

## GARSETT HOUSE

by Robert Smith

### SUMMARY

*An architectural and archaeological survey of the headquarters of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society, Garsett House in Norwich, was undertaken in 1994. This revealed that the structure is an amalgam of three blocks with the earliest extant structural elements probably dating to the first half of the 16th century. The building sequence is described and an interpretation is provided.*

### Introduction

Garsett House, St Andrew's Hall Plain, Norwich (TG 2315 0875) has been the headquarters of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society since 1951. The traditional date for the construction of the building is 1589, the date carved on the second-floor console at the north-west angle, leading to the erroneous assumption that the structure utilised timbers from wrecks of the Spanish Armada. In consequence the building has been known in the past as Armada House and this name, together with a representation of a galleon under sail, is displayed on the southern elevation. The present name, Garsett House, derives from Robert Garsett, owner of the site in 1589 and probable occupant, who died in 1611 and was buried in the church of St Andrew.

The Society occupies rooms on the first floor of Garsett House but lets out the ground and second floors to tenants. The Norfolk Archaeological Unit entered into the tenancy in late 1993 and resolved to undertake a survey of the structure. This paper is a result of that survey which was undertaken by the writer in 1994.

### Previous work

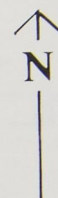
A record of the building was made in 1972 by the late Alan Carter, Director of the Norwich Survey. His unpublished report is held in the Centre of East Anglian Studies at the University of East Anglia and in it Carter concluded that the building was 'an interesting example of a late 16th-century type, transitional between medieval and post-medieval forms'. He also stated that the structure was 'an L-plan house with a rhomboidal-shaped entrance and staircase hall'. These conclusions were based on a comparison with other buildings in the city which at that time had received little academic attention; the available information was based on preconceived ideas which themselves were founded on standard types of plan form<sup>1</sup>.

Since then a systematic survey by the writer of all the surviving pre-1830 buildings within the city walls has been undertaken, enabling a more detached appraisal.

### Methodology

An accurately measured plan was a preliminary requirement in order to assist understanding of the building. Four such plans were prepared, one for each floor of the building and the cellar. A section was also prepared. The aim was to produce a detailed description of the structure prior to formulation of an interpretation and the preparation of interpretive plans.

Description (Figs 1-6)



1885 O.S. Sheet LXIII.II.23 Scale 1:1250



1972 O.S. TG2308NW Scale 1:1250

Fig. 1

Garsett House, Norwich: topographical location in 1885 and 1972. Crown Copyright reserved.

