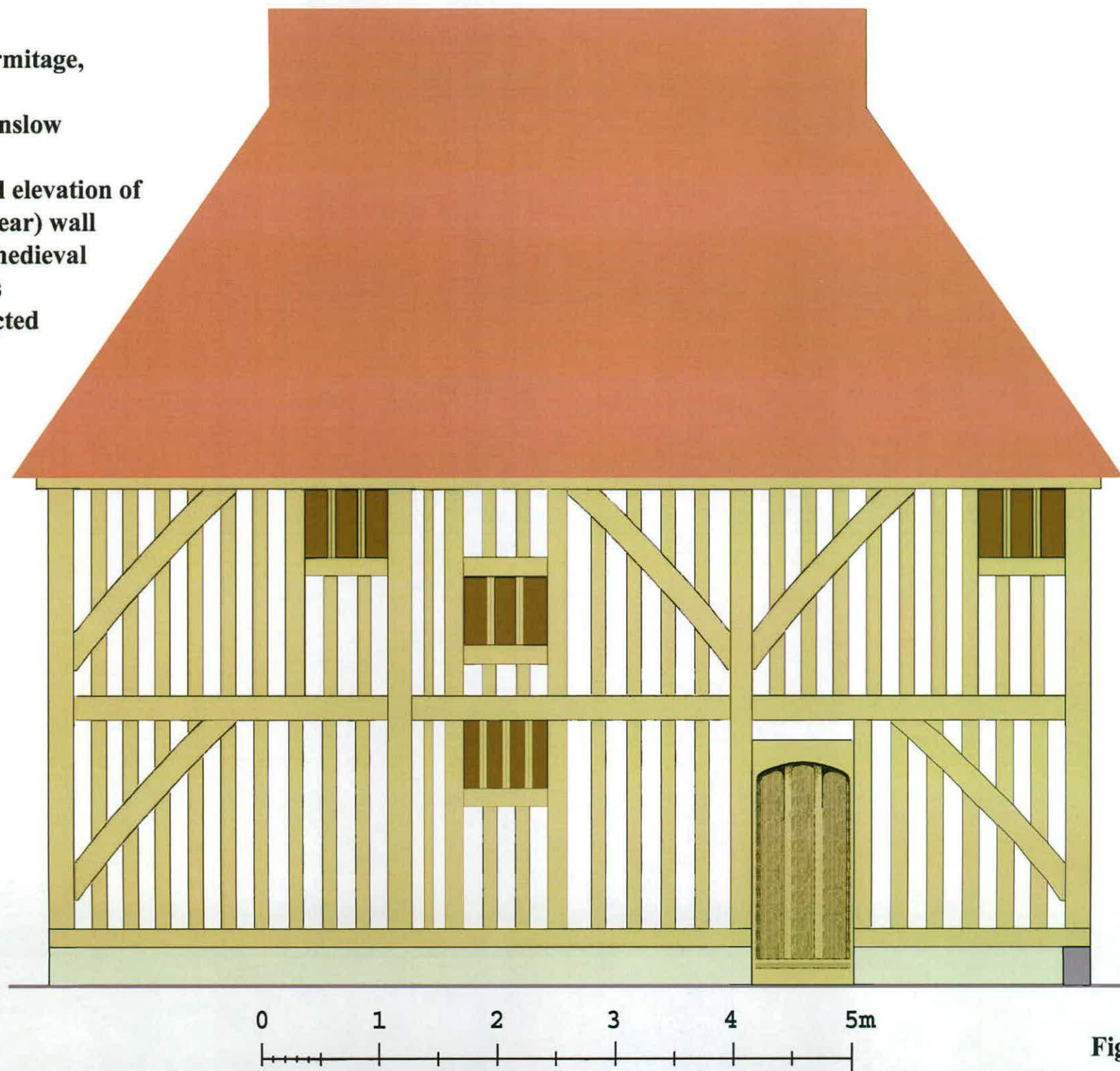


Figure 10

**The Hermitage,
Heston,
LB Hounslow**

**Internal elevation of
south (rear) wall
of late-medieval
house as
constructed**

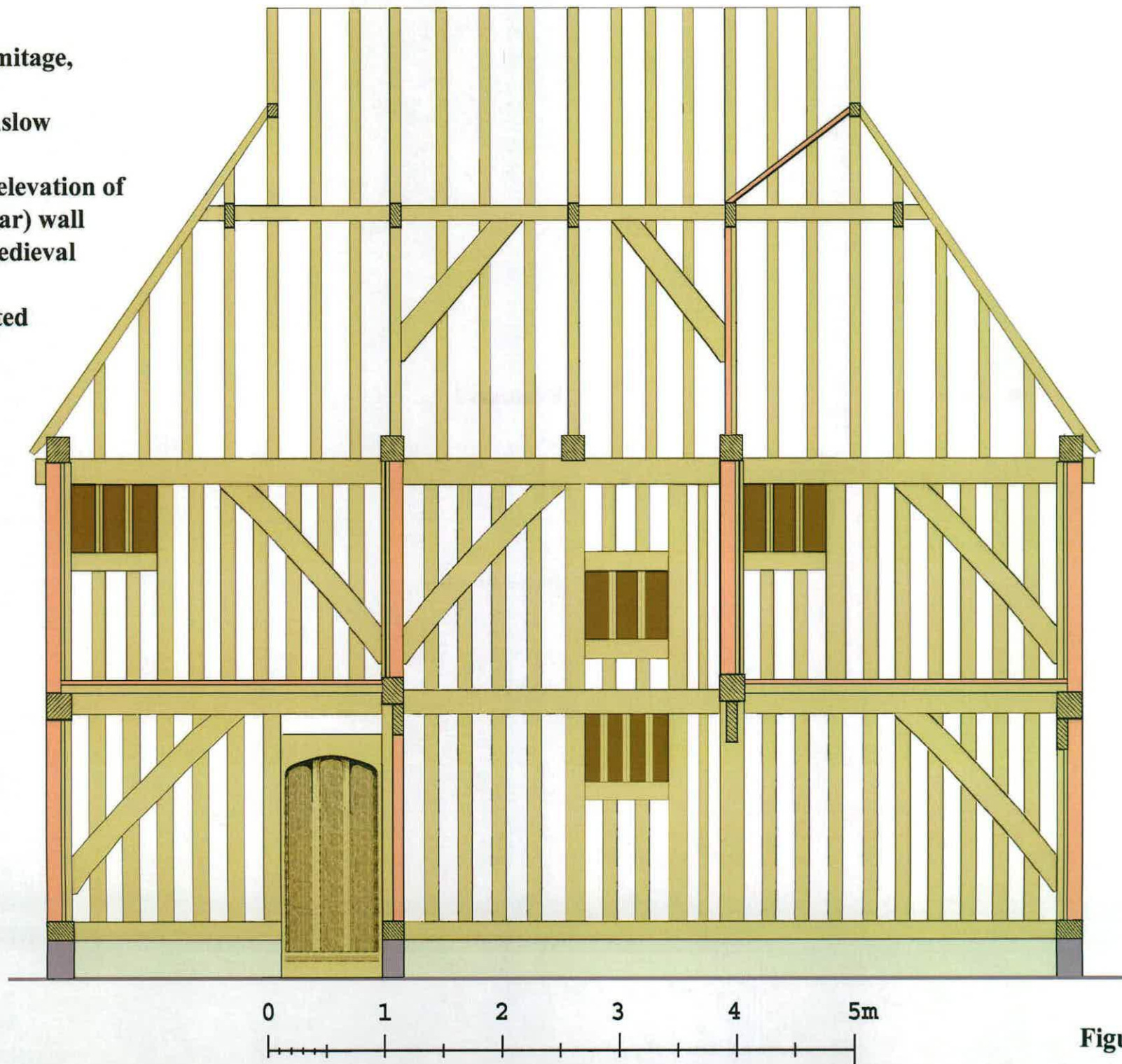


Figure 11

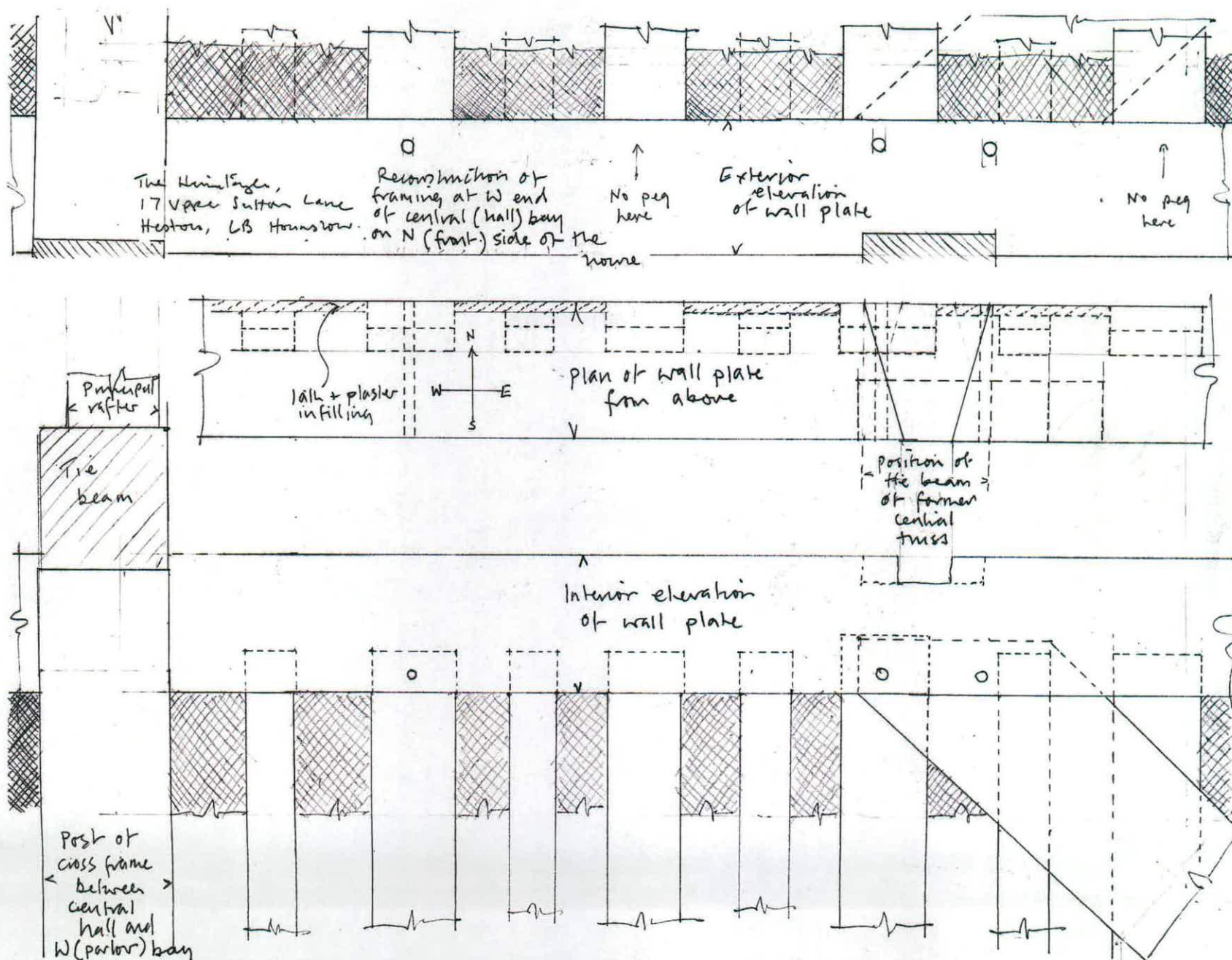


Figure 12 Sketch showing method of wall construction on front (N) wall of central hall bay



Figure 13 View of house from north. Photo taken in 1995



Figure 14 View of house from south-west. Photo taken in 1995



Figure 15 View of house from north-east. Photo taken in 1995



Figure 16 View of interior of central (hall) bay looking east. Photo taken in 1995



Figure 17 Interior of roof space looking west, showing smoke-blackened roof timbers and sloping ceiling over solar chamber. Photo taken in 1995



Figure 18 Interior of roof space over west (solar) chamber. Note the absence of smoke-blackening on the original roof timbers. Photo taken in 1995



Figure 19 View of front (N) elevation of house following the fire in June 2003



Figure 20 View of house from south-east following the fire in June 2003



Figure 21 View of house from south-west following the fire in June 2003



Figure 22 View of central (hall) bay looking east following the fire in June 2003



