

**Building Recording at  
Halesowen Abbey, 1989/90**

**by**

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## Building Recording at Halesowen Abbey, 1989/1990

'... in one way the mere sight of things is neither here nor there. You have to be linked to them by some plan or some question. All I saw was stones piled one on top of the other.'

Simone de Beauvoir. The Age of Discretion

### Introduction

Halesowen Abbey, a Premonstratensian foundation, lies approximately 1 kilometre to the south-east of the town of Halesowen, in the Metropolitan Borough of Dudley (Figure 1). The extant remains of the Abbey buildings now form part of the complex known as Manor Farm, one of the holdings of the Hagley Hall Estate (Figure 2).

The recent campaign of survey and interpretative work at the site began in 1986 with the preparation of a report on the potential for the display of the Abbey remains and associated earthworks, drawing upon the results of all previous archaeological and historical studies and on a detailed survey of the impressive earthwork complexes (Marsden 1986). This was followed, in 1987, by a detailed survey of the so-called Infirmary building (Ferris 1987), this survey itself later being supplemented by further architectural and archaeological recording work during the consolidation of the structure. The 1989/1990 survey was commissioned by English Heritage.

Further building recording work took place in 1989/1990 and forms the basis of this summary report. The 'Infirmary' building was designated Structure 1 within the overall abbey and farm complex, and the other recorded structures continue this numbering sequence (Figure 2). For each structure various distinct builds were assigned Structural Element (SE) numbers, and architectural features Architectural Element (AE) numbers, and these have been recorded on pro-forma recording sheets.

## Building Recording

### Structure 2 (Figures 3 and 4)

Structure 2 had been drawn prior to repointing and consolidation, these drawings being further enhanced as part of the process of renovation. Structure 2 consists of a 19 metres long stretch of east-west aligned walling, to the south of the present farmyard, and, indeed, at one time forming the south wall of a building in the south range of the monastic cloister (see Figure 2, based on evidence from the standing remains and from exploratory excavations). It stands in part to a height of c.7 metres, and has been truncated to the west, where it now abuts a low wall bounding the garden around a Victorian farmhouse, and to the east, where again it is bonded into the returning circuit of the garden wall, the medieval walling itself being thus incorporated into the boundary.

There is a distinct vertical break towards the eastern end of the wall (as seen on the north elevation) which is also marked by a slight but nevertheless noticeable, change in the alignment of the wall towards the north east. To the west of this break the walling is relatively easily understood, consisting of two tiers of windows each providing light to one floor of what was obviously a two-storey building. The bottom storey would appear to have been a vaulted undercroft with the scars of the vaulting being noticeable on the inner, northern face, around the three small, single-light windows (AE1, AE2, AE3) with their pointed, arched heads, and splayed jambs, only the westernmost of which (AE3) still retains its sill. Scars for two piers or corbels from which the vaulting would have sprung are noticeable between AE1 and AE2, now infilled largely with brick (SE1001), and between AE2 and AE3, now infilled with sandstone blocks (SE1002). There is no evidence for these windows having been glazed and they may simply have been provided with shutters.

Again on the inner face, can be seen the level of the floor between the two storeys, marked by a band of green sandstone (SE1003), the lower build being almost exclusively of red or purple-red sandstone (SE1000). The upper storey was lit by lancet windows, with angled and internally splayed jambs, of which five survive (AE4, AE5, AE6, AE7, AE8), AE4 to the east

(missing part of its east jamb and its head) forming a pair with AE5; AE6 with AE7; and AE8, to the west, being the sole survivor of a third conjectured pair. The southern, or outer, face of the wall is strengthened by two buttresses (AE9 and AE10), up to first floor level only, while a scar (AE11), to the east, may mark the position of a third buttress.

On the inner face, at the east end of the wall, interpretation is made more difficult by the fact that the walling does not survive above a height of c.2.40 metres. Nevertheless, it can be seen that to the east of the above-mentioned vertical building break is a doorway (AE12) which may have been part of a through-passage (or slype?), whose eastern limit was formed by a north-south aligned wall, now represented only by a scar (AE13), and its western end perhaps being formed by a timber partition corresponding with the vertical building break. The form of the stonework arch above the doorway, and the scar left around this feature, suggest the former continuation of the vaulting. It is likely that this doorway was inserted in the position of a former window, though whether this would have involved the destruction of some of the vaulting at this time cannot be said. The walling beyond the north-south wall stub (AE13), pierced by another doorway (AE14), would appear to be a later (?medieval) addition.

Some comparison will now be made with dated illustrations of the site, made before the laying out of the Victorian house and garden. The earliest, dated 1731, was drawn by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck and shows a considerable area of monastic walling still standing on the site; however, the drawing is extremely difficult to relate to the remains on the ground today, though the south refectory wall can clearly be seen to have five pairs of the first floor lancet windows surviving, in addition to a great expanse of walling rising above those windows.

An engraving of 1799, by J. Caldwell, though the relevant wall is only seen in the distance from the east, shows only three pairs of lancet windows surviving. From 1811 comes an engraving by J. Storer showing the south

face of the wall, with a number of carved grave slabs, one of which is now inside the Infirmary building, built into the wall fabric. A tall doorway to the east can be identified with AE14, while a stone-built dog-kennel (the dog itself is rather unconvincingly playing in the foreground) is built up against the wall face between AE14 and AE12. An undated, but presumably later, view of the same wall shows the truncated east and west ends of the wall before its incorporation into the garden boundary wall, and a new feature, between window AE3 and doorway AE12, an arch-headed niche cut into the upper face of the ground-floor walling, but this feature does not appear on any of the other illustrations, and its purpose is unknown.

### Structure 3 (Figures 5 - 10)

To the west of Structure 2, and standing a little away from the main farmyard complex in splendid isolation, is Structure 3, an open-fronted, south-facing shelter-shed or cart lodge. The building is in a poor state of repair and an area of tiles is missing from the roof at the west end; the inside is covered with a substantial quantity of compressed straw and manure, perhaps to a depth of up to 1 metre, obscuring any floor surfaces and the bases of the internal walls. The building was planned and elevations were drawn of all the external wall faces. In addition, the internal faces of the north and east walls were drawn, as were the lower levels of the west gable wall and of both faces of the stone, internal dividing wall.

Aligned roughly east-west, the building is c.13 metres long and 6.75 metres wide, the apex of the roof being at least 6 metres above the internal floor level. Open along its south front it is internally divided into two unequal parts (that to the west being c.6.75 metres long and that to the east c.5 metres) by a north-south aligned cross-wall of stone. The western bay is partially sub-divided by a brick wall, not running as far back as the north wall, this short brick wall forming part of the support for the frontage.

The building is quite obviously a composite structure, not only representing a number of periods of build but also the use of a number of types of building material, including red sandstone, green-grey sandstone and brick. It has been suggested that the structure incorporates part of the west wall of the medieval monastic refectory (represented elsewhere on site by the upstanding south wall, called Structure 2 above) but this cannot be categorically demonstrated; however, an examination of the elevations of the east wall of Structure 3 (Figures 7 and 8), shows that a great number of well-cut and faced sandstone blocks form the central portion of the wall, laid in good horizontal coursing, while, on the interior face (which would have been the external face of the refectory), two contiguous chamfered blocks at a height of c.1.5 metres, suggest medieval stringcoursing in situ. Certainly the regularity of this build is out of place in comparison with the rest of the building and therefore may well be part of the refectory structure.

The subsequent phases of building, the first of which obviously occurred some time after the Dissolution, can best be understood by looking at the external elevation of the north wall (Figure 6), where it can be seen that there are two very distinct building breaks, that to the east being a vertical break and that to the west being more jagged and represented by cracking, and the opening of jointing, along a point of weakness. Thus the building would appear to have been quite small when first constructed and then to have been subsequently lengthened on two separate occasions, on each occasion the build being of red sandstone blocks, presumably stripped from nearby standing walling surviving from the monastic period, with larger quantities of grey-green stone being used in the westernmost of these extensions. It is not possible to prove which build is the earliest but it appears likely that the westernmost end of the building is the oldest and that the stone wall which now acts as an internal dividing wall was once the eastern gable end of the building.

Looking at the arrangement of openings in the wall faces (that is, a small rough opening (AE1), almost at ground level on the north end of the east elevation; a small, rectangular window with chamfered jambs and a wooden head (AE2) in the north elevation, again at a low level; a small

rectangular window with a stone mullion (AE3), again in the north face and now blocked; a small rectangular window with chamfered surround (AE4), in the west face, and, further up this face, three ventilation holes (AE5-AE7) or owl holes) it seems unlikely that this structure was ever used for accommodation purposes, and must always have been a farm building.

A fifth and sixth phase of build are represented by the use of bricks, of two sizes; those of 2.3/4 inches thickness are used in the roof support trusses and in the southern brick construction in the east gable end; those of 2.1/4-2.1/2 inches are used for the northern upper part of the same gable. Some bricks of 1.3/4 inch thickness occur in areas of mixed build and of repair and infill.

The extension of the building c.1.5 metres southward - this can be seen on the elevations of both the east and west gable-ends - and the retiling of the roof represent the final phase of building and the creation of the structure as it appears today. Whether the structure had been open fronted before this is impossible to say. There are no diagnostic stylistic traits in this building to allow the dating of the various phases of construction, save that they must all be compressed into the period between the 17th and 19th Century, though perhaps farm documentation may help in this matter. Pictorial dating evidence will be considered below.

#### Structure 4 (Figures 11 - 15)

Structure 4 lies to the north, and forms the north side of the present farmyard. It is a rectangular barn, 31 metres long and 6.5 metres wide, aligned more-or-less east-west, with a roof apex at c.8 metres above the internal floor level. It is divided into seven bays, with a floor over the two easternmost bays, creating a loft space at this end of the building, and a smaller loft over the single bay at the west end. There are pairs of opposed wooden doors (cartdoors) in the long walls, not centrally located, but placed more towards the western end of the building. A well laid surface of stone hardstanding forms a floor in the cart bay while elsewhere floors are probably of brick. However, the building still

contains considerable quantities of rubbish which obscure the floor levels in most of the building. The roof over the west end has suffered damage from a recent fire while the general state of disrepair, with the cart doors now hanging off, has been further exacerbated by recent vandalism.

Butted up against the southern face of the barn are two further, brick-built, agricultural buildings forming the west and east sides of the farmyard. There is access from both of these buildings into the long barn, and indeed the two ends of the barn are not accessible from the main body of the barn itself, thus relating the latest function of these outer bays to that of the other buildings. The east end of the barn is butted up against the substantial standing remains of the south transept of the monastic church.

