Supplementary recording of a former barn near Monyhull Hall, Kings Norton, Birmingham (SP 0672 7909)

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Summary

In September 2000 a supplementary program of building recording was carried out on a former barn near Monyhull Hall, Kings Norton, Birmingham (NGR SP 0672 7907) by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit on behalf of Capitec, a part of NHS estates. The survey building appeared to be an eighteenth-century brick threshing barn of four bays and a tiled roof, but within the building the initial survey found a substantially intact timber-framed roof. On stylistic grounds, and on the known history of Monyhull Hall, the roof was provisionally dated between 1550 and 1650, but there was also evidence of alteration and reuse of timbers throughout the structure. Supplementary building recording was required by the Conservation Department of Birmingham City Council as a condition of listed building consent prior to demolition, and followed the recommendations outlined by the previous survey, which included a program of tree-ring sampling. This indicated that the timbers were probably felled between 1466 and 1501. The apparent anomaly in the dating of the roof is probably explicable in terms of substantial reuse of an earlier timber-framed structure, the walls of which were later replaced in brick.

Introduction

This document should be read in conjunction with the initial survey report produced in June 2000 (Litherland 2000), which provides a phased summary of the development of the Monyhull Hall barn together with the historical and planning background to the project. The survey building was an apparently eighteenth-century brick-built threshing barn of four bays and a tiled roof, but within the building the initial survey found a substantially intact timber-framed roof. On stylistic grounds, and on the known history of Monyhull Hall, the roof was provisionally dated between 1550 and 1650, but there was also evidence of alteration and reuse of timber throughout the structure. Supplementary building recording was required by the Conservation Department of Birmingham City Council as a condition of listed building consent prior to demolition, and followed the recommendations outlined in Section 8 of the initial survey report (Litherland 2000, 8). Recording concentrated upon more detailed survey of the roof structure and consisted of a combination of building analysis, drawn and photographic survey and dendrochronological sampling.

Method statement

The scope of the supplementary recording included:

- Completion of the elevations of those parts of the building that had been masked by other structures prior to their demolition.
- Exploratory work to ascertain if a threshing floor survived *in situ*.
- A program of tree-ring sampling to ascertain the date of the roof structure.
- Further detailed recording of the more readily accessible parts of the roof structure after removal of the lathes and tiles.
- Detailed inspection of individual timbers after they were carefully dismantled.

Specialist tree-ring dating services were provided by Robert Howard of Nottingham University. A summary of these results is presented below and a detailed specialist report follows (Howard 2001).

The report broadly follows the sequence of work highlighted above, concluding with a revised summary of our knowledge about the timber-framed (Phase 0) structure.

Results

The north and south-facing elevations were completed after the demolition of later buildings clustered around the eastern end of the survey building (fig.1; plate 1). The cutting of a number of modern features through the Phase 1 clamped brick wall had largely obliterated any evidence for earlier architectural features in this section of the building. The two simple segmental arches seen in the south-facing elevation were probably Phase 2 insertions associated with the conversion of the barn into stables. Likewise, no evidence of the former threshing floor of the barn was seen when the concrete floor was lifted. It would seem probable that the stone flags were either lifted and reused elsewhere, or discarded.

Twenty-eight tree-ring samples were taken from the roof. Each accessible timber was given a code and brief description while the roof was intact. The samples were cut under the supervision of the survey team after the timbers were dismantled. This was done by slicing the timbers with a chain saw. The samples without a code were wall plates located in the easternmost bay of the building that had previously been hidden behind a lathe-and-plaster ceiling. Note that these wall plates are depicted as continuous timbers on figure 2, 3 and 4 because their precise location could not be accurately measured. The samples were processed at the tree-ring laboratory in Nottingham University. The majority of the samples were taken from the larger wall plate and purlin timbers, although seven of the samples had too few rings for satisfactory analysis. Of the remaining samples, a group of twelve contained seventy six cross-matched rings spanning the period 1391-1466. Interpretation of the sapwood, and the relative positions of the heartwood/sapwood boundaries suggested an estimated felling date in the range 1466-1501. The location of the majority of these dated timbers is given on figure 2,

although some of the dated samples were from the uncoded wall plates referred to above. This date is considerably earlier than that postulated on stylistic and site-historical grounds for the roof. This apparent inconsistency is discussed in more detail below.

