The Manor House, Medbourne: The Development of Leicestershire's Earliest Manor House

by Nick Hill

The development of this important manor house has been the subject of a recent programme of detailed recording and analysis, accompanied by dendrochronology. A complex sequence of building phases has been established, dating back to the earlier thirteenth century, with major rebuilding in the late thirteenth century and the sixteenth century. It is suggested that an aisled hall of *c.*1238, possibly timber-framed, was replaced in *c.*1288 with a stone-built hall and a cross wing containing service rooms below a solar. Parallels are drawn within the locality and wider national developments to establish the significance of the building. In national terms, it provides an excellent example of the transition from aisled hall to a base cruck or 'short principal' type of roof structure, with unusually precise dating of both phases. Regionally, it is argued that it is a representative example of an early 'great rebuilding' in this stone belt region, probably marking the transition from timber-framed construction to stone, and using the base cruck/short principal roof structure within stone walls.

Introduction

Medbourne Manor House, lying on the eastern edge of the village, was the principal manor house in Medbourne, 15 miles south-east of Leicester. It has been recognised as an early building of considerable interest for many years, ever since it first came to the notice of historians during a visit in 1858 of the Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society, precursor to the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society (*TALAAS*, 1, pp.216-18). It was investigated briefly by S. R. Jones in 1960 (pers. comm.) during research for the Victoria County History, where a short description of the building is given (VCH, V, pp.232-5). Jones carried out a more detailed investigation and survey work with N. W. Alcock in 1971 (pers. comm.), though only a brief reference to this work was ever published (Alcock and Barley, 1972).

   The existing house is built of stone and consists of a main block, the original hall, with a cross-wing at the south end (illus. 1-3). A striking feature is the fine set of three medieval stone doorways in the cross passage which lead into the former service end in the cross-wing (illus. 4). The hall has a central truss of base cruck/short principal type,

1. View of the west front

and is single-aisled, the former aisle to the west front having been removed, but the roof still sweeping low over the remaining aisle to the east (illus. 5). The roof structure over the hall has arcade plates which support notch-lapped common rafters of early type, together with a strange asymmetrically braced truss. To the north, the surviving lean-to block probably represents a reduced remnant of a further bay to the hall. A large chimney stack and first-floor structure were inserted into the open hall in the sixteenth century.

The cross-wing is of two storeys with attics and has two blades from two separate cruck trusses surviving on the first floor, though cut away both above and below. Besides the thick stone walls, another early feature is the west gable window on the first floor of *c.*1500, with a deep-set hollow-moulded surround. In the sixteenth century, the west ground floor room was converted from service use to a fine new parlour, with a large stone fireplace, a projecting lateral chimney stack and a heavy-beamed ceiling. Later, ovolo-moulded stone windows were inserted in both the cross-wing and hall ranges.

Historical background

The history of the manor is described in detail in Victoria County History, on which this account is based (VCH, V, pp.232-5). The Manor House is exceptional for a building of its size in having a clear history of ownership back to Norman times. The Manor House formed the larger of the two manors identified from the early Norman period in Medbourne. In 1086 it was owned by Robert de Todeni, lord of Belvoir,
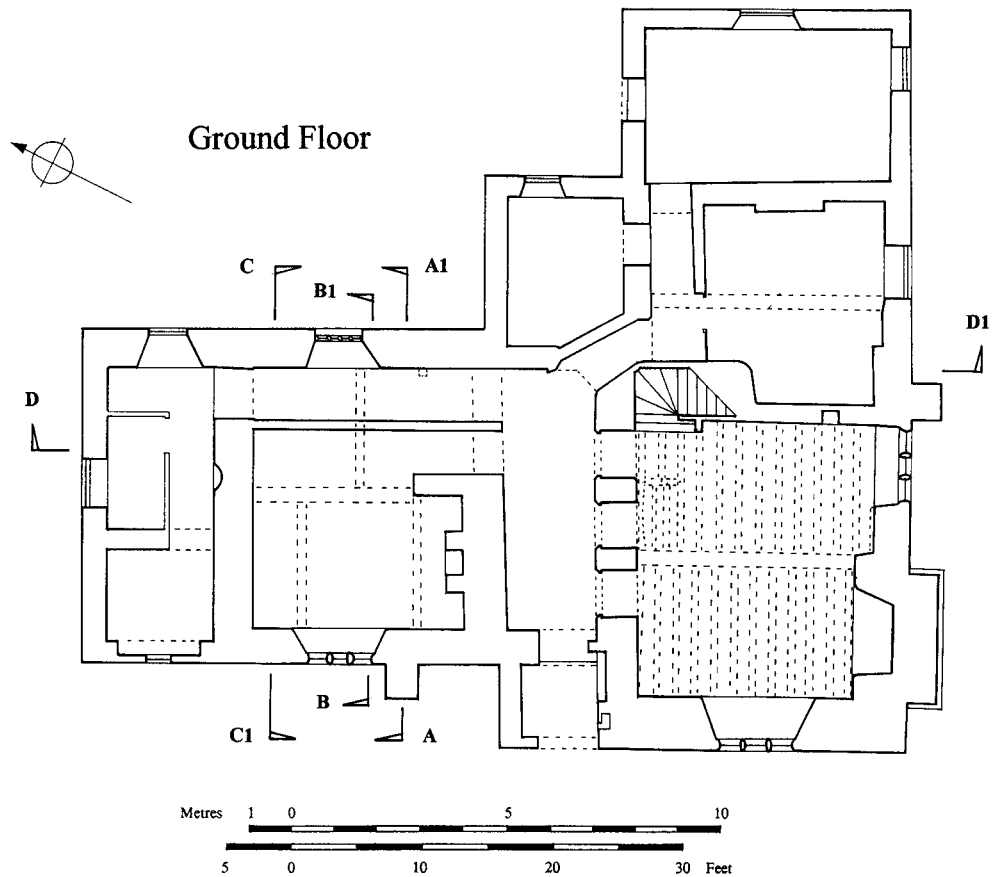
Ground Floor