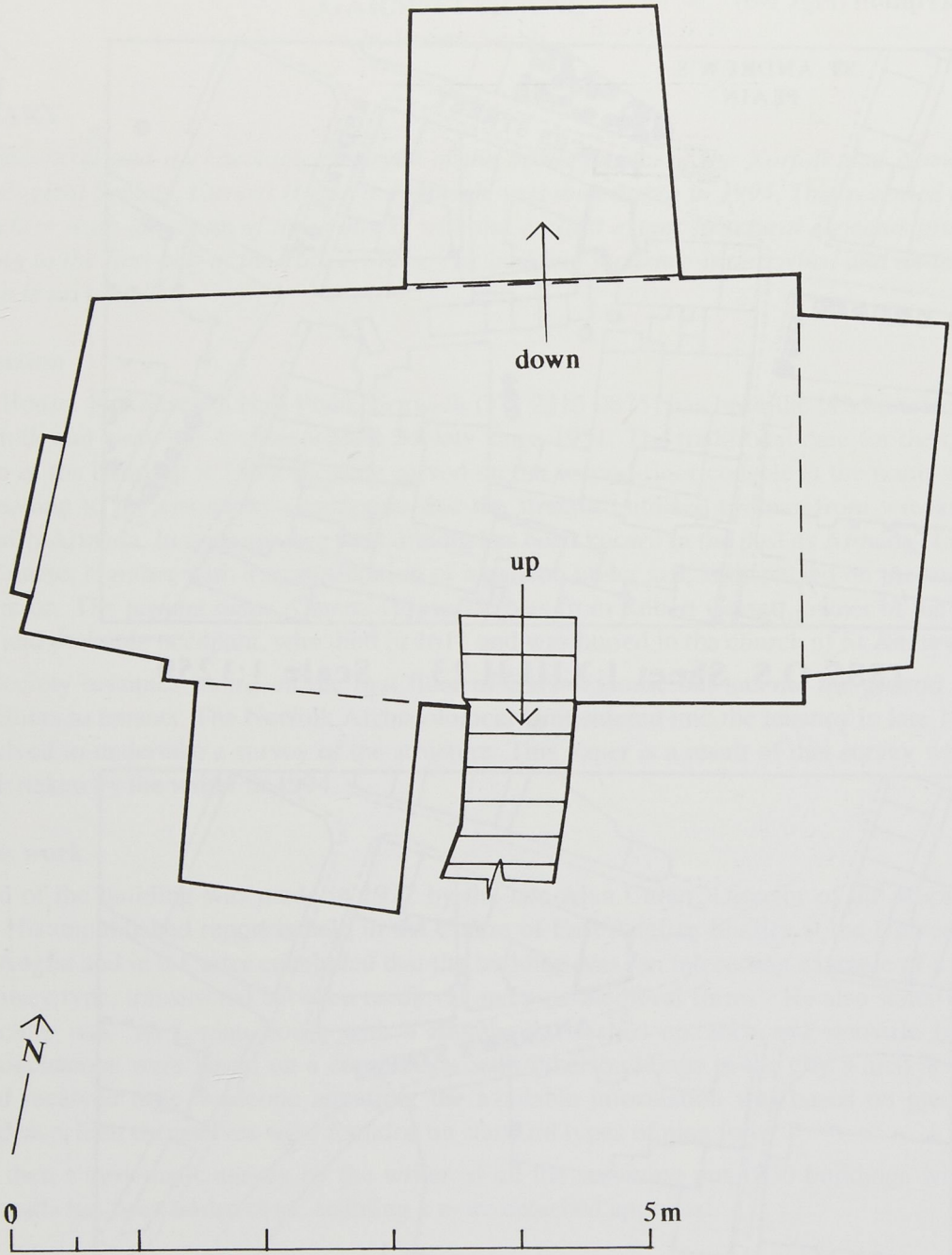


Fig. 2  
Garsett House, Norwich: cellar plan.