Further survey of the roof timbers was also undertaken after the tiles and lathes were removed from the roof, and later when the timbers had been dismantled (plate 2). This additional recording concentrated upon details of the joints and timbers that were not previously visible or accessible, and resulted in a revised cross-section of the roof that includes the main frame and common rafters represented in figure 3. Finally, figure 4 is not intended to be a straightforward reconstruction drawing, but instead is intended to represent some of the main features of the timber-framed phase of the building, although this is a complicated exercise for the reasons set out below.

Conclusions

The difference between the dating of the roof based upon the tree-ring samples and that previously proposed upon stylistic parallels and site-historical grounds requires careful explanation. The stylistic argument is complicated because our regional knowledge of timber-framed building in the region around 1500 is fairly limited, as few examples have either survived or been studied compared to those built between 1350 and 1450 and 1550 and 1650. The best known example of a building of this period is the Old Crown in the High Street, Deritend, Birmingham; but this is such a different type of building that to make any comparisons with Monyhull Barn would be inappropriate. The situation is further complicated because even less is known about ancillary farm buildings in this period. In contrast, there are several West Midlands examples of ancillary farm buildings built between 1550 and 1650. Therefore, while it is possible that the dating on stylistic grounds is simply incorrect, this is unlikely, as it remains extremely difficult to see this design of roof fitting within a 1450-1500 date range within a domestic context, let alone a more conservative agricultural setting. Moreover, the fact remains that there was a documented period of building work at Monyhull Hall that corresponds with the later date range.

Therefore, the most likely interpretation is that timbers felled in the late-fifteenth century were reused in a late-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth-century context. There was a concentration of similarly dated timber within Bays 2 and 3 that may have been salvaged from parts of a single earlier structure, although a number of the other samples remain ungrouped, and while this is not conclusive, it may support the notion that other timbers were obtained from a range of sources. Re-examination of the roof has also highlighted the degree of alteration and reuse of timbers as demonstrated by a number of crudely fitted joints that were not particularly apparent in the preliminary survey (plate 3).

The supplementary survey has confirmed that the proposed phasing of the building is probably broadly correct. It still seems most probable that the walling of the Phase 0 barn was timber framed prior to its replacement by brick in Phase 1, and that this framing was based upon four feet wide panels set within sixteen feet long and twenty feet wide

frames. This explanation remains more likely than the alternative proposition that the roof was merely reconstructed over the Phase 1 brick walls. This is because of the awkwardness of the fit between the roof, and the brick walls and wall-as-truss supports upon which it is set, particularly within the easternmost and westernmost ends of the building (plate 4). Furthermore, this heavy, traditional style of carpentry was largely out-moded by the later-18th century, when the Phase 1 alterations were probably made.

Acknowledgements

The report was written by Steve Litherland and the figures were drafted by John Halsted. The BUFAU recording team consisted of John Halsted (drawn survey) and Edward Newton (photographic survey). Thanks are due to Robert Howard of Nottingham University for conducting the tree-ring survey and Dr Mike Hodder of Birmingham City Council for monitoring the survey, and finally, Robert Stone of Capitec for commissioning the project.

References

Howard, R. 2001 *Tree-ring analysis of timbers from a barn at Monyhull Hall, Kings Norton, Birmingham,* (unpublished paper, Nottingham University).