The barn is built of a mixture of materials - timber, sandstone blocks, sandstone rubble and brick - which very much reflects the types of build, and reuse of materials, already seen in Structure 3. Again, like Structure 3, it is possible to identify some medieval masonry incorporated within the building, as well as medieval stonework reused in the later builds. As has already been noted, the eastern gable end of the barn butts up against the west wall of the south transept of the monastic church, while parts of the south wall of the nave of that church are certainly incorporated within the north wall of the barn, as at the west end external face of this wall (Figure 13). Again, by examining the interior faces of the wall, around doorways AE4 and AE8 (Figure 14), it can be seen that wide, arched doorways of medieval build (AE17, AE18) still exist in situ here, that to the west end of the wall probably being the entrance into the church reserved for layfolk and that to the east being in the position of the processional door into, and out of, the cloister to the south. Other portions of church wall may be incorporated within the barn's north-wall fabric - indeed the rubble build used in much of this wall, to the east of the cart door, may simply be the consolidated exposed core of the medieval wall, while the lower portions of the sandstone wall to the west of the door may be medieval. The inner face of the west wall of the barn, at least at its lowest level (the unusual thickness of this



wall is apparent in plan) may be medieval. The sandstone blocks used elsewhere in the building are probably reused.

It seems likely that prior to the construction of the present barn there was an earlier, smaller barn here, as is suggested by an examination of the roof (Figure 15), there being noticeable remnants, along its southern side, of a possible cruck-frame in the central section of the present barn. The present roof arrangement, a uniform queen-strutted roof, although obviously reusing timbers, is a single build, although the use of brick trusses to support the wall plate and the purlins at the western gable end of the building suggests that the most westerly bay is an extension to the structure, and the same may be the case with the most easterly bay.

The brickwork in the main build of the southern wall of the barn, pierced here by numerous ventilation openings, the bricks being 3 inches thick, is a single build, though bricks of other sizes are found elsewhere in the barn, mainly being used for infilling and repair. There is a discontinuity in build and fabric both to the east and to the west of this 'ventilated' brickwork and its associated timber framing (see Figure 12).

A number of general points about the phasing of the building can therefore be made. The barn, it has been suggested above, is of three main phases, (not including the medieval fabric); an initial small structure with a possible cruck-frame was enlarged and virtually rebuilt using quantities of brick and, perhaps, at this stage was butted up against the standing medieval masonry of the church transept to the east. A further extension was later added to the west, taking in further medieval stonework. At every stage the building will principally have been used for the storage and processing of grain crops and for the storage of hay; the alignment east-west provides shelter for the south-facing farmyard of which the barn would have formed an integral part. The changes in size of the structure will reflect not only the changing needs of Manor Farm but also, perhaps, wider changes in agricultural practice and, indeed, changing sizes of yield as a result of agricultural improvements.

An examination of the various illustrations/drawings of the abbey complex do not help to date closely either the shed, Structure 3, or the barn, Structure 4. The Buck drawing of 1731 (Figure 16) shows no agricultural buildings on the site, though the veracity of this illustration has already been questioned above. The Hooper engraving of 1774 (Figure 17) shows, from a distance, a farm building roughly in the position of Structure 3 but detail is lacking. An engraving of 1799 by J. Caldwell (Figure 18), and confirmed by drawings of 1801 and 1808 by D. Parkes (Figures 19 and 20) shows a large barn-like structure, partially hidden behind the walling of the south transept, while an engraving by W. Angus, based on another drawing by Parkes (Figure 22), and published in 1813 (though it is likely to be somewhat earlier as Parkes had been recorded as drawing at Halesowen as early as 1789) shows the east end of a barn butted up against the south transept wall. The details of this walling are completely unlike anything visible today, suggesting that much of this face was destroyed when the brick building forming the east side of the farmyard was built up against the long barn. There is a noticeable building break visible on the Angus/Parkes illustration which tends to support the theory of the barn having been extended eastwards at some stage and not originally to have incorporated the fragments of medieval transept walling.

### Discussion

The recent survey work at Halesowen has added both to our knowledge of the monastic buildings and of those belonging to the farm that colonised the site from the 17th century onwards. While both the farm structures surveyed can be seen to be of a number of different periods and phases of build, these phases cannot as yet be securely dated. As has been demonstrated by the work of the Norfolk Historic Farm Buildings Project, documentary research, into collections of farm and estate papers, can often throw light on the dating and function of farm structures (Carter and Wade Martins 1987). Even if specific records of individual buildings are not found more general records often highlight changes in farming practice or in the management of a farm or estate which could form a broad framework

into which a model of responsive changes in the form or plan of the farm buildings, as recorded by survey, could be fitted.

Both Structures 3 and 4 would repay some further survey work, and monitoring of their repair and consolidation, if this is to happen, since certain logistical problems (that is, rubbish dumped inside both structures obscuring floor levels and the bases of some walls and, in Structure 4, an infestation of rats in the western end of the building where some old dumps of grain form an attraction) prevented complete recording. It would also be useful, in order to complete the study of the farm, to record the other farm buildings, especially as these are due to be renovated and converted for use as workshops. With Manor Farm no longer a working farm this provides an opportunity to catch in stasis the final manifestation of an activity that has dominated the site for at least as long as the monastic activity which it succeeded.

#### References

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- Ferris, I.M. 1987. Halesowen Abbey. Building Survey. B.U.F.A.U.
- Marsden, A. 1986. St. Mary's Abbey, Halesowen: Proposals for Presentation, Management and Exploration on the Abbey Site. B.U.F.A.U.

### Acknowledgements

The survey of the three structures reported on here was undertaken by a number of individuals under the supervision of Jon Sterenberg. Survey staff were, in alphabetical order; Lucy Dingwall, Quentin Hutchinson, Laurence Jones, Iain McCraith, Ed Newton, and Paul Sewter. I am further indebted to Quentin Hutchinson for his discussion on the interpretation of the long barn.

In addition to drawings prepared for this report by the above, further figures were prepared by Iain Ferris, Caroline Gait, Sonia Hodges and Liz Hooper.

The text was typed by Ann Humphries and edited by Simon Buteux.

We are grateful to Mr. David Condy, the Estates Manager at Hagley Hall, who allowed access to the buildings at Manor Farm.

## Figures

The illustrations are based on the field drawings of the survey team. Not all of these drawings have been reproduced here but remain part of the site archive.

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- Figure 2      Area of Farm Buildings with Abbey Plan Superimposed. (after Marsden 1986)
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- Figure 4      Structure 2. South, Exterior Elevation. (Jones/Ferris)
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- Figure 7      Structure 3. East Wall, Exterior Elevation. (Hooper)
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- Figure 9      Structure 3. West Wall, Exterior Elevation. (Hodges)
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## Early Illustrations

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- Figure 18     J. Caldwell. (1799)
- Figure 19     D. Parkes and J. Storer. (1801)
- Figure 20     D. Parkes and J. Basire. (1808)
- Figure 21     J. Storer. (1811)
- Figure 22     D. Parkes and W. Angus. (1813)
- Figure 23     Anon. (no date)

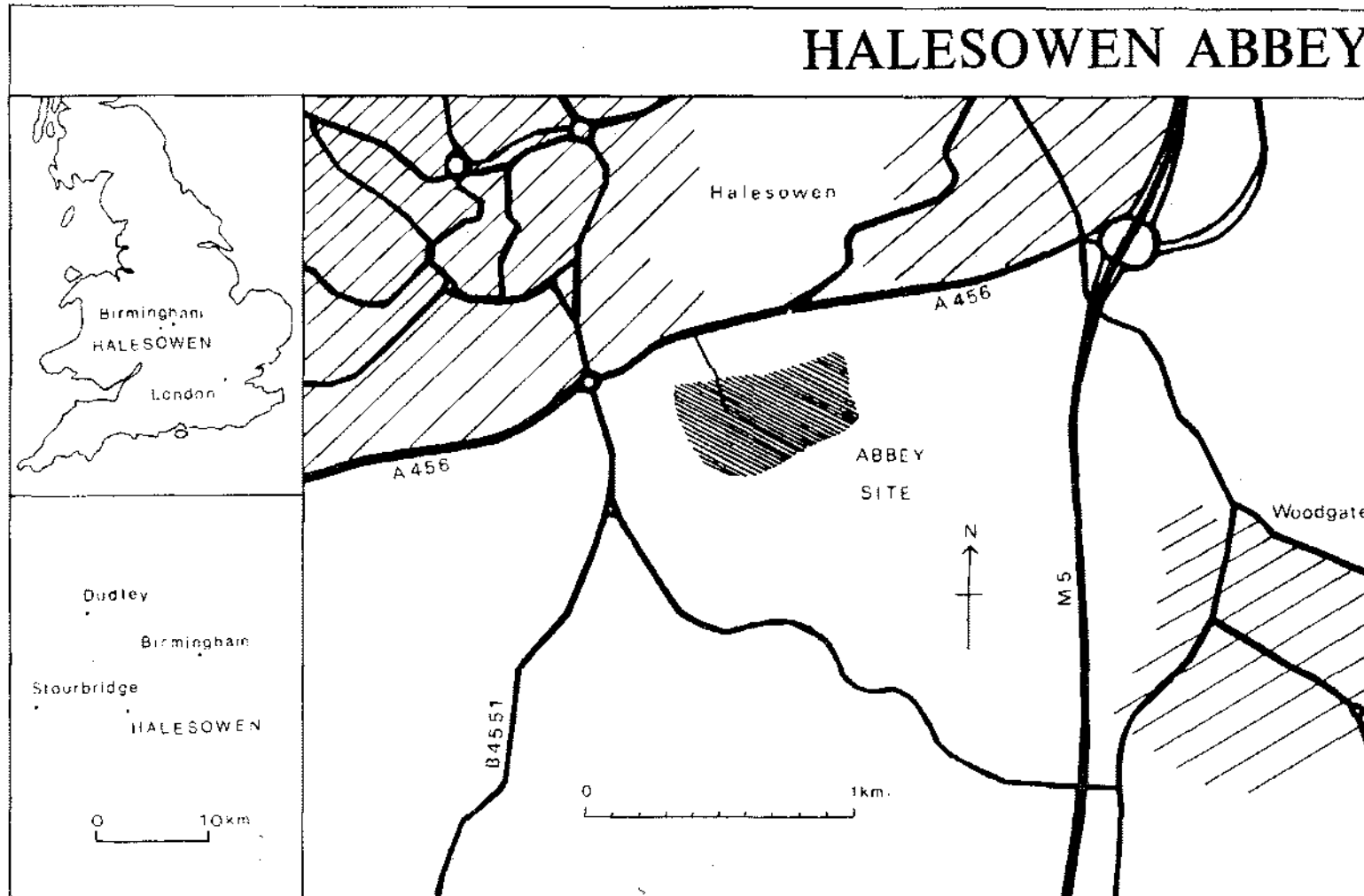


Figure 1 Location of the Abbey Site. (after Marsden 1986)

