THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF COURT COTTAGE

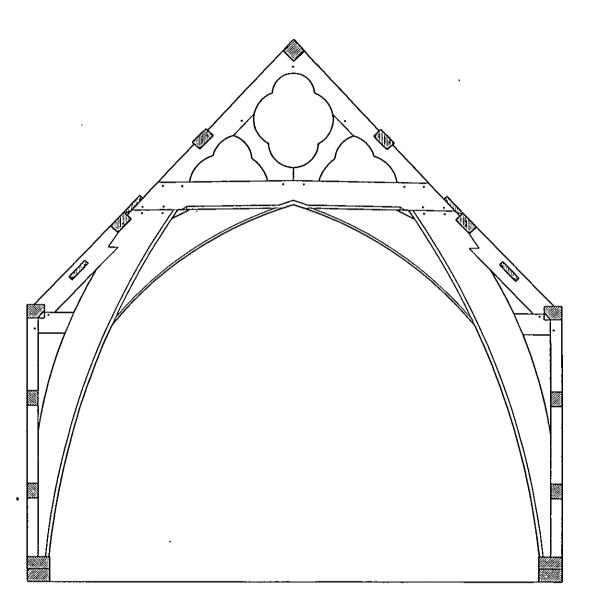
Preston Wynne, Hereford and Worcester

by Richard Bond

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ENGLISH HERITAGE

The historical development of Court Cottage, Preston Wynne, Hereford and Worcester



Richard Bond Historical Analysis and Research Team English Heritage

May 1998

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1.0 Introduction

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- Court Cottage is a grade II* listed building situated at Court Farm in the village of 1.1 Preston Wynne in Herefordshire. The house is timber-framed and dates from several periods. The present house has an L-shaped plan, comprising a main front range aligned E-W, with a longer rear range aligned N-S extending to the N (fig 3). The southern end of the rear range contains the remains of a two-bay timber-framed hall of probable early-15th century date. The hall is spanned by central cross frame of truncated cruck type, and the northern bay is sub-divided by a spere truss of aisled form. Adjoining the hall to the north is a further two-bay structure, again timber-framed, but of distinctly later form than the medieval hall. Adjoining the southern end of the medieval hall, forming what is the principal farmhouse range of the present house, is a large, two-storey, timber-framed cross wing. The cross wing was refenestrated and given a new external cladding of cement render in the late-18th or 19th century; internally, however, much of the original timber frame remains exposed to view, with structural and decorative details pointing to a late-16th century construction date (fig 30).
- 1.2 In late 1997 the rear range of Court Cottage was a derelict structure, having stood empty and disused for many years. The upper floor, roof and wall frames were all in poor state of repair, with the gable cross frame at the northernmost end of the range in danger of collapse (*figs 37, 38, 39*). In view of the worsening condition of the building, EH interceded with an offer of a repair grant, and appointed a conservation architect, Mr John Goom, to draw up a scheme of urgent structural repairs.
- 1.3 The Historical Analysis and Research Team was requested by West Midlands Team of English Heritage to undertake a detailed fabric analysis of the surviving medieval structure. The aim of the analysis was to provide a permanent historical record of the structure and investigate its structural development from the medieval period. It is hoped the analysis will be of benefit to the forthcoming repair project and serve as a practical framework for informing future conservation decisions.
- 1.4 The building analysis was carried out by Richard Bond of the Historical Analysis and Research Team of English Heritage. The fieldwork for the study was conducted over a period of three days in December 1997.

2.0 Historical background

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- 2.1 Court Cottage is the farmhouse of Court Farm, a mixed farm situated close to the centre of the village of Preston Wynne in Herefordshire. Standing alone in the open fields to the south of the house is the parish church of Holy Trinity, built in 1727. Across the fields to the north-west lies the village of Marden, site of the late-14th century Amberley Court.¹ Approximately one mile to the south-west stands another late-14th/early-15th century house, Thing Hill Grange (figs 1 & 2).
- 2.2 In the Domesday survey of 1086 the manor of Preston Wynne was valued at 60 shillings.² The lord of the manor held land for four ploughs, and five villagers *(villeins)* together held land for four and a half ploughs. An additional four hides were also paying tax. The manor contained twenty acres of meadow, and one and a half virgates of waste land. There was one female servant *(bondwoman)* living in the village at the time of the survey.
- Although not certain, it seems likely that Court Cottage was the site of the medieval 2.3 manor house of Preston Wynne. The house itself is situated on a prominent site at the heart of the village, and the name of the building - 'Court Cottage' - if it can be shown to have originated in the late-medieval period, might well denote a manorial connection. Certainly to judge from the form and quality of construction of the medieval structure - in particular the use of the architecturally impressive base cruck truss (or, more accurately, truncated cruck truss) at the central cross frame the original 15th century house must have been constructed by a person of considerable wealth and local importance. As a high status building type, the base cruck hall in both its pure and derivate forms proliferated throughout lowland England and Wales from the late-13th century onwards. Today, only nine basecruck houses are known to survive in Herefordshire. Of these nine houses, two are stone-built and seven are timber-framed. All nine examples were clearly superior buildings constructed to the highest standards of their day. It has been suggested that such houses, although probably not built by the very highest strata of medieval Herefordshire society, are likely to have been the homes of the lesser gentry of the county.3

¹ RCHME Herefordshire, 1932. Vol.II (East): M Wood, 'The English Medieval House', 1965, 43.

² Domeday Book, Vol.17. Ed. F & C Thorn: General Editor, J Morriss. Philimore, Chichester, 1983.

³ JW Tonkin, 'Social Standing and Base-Crucks in Herefordshire', Vernacular Architecture, 1970, 7.

3.0 The medieval house: architectural description

- 3.1 In its earliest form, the medieval house appears to have conformed to the classic late-medieval arrangement of central hall set between flanking cross wings (fig 25). The hall measures approximately 27'6" x 20' (8410mm x 6110mm) and is aligned N-S. It was entered from its southern end via a pair of opposing doorways in the side walls; the door openings led into a passageway running across the building. which was screened off from the main body of the hall by a timber cross frame known as a spere truss. The spere truss consisted of two vertical posts, their bases inset from the side walls of the building, and tops linked by a tie beam. Surmounting the tie beam was a roof truss with diagonal struts and cusped open panels (fig 18). The hall was open from ground floor to roof, and heated by a hearth situated in the middle of the floor. Spanning the centre of the hall was an open cross frame of truncated cruck form. This consisted of a pair of long, curving timbers, their feet set against the base of the side walls, and heads linked by a substantial collar beam (in constructional terms the counterpart of the tie beam of the spere truss). Above the collar beam was a pair of cusped diagonal struts to match those of the spere truss fig 20).
- Between the central truncated cruck truss and the S end cross frame, the roof over 3.2 the upper end bay of the hall was sub-divided by an intermediate roof truss, now missing. The roof truss stood some 2.0m to the north of the south end cross frame, its position within the roof frame today indicated by a break in the decorative chamfers found on the purlins of the east roof slope, both of which date from the original construction of the house.⁴ The precise appearance of the missing truss is not known, although it seems likely that it would have closely resembled the form of the other two trusses, with a pair of principal rafters linked by a collar beam, and cusped diagonal struts forming a pattern of decorative open panels. Such intermediate trusses were employed in the roof of the hall at nearby Amberley Court in Marden, where the decorative cusping was extended to the inner faces of the principal rafters. At Amberley Court, the principal rafters are linked just below their apex by a high-set, arch braced collar beam; but unlike the main roof trusses themselves, the intermediate trusses included no struts above collar level, but were finished instead with a single cusped open panel (fig 66).
- 3.3 The hall terminated at each end in a timber cross frame of standard box-frame construction. The cross frames were of identical form, consisting of a pair of posts in the side walls linked by a long tie beam. The cross frames carried roof trusses similar to those of the spere and truncated cruck trusses, although here the diagonal struts were left uncusped with plain open panels (figs 14, 15, 16).

4 I am grateful to Mr Ian Tyers for this information.

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The roof over the hall featured a double tiers of purlins along each slope, and a central ridge piece. With the exception of the ridge piece, which is clearly a later timber, the majority of the existing roof timbers date from the original construction of the house. Many of the purlins and most of the common rafters still remain blackened from the smoke of the original open hearth, suggesting the medieval roof has undergone little significant alteration. Those of the original purlins to have survived are decorated with plain 50mm-wide chamfers, the chamfers terminating in plain run-out stops. The upper and lower purlins along the west roof slope both appear to have been renewed. The upper purlin between the cruck truss and north end cross frame is formed of two lengths of reused timber, halved together at the spere truss, and pegged through to the spere post. The northernmost section is fashioned from a length of former wall plate. The southernmost section is a re-set former purlin. Both timbers probably came from the early-15th century house.

In the eastern wall plate to the immediate south of the spere truss is a scarf joint 3.5 dating the construction of the medieval hall. The joint is of bridled tenon type, with sloping abutments, and a single side peg. The tenon points to the south, indicating that the assembly of the wall plate (and probably the rest of the frame) proceeded from south to north (figs 27 & 46).

The side wall framing of the hall consisted of a series of wide-section vertical studs 3.6 (probably) linked by a double tier of short horizontal rails. The studs had an average width of 250mm, and were spaced at approximately 1000mm centres; all were double pegged to the wall plate (fig 47). Between the central cruck truss and the south end cross frame on both sides of the hall the wall frames included a series of three studs, evenly spaced. Between the cruck truss and the spere truss was a single stud. Facing each other across the screens passage at the lower end of the hall were the two (approximately 1.5m wide) doors leading into the house. On the west side of the building can be seen one of the original timber door heads; the door head had a gently curved soffit and extended from the spere truss to the north end cross frame (fig 48).

3.7 Given the apparent lack of intermediate framing members in the construction of the 15th century end wall frames, there is a possibility that the present hall may have been inserted between two earlier cross wings, or similar ancillary structures, and that these in turn may originally have flanked an earlier hall. Below tie beam level the northern cross frame has been extensively remodelled following the insertion of a doorway at first floor level (figs 11 & 13). However there are no clear signs of any earlier arrangement of studs (e.g. empty mortices in the soffit of the tie beam) apart from a series of empty socket holes, presumably associated with a former wattle and daub infill. Below tie beam level the frame of the south end cross frame is obscured, however the upper parts of the cross frame are accessible through small

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gap between the rear and front ranges at the south-east corner of rear range. Above the tie beam the cross frame retains its original straight collar with two raking struts above extending to the principal rafters. All the timbers are of heavy scantling as found throughout the early building. Where they are exposed to view, the internal faces of the timbers (i.e. the sides of the timbers facing into the building) can be seen to be smoke-blackened. There is no clear evidence (empty mortices, wattle holes, stave grooves, etc) to show how the upper part of the cross frame was infilled originally (if it was infilled at all). All the existing infill panels appear to be secondary. The panels have been constructed with their inner (north) face set flush with the inner face of the cross frame. The infill panel filling the space between the upper struts is constructed of lath and plaster, the laths set diagonally. The panel between the eastern strut and the collar is of wattle and daub construction, the wattles set horizontally and set in a red-brown coloured daub: the inner (north) face of the panel has a 25mm-thick finish layer of lime plaster. Both panels have been built up against (and partially conceal) the sides of the adjacent smoke-blackened timbers. Most of the pegs securing the timber joints have dropped or been pulled out, and where they do survive most have been cut off flush with the frame at both ends, so that it is now unclear from which direction they were driven. The upper purlin on the east side has a sawn end, the purlin terminating approximately 200mm beyond the south (exterior) face of the south end cross frame. The saw marks on the end of the purlin follow an angle of approx. 45 degrees. The lower purlin on this side has also been truncated but in this case the cut marks on the end of the timber are horizontal. The cut marks appear to have been made with an axe rather than a saw.

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3.8 The roof frame of the medieval hall included windbraces between the cross frames (including the intermediate truss over the upper end of the hall) and the intersecting purlins (both upper and lower tiers) on both sides of the building. Those windbraces that survive are all cusped and chamfered to match the roof trusses (fig 43). Elsewhere in the building, the timber mouldings consisted of plain, wide chamfers terminating in simple, unstepped run-out stops (fig 27). At the spere truss, the base of the arch braces between the posts and tie beam terminate in decorative moulded timber corbels, cut from the timber of the post; the chamfers on the inner sides of the braces terminate in simple brooch stops (figs 26 & 45).