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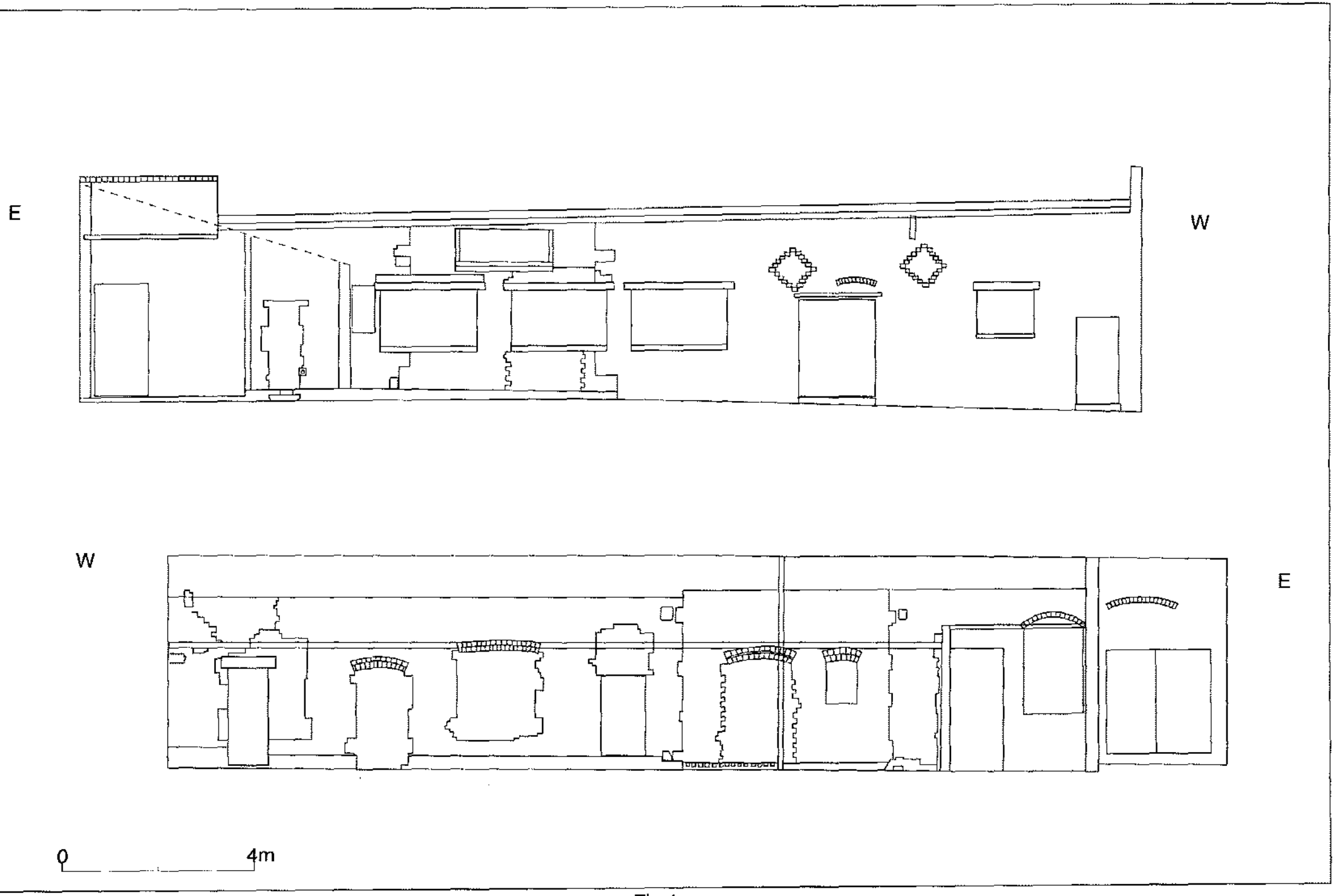