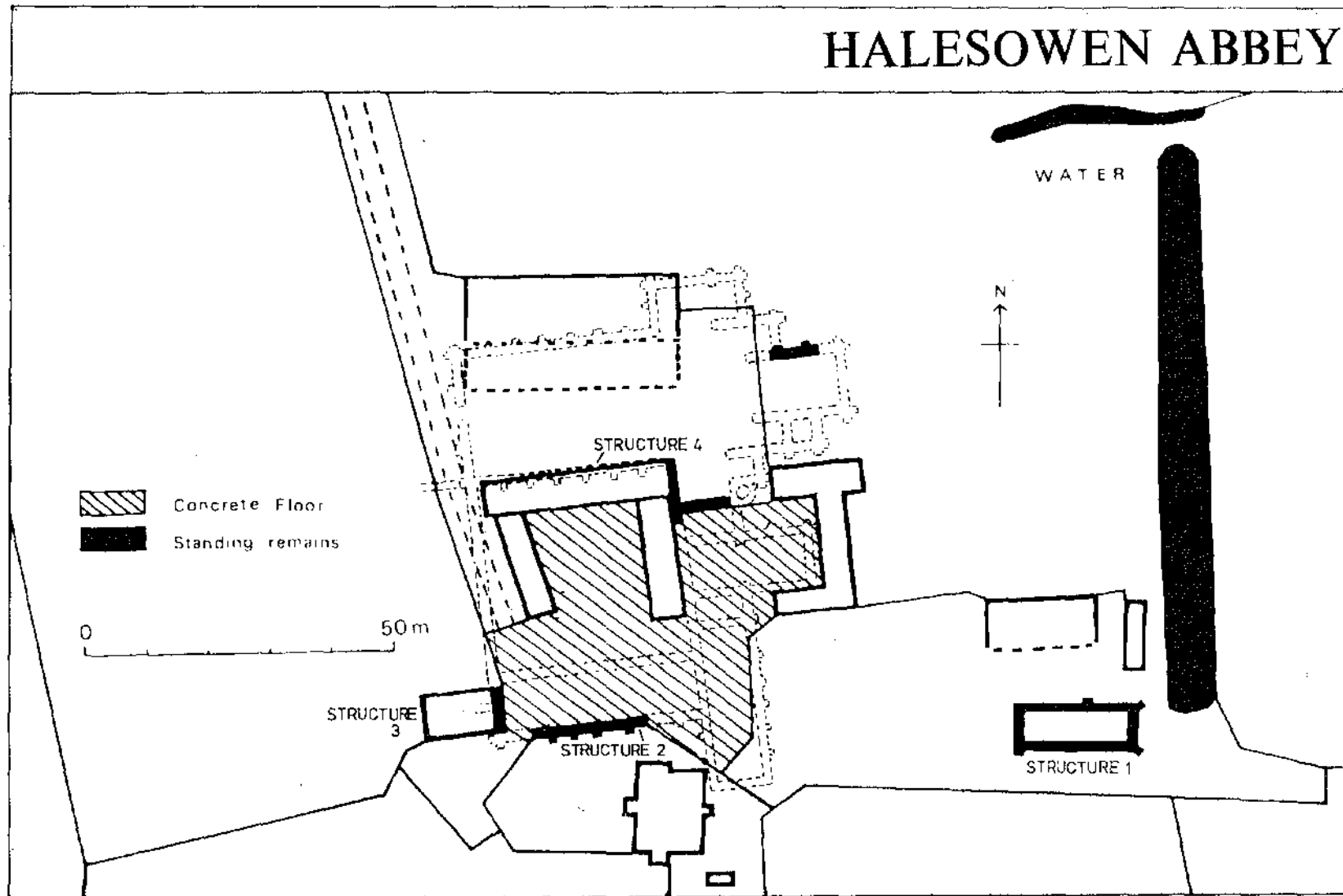


Figure 2 Area of Farm Buildings with Abbey Plan Superimposed. (after Marsden 1986)

HALESOWEN ABBEY  
Structure 2

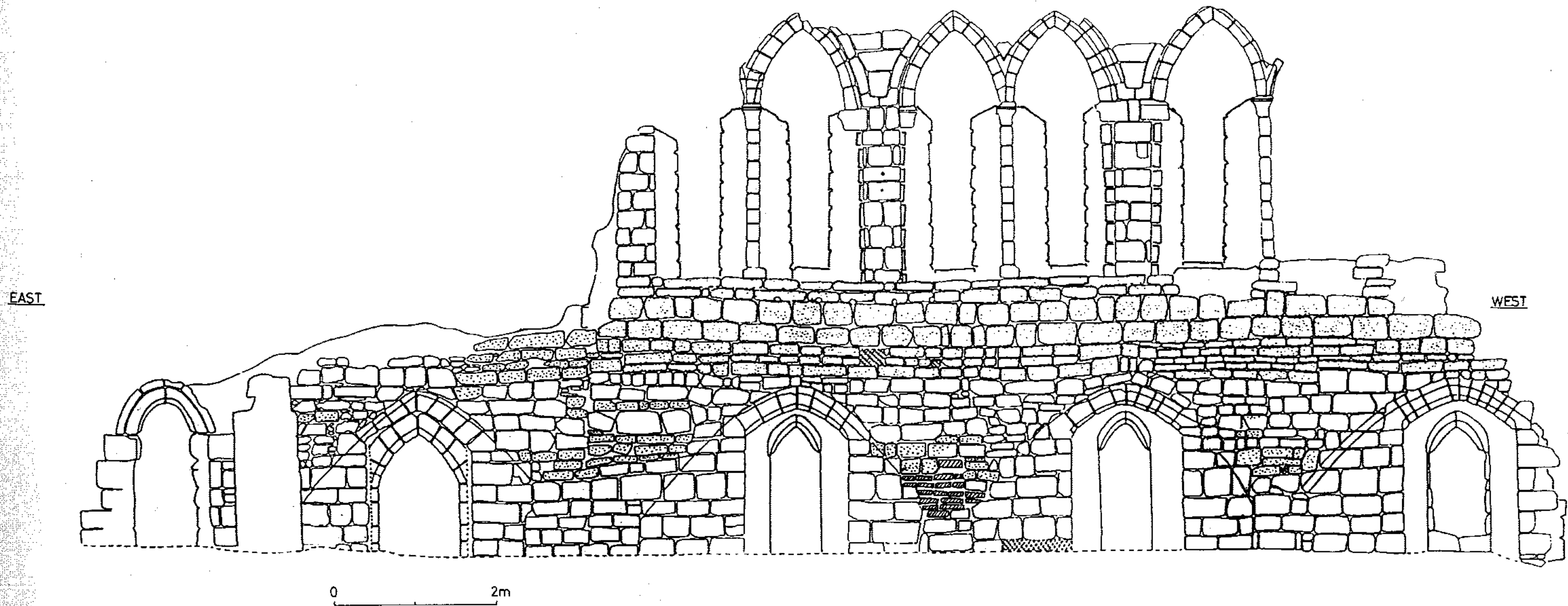


Figure 3 Structure 2. North, Interior Elevation. (Jones/Ferris)



HALESOWEN ABBEY  
Structure 2

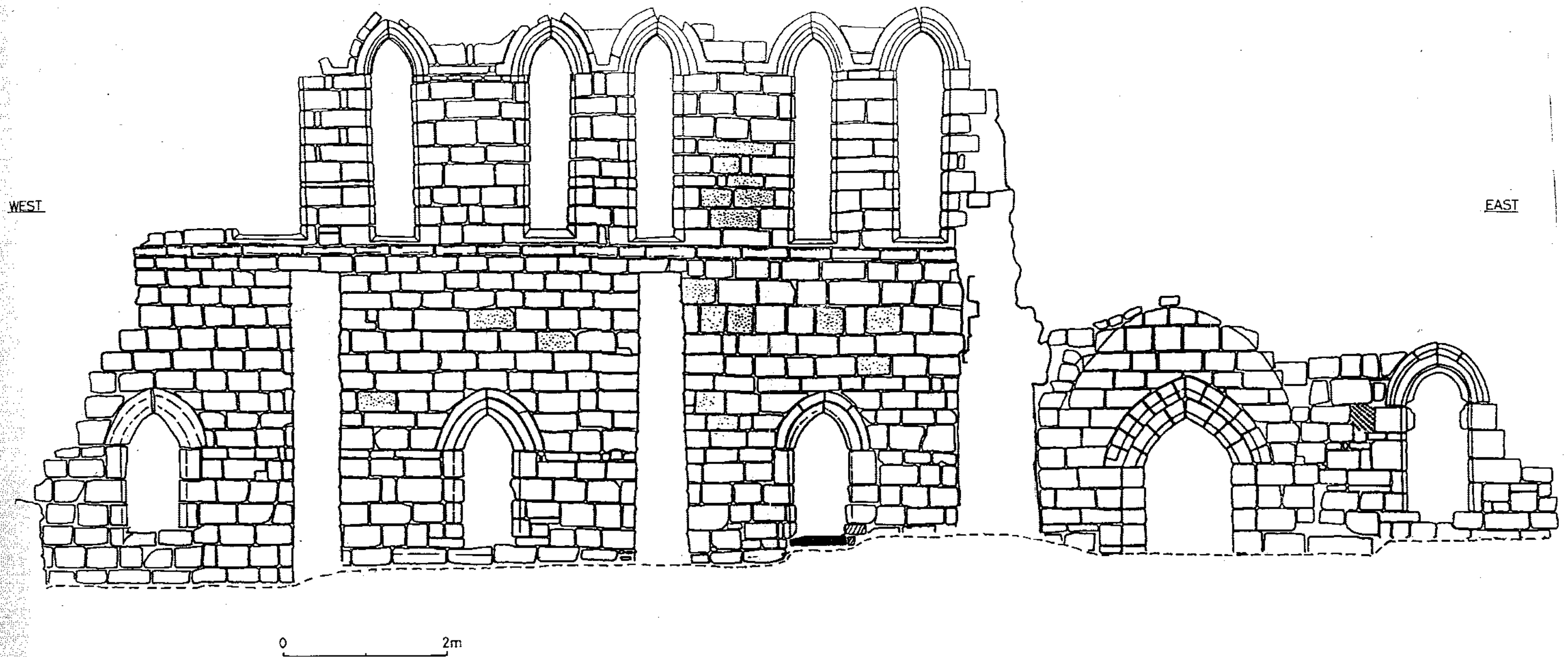


Figure 4 Structure 2. South, Exterior Elevation. (Jones/Ferris)

