

HONINGHAM HALL, NORFOLK

By J. J. SAMBROOK, B.Sc.

IN June 1966 a public enquiry was held at Hellesdon, Norwich, into an application by the owner to demolish Honingham Hall. The Norfolk County Council opposed the application and sought confirmation of a preservation order on the building and the adjacent stable block. Following the enquiry the Minister confirmed the order on the stable block but permitted the demolition of the Hall. It was pulled down early in 1967.

INTRODUCTION

The village of Honingham lies eight miles west of Norwich on the road to Dereham and King's Lynn. The traveller from Norwich encounters first the Church, standing on rising ground some distance from the village, and, looking north from this point, could until recently discern the pinnacled outline of the Hall in a hollow in the wooded landscape.

Honingham Hall, as it stood before demolition, had little to recommend it except that intangible sense of history which all such buildings evoke; as a house to live in it would have required unreasonable expense to render it habitable, and, architecturally, its merits had been eclipsed by later alterations. The principal, or east, façade was still recognizable as an E-plan hall of the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, complete with the angle turrets, stepped gables and pedimented windows characteristic of the Norfolk brick houses of the period. Unfortunately the brickwork was entirely obscured by rendering and such details as the finials to the angle turrets had been replaced in sandstone. In fact, were it not for bits of two-inch brickwork showing through occasional chinks in the rendering, the whole façade could have been mistaken for a Victorian fake. The south and west fronts were dominated by later additions, basically Georgian but outwardly Victorian, while, to the north, a rambling service range extended into an irregular collection of outbuildings of indeterminate date.

The internal decorations were partly of the later eighteenth century and partly Victorian. Nothing visible remained from the seventeenth century.

However, despite its unpromising appearance, Honingham revealed a good deal about its past during the unmasking process of demolition, and the following account of its architectural development is largely based on observations made at various times between February and April, 1967. The task has been made much simpler by the fortunate survival, at the house, of a complete survey made before the alterations of *c.* 1850. A second, earlier set of drawings, by William Kent, also survives, but since these are projected works, never executed, they tell us little about the house as it stood.