Fig.1

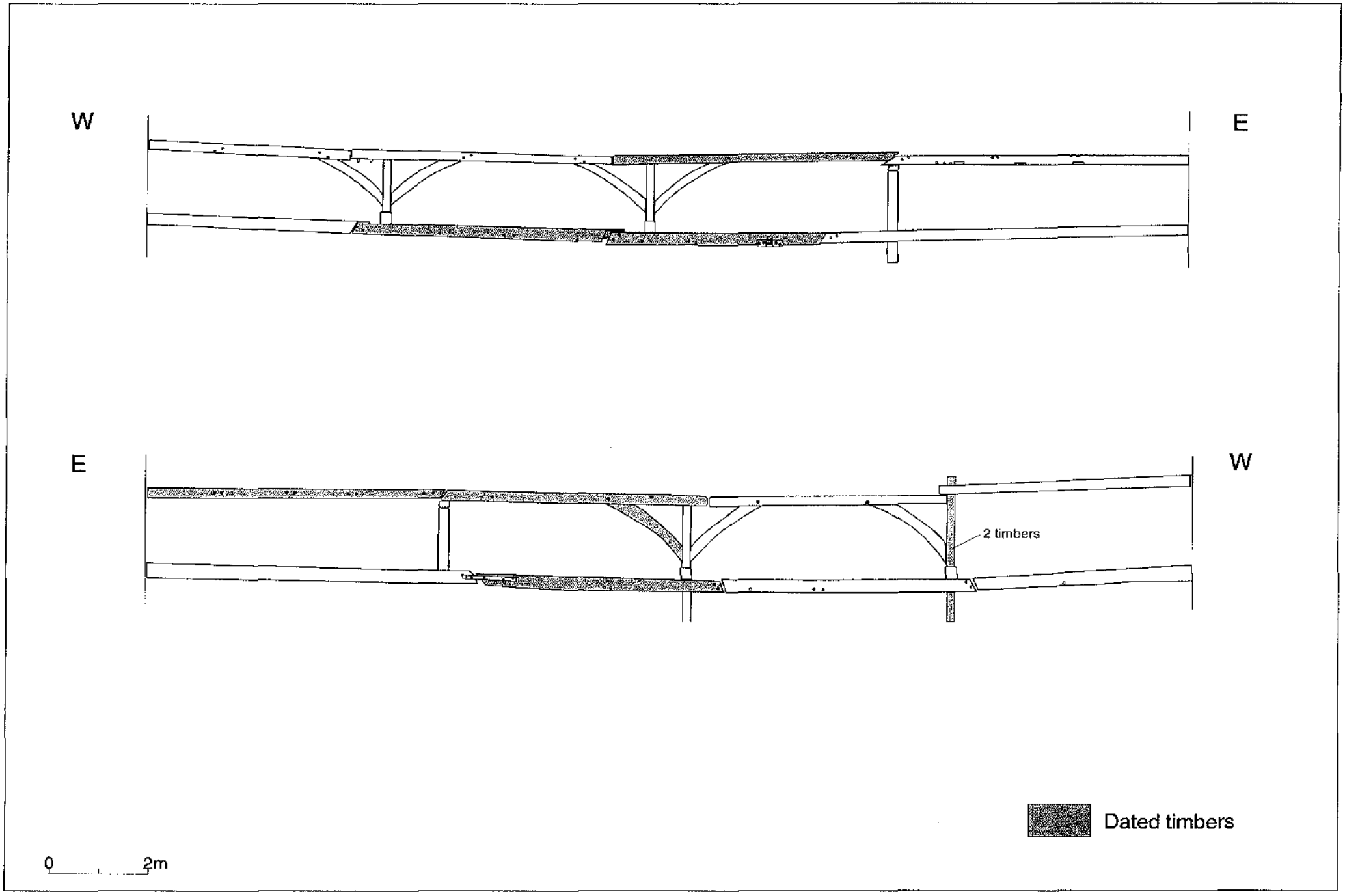

Fig.2

