

# BELL'S FARM, SLAUGHAM

BY R. T. MASON

THIS pleasing old farm-house is at present receiving restoration and additions on behalf of its owner, Mr. John Smith, who, as one keenly interested in old houses generally, is making every effort to preserve its ancient character and at the same time ensuring that the additions made are sympathetic.

The *Victoria County History of Sussex* contains a brief but comprehensive description of the features of construction which were visible at the time of publication, but the present works have naturally brought to light others which are, perhaps, worth recording.

The date of erection may be fixed within reasonable limits by the contours of a rather heavy moulding which is cut upon a beam at what was the 'dais' end of the hall. A glance at its section shows the succession of simple compass curves forming a moulding which was conceivably favoured for ease in execution rather than for architectural beauty.

The original plan consisted of at least five bays—two of which were included in the buttery portion. These have a longitudinal partition (forming two separate offices) which has every sign of being part of the medieval structure.

The solar bay, which lay at the east end, has completely disappeared, but the fact has been revealed that it had an overhanging upper story—facing north—which was carried upon heavy corbels supported by shaped brackets tenoned into the main upright bay posts.

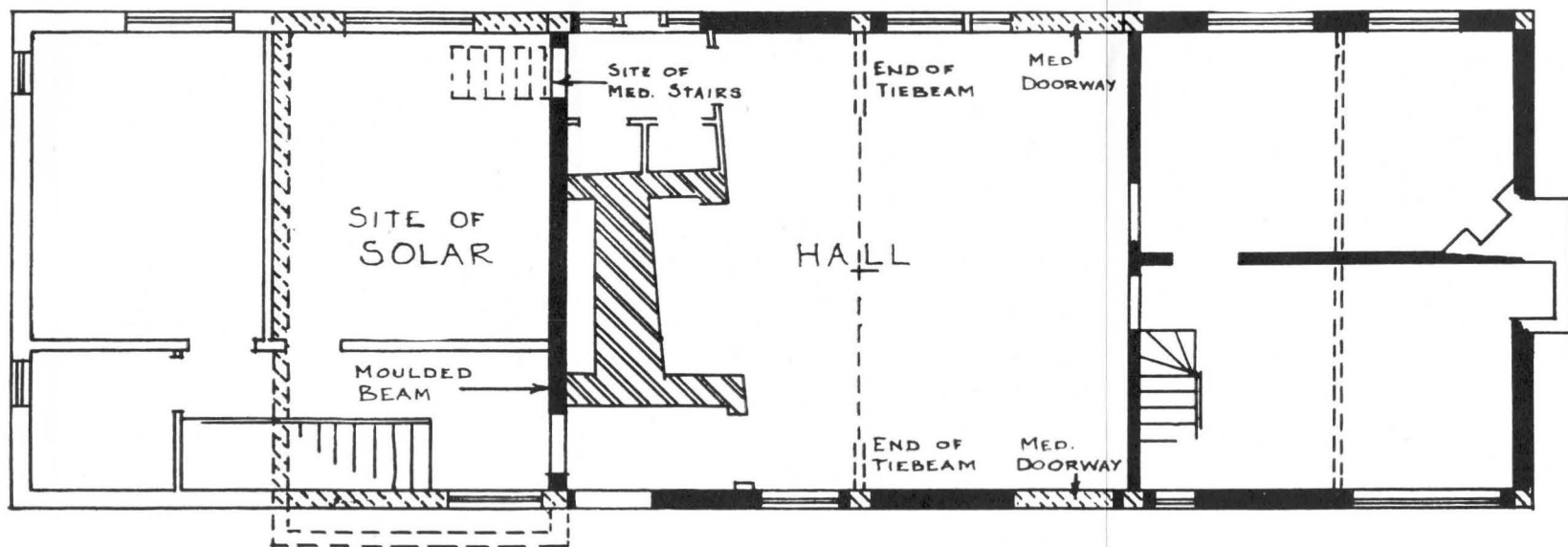
There is a possibility that the solar contained more than one bay. Three pieces of oak, obviously wall-



MOULDING  
OF DAIS BEAM



PLATE I. BELL'S FARM: NORTH SIDE; HALL AND BUTTERY BAYS



SCALE



BELL'S FARM, SLAUGHAM: GROUND PLAN

plates, are traceable as re-used timbers in the house, but their lengths—two pieces of about 11 ft. long and one of about 22 ft., would do for either a gabled roof of two bays or a hipped roof of one bay only. It is conceivable also that they are, in fact, imported from some other building.