Plate I. East front of Honingham Hall, 1967

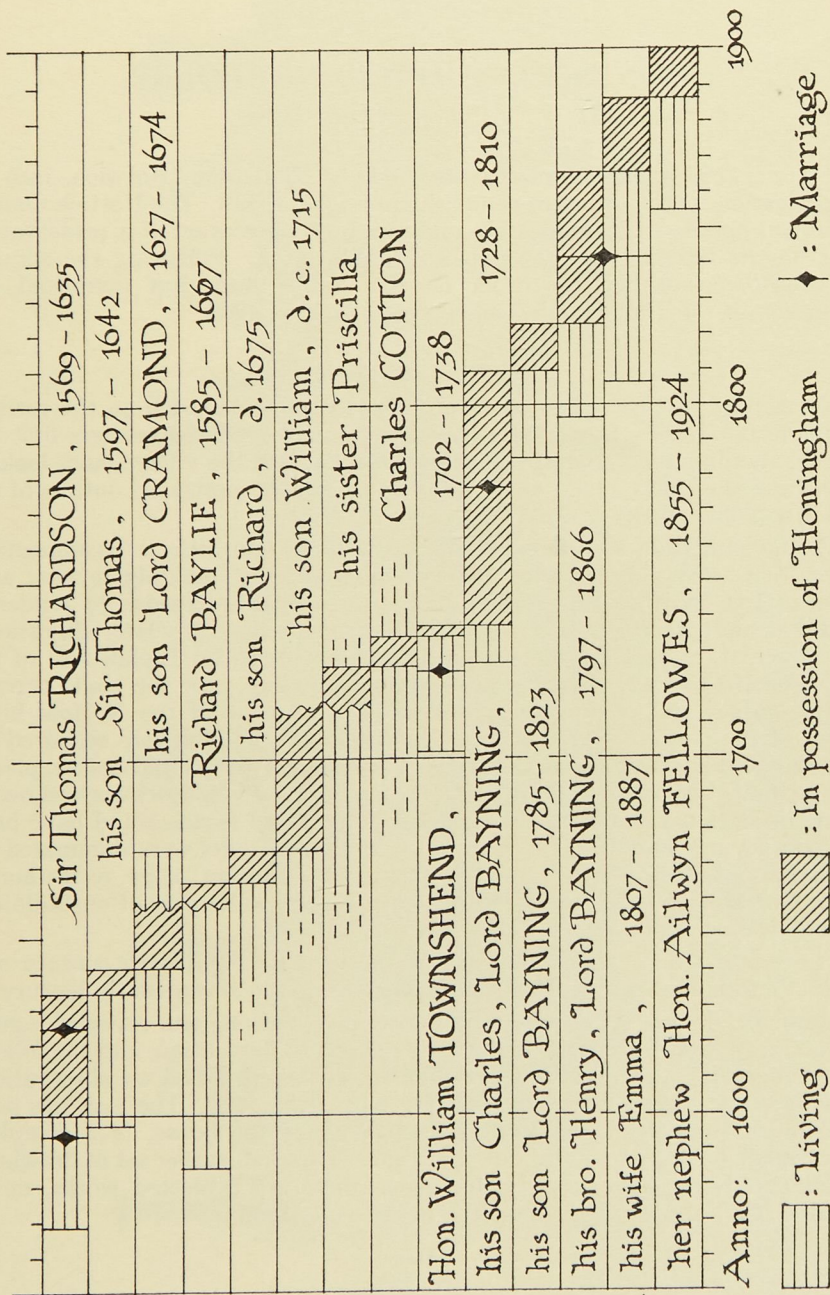


Fig. 1. Owners of Honingham Hall, 1600-1900

In attempting an account of the various phases in the growth of a house such as Honingham it has, of course, been necessary to consider the fortunes and position of its successive owners. For ease of reference I have found it useful to summarize their dates graphically (see fig. 1).

THE FIRST BUILD, 1605

Honingham Hall was built (or at least enlarged, for there was probably a previous building on the site) by Sir Thomas Richardson in, or around, the year 1605. Sir Thomas was born at Hardwick, Norfolk, in 1569, and was a rising young lawyer, not many years married, when he purchased the Honingham estate in 1600. Five years later he was appointed deputy steward to the Dean and Chapter of Norwich, and was later Recorder of Bury and then of Norwich. It is, therefore, likely that his building activities at Honingham should date from this period of residence in Norfolk. In later years he spent much time in London. He became a Member of Parliament and it was as Speaker of the House of Commons that he came to be knighted at Whitehall in 1621. A few years later, in 1626, he succeeded his Norfolk neighbour, Sir Henry Hobart of Blickling, as Lord Chief Justice of Common Pleas, and was finally elevated to the King's Bench in 1631. He died at his house in Chancery Lane in 1635. In character Sir Thomas was a weak but clever man, and he was said, by his contemporaries, to have pursued the cause of his own advancement with more diligence than the cause of justice. Nevertheless, some of his judgments, notably at the trial of Buckingham's murderer, Fenton, where he held that the use of the rack to elicit a confession was illegal, constituted a real advance in English jurisprudence.

Sir Thomas's Norfolk home was a typical, fairly large house of rather conservative design. The principal elevation was all but completely symmetrical with the large hall window mirrored, for no functional reason, on the service side. All the windows bore pediments, except, apparently, those on the porch, which was topped by a shaped gable of unusual design. In plan the house was not remarkable; it was one room deep with the hall occupying that part of the centre range south of the porch. To the north were the service rooms, with cellars below; the latter unusual in being only partially below ground, so that the floors above were raised by about three feet; an arrangement dictated, no doubt, by the height of the ground water-table. The south wing probably contained a parlour and the staircase, with the principal chamber on the first floor (see fig. 2).