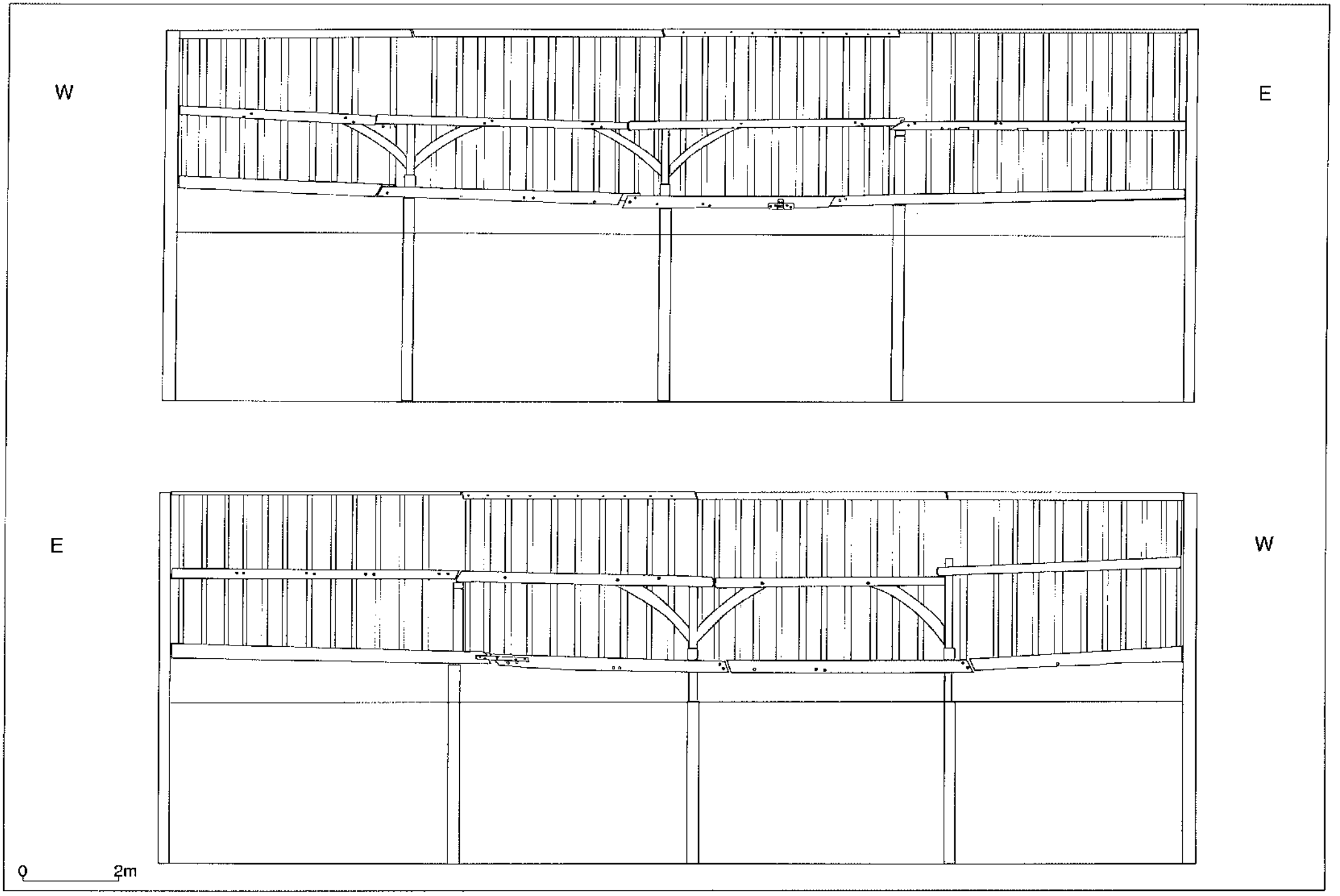

Fig.3

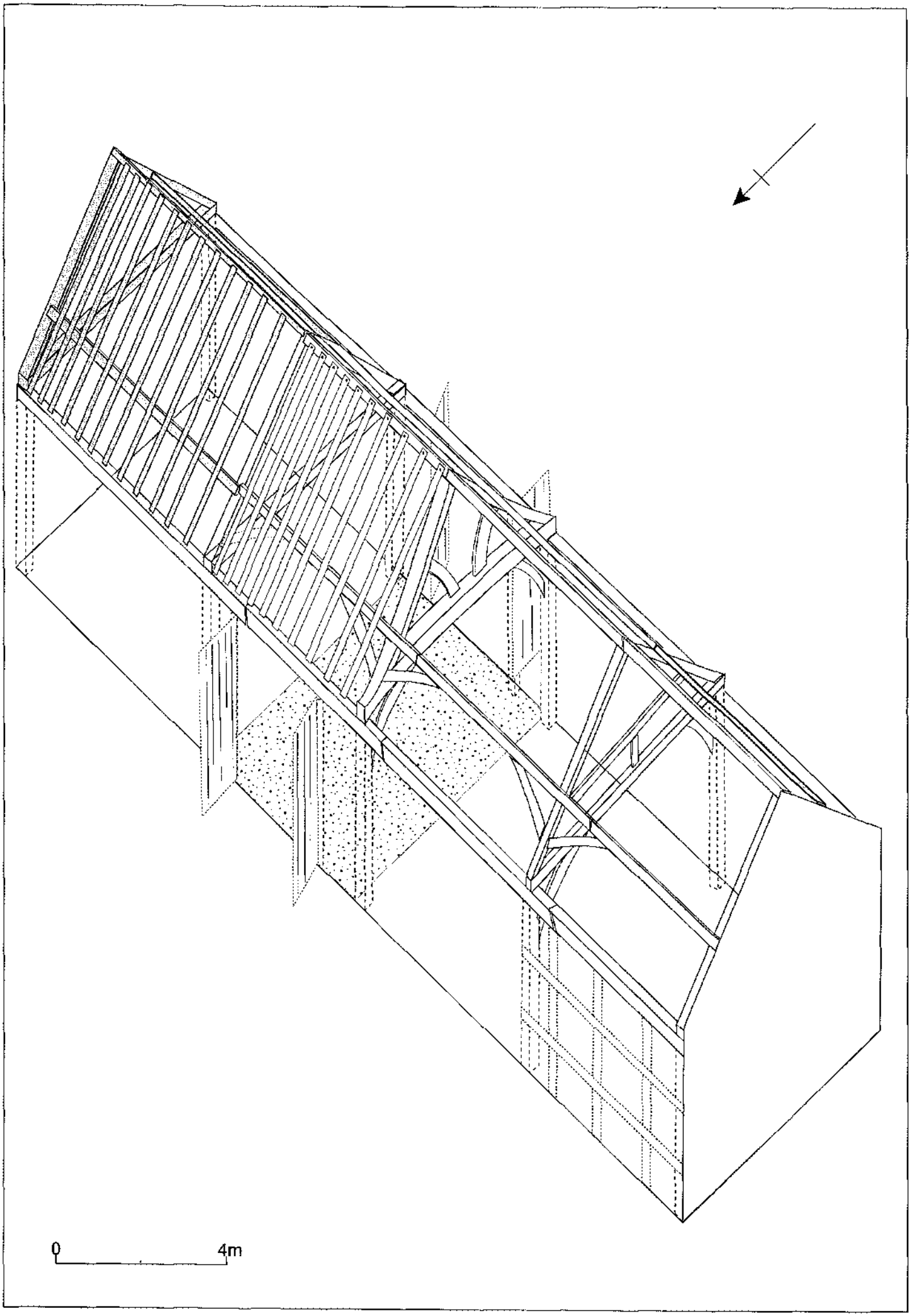