# HALESOWEN ABBEY

## Structure 3

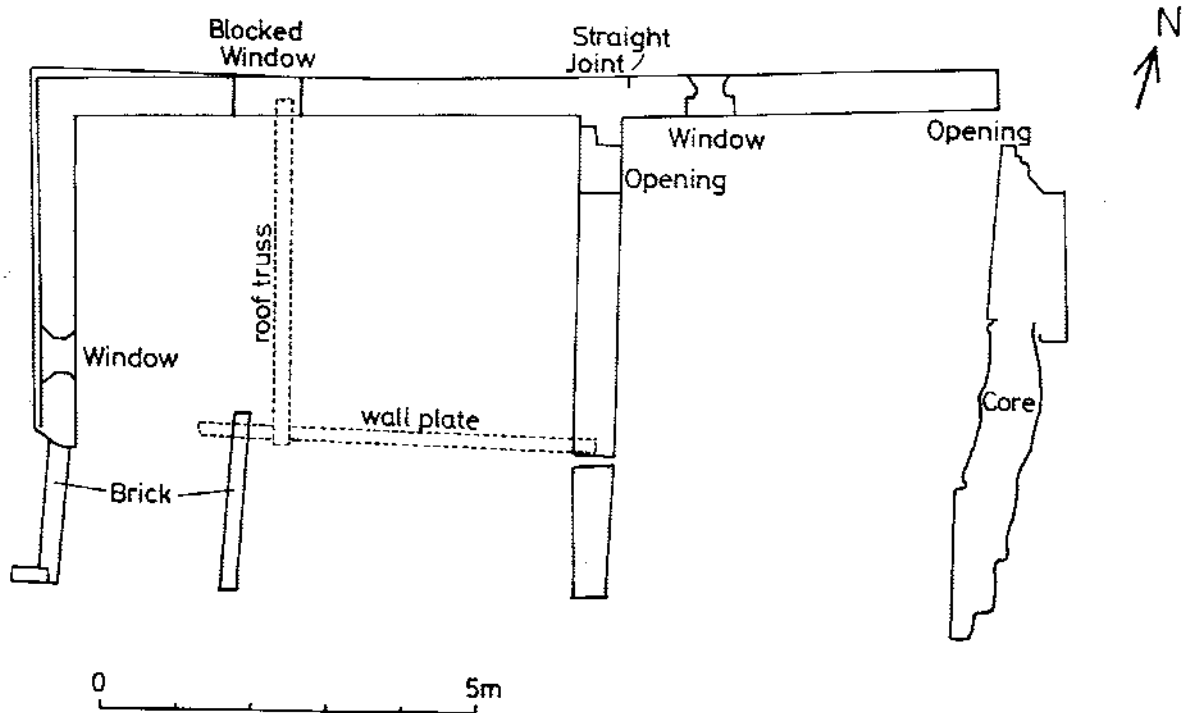


Figure 5 Structure 3. Groundplan. (Sewter)

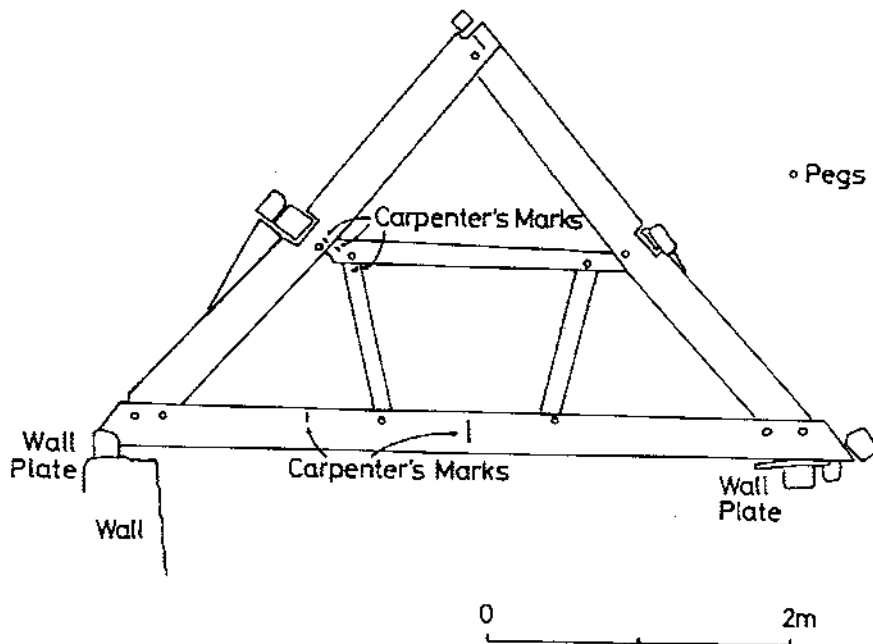


Figure 6 Structure 3. Roof Truss; Detail. (Sewter)

# HALESOWEN ABBEY

## Structure 3

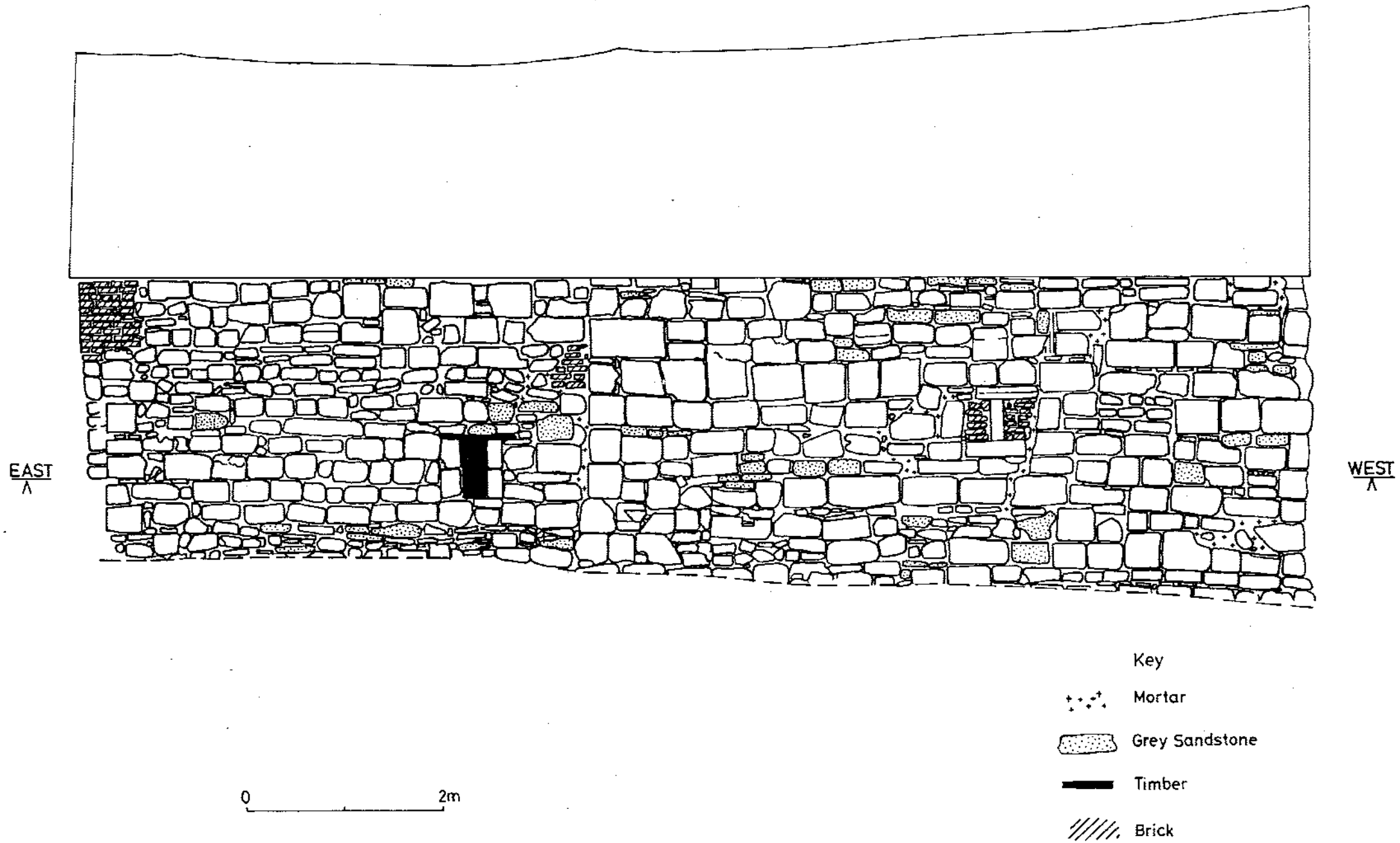


Figure 7 Structure 3. North Wall, Exterior Elevation. (Hodges)

# HALESOWEN ABBEY

## Structure 3

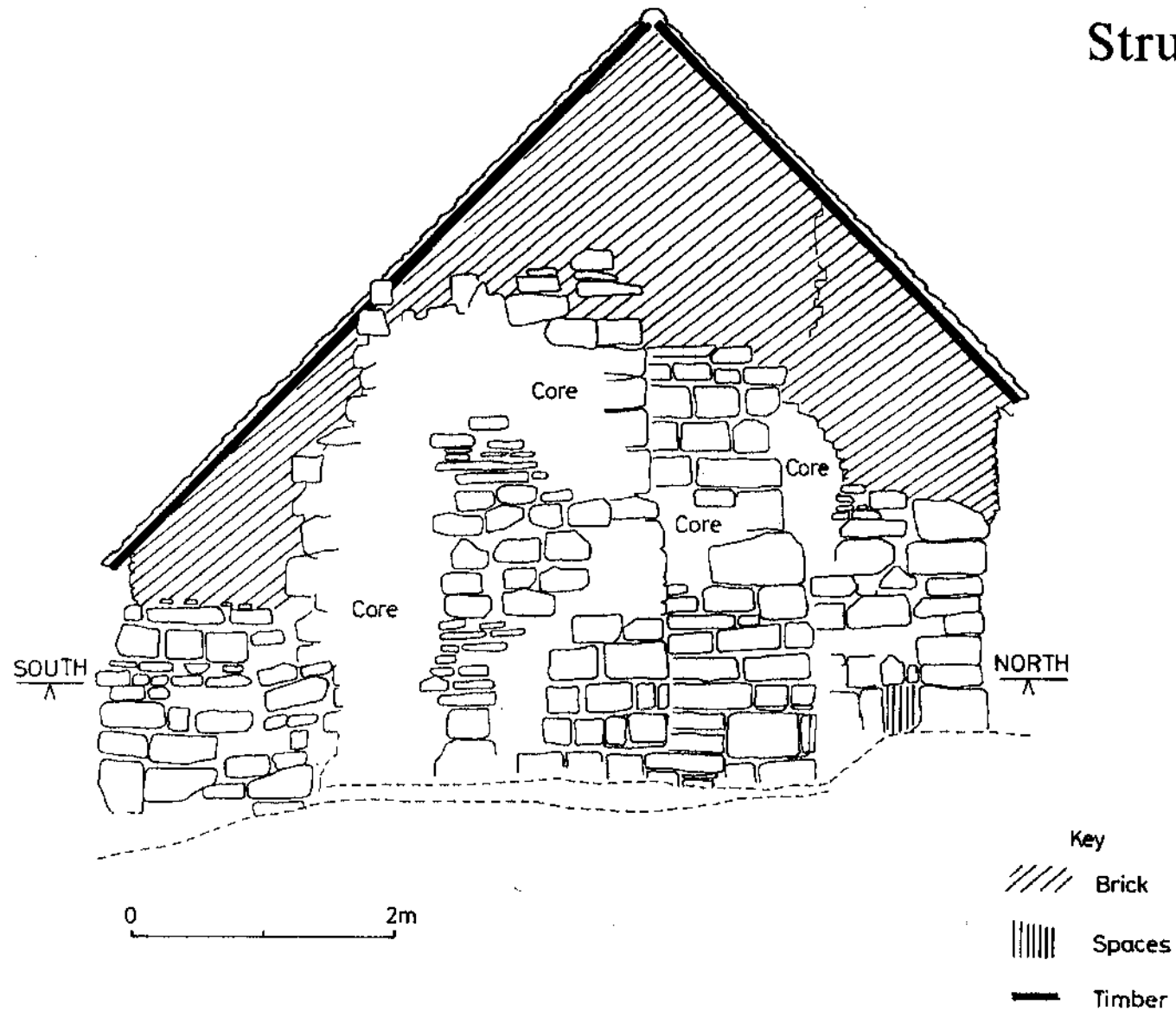


Figure 8 Structure 3. East Wall, Exterior Elevation. (Hooper)