THE FIRST ADDITIONS—SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The earliest additions to the original structure are not easy to date but must, on structural grounds, be ascribed to the seventeenth century. Only a small section of this building had survived in 1967, forming the outer (western) wall of a passage behind the service end of the centre range. Although the brickwork and window details were practically identical to the original, there were several indications that it had been added later; firstly, the internal wall to the east of the passage contained bricked-up windows on both ground and

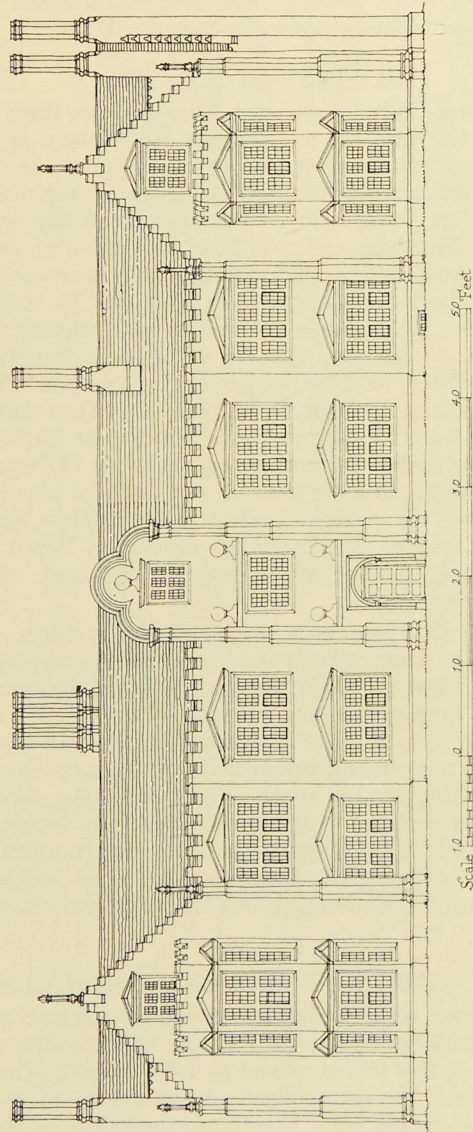


Fig. 2. Reconstructed elevation of 1605

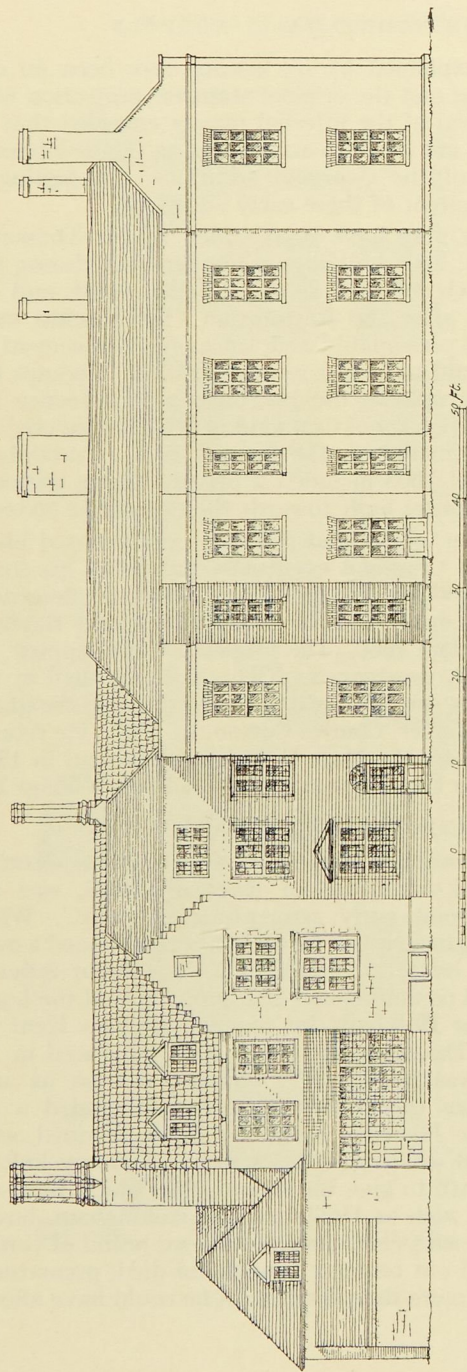
first floors (only to be explained by its having once been an outside wall); secondly, the new building met the original staircase projection with a straight joint; and, thirdly, removal of the internal plaster revealed that the staircase projection itself had been cut away to accommodate the new passage. Further south, below the floors of the Georgian additions, old footings gave some indication of the former extent of these early additions.