Fig.4

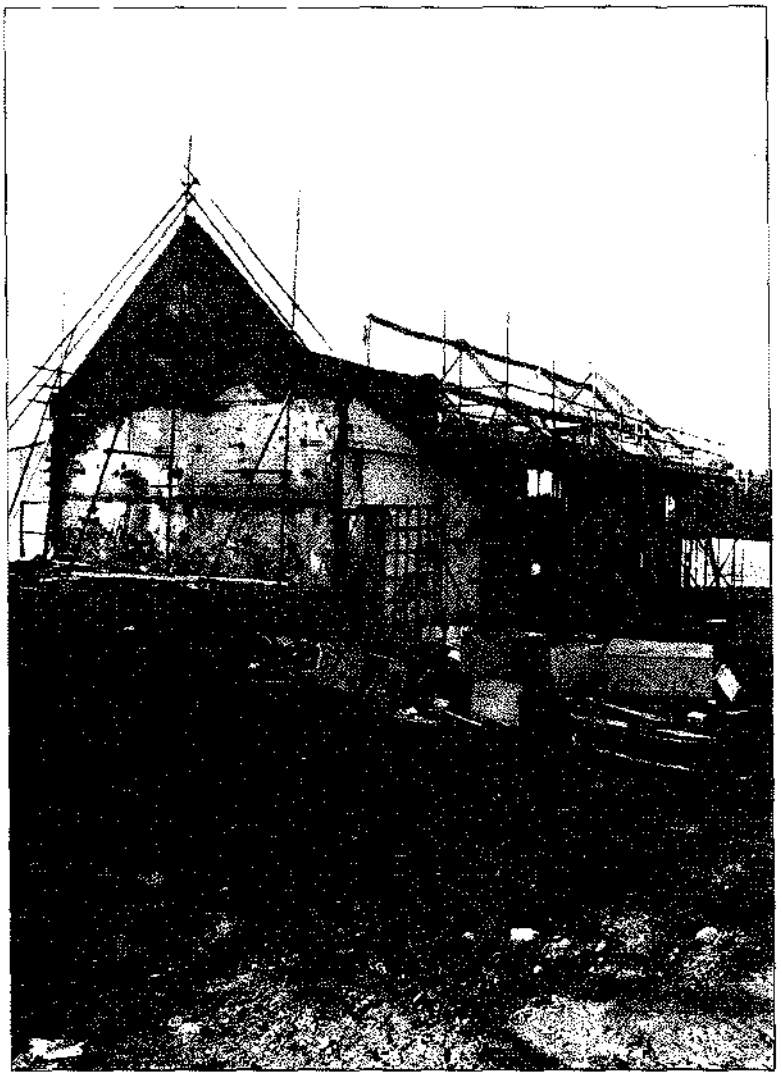

Plate 1