PRINCES STREET

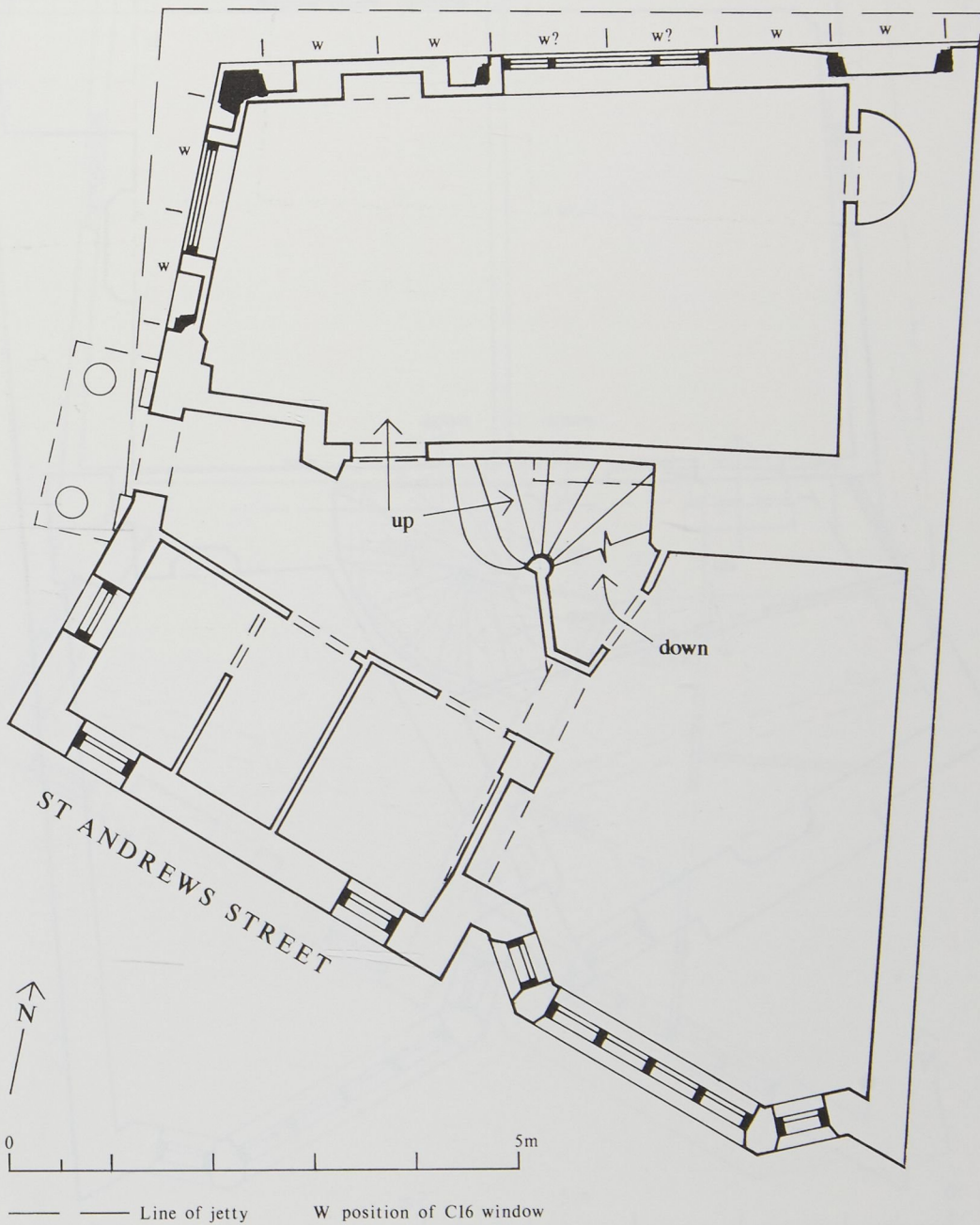


Fig. 3  
Garsett House, Norwich: ground floor plan.