That this extra range may have been added by Sir Thomas Richardson himself is not improbable; little building was undertaken during the Civil War and Commonwealth, which followed soon after his death, and brickwork in English bond is unusual after the Restoration. Sir Thomas had married a second time in c. 1626, and presumably well, since his advancement, in that year, to Lord Chief Justice is said to have cost him £17,000! Perhaps his ambitious new wife (she did not scruple to use her husband's influence to secure for herself the creation of the Barony of Cramond in 1628) considered that Honingham lacked private apartments on the ground floor. Certainly there is no evidence that the house of 1605 included a private dining parlour which was becoming quite usual in houses built towards the end of the sixteenth century.

Sir Thomas's eldest son, of his first marriage, predeceased his stepmother, in 1642, so the barony of Cramond eventually passed to his son, also called Thomas, in 1651. We know little enough about these later descendants, except that Thomas, Lord Richardson, sold the estate to Richard Baylie, D.D., Dean of Salisbury, sometime before 1660. The property would appear, at this time, to have been fairly heavily mortgaged. Richard Baylie died in 1667 and the estate passed, through his son and grandson, to a grand-daughter, Priscilla, who sold it to a London Mercer, Charles Cotton, in 1727. He retained Honingham until it was acquired by the Hon. William Townshend in 1735, some ten years after his marriage to Henrietta, daughter of Lord William Powlett.

GEORGIAN ALTERATIONS

The Hon. William Townshend, who was third son of the second Viscount—the celebrated “turnip” Townshend—of Raynham Hall, was described by George II as “a silent, proud, surly, wrong-headed booby”. Whether or not he merited such a damning description he certainly entertained a most grandiose scheme for enlarging his house at Honingham. No doubt influenced by the work which his father had commissioned at Raynham, and the huge rebuilding which was taking place at Holkham, he engaged William Kent to prepare a scheme of enlargement. The drawings which Kent produced in 1737 and for which, incidentally, he was paid twenty guineas, survive as an interesting example of early Georgian taste. His suggestions included a complete remodelling; the shell of the Jacobean house was to be retained, with additions to the west; and detached service blocks, with single-storey links, were to be built to the north and south to give the sort of plan which Kent was using on strictly Palladian houses, such as Holkham. At Honingham, however, it was to be used in conjunction with elevations in his own brand of Gothic. None of this work was ever carried out because Townshend died, prematurely, in 1738. Even if he had lived, it is more than doubtful if he could have afforded to build



West Elevation - Honingham Hall - 1827

Fig. 3. West elevation as in 1827

so lavishly, and Kent was probably aware that he would not be called upon to execute his designs. Had he done so, the present owner points out, the extensions to the left would have sunk very firmly into the marshy ground south of the Hall.

William's son, Charles, who was only ten when his father died, followed a successful career in the public service, his first appointment being as Secretary to the Spanish Embassy in 1751. On his return to England, after five years, he entered the House of Commons as member for Yarmouth, where he became known as "Spanish Charles" to distinguish him from his brilliant cousin of the same name. He sat as M.P. for Yarmouth for thirty-six years between 1756 and his creation as Baron Bayning of Foxley, Berkshire, in 1797 and during this time held several important posts in the Admiralty and the Treasury.