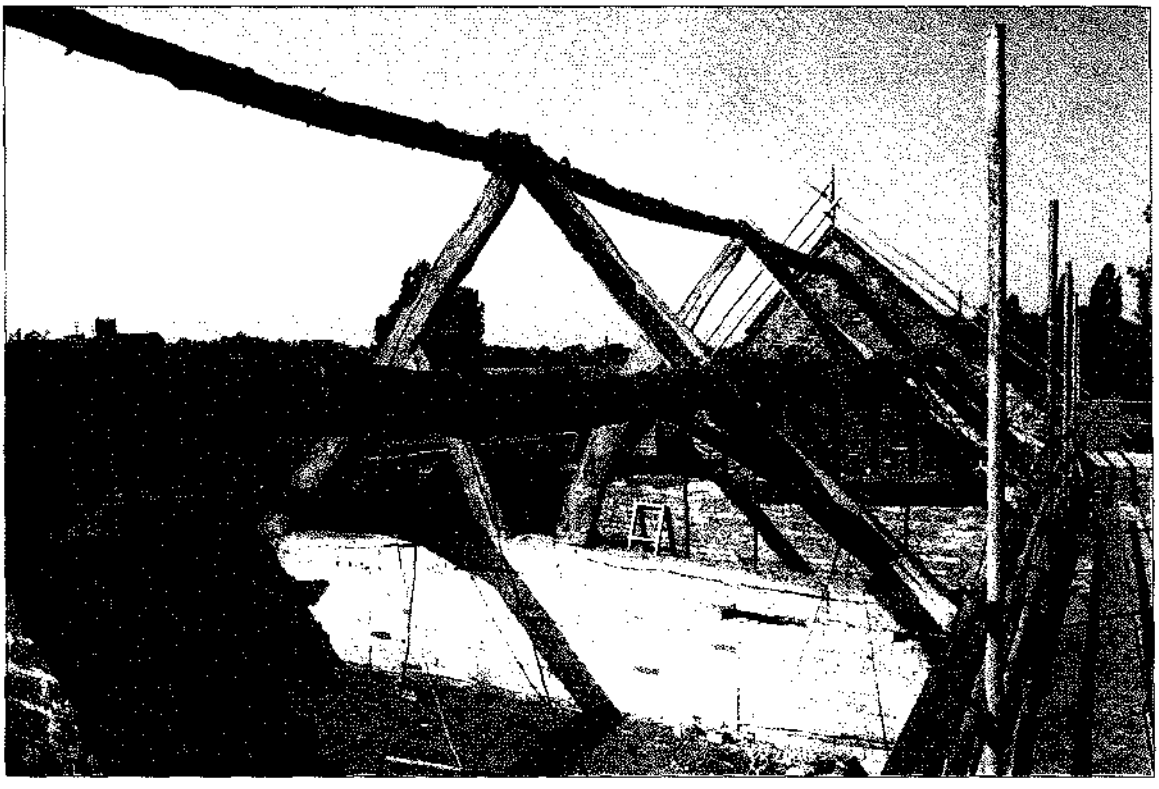

Plate 2

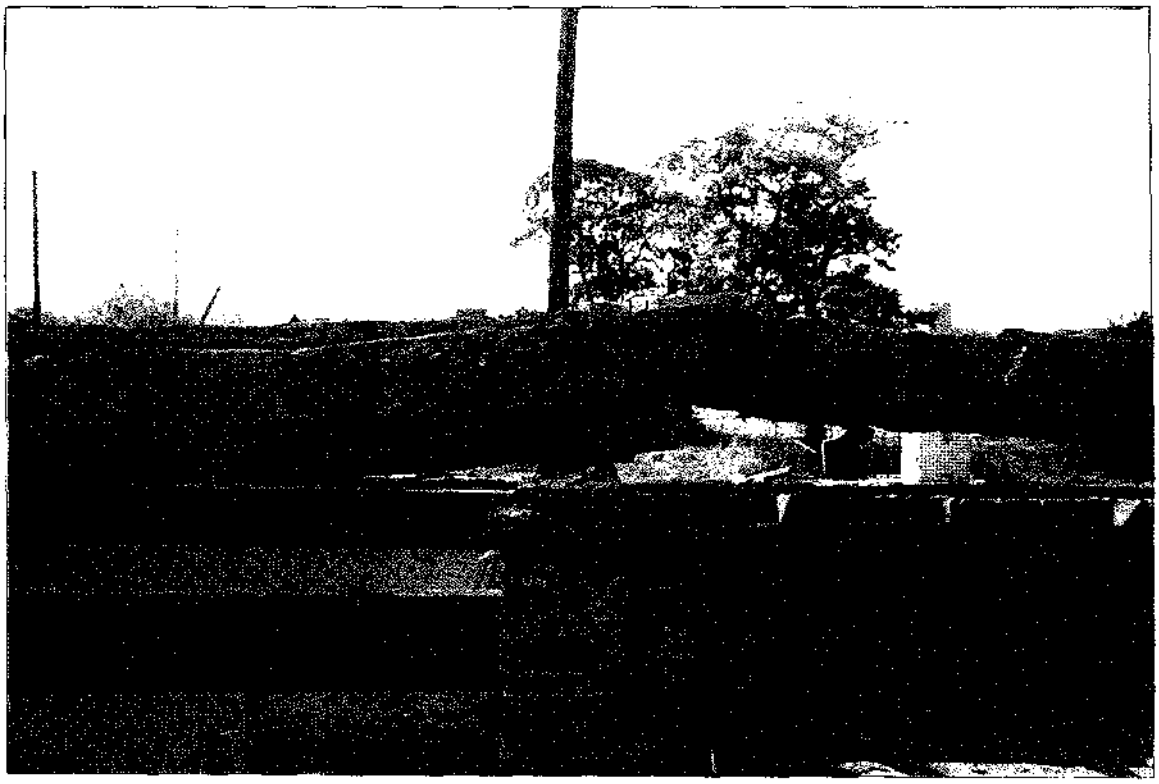