Figure 23 View looking south-eastwards from central (hall) bay into west bay following the fire in June 2003



Figure 24 Framing of upper part of west intermediate cross frame following the fire in June 2003



Figure 25 Exposed timber frame at first floor in north-west corner of east bay



Figure 26 Original late-medieval infilling of timber frame at north end of east intermediate cross frame

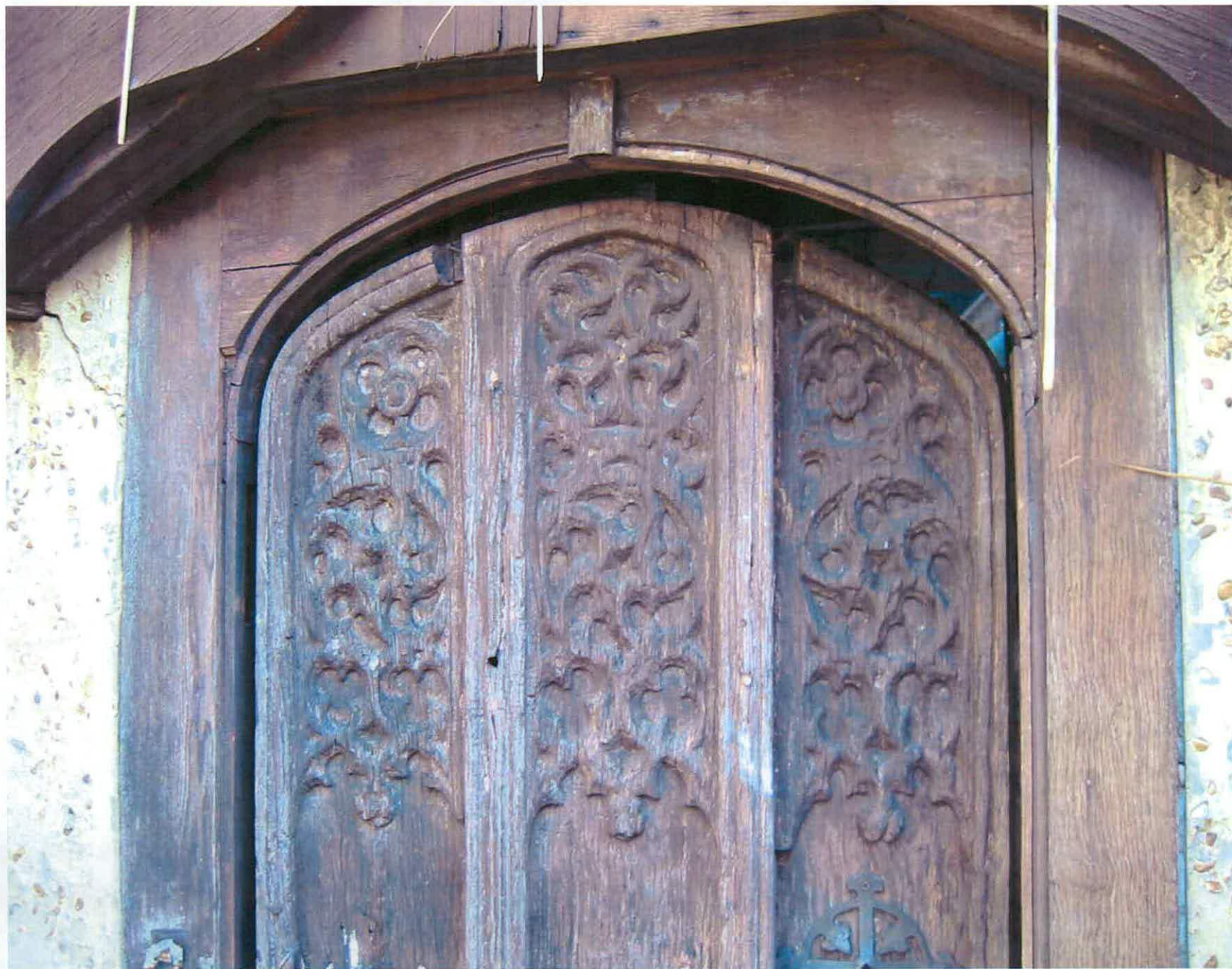


Figure 27 Front door of house *in situ*