Lord Bayning was responsible for the late eighteenth-century alterations to Honingham which figure in the surviving survey of 1827, and which probably date from the time of his marriage to Annabella Powlett Smyth, grand-daughter of his maternal uncle, in 1777. These alterations were quite extensive; they included rebuilding the earlier alterations to the west, reorganizing the interior, and the addition of a new service range to the north. The internal reorganization involved raising the ceilings of the principal rooms of the old house, dividing the hall and building a new staircase in the space created. The former parlour was then made into the dining room—an arrangement of the greatest possible inconvenience, which must have ensured that every meal arrived cold, since it had to be carried the full length of the house.

The new building to the west included the drawing-room, an ante-room adjoining the staircase, and a large library with a bay window. The work was executed in modest Georgian style and decorated internally with restrained plasterwork. Some marble chimney-pieces of this period remained in 1967, their fireplaces fitted (of course) with Victorian cast iron, economical, coal-burning grates. From the outside these additions were rather elegant, with their sashed windows, and a simple hipped roof partly hidden by a parapet (see fig. 3)

The exterior of the original building seems to have been largely untouched by Lord Bayning's work; a pretty Venetian window was inserted in the south wall and it is likely that the first coat of rendering was applied to the east front at this time; the survey of 1827 includes measured drawings of the base-mouldings of the angle turrets "as formerly executed in brickwork" and "as executed in plaster". No doubt the original brickwork had become decayed.

Lord Bayning's eldest son, Charles Frederick, succeeded his father in 1810, but I doubt if he ever lived at Honingham since the hall was leased to Sir John Lubbock in 1811. Prior to his succession he had been M.P. for Truro, and when he died in 1823, at Winchester, the title passed to his brother, Rector of Brome in Suffolk.

VICTORIAN REMODELLING

Henry William Powlett (both he and his elder brother had taken the name of Powlett on assuming the title), third Baron Bayning, did not move to his

family seat until about 1847, in which year he gave up his living at Brome. He was inducted as Vicar of Honingham in 1851. He did, however, have his property surveyed in 1827, at which time the fabric is shown as being in need of attention; the south front, particularly the Georgian end, had settled and cracked and there are notes on the poor state of the foundations. Who occupied the Hall during the second quarter of the nineteenth century I have been unable to discover, but there are in Honingham Church memorials to two of Lord Bayning's sisters who died there in 1845, and the Bayning papers in the Norfolk and Norwich Record Office include a seven-year lease of the Hall, dated 1824, to Richard Crawshay of Rowfont in Sussex.

In 1842 Lord Bayning married Emma, daughter of William Fellowes of Ramsey Abbey, Hunts., later first Baron de Ramsey. Perhaps it was this event which decided him to make the move to Honingham, and, in doing so, to remodel the house in accordance with the dictates of current fashion. In fairness it must be admitted that the south front had, for structural reasons, to be rebuilt, but it is a pity that Lord Bayning felt it necessary to make gratuitous alterations to the rest of the house. What he, apparently, sought to do was to impose a uniform style on the whole building, and he achieved this by raising the height of the east front, rebuilding the south front and the service wing in (unconvincing) imitation of the original style, and disguising the Georgian additions with Elizabethan detail. This meant replacing the elegant sashed windows with new sashes contrived to look like mullions and transoms (though the effect was spoilt by the use of plate glass in the lights), cutting battlements into the parapet, and replacing the hipped roof with gables to the south and west. The latter alteration, particularly, served no functional purpose since the large, and well lit, room it created was only accessible by crawling through a gap in the roof timbers.

No doubt these improvements were much admired in Lord Bayning's time, but there is equally no doubt that, without them, Honingham Hall would be standing today.

Lord Bayning died, at Honingham, in 1866. Since there was no heir to the title, the house continued to be occupied by Lady Bayning until her death in 1887, when the estate passed to her nephew, the Hon. Ailwyn Fellowes, later first Baron Ailwyn of Honingham. He died in 1924 and was succeeded by his son who died in 1936. At about this time the estate was purchased by Sir Eric Teichmann, who bequeathed it to the Dr. Barnado's Homes, from whom it was eventually purchased by the present owner.