Plate 3

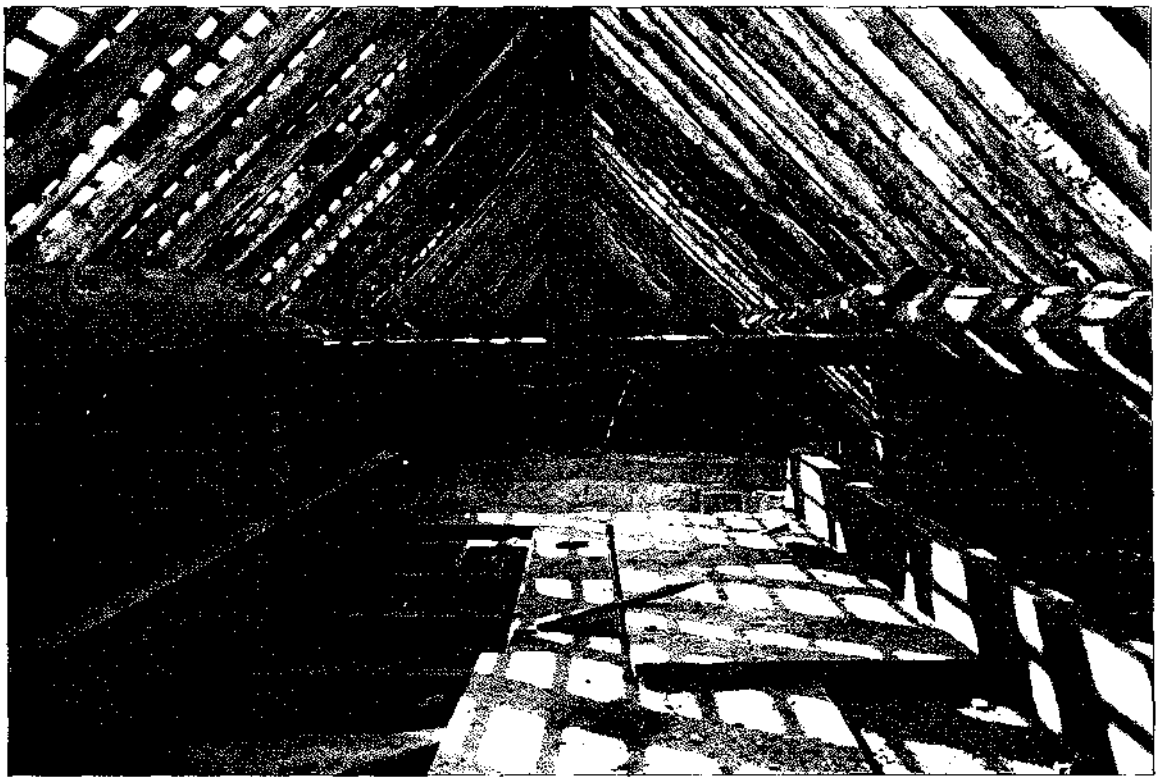

Plate 4