4.0 Later development of the building

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- 4.1 The south cross wing was probably built during the second half of the 16th century. The cross wing is timber-framed with square-panel wall framing. The infill panels are of lath and plaster, the laths woven together to form a substantial support for the plaster. The present accommodation consists of a principal room on either side of a central staircase on ground and first floors, with further rooms in the attic. The tie beams are interrupted to provide connecting doorways between the attic rooms. Most of the floor beams have very wide (4-5" wide) plain chamfers. The beams over the first floor chamber at the east have cyma run-out stops; elsewhere the stops are plain, as in the hall range. The cross wing has an L-shaped stone chimney stack with original diagonally-set plain brick shafts. The upper courses of the chimney have been rebuilt in modern brick.
- 4.2 Following the rebuilding of the north end of the rear range the earlier south end underwent a series of changes. The original doorway leading into the cross passage on the west side of the hall was blocked, and a new door opening (existing) constructed further to the south (fig 8). A new partition wall was built along the west side of the building running southwards from the west spere post. This created a narrow enclosed passageway leading from the new entrance door into the new rear extension (fig 4).
- 4.3 The north extension was constructed with accommodation on both ground and first floor in the south bay, but appears always to have been open from ground floor to roof in the north bay (*fig 5*). The first floor of the southern bay is supported on twin floor beams, aligned N-S, with common joists morticed into the beams on either side. The floor joist mortices in the inner faces of the beams have a soffit tenon, whilst those on the outer faces appear to be cogged. The first floor was accessed via an external door opening in the west wall situated at the top of a set of stone steps.
- 4.4 There are indications of a former inserted floor in the north bay of the northern extension. The evidence consists of a series of mortices in the north face of the girding beam of the partition cross frame, and an applied timber ledge attached to the inner face of the mid rail of the eastern wall frame. The floor was clearly of very rudimentary construction, and may well have been inserted after the initial construction of the northern extension.
- 4.5 A break in the ridge piece over the northern extension suggests a chimney stack may at some time have been inserted in the north bay. However there is no evidence of smoke-blackening or sooting to confirm this. The existing roof frame

(rafters, purlins) of the northern extension appears to be of a much later date than the wall framing (it is mostly of elm, and constructed from neatly squared timbers). The area of the possible former stack is now roofed over, the modern replacement rafters supported by two pairs of diagonally-set struts standing off a collar (*figs 6*, 56, 57).

4.6 To the north of the medieval hall, the east wall of the south bay of the northern extension is constructed from a mixture of brick and stone. The wall construction post-dates the remodelling of the north end cross frame of the medieval hall, and replaces the original wall frame of the northern extension. The wall contains two fireplace openings, a larger opening situated centrally to the bay, and a much smaller opening to the south, now blocked (*figs 28 & 39*). The larger fireplace is 1235mm-wide and has a segmental arched head. The wall to the north of the larger fireplace appears to belong to a later phase of rebuilding. The wall is constructed from a single skin of 4"-wide brick; the wall finishes some 800mm from the north jamb of the central fireplace, and continues as a brick return to the east. The wall is now in a very poor state of repair and structurally unstable. On the east elevation, the remains of the chimney stack(s) and all evidence of a former outbuilding and/or entrance into the northern bay is obscured by garden deposits, fallen brick and stone rubble, etc.

5.0 The architectural and historical significance of Court Cottage

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As it stands today, Court Cottage is an amalgam of different construction dates and 5.1 architectural styles resulting from some six centuries of structural repairs and improvements to the layout and fabric of the building: an ongoing process which continues to the present day. Through the study of these past changes to the building, it is possible to chart the transition of Court Cottage from medieval gentry house to 20th century farmhouse. From an architectural point of view, much of the interest of Court Cottage lies in the constructional detailing of the medieval hall, particularly in its adoption of the truncated cruck form in preference to true base cruck construction at the central truss. Altogether, there are only nine surviving base cruck buildings (including base cruck derivative structures) in Herefordshire, of a total of about ninety examples in the whole of England and Wales. Over the past thirty years there has been much research into the origins of the base cruck hall. At a local level, the questions of social status and dating presented by the Herefordshire examples has been explored by J Tonkin in 'Social Standing and Base-Crucks in Herefordshire' (Tonkin, 1970). More recently, a survey of latemedieval timber buildings carried out by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) has shed much useful light on the social status of a range of hall house types in Wales. The survey found that most cruck-framed and box-framed hall houses in the Welsh Marches were built from the early-15th century to the mid-16th century; but that this was part of a broader 'great rebuilding' of Wales beginning in the early-14th century but increasing in pace after 1400 (Suggett, 1996). In addition, the survey found evidence of a size effect which suggests that the rebuilding was socially staggered, with the great halls of the nobility pre-dating the gentry halls and these in turn pre-dating peasant houses (Suggett, 1996).

5.2 Samples were taken from the timber frame throughout the rear range to determine the precise growth rate of the timbers and demonstrate the potential of the building for tree-ring dating. Following this analysis, the dendrochronologist concluded that the frame of the medieval hall was constructed entirely from trees that were fast grown, some exceptionally so, and is therefore completely undatable using current tree-ring dating methods. The samples taken from the northern extension were more promising; however here the fabric evidence was itself confusing since the frame possibly included a number of unidentified resused elements. One potentially important piece of evidence thrown up by the tree-ring analysis was that the positively identified reused elements in the northern extension are of a different date to the medieval hall timbers.

5.3 On stylistic grounds the medieval hall at Court Cottage is dateable to the late-14th

century (e.g. hollow chamfer mouldings with pyramid stops).⁵ Court Cottage clearly shares a number of characteristics with Amberley Court (dated 14th century by RCHME in 1931) in the neighbouring village of Marden (figs 64, 65, 66), and (from photographic evidence) has a similar type of roof construction as another nearby house, Thing Hill Grange (fig 67). In marked contrast to Court Cottage, Amberley Court is a conventional base cruck hall complete with square-set arcade plates and normal aisled construction at the spere truss. Court Contrast, on the other hand, is an altogether smaller, more compact structure, and represents a style of construction more closely associated with the cruck tradition than true aisled/base cruck construction. Examples of true base cruck and truncated cruck halls appear to survive in more or less equal numbers in Herefordshire, however whether or not one is earlier than the other, or both types appeared at more or less the same time in the county, remains unknown at present. In the light of the recent Welsh study (see above) and the discovery of a possible a link between the size of houses and their construction dates, it would seem likely that the smaller truncated base cruck house post-dates the true base cruck type; however as Suggett (writing for the RCAHMW) himself concluded, the origins of the cruck-framed hall house are far from obvious.

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5 J Tonkin, pers, comm.

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6.0 Sources

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7.0 Acknowledgements

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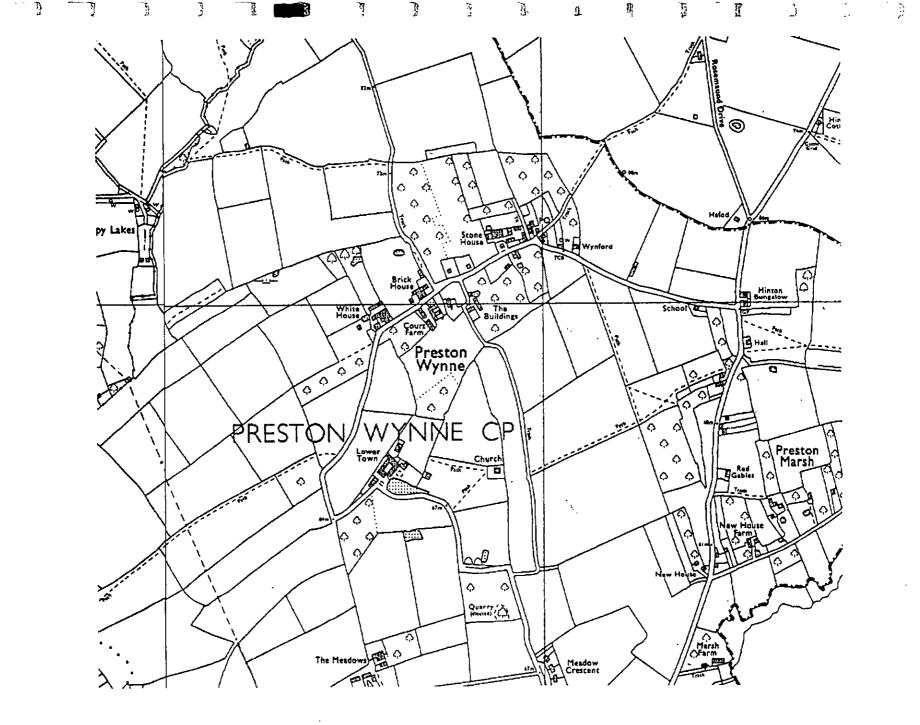
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I am grateful to Mrs Trudy Hughes of English Heritage for producing the initial brief for the project, and Mr John Goom, the project architect, both for his valuable discussion of the building and providing many of the drawings for this report. I am indebted to local historian Mr Jim Tonkin, for sharing his extensive knowledge of historic timber building in Herefordshire and providing additional research material, and to Mr Ian Tyers from the Dendrochronology Department of Sheffield University. Finally, I would like to thank the owners Court Cottage, Mr and Mrs Hergist, for their kind hospitality and assistance during the recording project.



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Figure 1 Current 1:10,000 scale O.S. map (early 1980's)

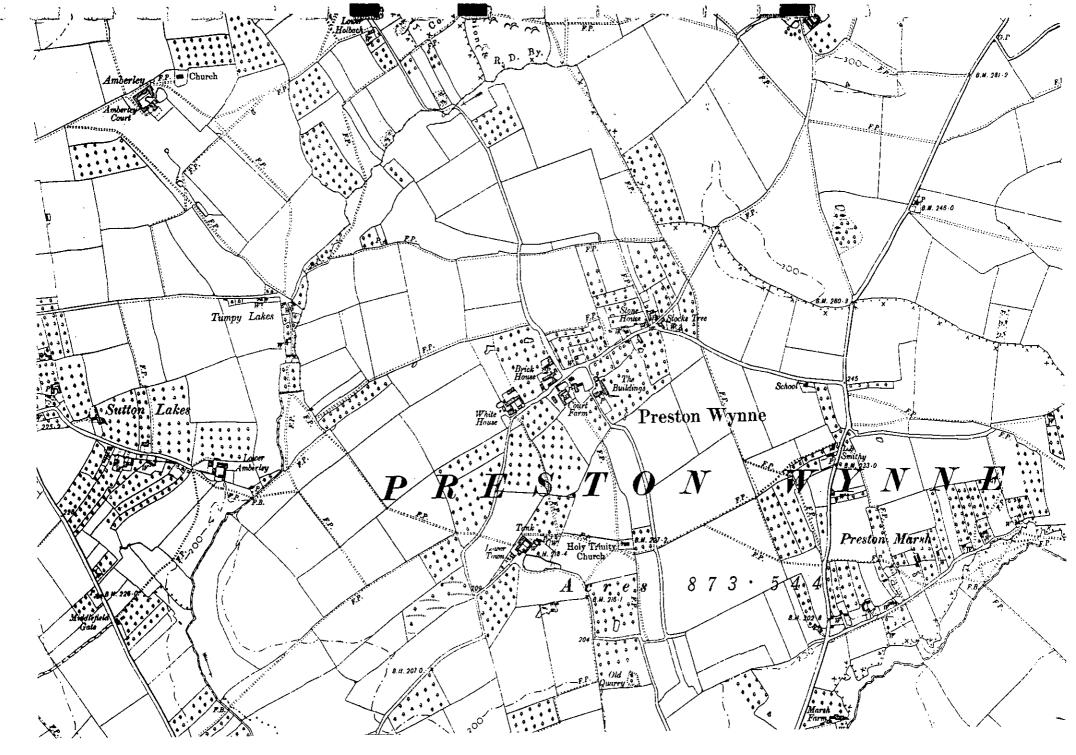
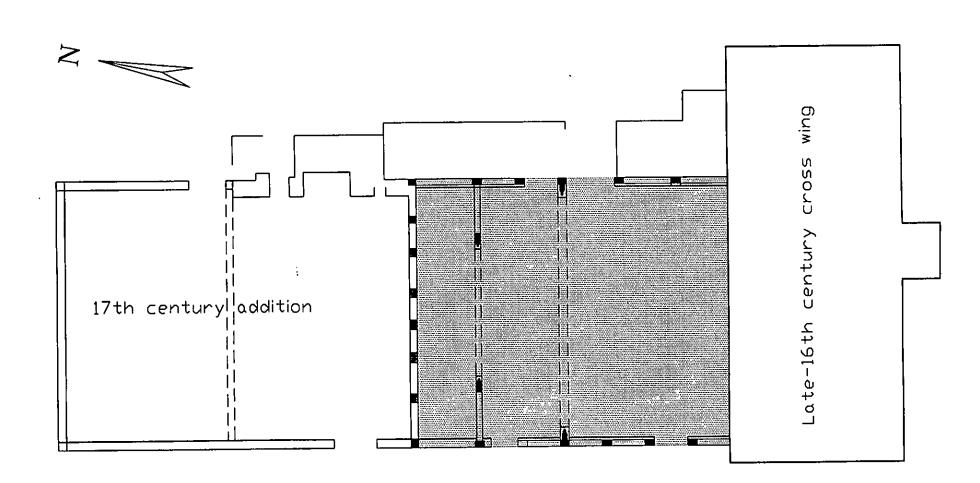