# HALESOWEN ABBEY

## Structure 3

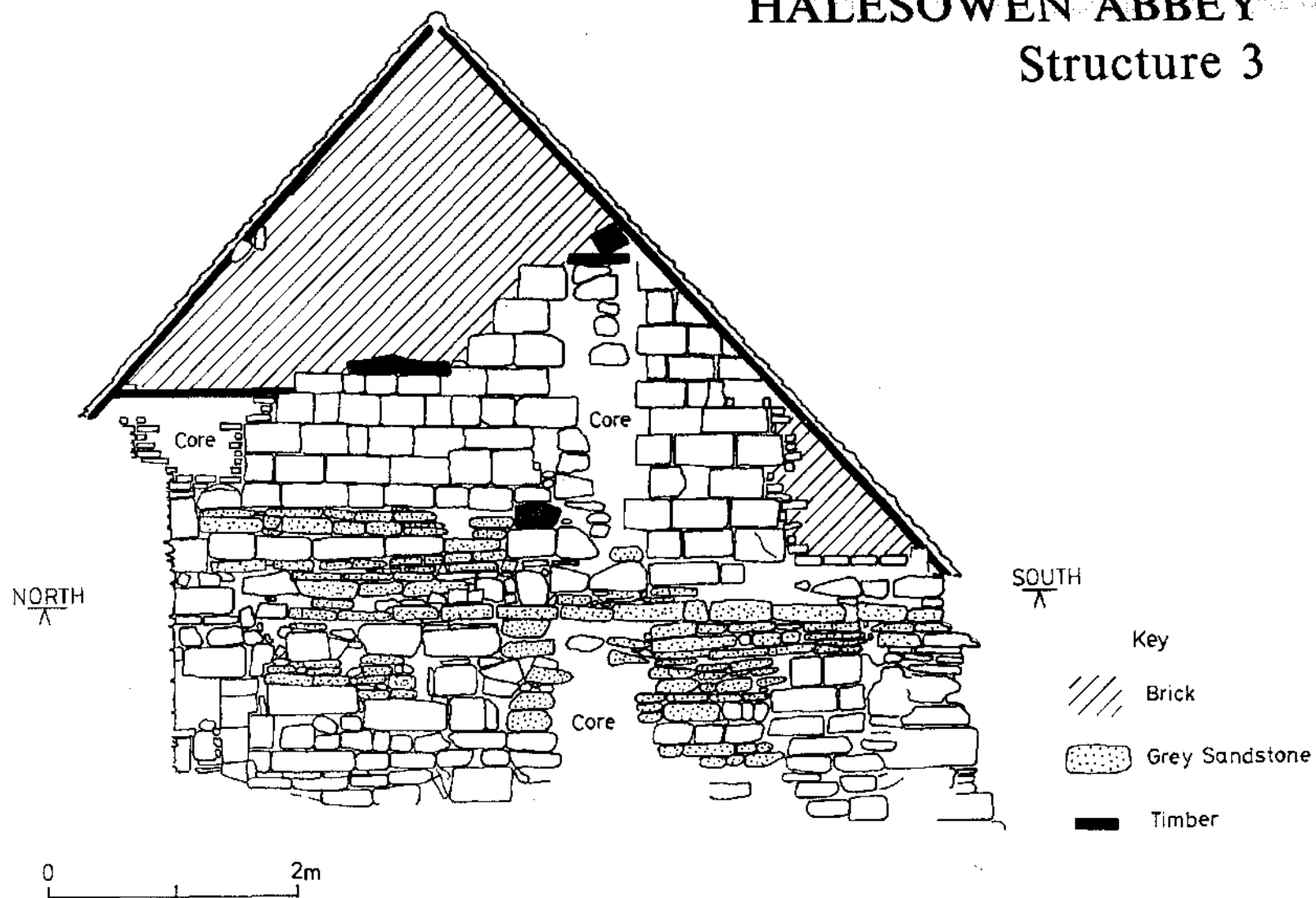


Figure 9 Structure 3. East Wall, Interior Elevation. (Hodges)

# HALESOWEN ABBEY Structure 3

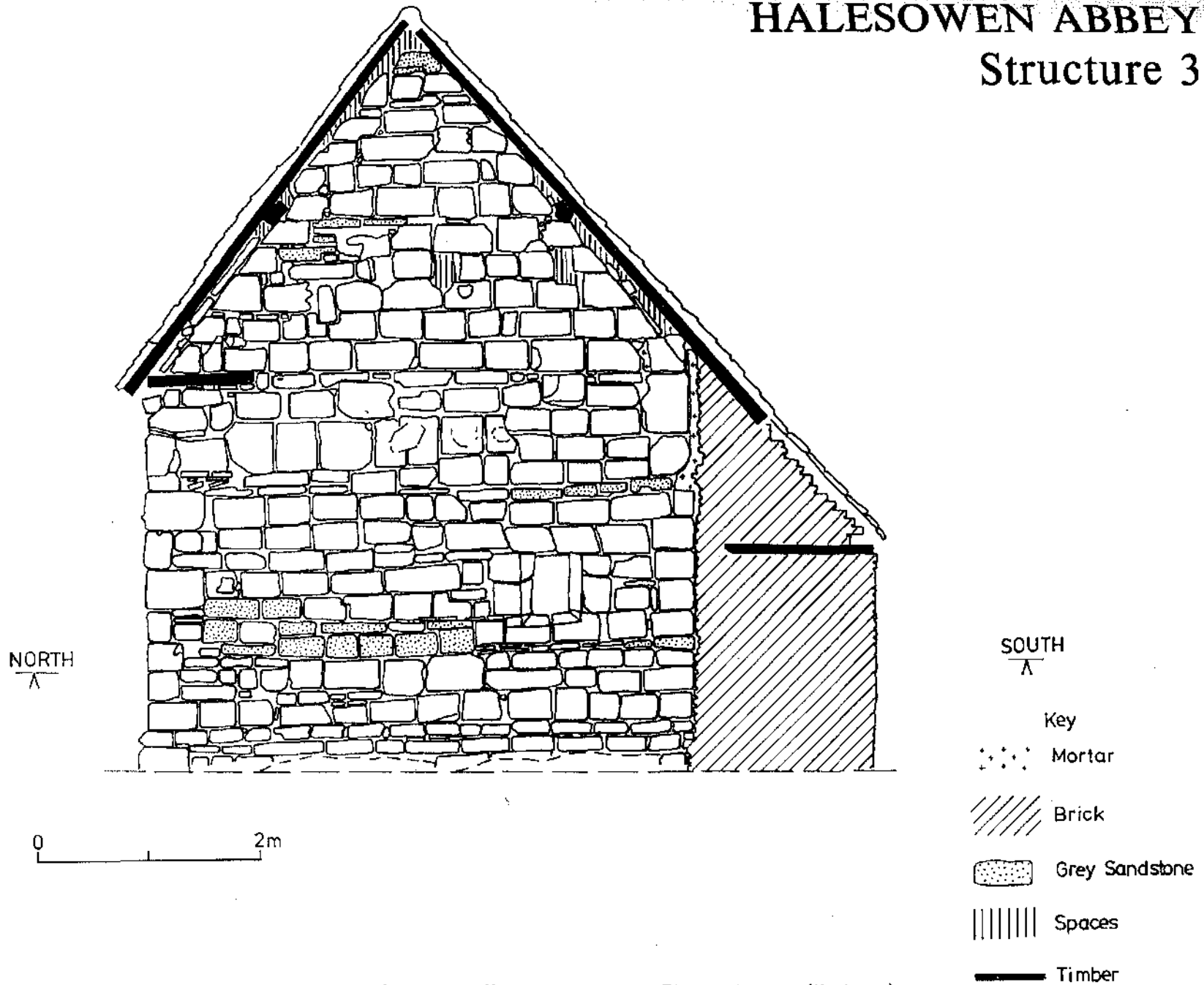
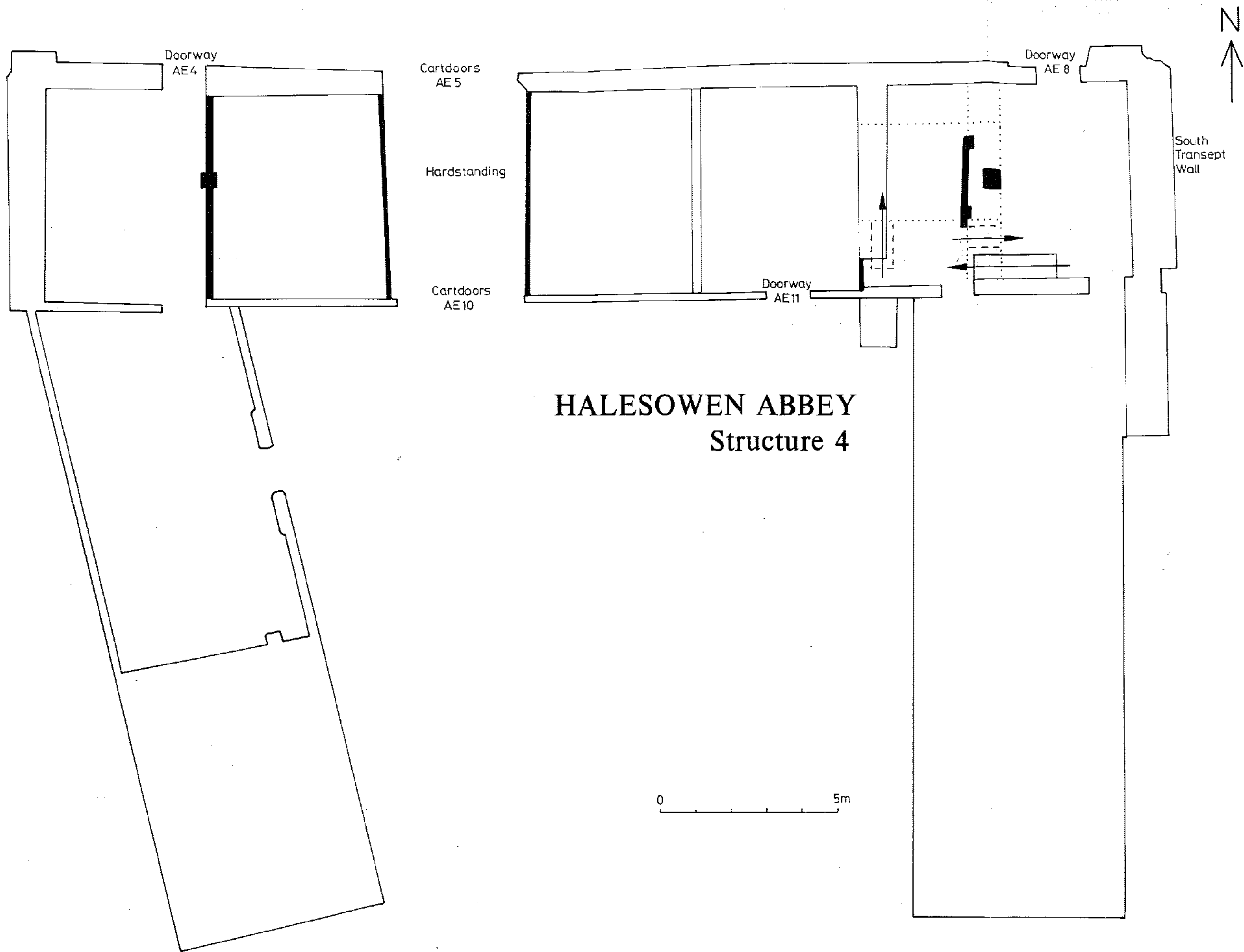