So far I have attempted to trace the pattern of development and change, in the hands of successive owners, which we may expect in a large country house such as Honingham. The following section deals with some of the details revealed by demolition.

THE PULLING DOWN, 1967

The plan at the end of this account is taken from the survey of 1827, and, therefore, represents the house as it was before the remodelling of c. 1850.

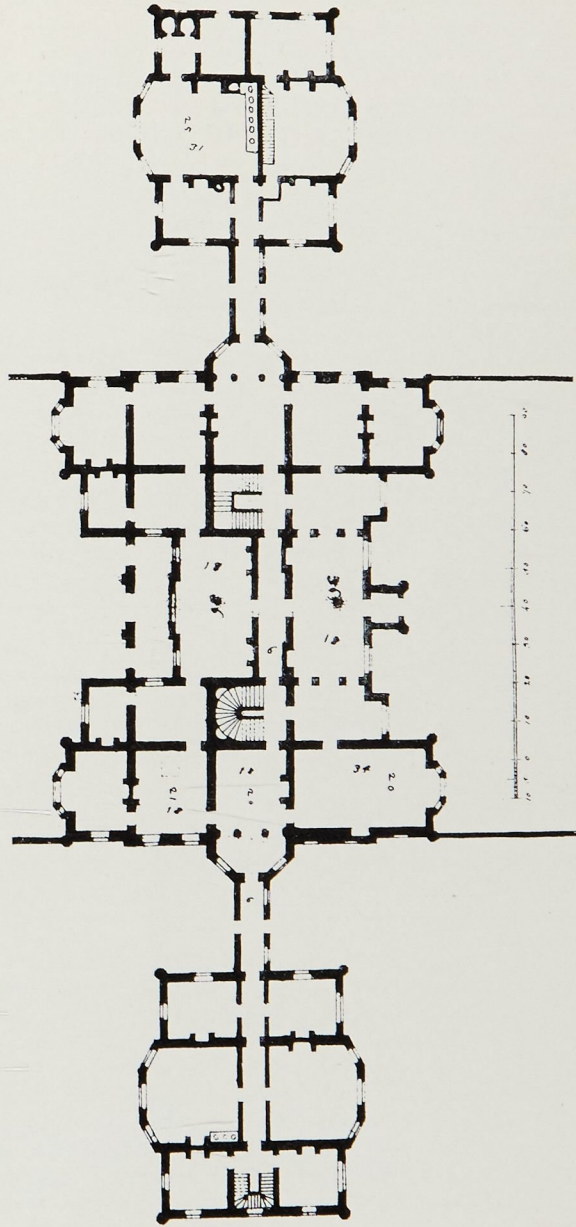
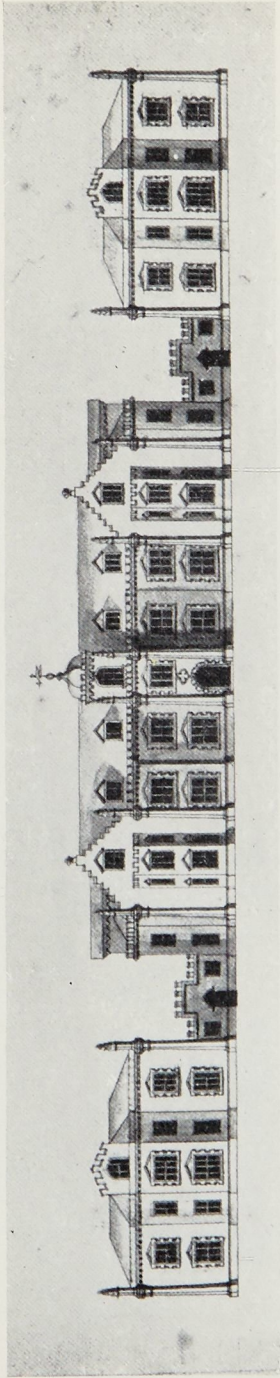


Plate II. Drawings by William Kent for Honingham Hall, 1737

Using this as a base I have indicated the dates of the various brickworks, as revealed under their coats of plaster, by means of shading. From the evidence of this plan it is possible to reconstruct many of the features of the original house. Some of the more interesting discoveries are discussed below. I make no apology for omitting the Victorian alterations; they have already been mentioned and they were, in any case, decorative rather than structural.