Figure 2 Second edition 1:10,000 scale O.S. map, 1905



Hatched area indicates extent of medieval open hall

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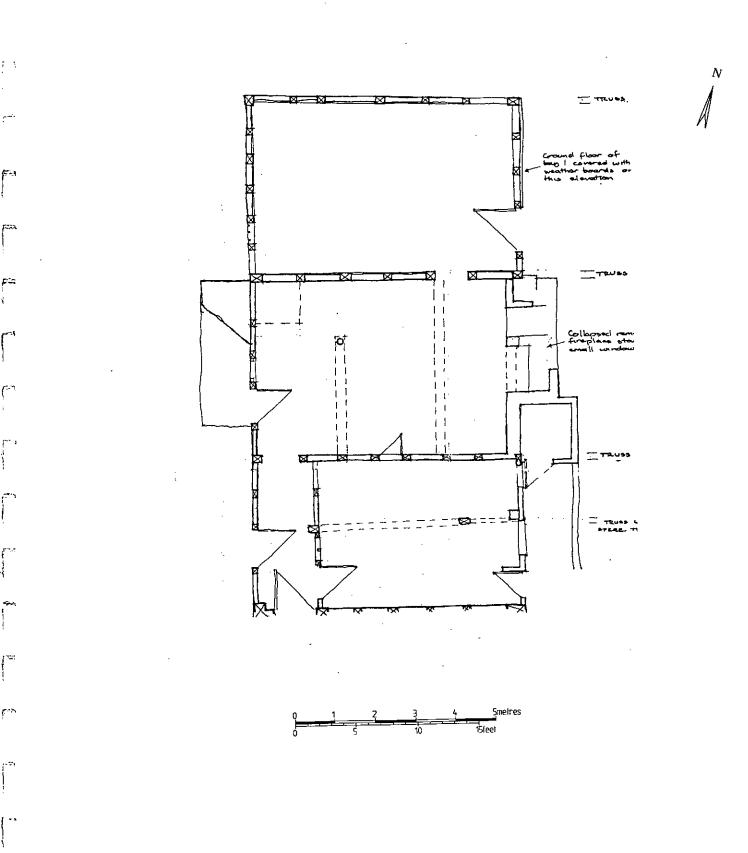
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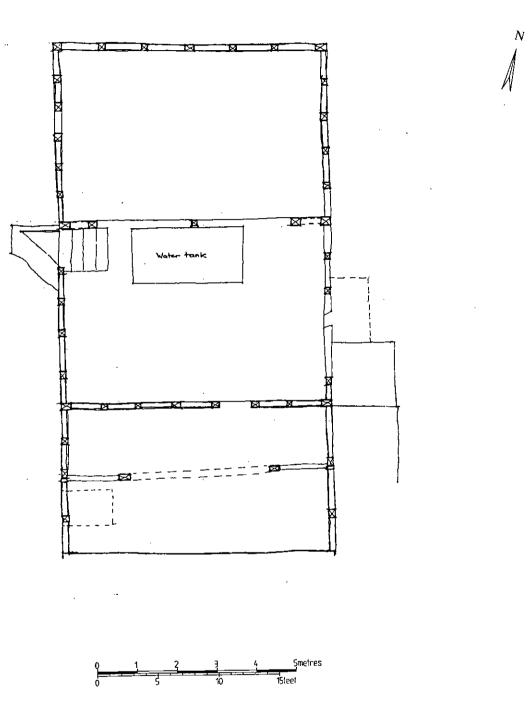
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Figure 4 Ground plan of rear range as existing



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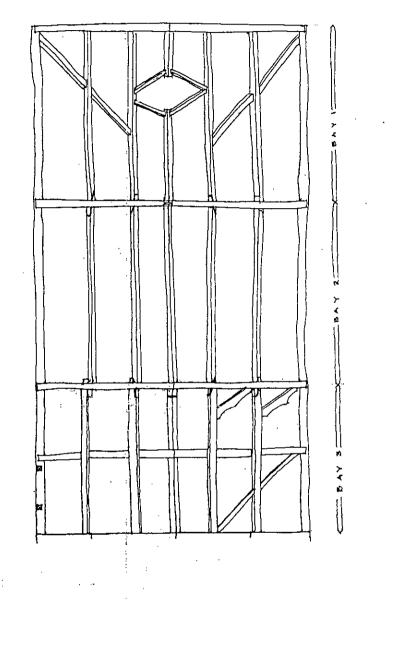
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Figure 5 First floor plan of rear range as existing



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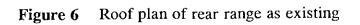
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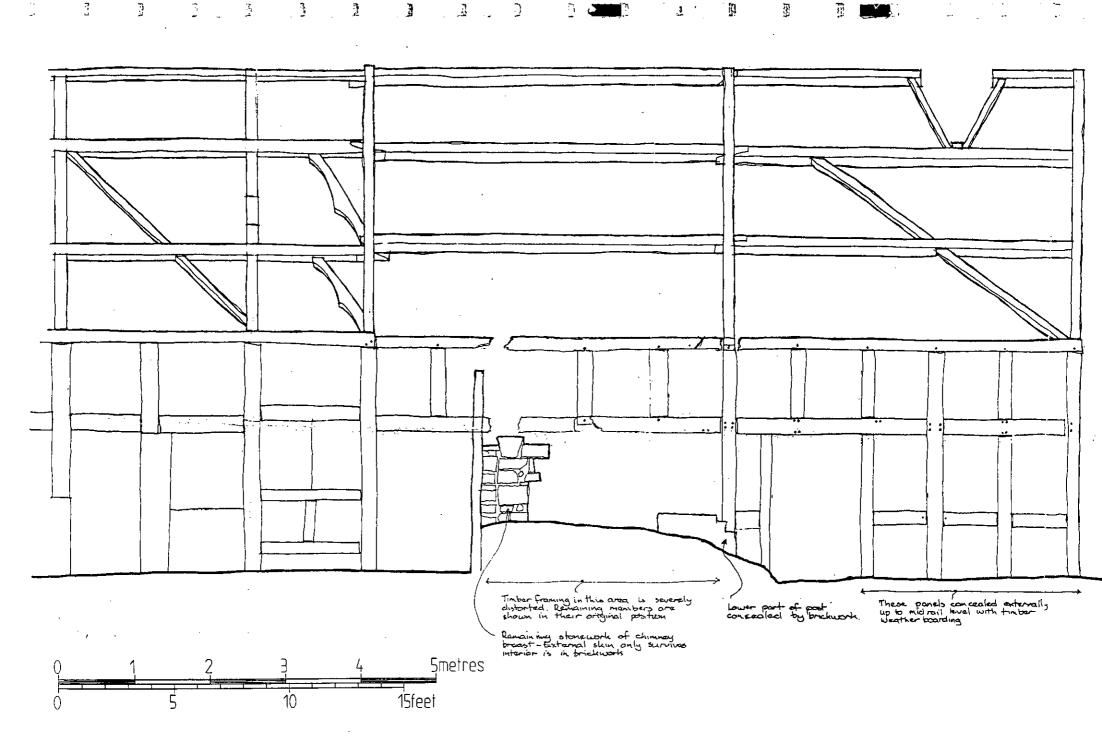
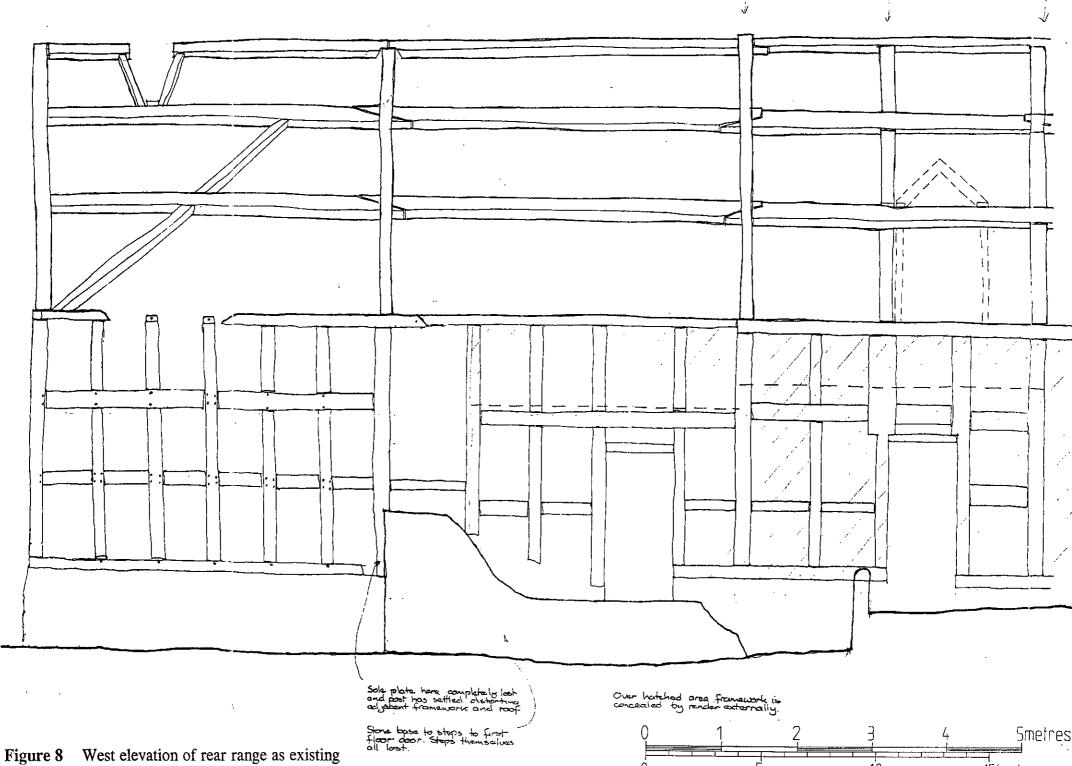


Figure 7 East elevation of rear range as existing



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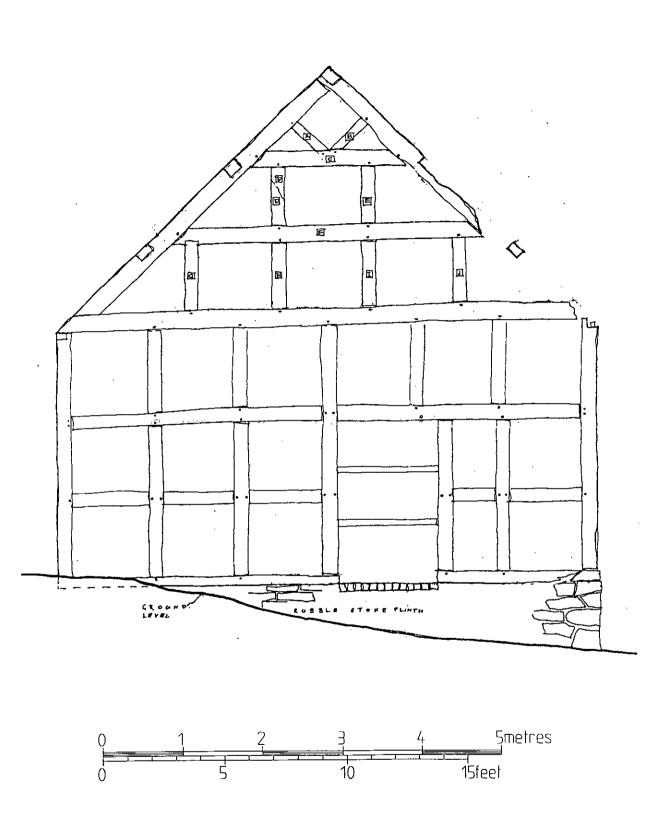
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N elevation of N (gable) cross frame (C17th addition to rear range) as existing Figure 9