The major pieces of the medieval framing are all intact, as also are numerous smaller members—sufficient at least to show that the design was of large rectangular panels with curved braces and brackets. Most of them are of good size, but not really heavy. Practically all the plaster infilling has been replaced by brickwork of varying dates, though in the interior trussed partitions of the roof space there is a substantial amount of woven lath, plastered on both sides but blackened only towards the hall.

In medieval times there were two external doorways, situated on the north and south sides of the hall at its western end. These were framed into the main structure and had massive curved spandrels to form equilateral Gothic arches similar to that in the Priest House, West Hoathly. The mortices and long row of pin-holes, which were an essential part of this feature, are still clearly visible.

The roof is of the 'king-post and short collar' pattern, though the central hall king-post and its brackets have been taken out. Its tie-beam, also, has lost a large portion of the central part of its span, the ends being now supported by rather crude struts. The removal of almost one-third of the main hall tie-beam was a drastic action, and not without risk to the structure. One is inclined to think that such ill-advised methods upon the part of builders in the past has produced much of the 'tumble-down' character of old houses in the present.

Much of the Horsham stone with which the roof is covered is original; many of the slabs still have a liberal coating of soot from the hall fire. There is no trace of a louvre or funnel.

The slope of the roof is rather flat by local standards



PLATE 2. BELL'S FARM: SOLAR-HALL PARTITION; SHOWING NORTH DOORWAY

for the period. Its angle with the horizontal is probably only about  $47\frac{1}{2}$  degrees, whereas 55 or 60 degrees is more common in Sussex and Surrey. The west end has a hipped termination with the familiar little gables at the apex, but these are clearly not medieval work, though use has been made of the old rafters in reframing. The inference is that both ends of the roof were originally fully gabled, but the buttery end was so far advanced in decay by Tudor times that reconstruction became necessary.

The little gables are a charming adornment to many old Sussex roofs, but in searching for the utilitarian factor in their evolution the following suggestion may be worth consideration: The framing of a true hipped end involves the uniting at the apex of four, or possibly five, pieces of timber. Ruling out nails, which the old carpenters were reluctant to use in oak, no satisfactory joint was evolved to meet these requirements; but by uniting the hip with the end common rafter at a point 2 ft. or so below its tip, the joints could be reduced to the framing together of two pieces only, and with this the craftsmen of the times were well able to deal.

An unusual feature of the hall roof, the purpose of which is not readily obvious, is the presence of two small octagonal posts in the apex above the collars. They are seated each upon its appropriate collar with their upper ends pinned between the points of a pair of rafters. They resemble miniature king-posts, lacking braces, and seem to have no practical function, being interpolated into a design which is generally recognized as efficient and complete without them.

Internally, two original doorways remain. The solar-hall partition had a communication door at either end, under the moulded beam, the space between them being filled with some kind of panelling, as shown by the deep groove in its lower surface. The northern of these doorways has survived and has chamfered spandrels forming a depressed Gothic arch. The position of its fellow is readily traceable by the door-post mortices in the beam. Here the bottom of the beam has been cut sharply

upward, presumably to give headroom to a staircase which once existed. This would have been the logical position for the 'cat ladder' stairs leading to the upper chamber of the solar end.

One doorway remains in the hall-buttery partition and is set towards the centre of its length. It is probable that here also there were a pair, but side by side and quite close together.

The conversion to a two-storied dwelling apparently took place towards the end of the sixteenth century. A chimney was then built approximately in the centre of the west bay of the hall, but at some later date and before the end of the seventeenth century this was pulled down and another built at the east end of the hall. Some of the stone of the first chimney was re-used in the new one, as evidenced by certain blackened pieces which have been extracted from the masonry during the present works. The trimming for the first chimney remains also, and as an example of carpentry is vastly inferior to the medieval work to which it has been attached.

On taking up the floor of what was presumably the farm-house kitchen the site of the old hall hearth was plainly indicated by a roughly circular patch of burnt earth and ashes.

The second chimney still remains and is being restored from a rather mutilated state as part of the renovation programme. At some date subsequent to its erection the solar part of the house was completely destroyed, probably by fire, as the moulded beam previously mentioned passes across the front of the chimney breast and through the hearth of the first-floor chamber. Modern Building By-laws expressly forbid such a practice and the regulation is here amply justified, for the beam is badly charred. Steps are naturally being taken to rectify the fault.

An extension is now being made to the east end, which may in fact be a reconstruction, assuming that the solar portion had two bays instead of the single one as hatched upon the accompanying plan.

There is some evidence that the fire took place during the early part of the nineteenth century. The wall of the hall which was exposed by the dismantling of the solar was faced with seventeenth-century bricks, but these appear to have been, as it were, second-hand, and have again been re-used in the present works. Deal weather-boarding covered the upper portion and also the south side of the house, and it seems likely that this belongs to the reconstruction which took place after the fire.