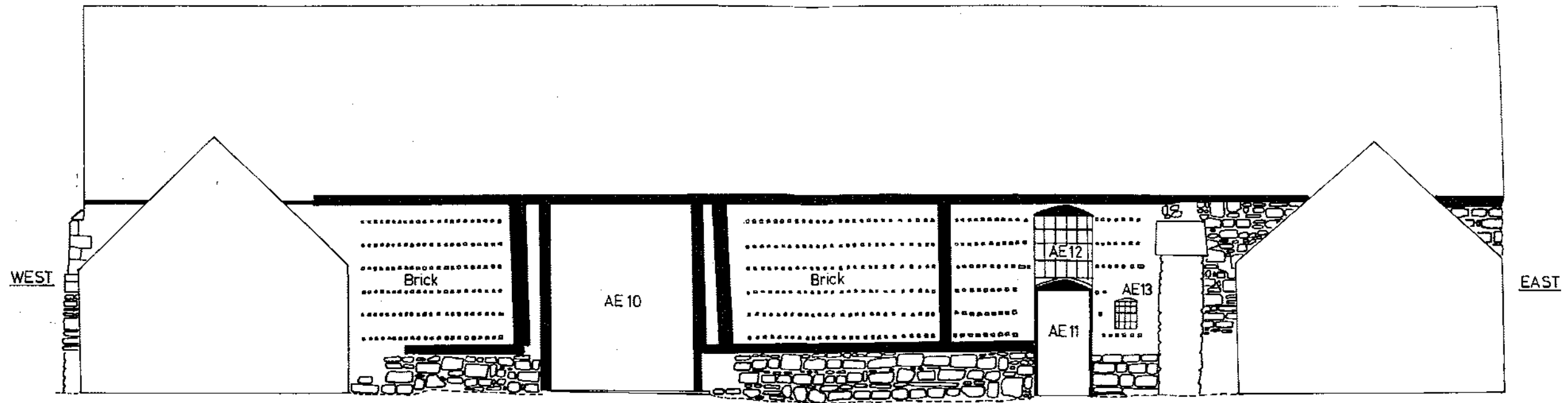
Figure 10 Structure 3. West Wall, Exterior Elevation. (Hodges)



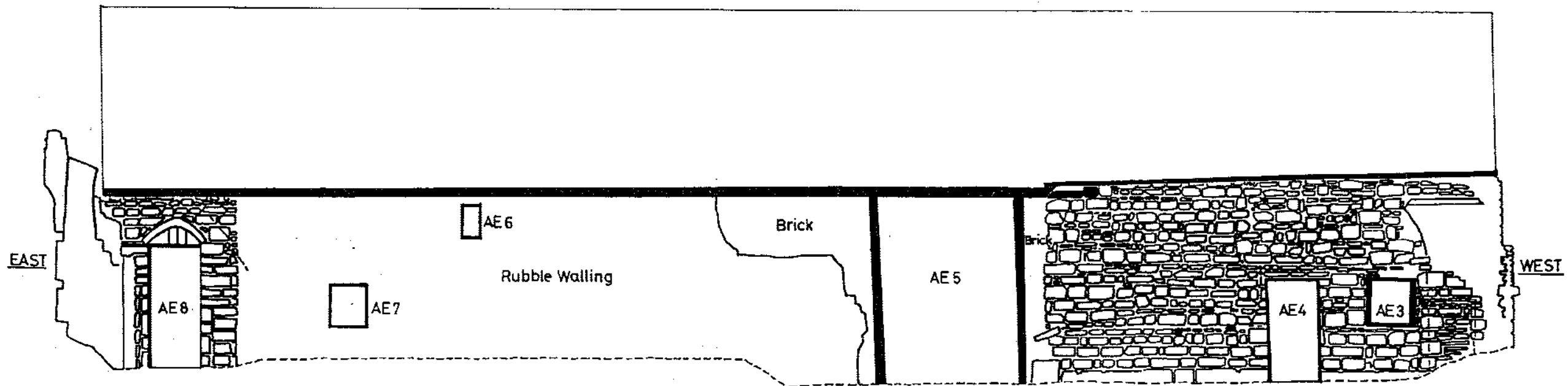
**HALESOWEN ABBEY**  
**Structure 4**

Figure 11 Structure 4. Groundplan. (Stereberg)

HALESOWEN ABBEY  
Structure 4



South Elevation



North Elevation

0 5m

Figure 12 Structure 4. Elevations of North and South Walls. (Ferris)



HALESOWEN ABBEY  
Structure 4

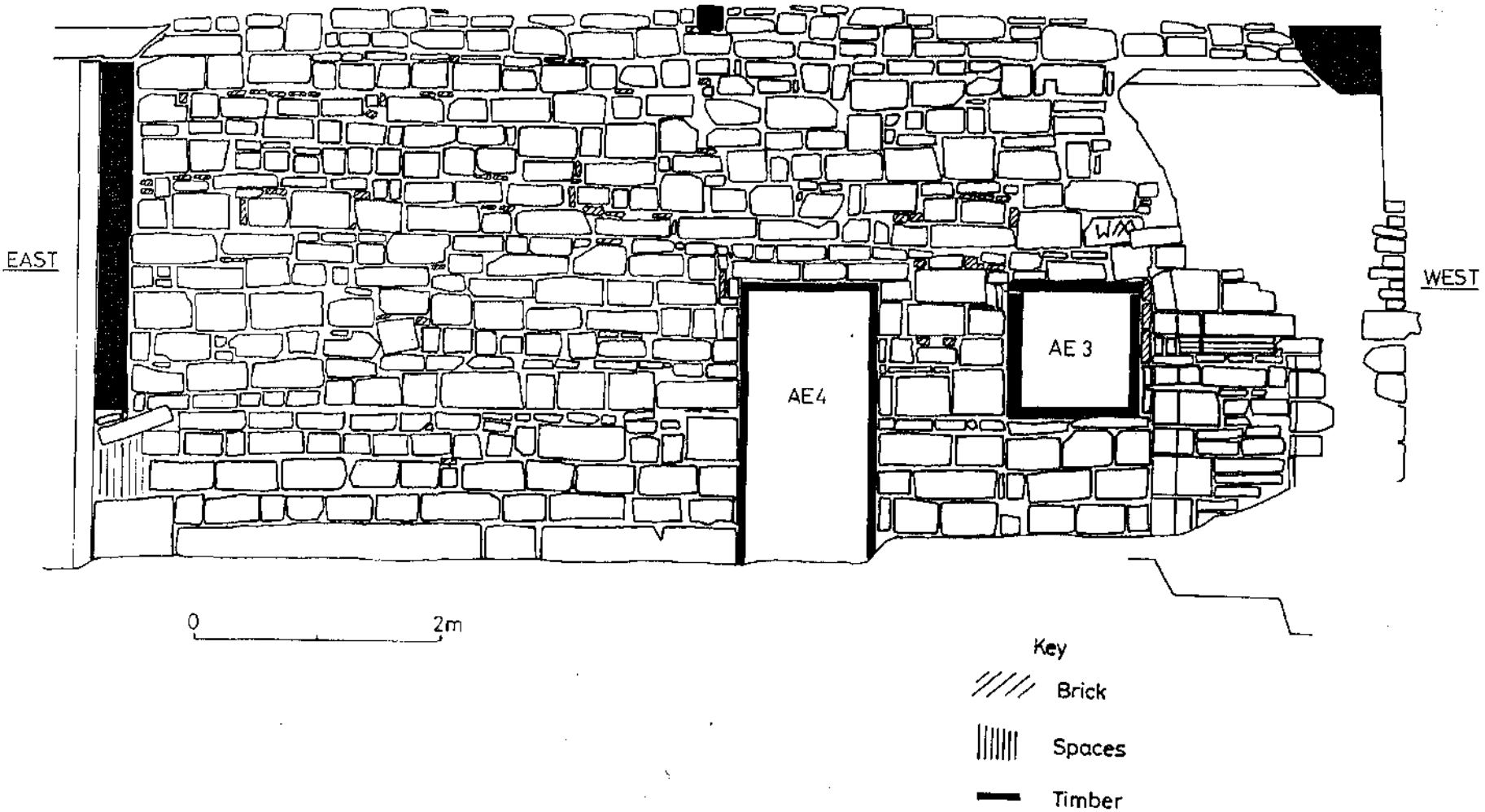


Figure 13 Structure 4. Detail of Stonework at West End of North Wall. (Sternberg)