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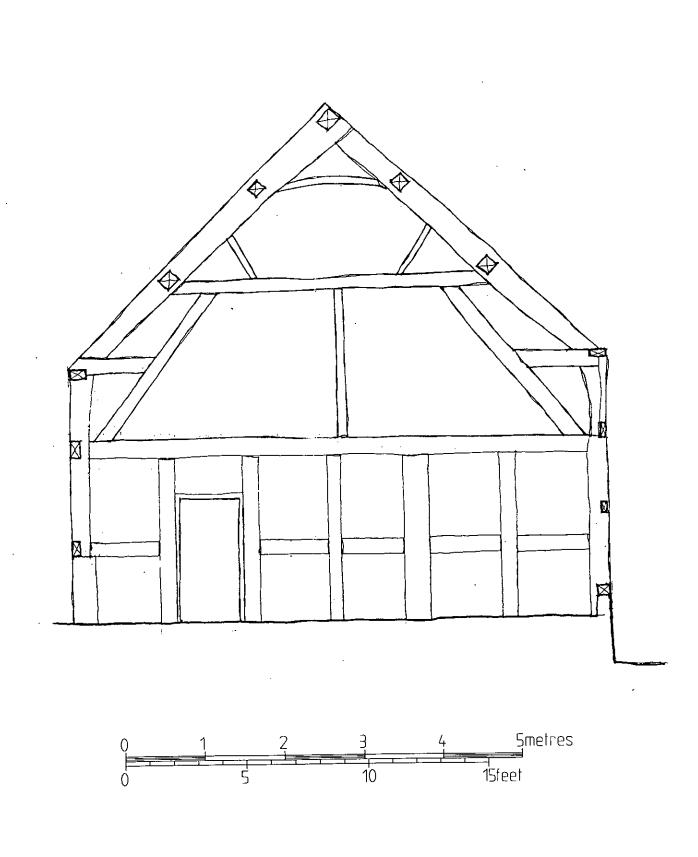
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Figure 10 N elevation of cross frame no.2 (C17th addition to rear range) as existing

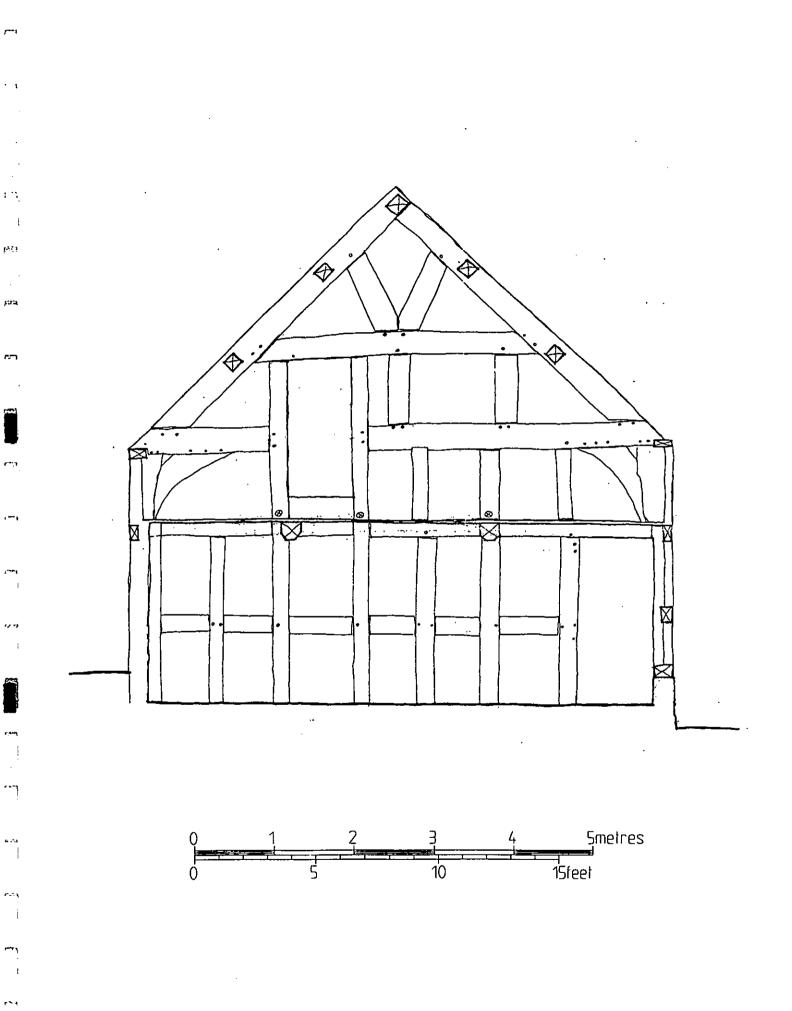


Figure 11 N elevation of N end cross frame of medieval hall as existing

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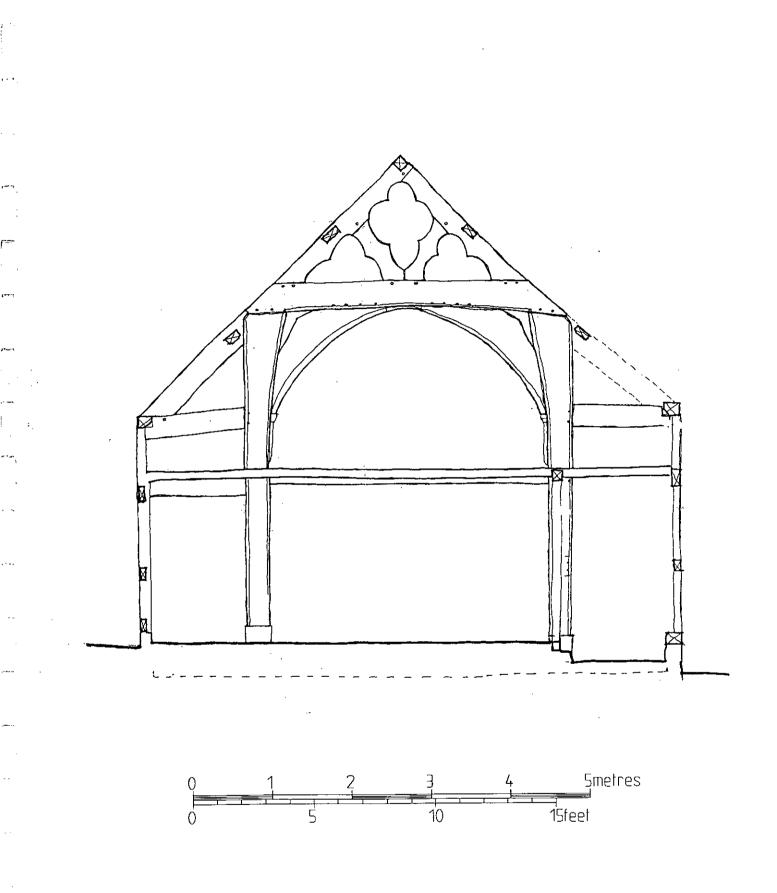
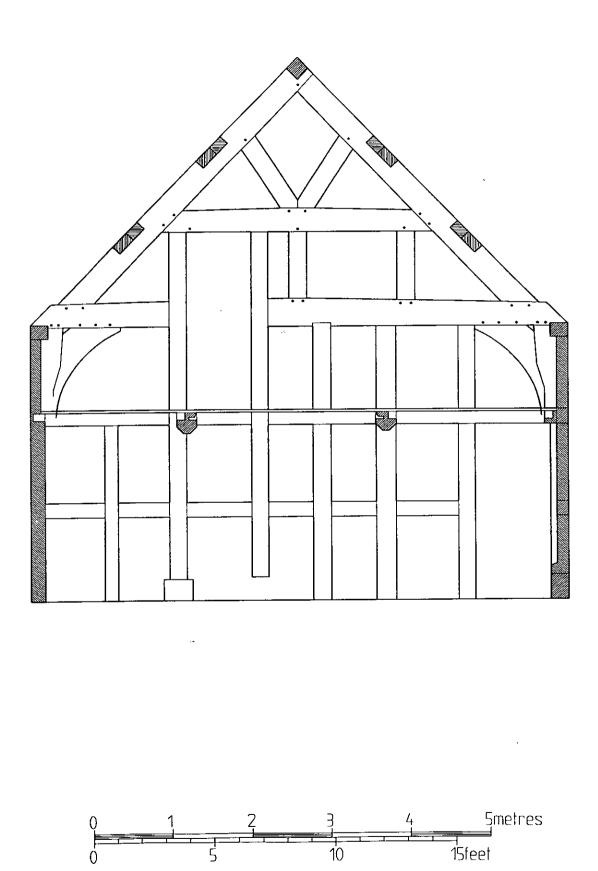


Figure 12 N elevation of spere truss of medieval hall as existing



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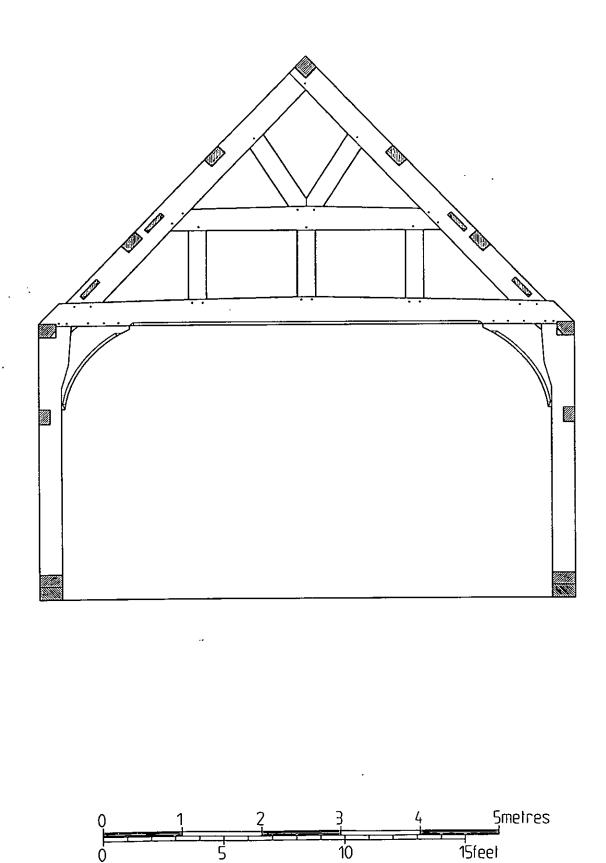
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Figure 13 N elevation of N end cross frame of medieval hall as existing (fabric survey)

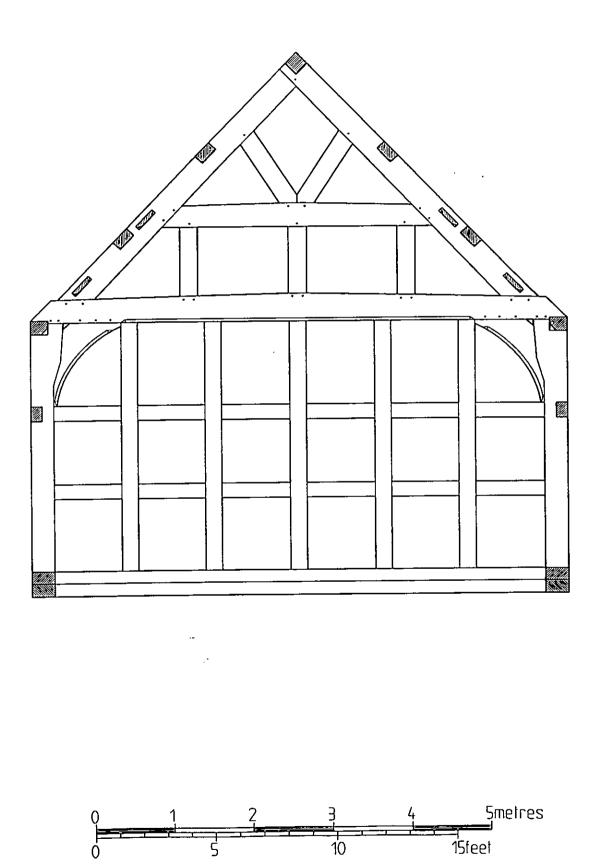


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Figure 14 S elevation of N end cross frame of medieval hall as built (version 1)

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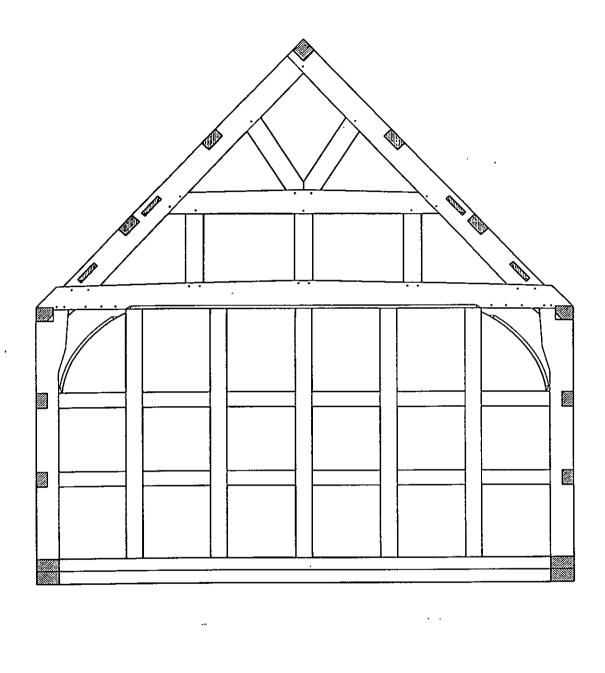
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Figure 15 S elevation of N end cross frame of medieval hall as built (version 2)