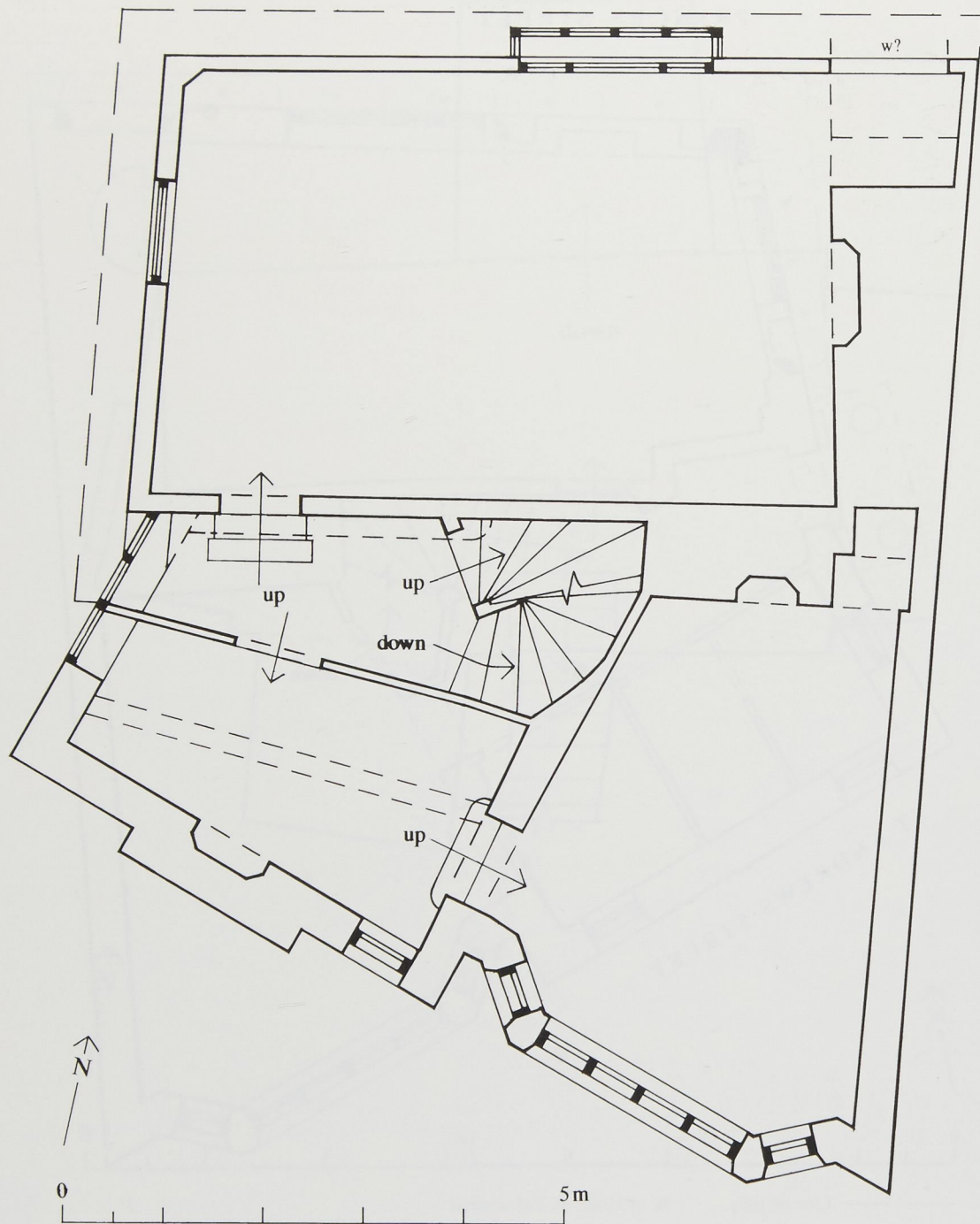


Fig. 4  
Garsett House, Norwich: first floor plan

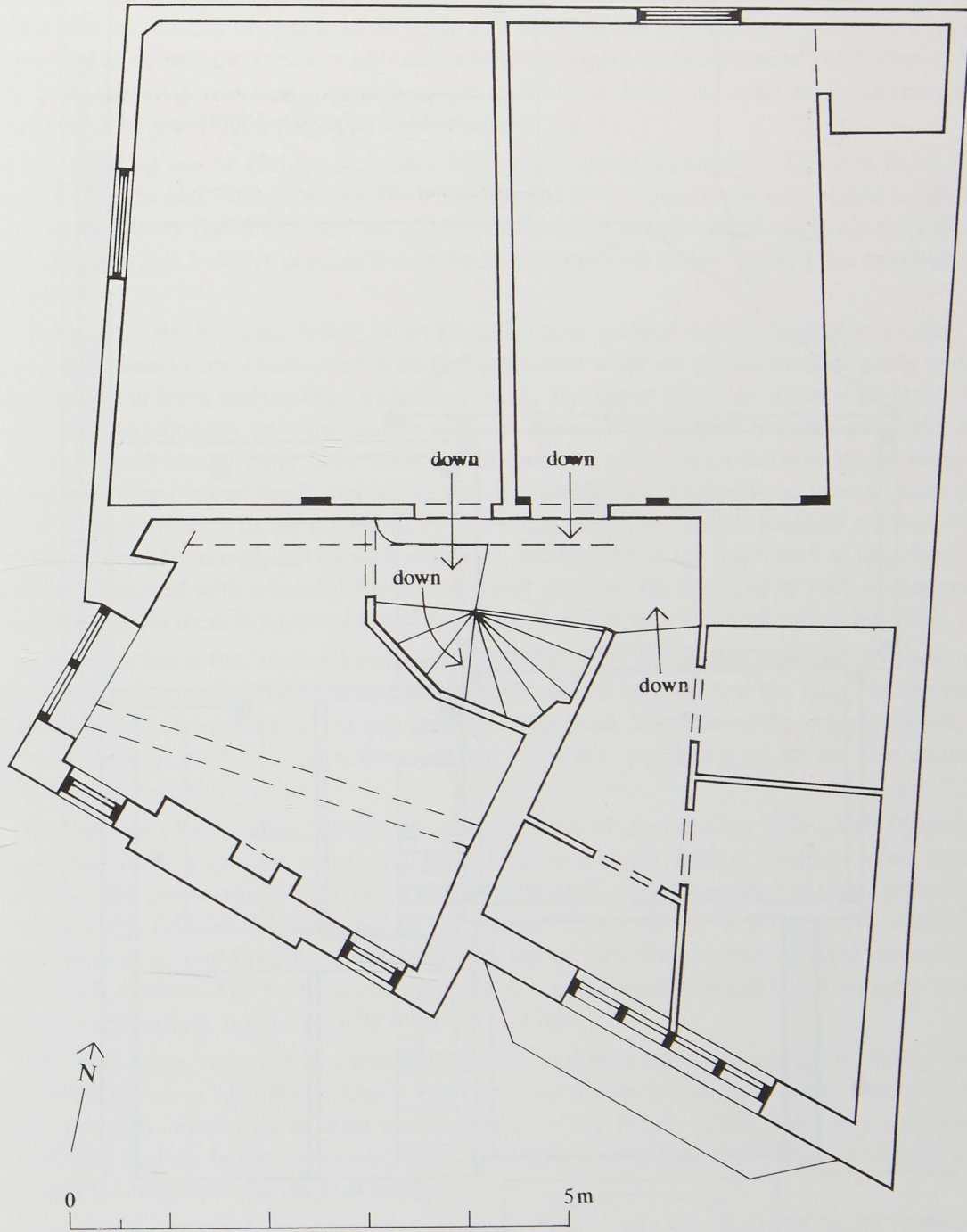


Fig. 5  
Garsett House, Norwich: second floor plan.

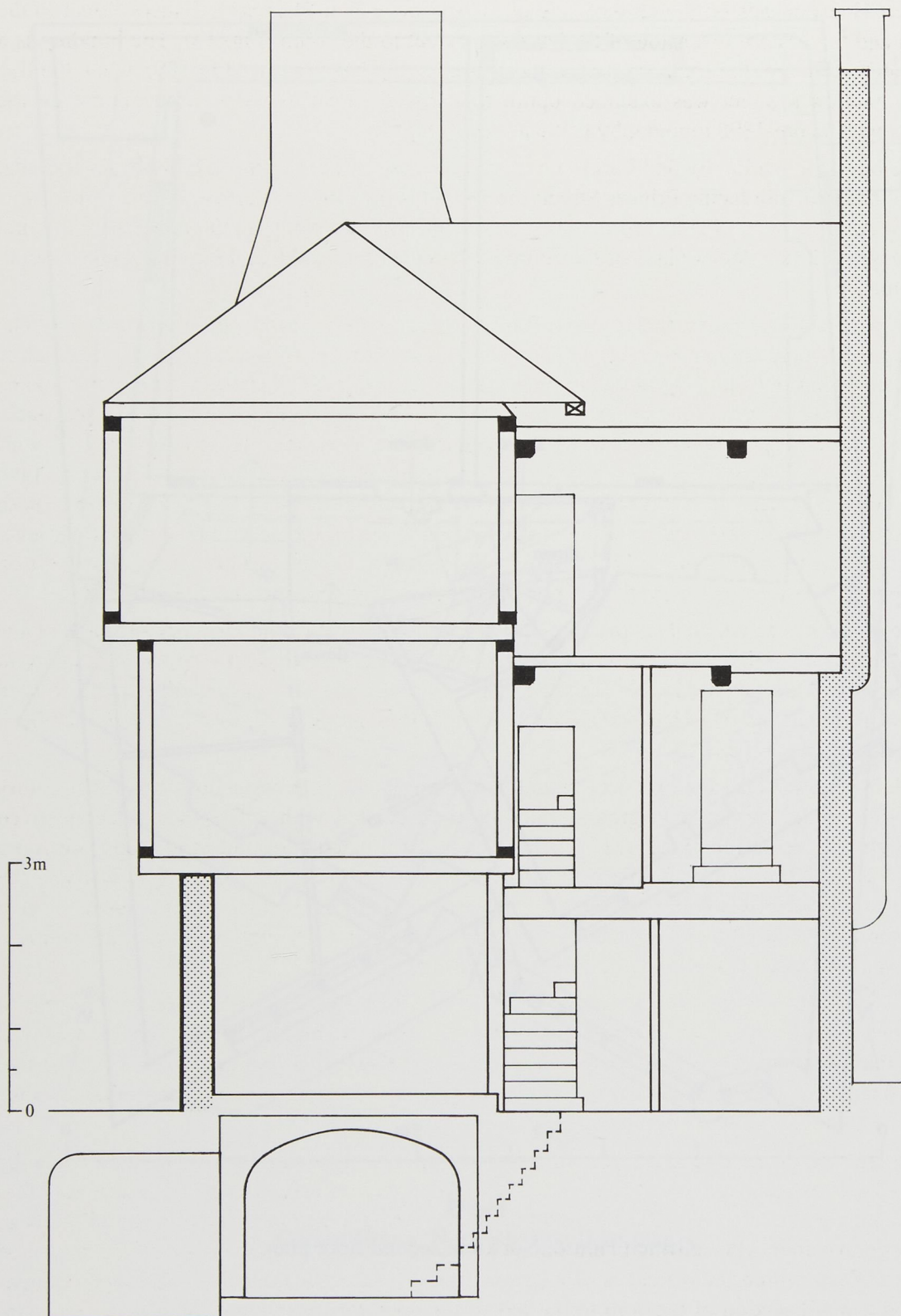


Fig. 6

Garsett House, Norwich: north-to-south section

Garsett House stands on the eastern side of St Andrew's Hall Plain with Princes Street to the north and the eastern extension of St Andrew's Street to the south (Fig. 1b). The building is a truncated structure, the southern part of the house having been removed in 1898 when the line of St Andrew's Street was extended uphill to Redwell Street in order to accommodate the tramway. The pre-1898 topography is illustrated in Fig. 1a.