In the hall, part of the flat four-centred arch of the former fireplace was uncovered south of the later chimney-piece; on the opposite side of the hall, under the staircase, the projecting corner of the bay was treated with the same moulding as the main entrance in the porch. These features confirm, what is obvious anyway, that the hall had formerly included the site of the Georgian staircase. To the north of the hall, beyond the former screens passage, the seventeenth-century dividing wall had survived complete under a later lath-and-plaster covering. It was of timber studding filled with contemporary brick nogging. It contained two openings; one, against the west wall, was recessed to take a door, the other, just west of centre, had moulded jambs and a four-centred arch with carving in the spandrels. The woodwork was painted yellow ochre and was well preserved except where the base had been attacked by death watch beetle. It is interesting that the brick nogging was in the familiar herring-bone pattern except that where the studs were the right distance apart the bricks were laid in horizontal rows. This suggests that herring-bone was not so much a consciously artistic device as a practical way of fitting a regular unit (the brick) into an opening of variable size. Builders, no doubt, made a virtue of the necessity.

The service rooms north of the hall, presumably a buttery and a pantry, had been subject to several alterations. Two openings from the service passage behind are shown in the plan of 1827. By 1967 there were three, and only the northern one, opposite the staircase, was shown to have a surround of chamfered two-inch bricks. Because of all these openings only a small section of the original outside wall remained intact, and within it was found, bricked up, a five-light window with oak mullions of a pattern not found elsewhere in the building. Further examination of this wall showed it to be constructed of brick and flint rubble, whereas the rest of the house was brick; it must, therefore, represent part of a previous building incorporated into Sir Thomas's new house.

On the first floor, above this wall, were two more bricked-up windows, similar to the remaining windows on the east front—further proof that this was formerly an outside wall. While on the subject of windows it is worth noting that the *west* wall of the service passage also contained windows hidden by the additions of *c.* 1780; the northern wall of the Georgian wing met the earlier work at a window, reducing it from three to two lights. During demolition the upper half of the missing light was discovered. It was not an opening case-ment and the leaded glazing was held in place by plaster and lead tabs tied round a vertical iron glazing bar. The glass, which was greenish and opaque, was set in an attractive pattern; unfortunately it was badly damaged but most of it is now in the Bridewell Museum, Norwich.

At various stages in the demolition small sections of the external rendering were chipped away. This revealed the presence of further bricked-up windows in the inward-facing walls of the wings on the east front, and it was quite clear that these windows had formerly borne pediments, as had the narrow windows in the angled sides of the bays. Some of the moulded bricks from these blocked windows were found to be in perfect condition, having been immured for upwards of three hundred years.

Several aspects of the building did not emerge, and still remain in doubt; the site of the principal staircase, for instance, and the disposition of the kitchens, including the access to the cellars.

DISCUSSION

As would be expected in a house built at the very beginning of the seventeenth century, Honingham was still basically medieval in plan. Outwardly, although surprisingly free of classical ornament (except the pediments) a considerable attempt had been made to impose symmetry on the façade. To achieve this it was necessary to dispose the rooms so that the main doorway was in the centre and yet the hall was entered at one end. This problem was finally overcome, as at Blickling, by entering the hall in the middle, but such a solution would not have presented itself to the builder of Honingham in 1605. Thomas Richardson's solution was a fairly common one; he repeated on the service side the large and handsome windows of the principal apartments, though he could not resist giving his own Great Chamber in the south wing a little more glass than the servants had in the north.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Mr. J. M. Rampton, the present owner, for permission to visit the house and for allowing me access to the plans and drawings in his possession, and the builder's agent, Mr. S. M. Abbs, for keeping me informed of interesting developments during the process of demolition.