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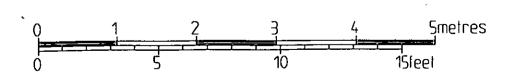
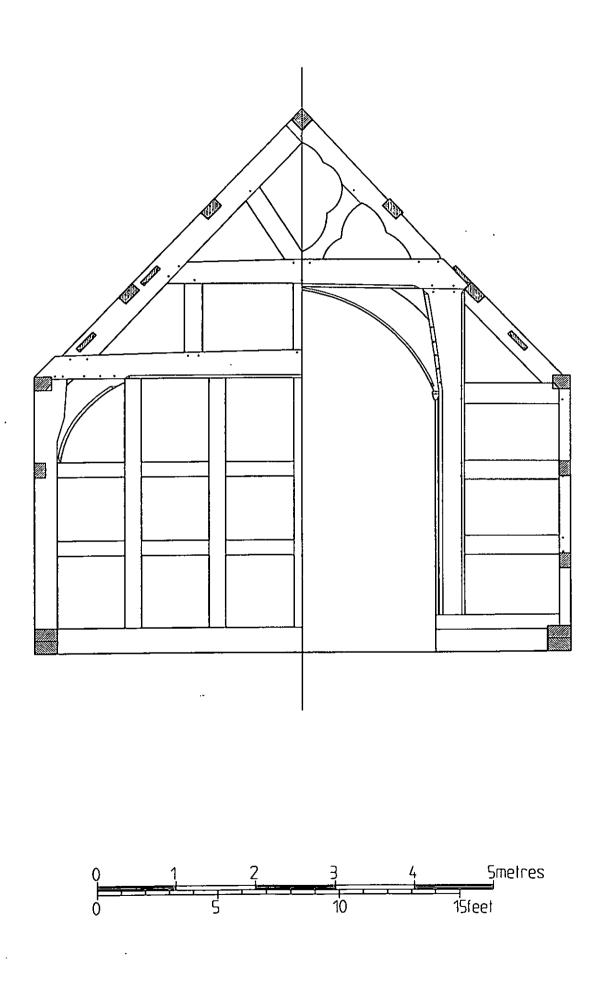


Figure 16 N elevation of S end truss of medieval hall as built

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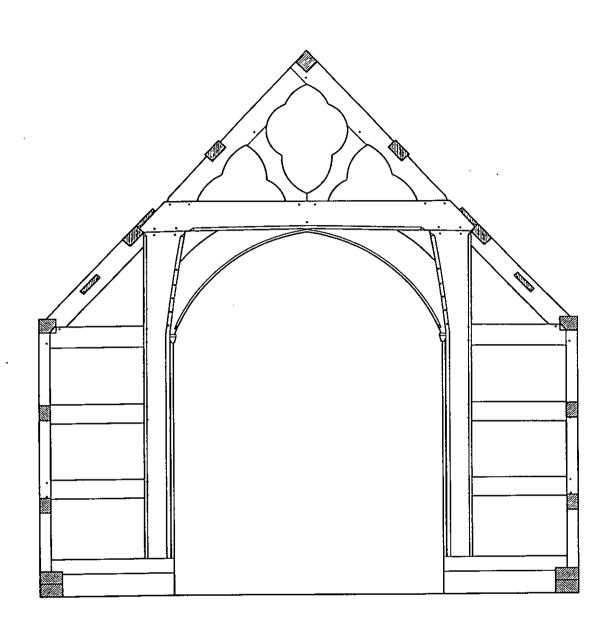
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Figure 17 S elevation of N end cross frame/spere truss as built (composite drawing)



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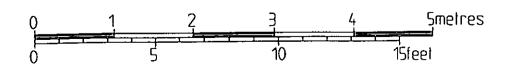
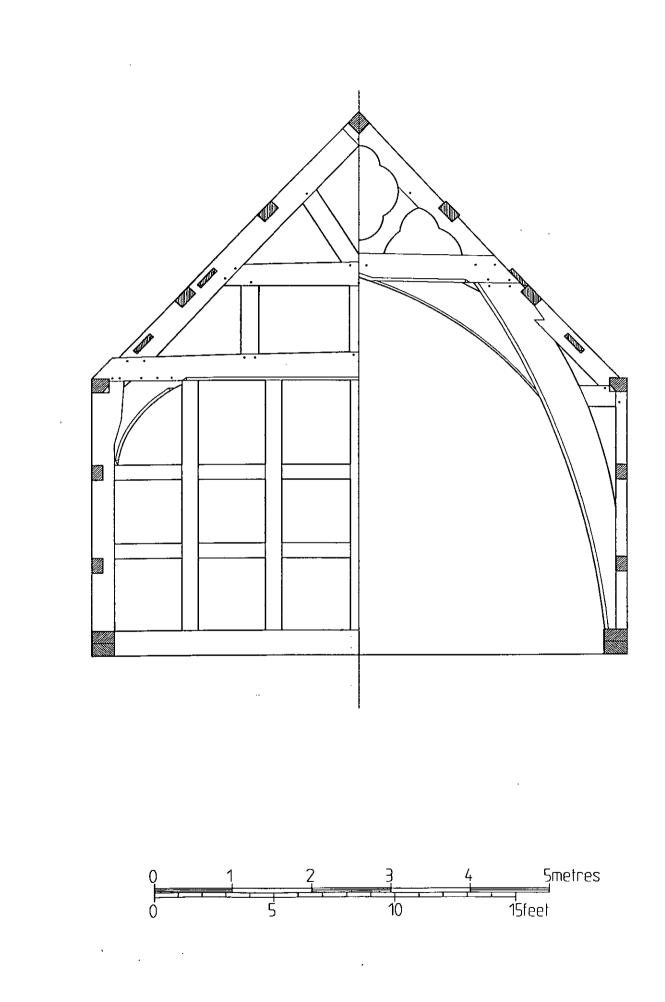
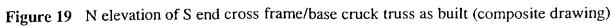


Figure 18 S elevation of spere truss of medieval hall as built





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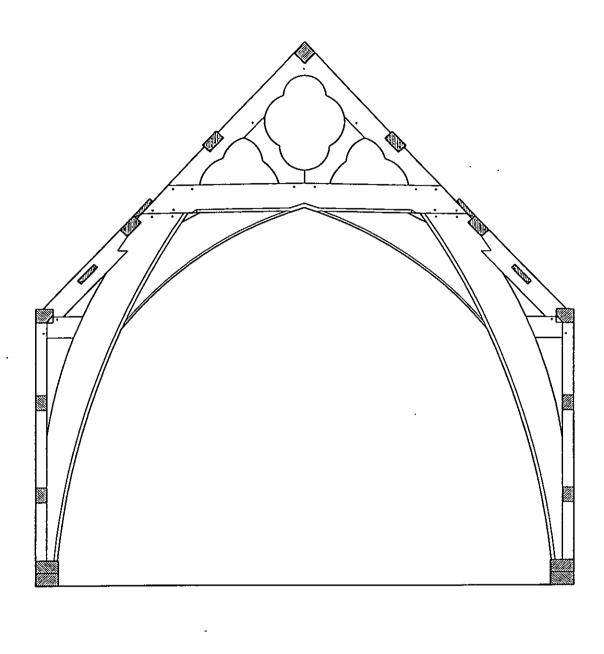
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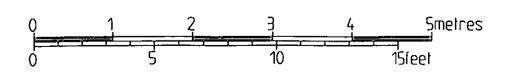
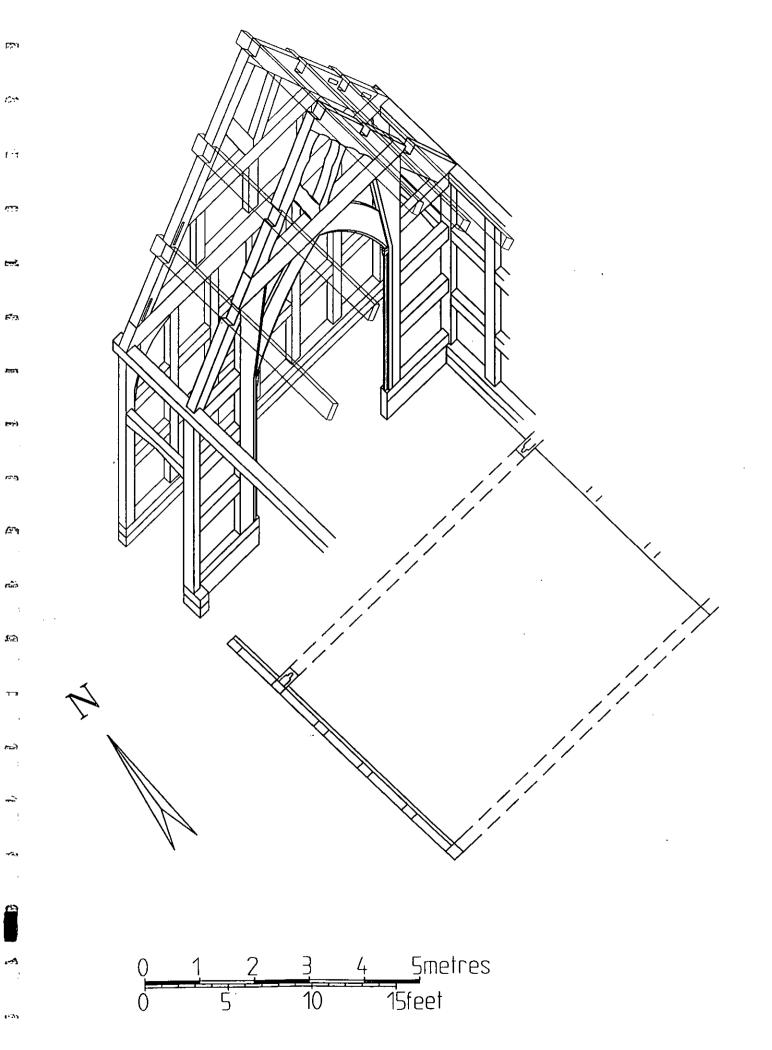
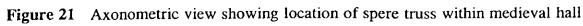


Figure 20 N elevation of base cruck truss of medieval hall as built





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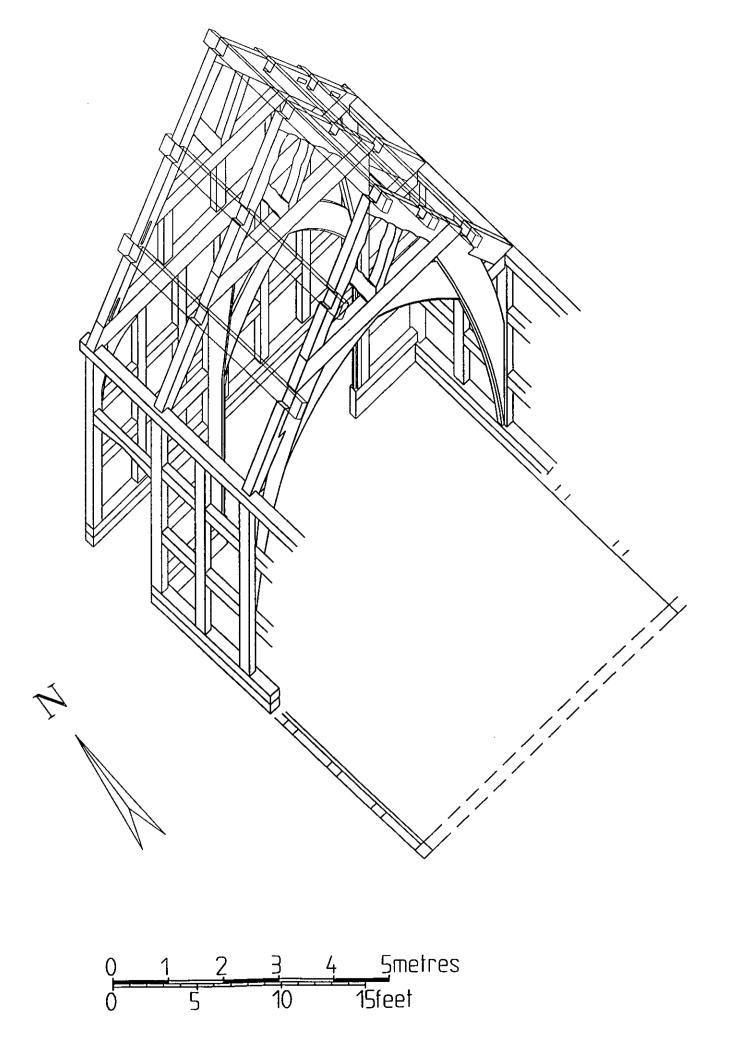