The building can be divided into three blocks for ease of description. The first block is that part of the structure facing Princes Street; the second is the range to the rear of this which faces into St Andrew's Hall Plain; and the third is the block in the re-entrant angle between the first two. Figures 2 to 5 depict plans of the entire building at each storey and Fig. 6 a north-to-south section.

The part of the building facing on to Princes Street is three storeys high plus a cellar. The two upper storeys are constructed with timber-framed walls on all but the east gable which is constructed in brick and contains a chimney stack. The upper floors are divided into two rooms each and consequently only the eastern half was heated from fireplaces in the gable-end stack. The north and west ground floor walls are of masonry and contain the remains of large windows with four-centred heads and jambs with roll mouldings. At first floor level a recess in the north wall, now seen in the cupboard by the stack, could be another blocked window. These windows have been replaced by sash windows, and the one in the north wall at first-floor level has been covered with a mock 17th-century oriel window. On the head of each corner post on the upper floors there is a carved bracket, the upper one of which contains the date 1589.

The cellar has a flat, timber-joisted ceiling, brick walls and a side chamber off each of the north and south walls. These have three-centred vaulted ceilings and the larger of the two, in the north wall, has additional coving against its rear wall. The base of the chimney stack, seen against the east wall also has a three-centred vault thus providing, as do the side chambers, extra floor space in the cellar.

The interior of this range reflects the refenestration of the building with a late 18th-century stack-side niche cupboard at ground floor level associated with a fireplace since removed although the fire surround survives. There is a similarly dated surround in the top floor room and an early 19th-century fireplace in the present library on the first floor. The walls of the west room at second floor level are lined with reused panelling, including blind doors, from at least three sources. The roof has been remade to a wider span although the front pitch contains some reused rafters, not necessarily from the first roof.

The rear range, which was truncated in 1898 and now has its south gable facing onto St Andrews Street, is also three storeys high and has rendered masonry walls. The interior has been radically altered on at least two occasions – see below – and now only contains two chamfered ceiling beams at second floor level and one at first floor level as candidates for internal features from the original building.

The interior of the three-storeyed third block, which is in the re-entrant angle between the two ranges described above, has been completely reorganised and contains no noteworthy features. The entrance to the cellar beneath the Princes Street range is in this block and it has an 18th-century door. The skirting board on the left-hand side of the doorway into the entry lobby (as seen from within the office) is of a similar date to the cellar door. This skirting continues around a small section of the wall to the left of the door suggesting that the present cupboard was an opening through to the adjoining block. A chimney stack associated with this block was constructed against the rear wall of the Princes Street range although the fireplaces have been either blocked or removed.



The south elevation, with a canted bay at ground and first floor levels, was completely rebuilt, or simply refaced, in 1898.