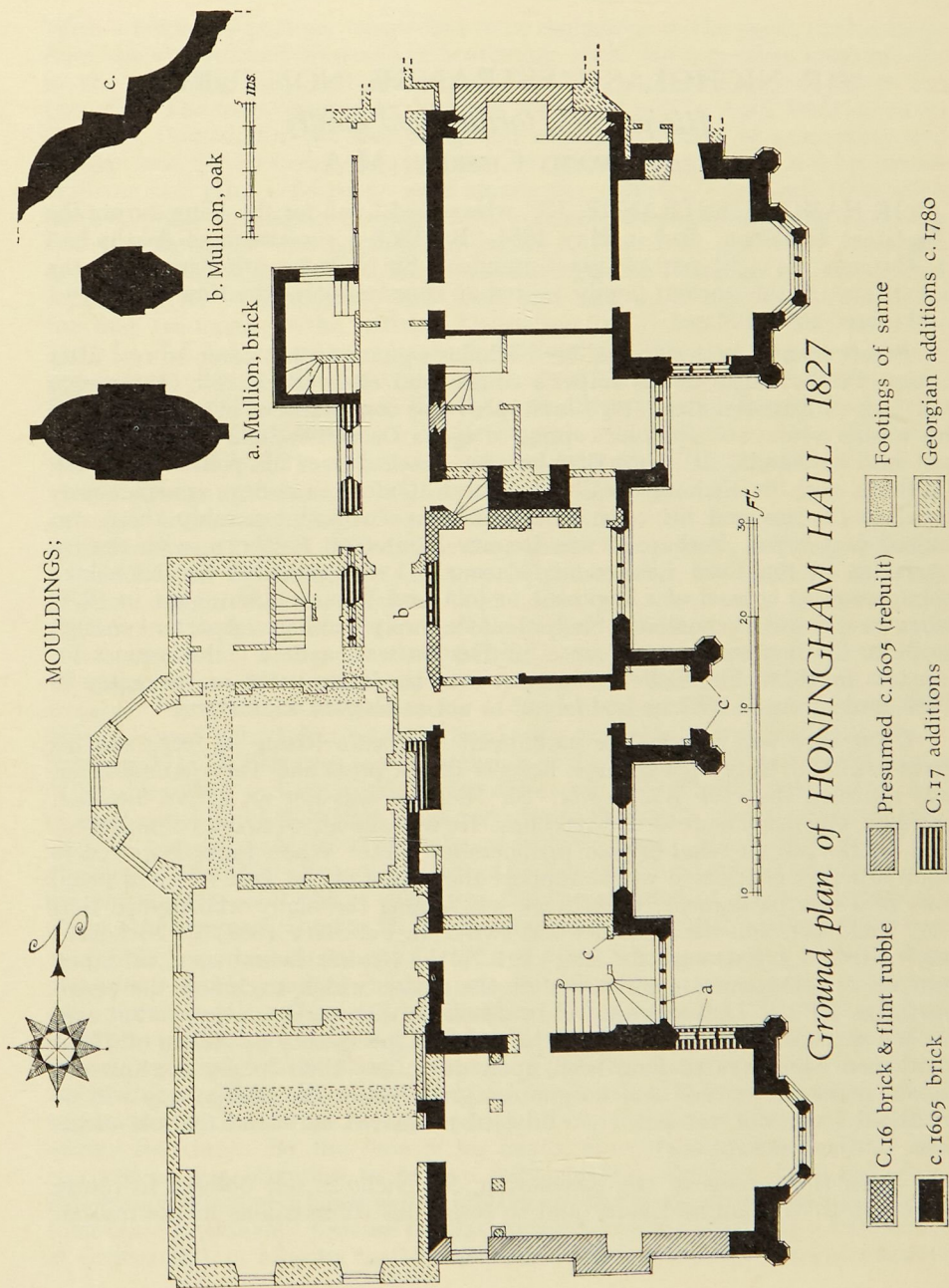


Fig. 4