Figure 22 Axonometric view showing location of base cruck truss within medieval hall

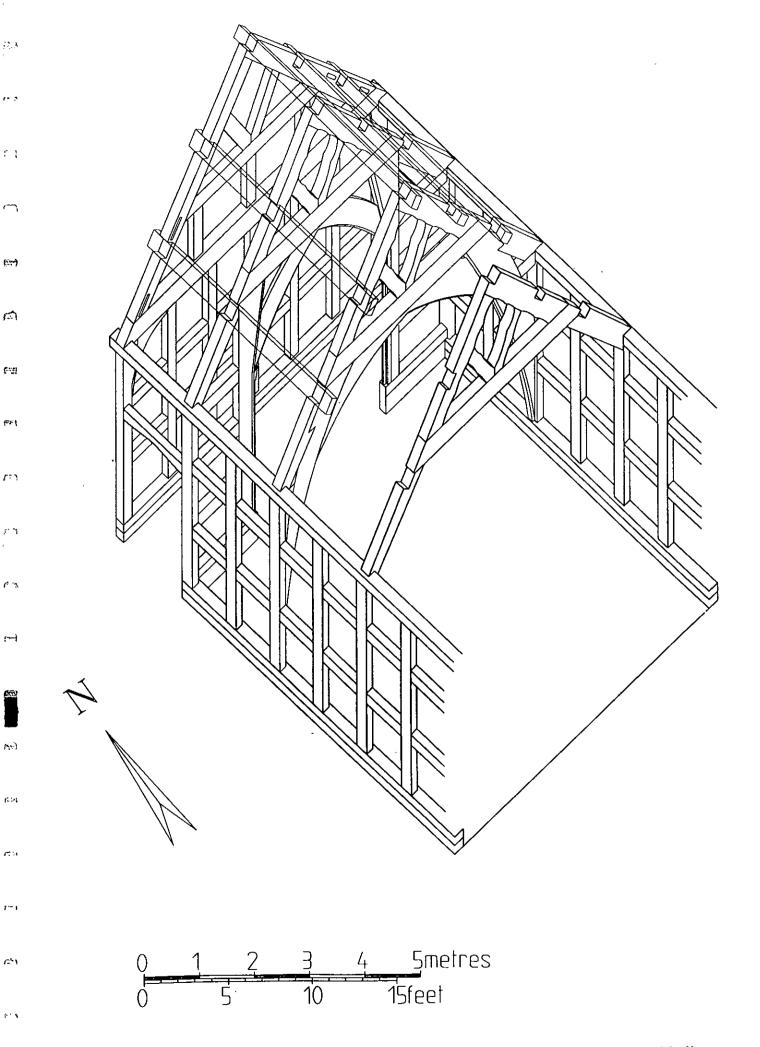


Figure 23 Axonometric view showing location of principal truss within medieval hall

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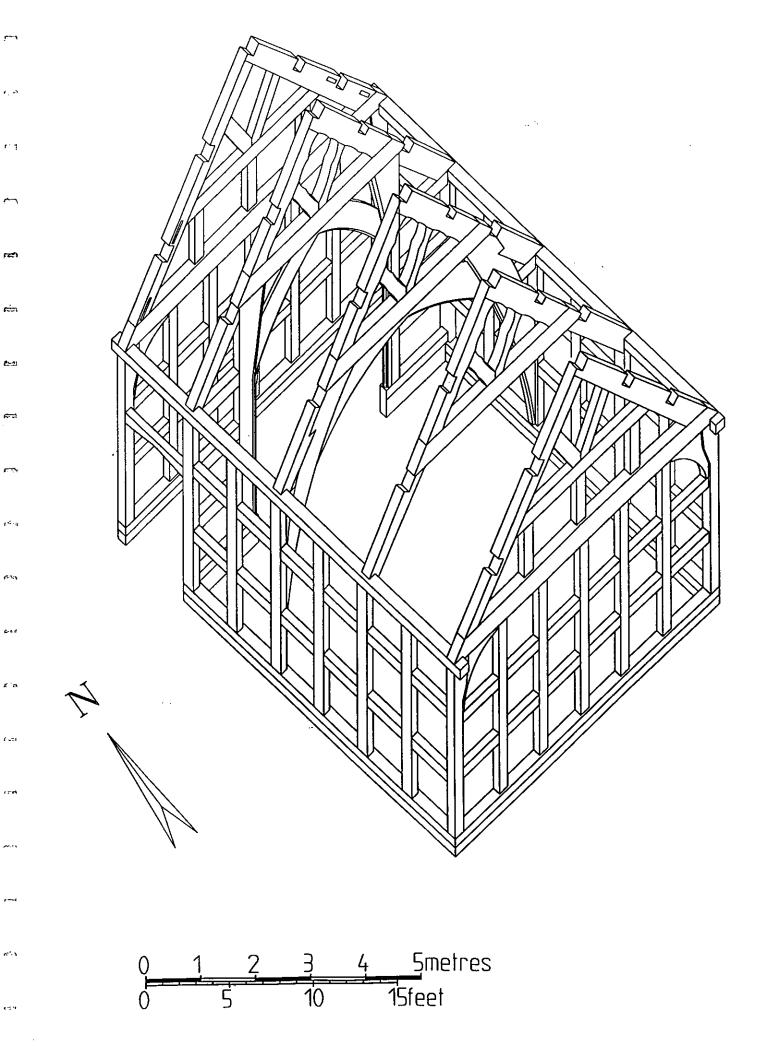
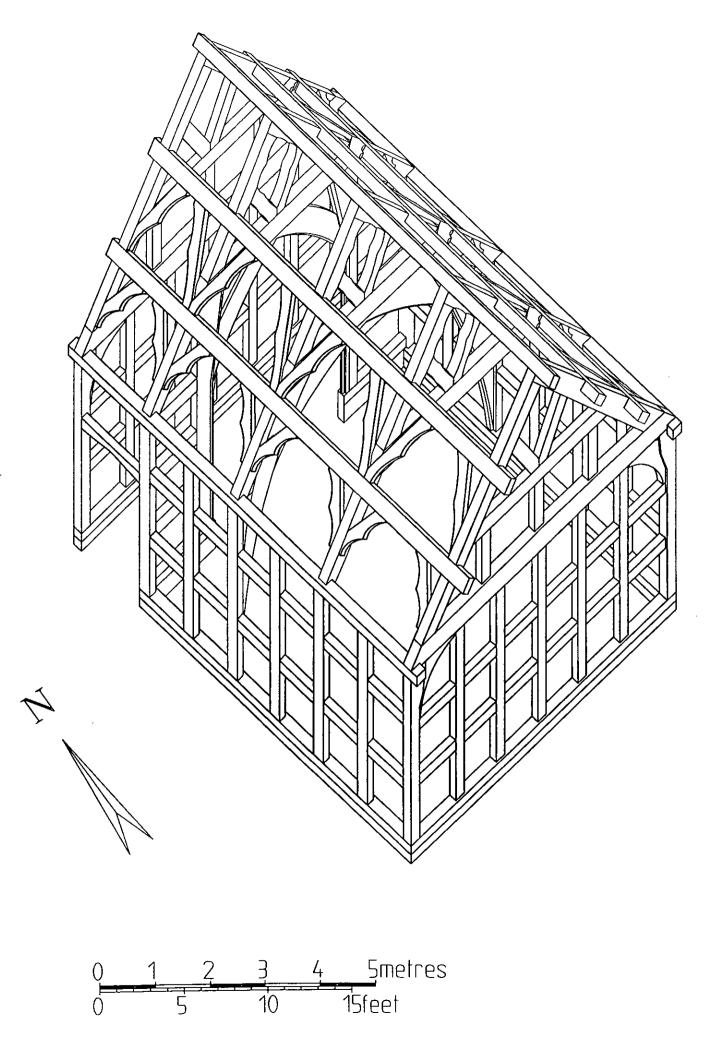


Figure 24 Axonometric view of medieval hall (roof framing omitted for clarity)



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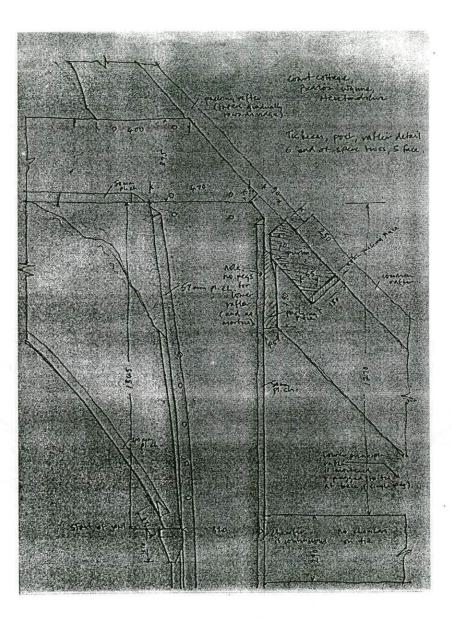
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Figure 25 Axonometric view of medieval hall



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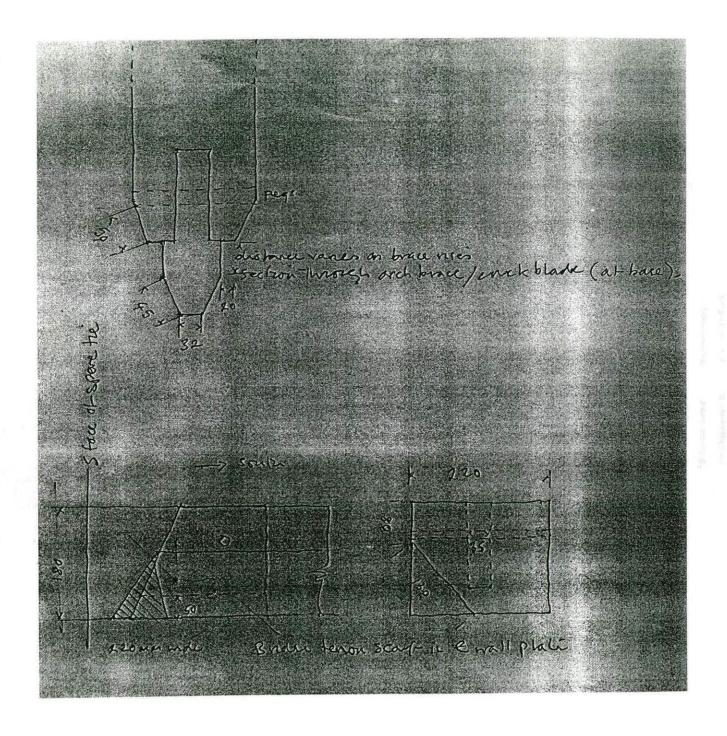
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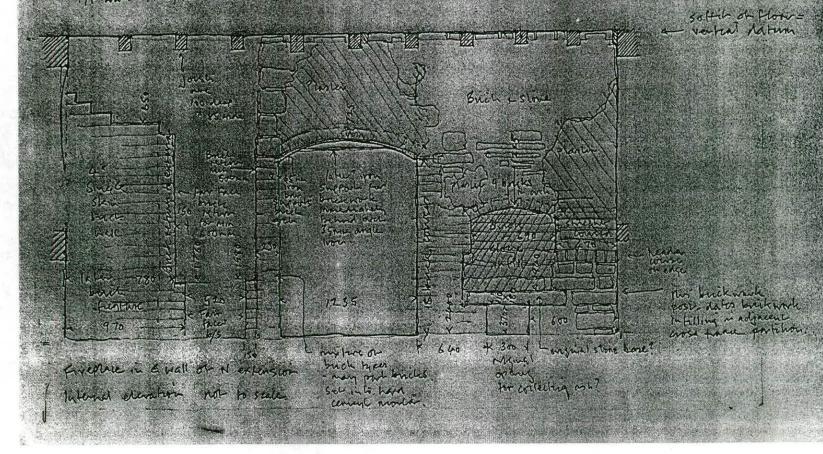


Figure 28 Record drawing of E wall of S bay of 17th century N addition, as existing



Figure 29 Court Cottage, view from the west c.1932 (photo RCHME)