**Interpretation (Fig. 7)**

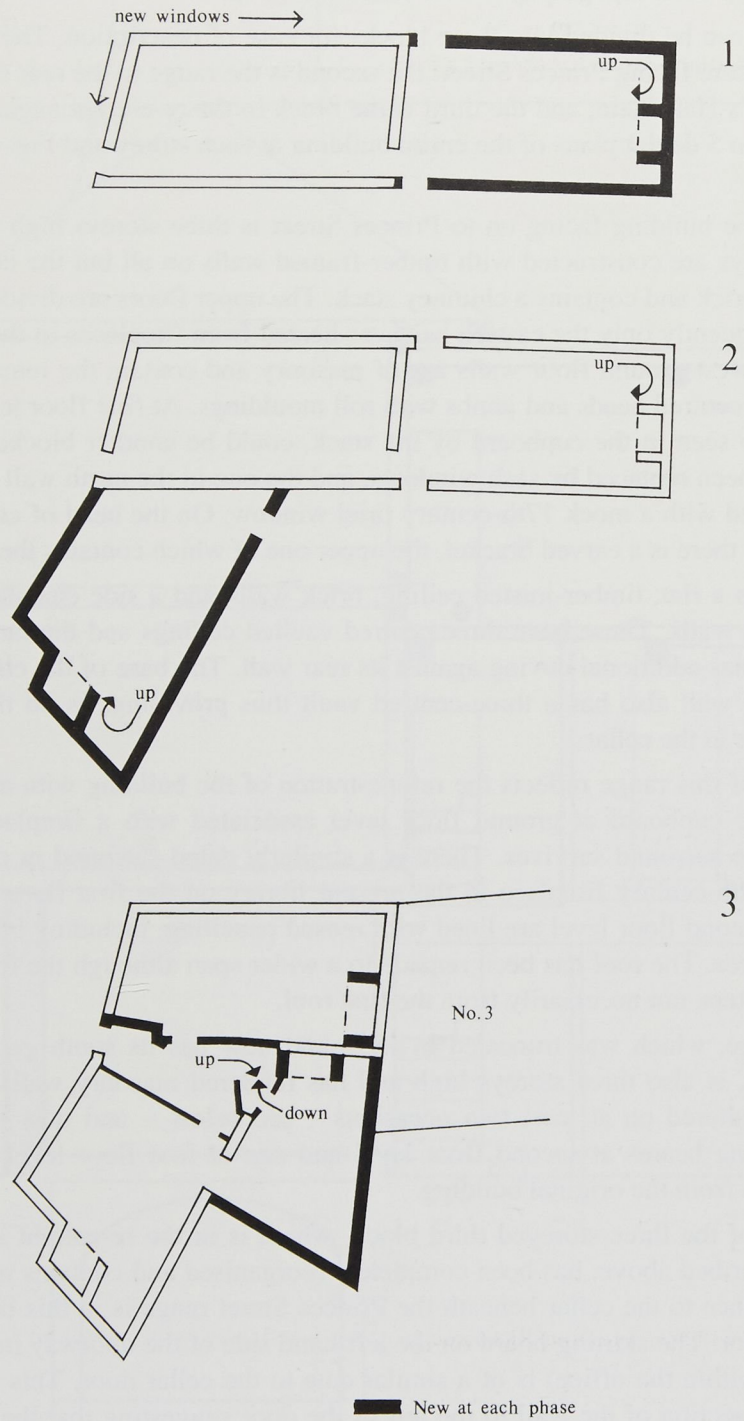


Fig. 7

Garsett House, Norwich: interpretation plans.

The architectural development of the building does not follow the same clear-cut path as the description which, for convenience, divided the building into three blocks. The inter-relationship between the blocks was complete by the 18th century and the cutting of the tramway did little to confuse the interpretation contrary to conclusions drawn in 1972.

### Phase One

The earliest part of the building is probably represented by the north and west ground floor masonry walls of the Princes Street range. The reason for disassociating these from the 1589 timber-framed building above is the complete misalignment between the ground floor walls and the jettied walls above – a seemingly unnecessary complication, both visually and structurally, in a building which was above basic and contained some architectural pretension.

The east gable of this block is formed by the adjoining 18th-century building and this, plus the misalignment, suggests that the 1589 building extended further along Princes Street when it was constructed (shown in black on Fig. 7.1). The uncomfortably close proximity of the 16th-century ground floor window (top left, Fig. 3) and the present east end of the building contributes support for this hypothesis. The ground floor front wall of the hypothetical 16th-century building was probably on a slightly different alignment with the surviving, earlier walls. These were incorporated into the 16th-century building although the wall line above followed the line of the new building and hence the misalignment.

Obviously, it is impossible to say what the plan form was of the 16th-century building but it is an important consideration that the corner room was unheated in the 16th century and was to remain so until the 18th century. The Colegate range of Bacon's House provides an interesting comparison. Alice Bacon died in 1573 and left an exceptionally detailed will<sup>2</sup> which was more akin to a probate inventory and listed the rooms of the house as part of the disposition of their contents. A shop is mentioned in the will and an interpretation of the architectural development of the building<sup>3</sup>, coupled with the list of rooms, suggests that this may have been on the Colegate and St George's Street corner. In 1990 remedial work was carried out on the gable of the Colegate range and a section of door jamb plus an adjoining window were uncovered, both of which had roll mouldings, very similar to those seen on the partly blocked windows in Garsett House. The shop in Bacon's House was unheated and it is tempting to designate the surviving room on Princes Street to the same function.