# HALESOWEN ABBEY

## Structure 4

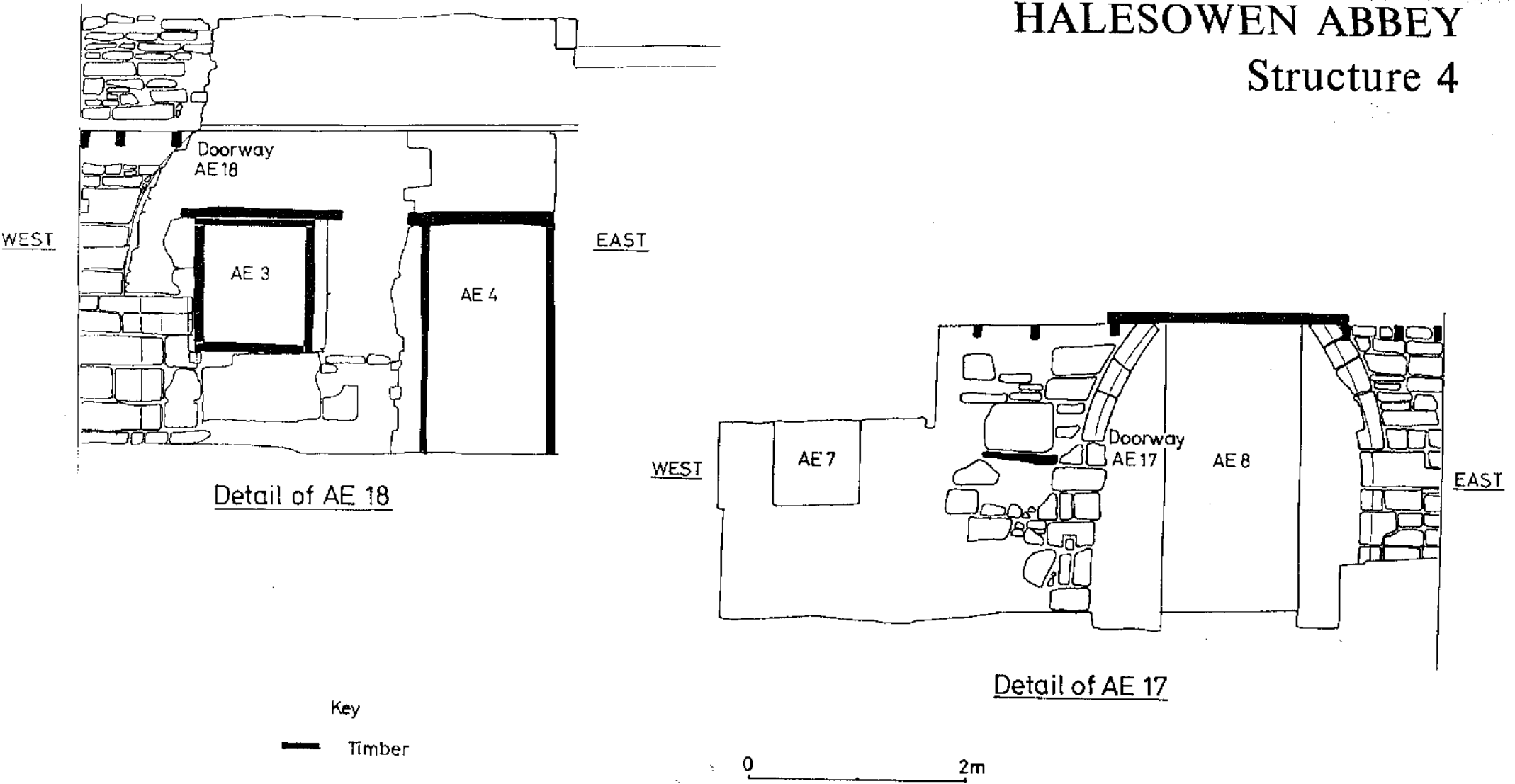


Figure 14 Structure 4. Details of Medieval Doorways, Interior Face of North Wall. (Hooper, after Sterenberg)

HALESOWEN ABBEY  
Structure 4

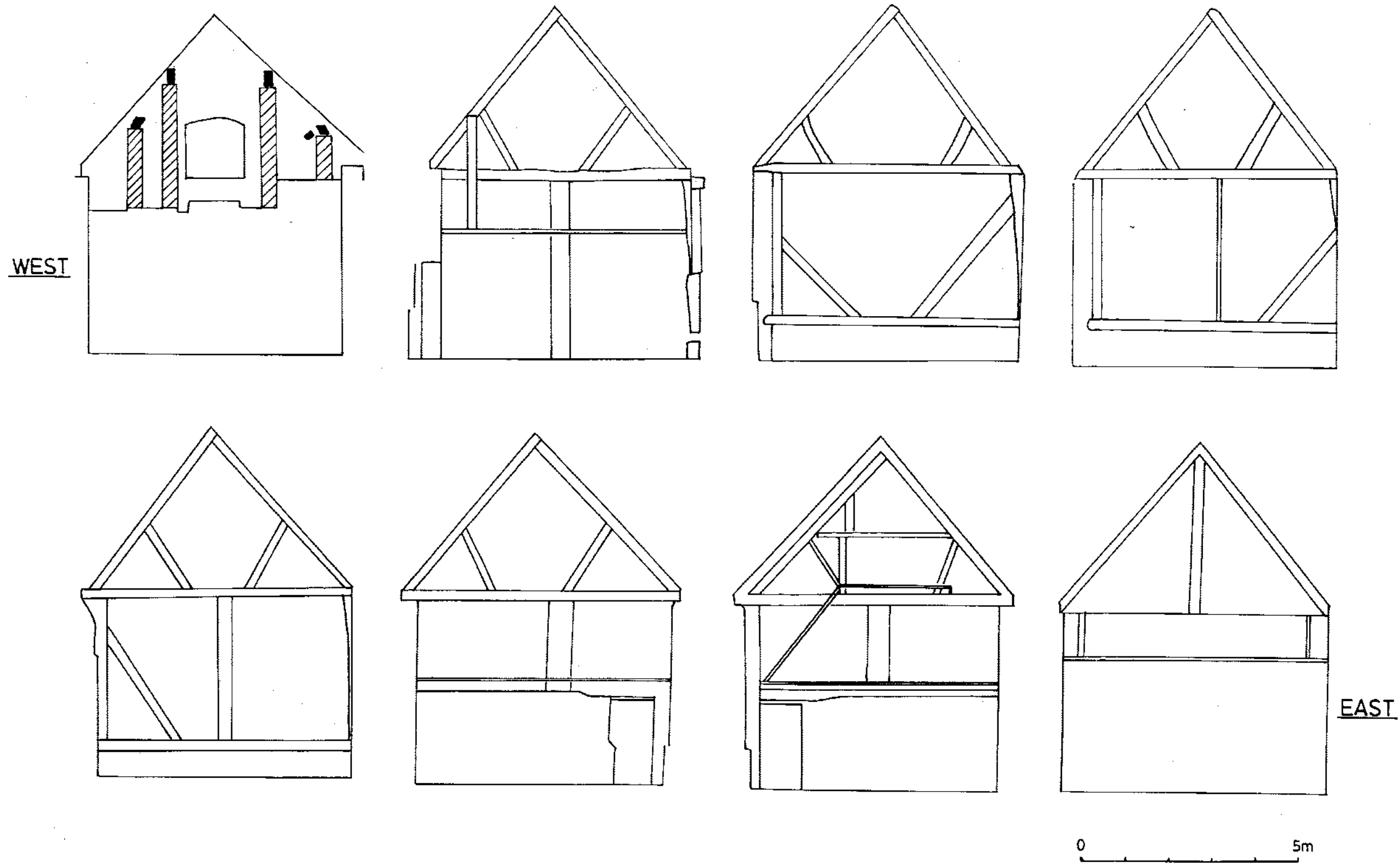


Figure 15 Structure 4. The Roof. (Ferris)

*THE EAST VIEW OF HALESOWEN ABBY. IN THE COUNTY OF SALOP.*

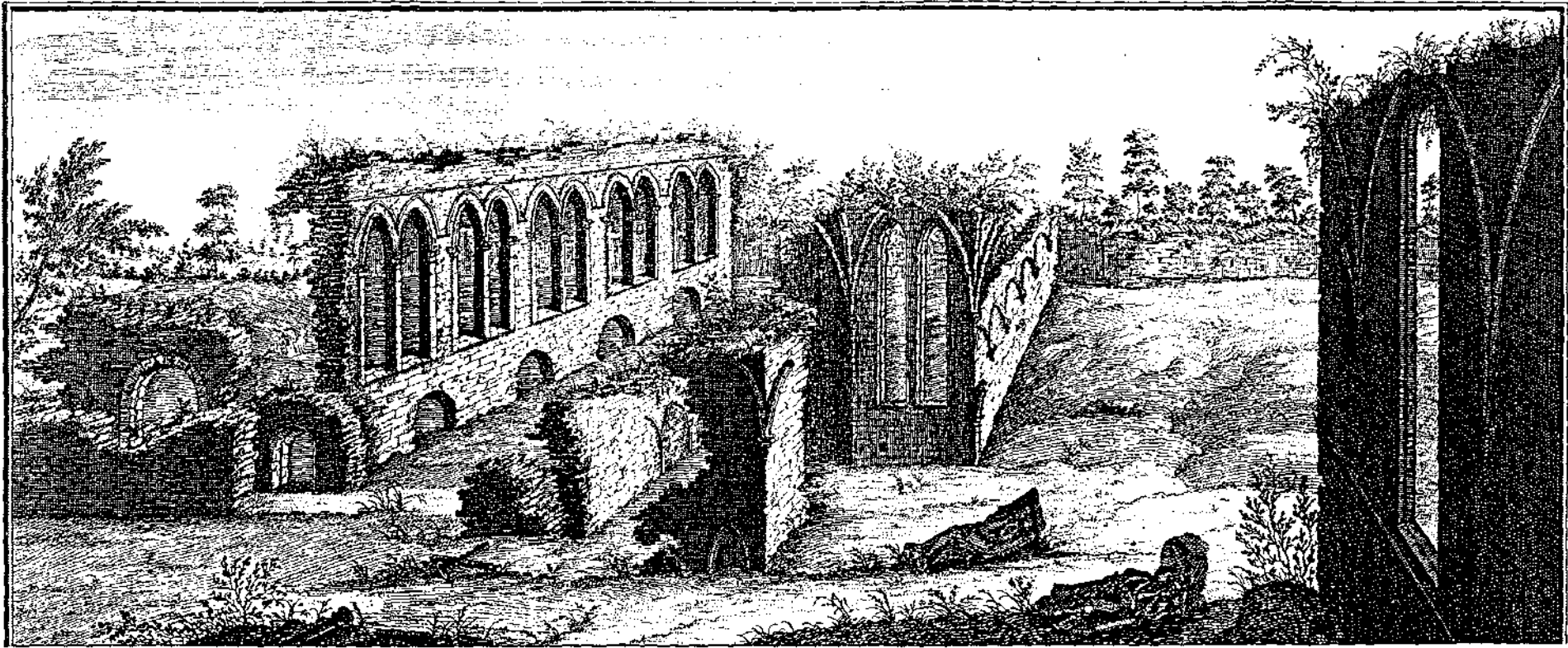


Figure 16 S. and N. Buck. (1731)