## Figure 30 Court Cottage, view from west

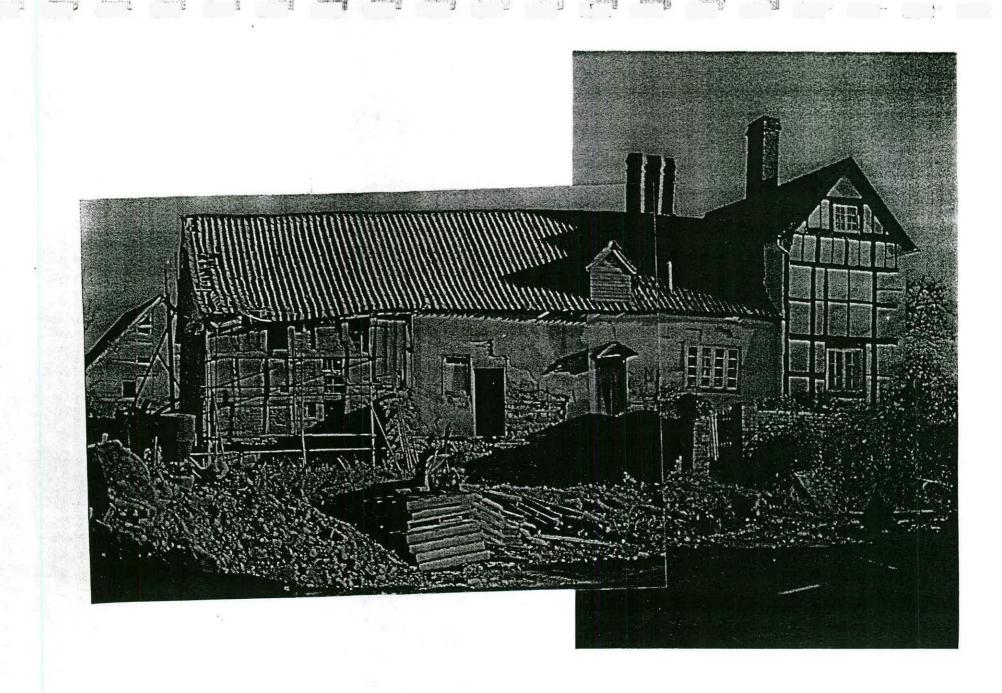


Figure 31 Court Cottage, view from west

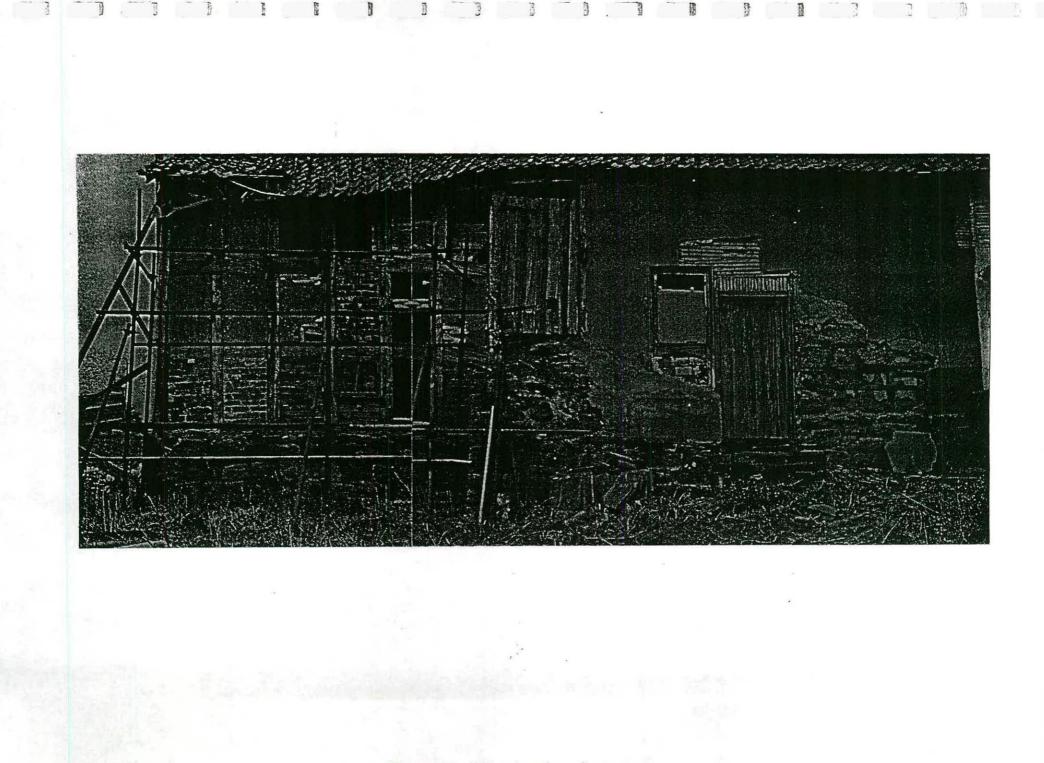


Figure 32 West elevation of rear range



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Figure 33 Court Cottage, view from south-east



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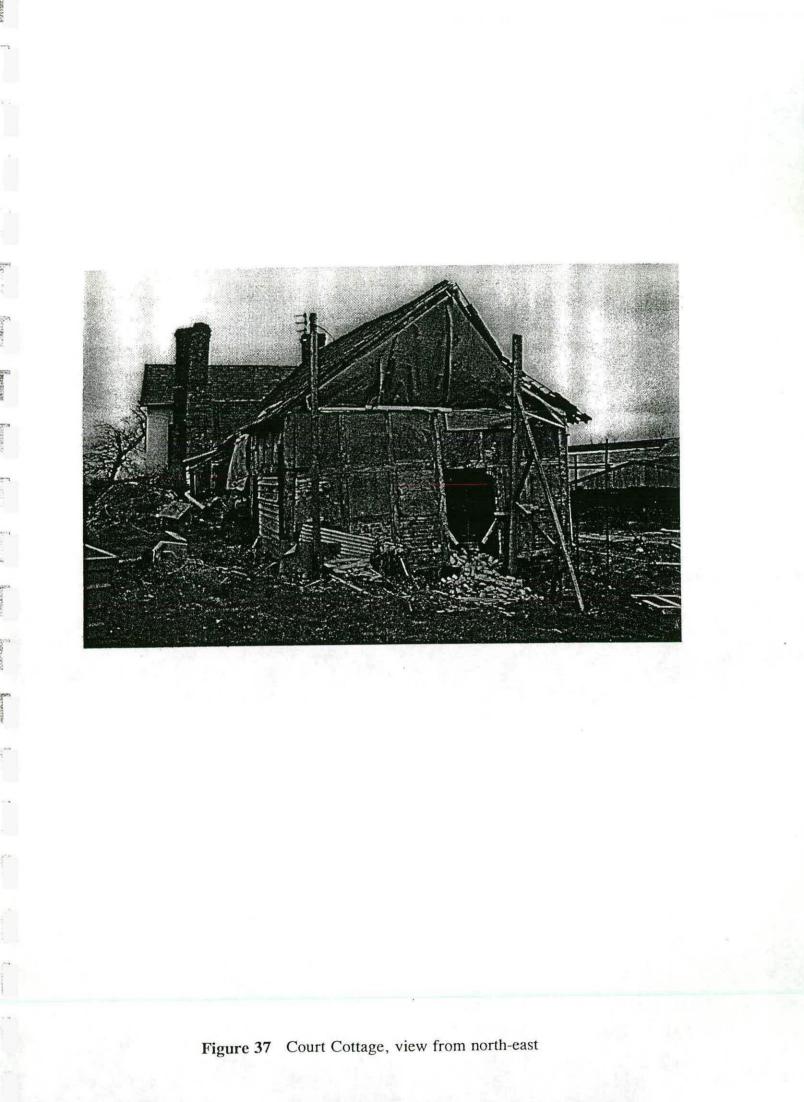
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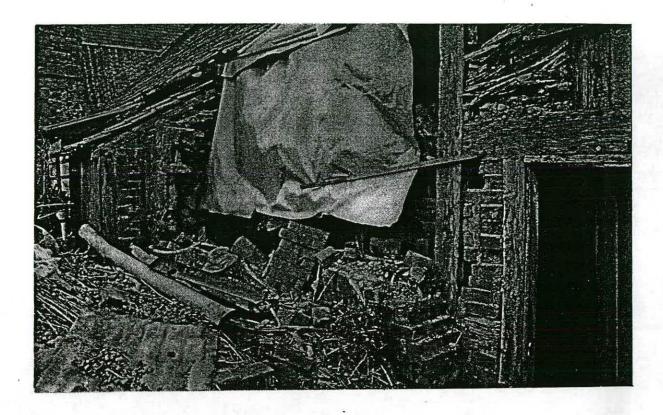
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## Figure 34 Court Cottage, view from south



Figure 35 Court Cottage, view from north-west







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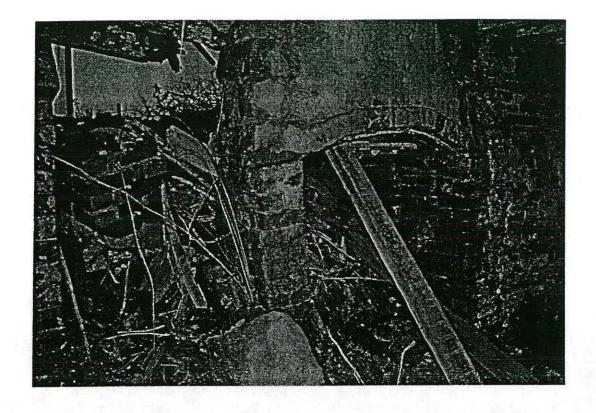
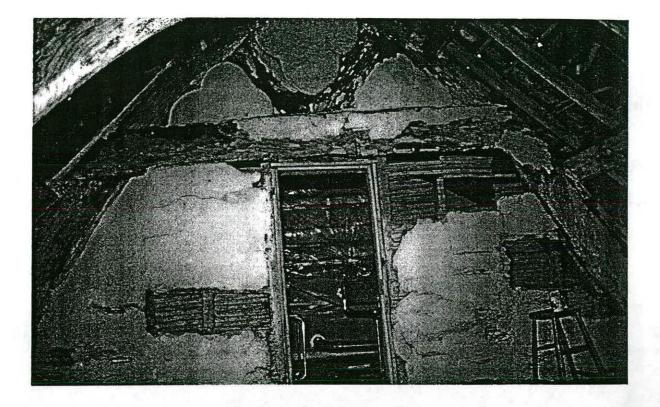
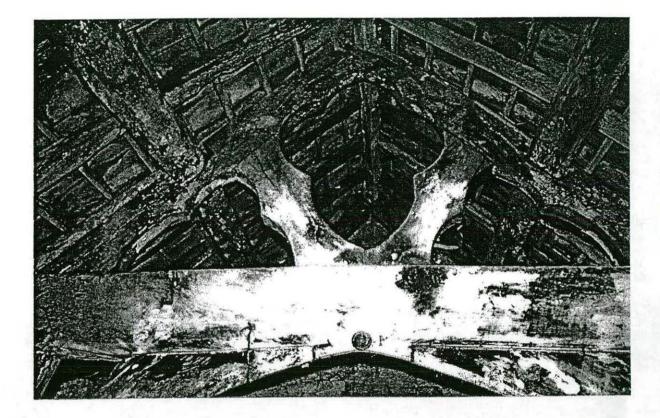
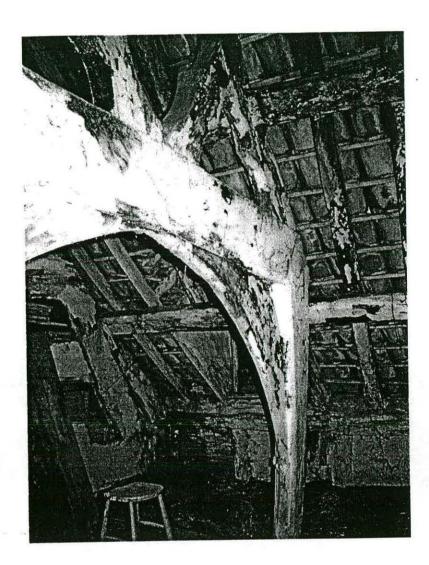