### Phase Two

The next discernible phase of development saw the construction of a rear wing which was unfortunately truncated for the tramway in the 19th century (Fig. 7.2). The side walls of this block were built out from the rear wall of the 16th century range although it is most unlikely that there was a stair in the present position as proposed by Alan Carter. The reason for this statement is that the bulge in the wall, seen on the first floor to second floor staircase, represents the end of the east wall which was removed at a later stage. If there was a stair in this position contemporary with the erection of the rear range it would have been, as there were no structural restrictions, wholly within the room space and not partly outside of it. As stated above the only internal features left from this phase are the ceiling beams and these could indicate an early 17th-century date.

### Phase Three

Although there is little tangible evidence to justify the date, the next phase of alteration proba-

bly occurred in the 18th century and resulted in a plan which formed the basis of that seen today (Fig. 7.3). The four basic alterations to the building are:

1. the re-entrant angle between the present Princes Street range and the rear addition was infilled with a block containing a single room on all three floors and a stack against the rear wall of the street range
2. a stack inserted into the room on Princes Street
3. the cellar was dug and
4. the entrance hall plus stairs created partly within the earlier rear range.

The street range was probably re-roofed during this campaign of alteration as there are deep section joists spanning from wall plate to wall plate between the earlier tie beams. The ends of the joists were cut to correspond with the pitch of the roof and this shows that the roof was rebuilt again, probably in the late 19th century, with a shallower pitch and a wider span.

### Concluding Remarks

Not one of the pre-1830 buildings within the city's walls has escaped alteration and addition, in varying degrees, in the years after its construction. These changes were determined by one or a combination of at least four factors: social considerations affecting the use of the building; damage by fire or structural failure; topographical changes within the immediate vicinity; or simply a change in architectural fashion. The changes seen in Garsett House, which form the basis for the understanding of its architectural history, came about by a combination of all but one of these factors, although this – the rebuilding due to fire or structural damage – could account for the restructuring of the Princes Street range of Garsett House.

### Appendix

Shortly after the preparation of the above report the exterior of Garsett House was scaffolded for repair and redecoration which allowed close inspection of the consoles beneath the dragon beams on the first and second floors and removal of part of the fascia at second floor level exposed the joists. The deep-section joists measure 18cms x 5cms and are spaced, on average, 32cms c/c. Six joists were exposed on the west side of the building and one on the north side and all had a small half-lap mortice to accommodate the bressumer. The bressumer is 13cms wide with a small rebate on the outer arris which measures 3cms x 1.5cms deep, and was associated with contemporary rendering. This shows that in 1589 the timber framing was, as now, covered. The outer face of the tenon of the wall studs, which are at 40cms c/c, is in line with the vertical face of this rebate.

In section the second floor dragon beam measures 31cms x 18cms deep and the two end faces stop in line with the vertical sides of the rebate mentioned above. Part of the western side of the beam is chamfered and the joist(s) cut accordingly. The chamfer is only visible against the first joist away from the dragon beam due to diagonal packing pieces which have been inserted between the next three joists. The chamfer does not appear on the dragon beam after these. On the west face of the dragon beam and the first joist the number seven (VII) is scratched with a semi-circle on the last digit, although this number does not fall into any recognisable sequence. The number one (I) can be seen on the other face of the beam.

Five centimetres down from the top face of the dragon beam there is a 5cms-deep scar on the surface of the timber presumably associated with a further order of decoration above the console.

The carving on the upper console is of a very high quality and contains the date 1589 above a scale pattern plus deeply cut scrolls with flower motifs included on the sides. On the top of both sides of the console there are pegs presumably associated with the head of windows similar to those seen at ground floor level.

Part of the lower console is missing and the whole thing appears to be joined to the corner post by a metal bracket. The carved decoration on this bracket is not of the same family as that seen above as the scroll motif is much broader. This, plus the uncomfortable relationship between the console and the adjoining roll mouldings, could indicate that it is a later replacement or addition.

1. Eden, P. in Munby L.M. ed. 'Small Post-Medieval Houses in Eastern England', *East Anglian Studies* 1968, 71-93.
2. The will of Alice Bacon, NRO Consistory Court of Norwich Wills, Fairchilde 148.
3. Smith, R. 'An Architectural History of Norwich Buildings' unpublished M Phil. thesis, University of East Anglia.