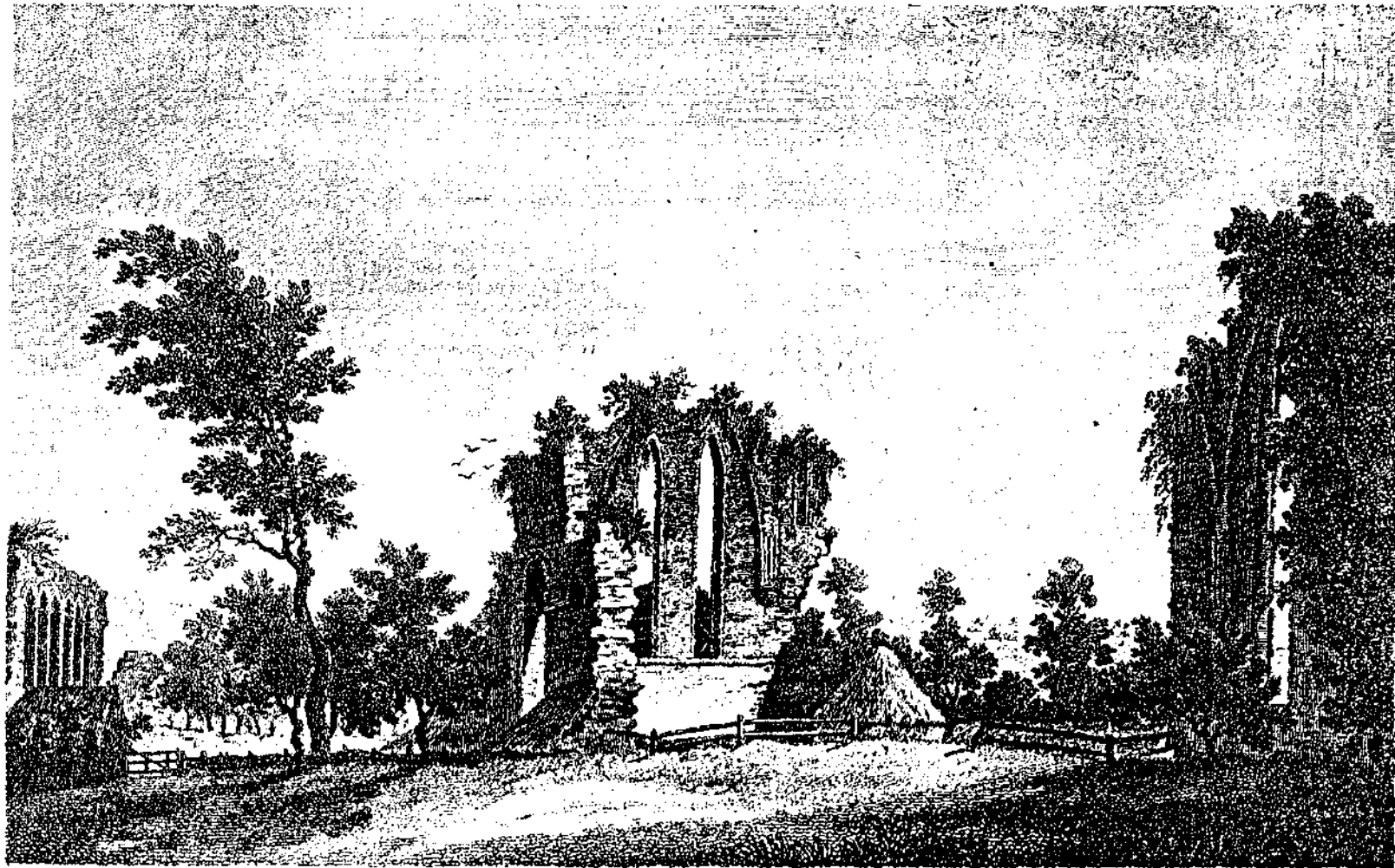
*Plat. 25. March. 1785. by S. Hooper.*

*Halton Owen Abbey, Shropshire.*

*J. Carter sculp.*

Figure 17 S. Hooper. (1774)

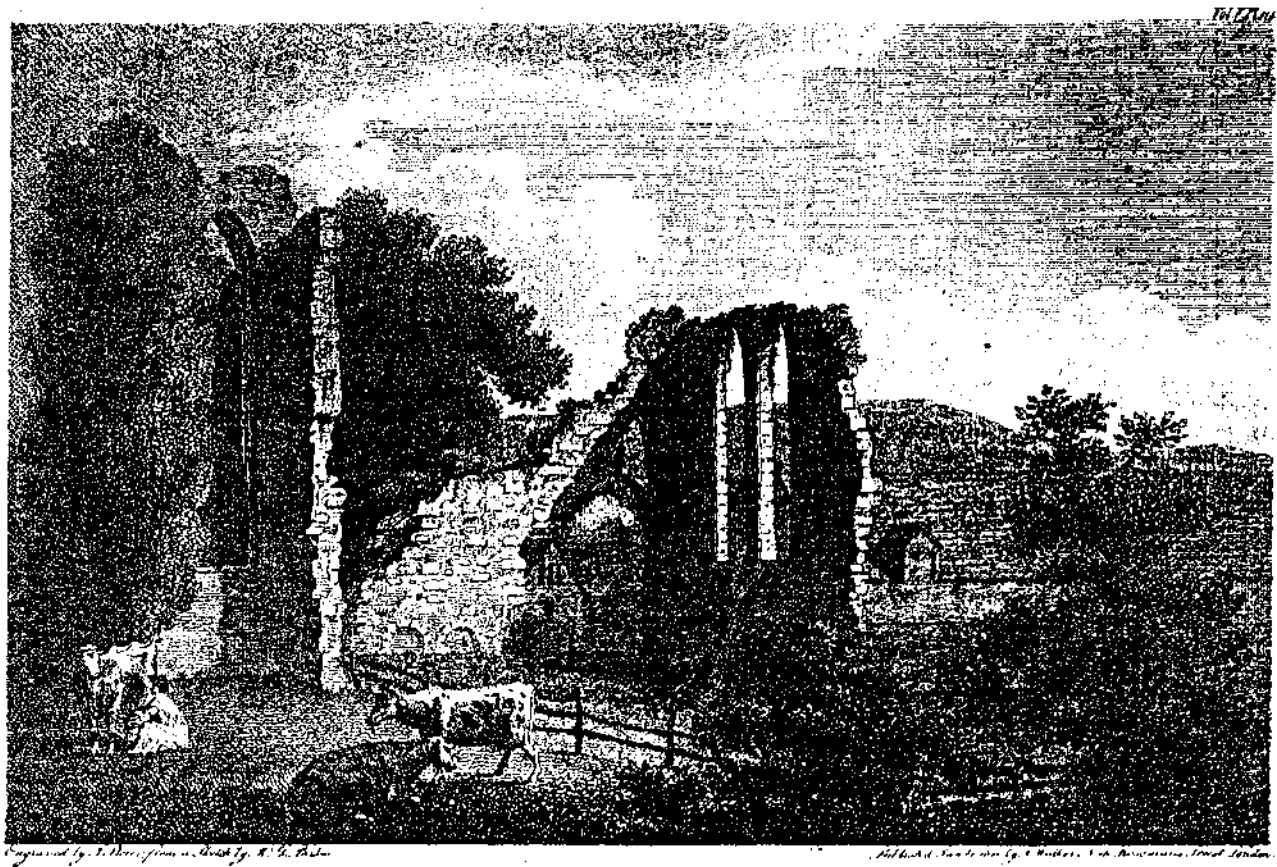
to face p. 490



J. Caldwell sculp

REMAINS OF HALES OWEN ABBEY

Figure 18 J. Caldwell. (1799)



HALES-OWEN-ABBEN, Shropshire.

Figure 19 D. Parkes and J. Storer. (1801)

*Gent. Mag. July 1808. P. 577.*



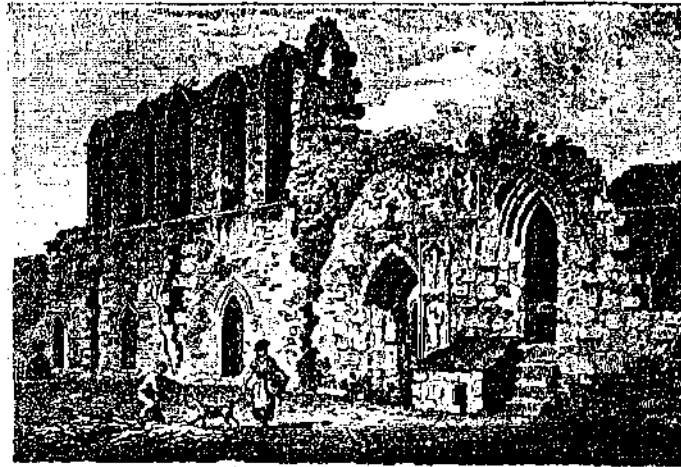
*D. Parkes del.*

*J. Basire sculp.*

*Remains of the Abbey Church of Hales-Owen.*

Figure 20 D. Parkes and J. Basire. (1808)





*St. Peter's Church, Speyer*

Figure 21 J. Storer. (1811)



Figure 22 D. Parkes and W. Angus. (1813)

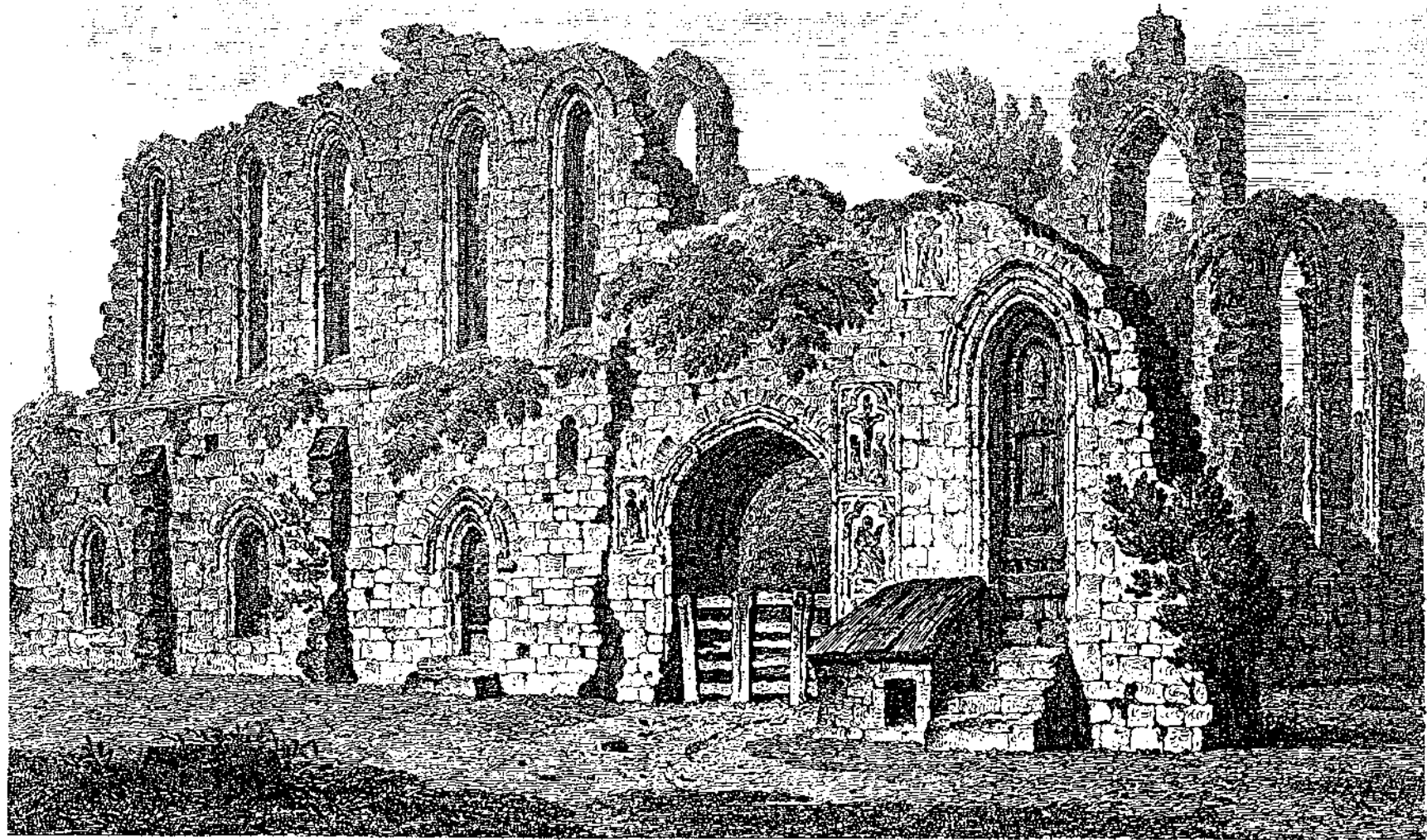


Figure 23 Anon. (no date)