Figure 39 Internal elevation of E wall of S bay of 17th century N addition











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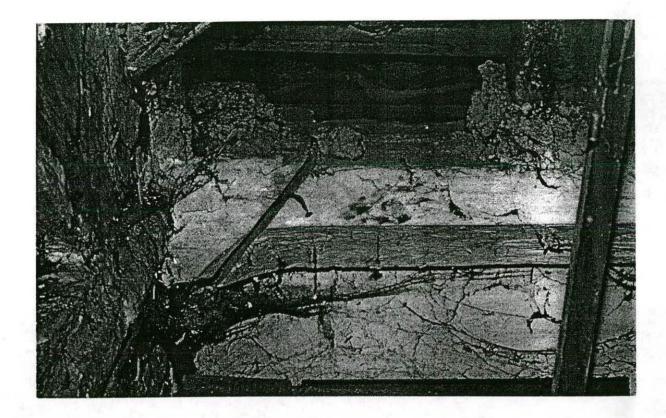
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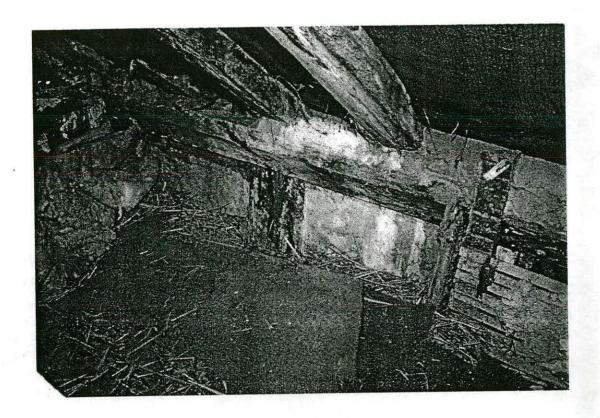
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Figure 44 E end of spere truss showing arrangement of post/lower purlin/principal rafter





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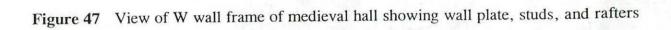


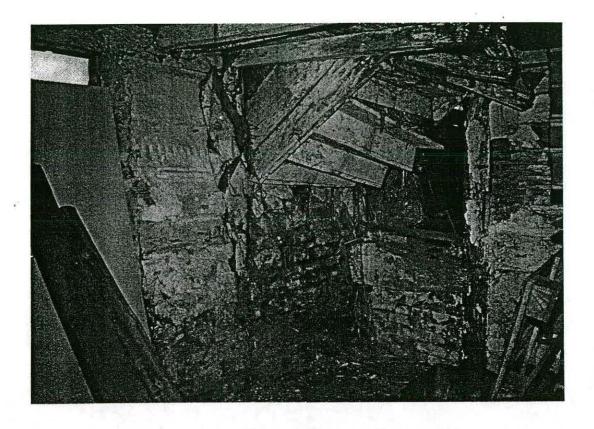


Figure 48 Timber doorhead to former exterior door opening in W wall of medieval hall





Figure 52 N elevation of N end cross frame of medieval hall



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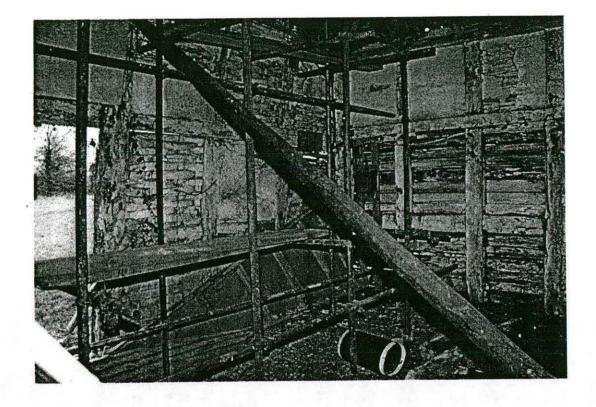
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Figure 54 First floor of S bay of 17th century N addition; view to NE



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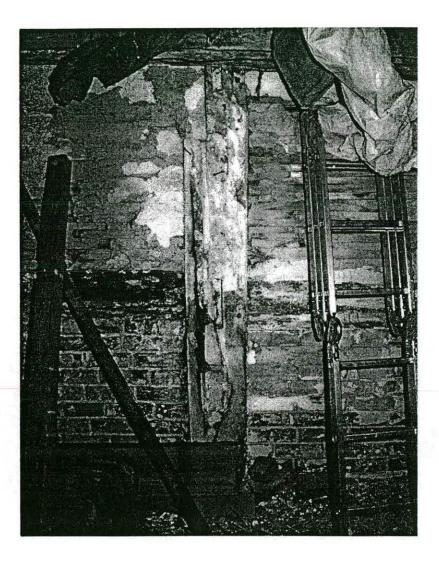
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Figure 59 Ground floor of N bay of 17th century N addition; view to NW



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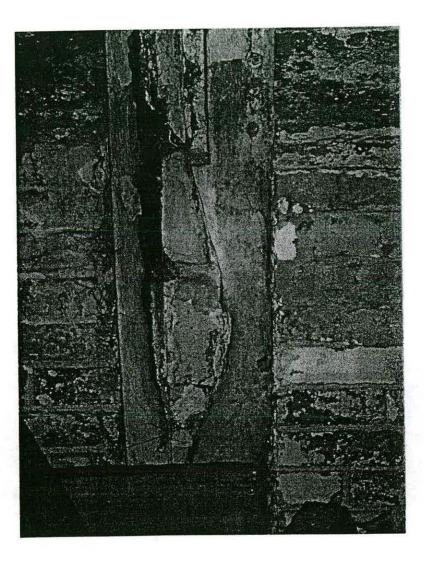
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Figure 60 Reused medieval timber in central cross frame of 17th century N addition



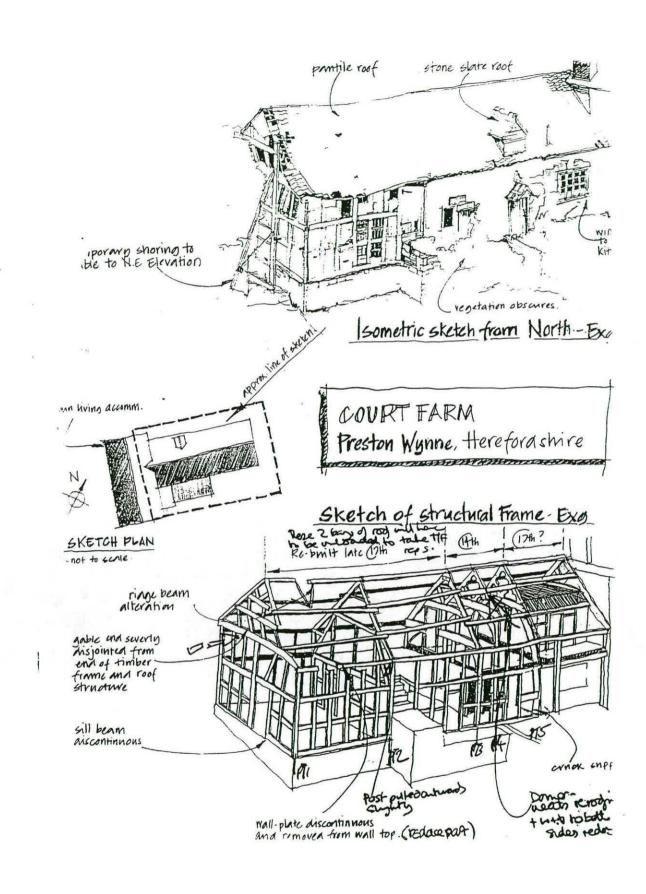


Figure 62 Sketch of rear range of Court Cottage as viewed from NW (drawing SPAB)

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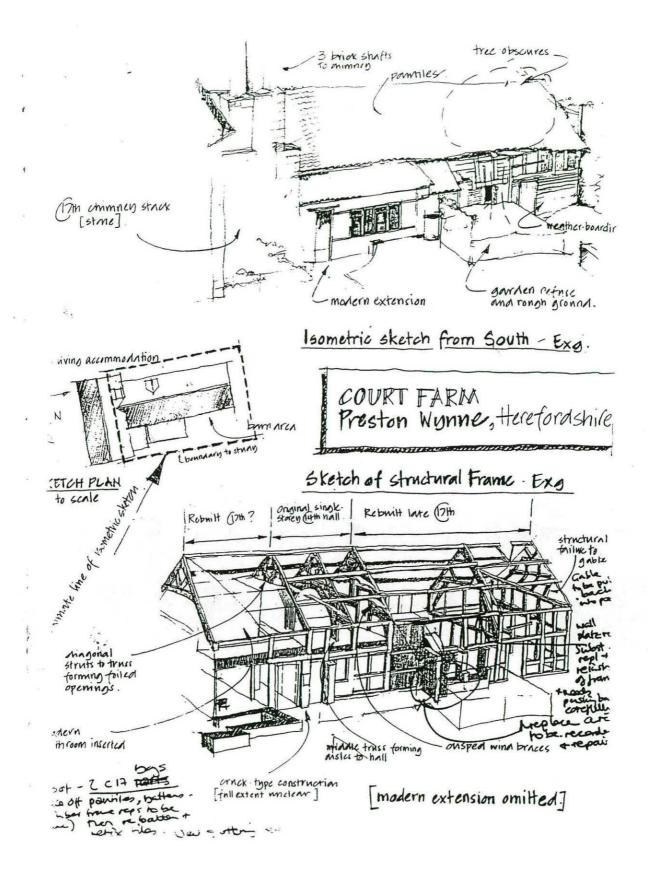
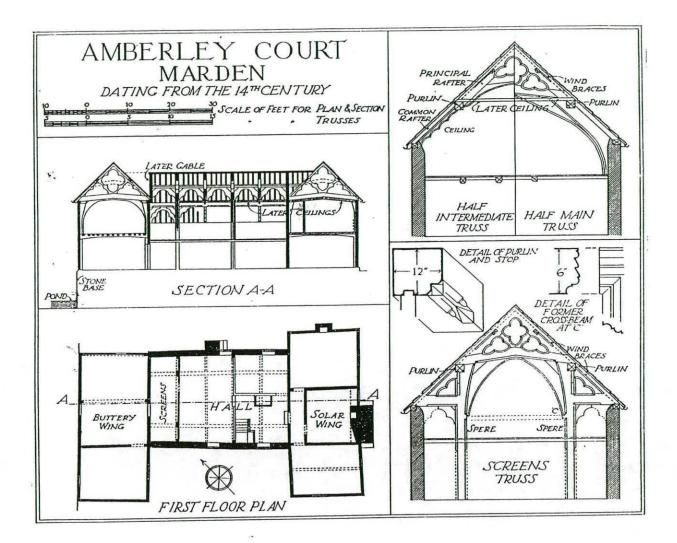


Figure 63 Sketch of rear range of Court Cottage as viewed from SE (drawing SPAB)



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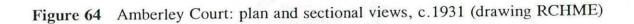
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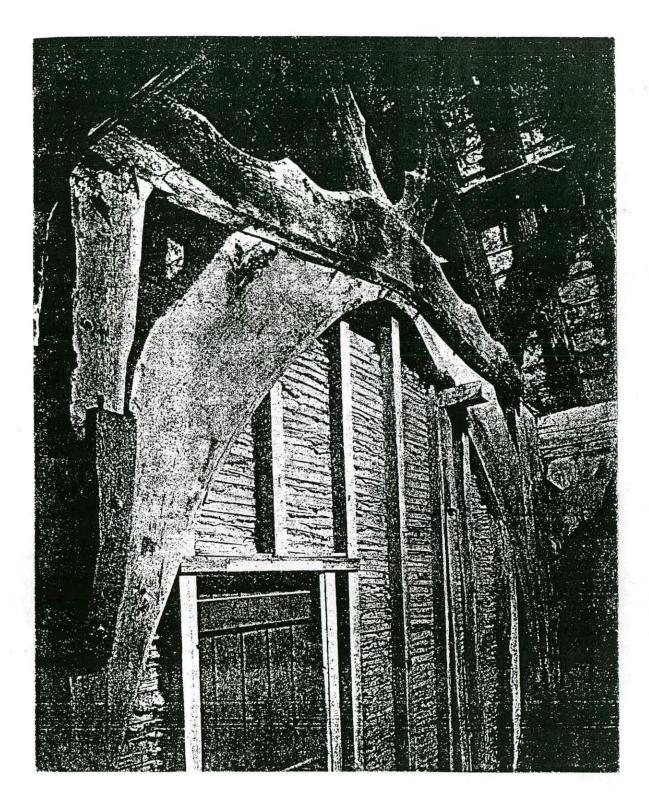
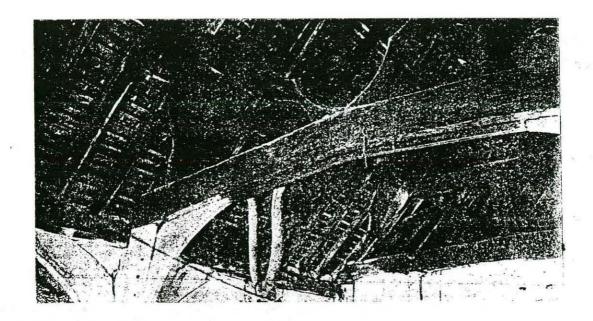


Figure 65 Amberley Court: spere truss, c1931 (photo RCHME)

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Figure 66 Amberley Court: roof of service wing, c.1931 (drawing RCHME)