2. The Manor House, Medbourne. Ground floor plan

along with 4 carucates of land. This was a substantial holding, with land sufficient for 8 ploughs before 1066. The manor passed to the d'Aubeney family and then to the family of Ros of Belvoir, who held the overlordship through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The manor itself was occupied by the Chaworth family, first mentioned in 1235-6 when William de Chaworth held the manor of William d'Aubeney. William's son Thomas de Chaworth was evidently a man of some local status. He secured a grant of free warren (hunting rights) in his demesne lands at Medbourne and Tugby in 1257, and the grant of a market and fair in Medbourne by Henry III in 1266 was made jointly to Thomas de Chaworth and John de Kirkby. In 1290, Thomas is also recorded as holding much of the secondary Medbourne manor. The Victoria County History states that he died before 1315 and was a resident manorial lord – an obvious candidate for the building of the substantial manor house of this period.
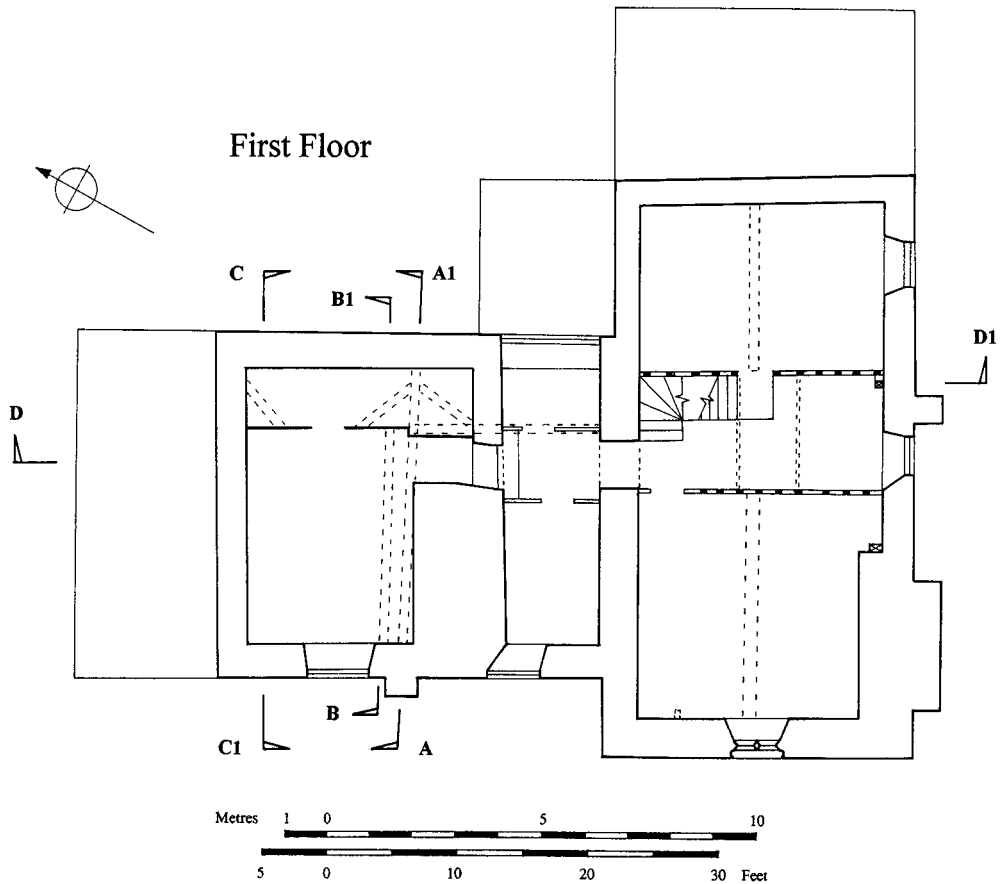
First Floor

3. The Manor House, Medbourne. First floor plan

The Chaworth manor descended in the male line of the Chaworth family for nine or ten generations, until the death of Thomas Chaworth (VII) in 1485. Thomas de Chaworth's descendants continued to live at the manor for most of the fourteenth century, with his grandson Sir Thomas de Chaworth (d.1371) probably the last family member to live in the house. By 1381 it was leased to Hugh Hemyton, 'franklyn', and throughout the fifteenth century the Chaworths probably continued to lease the manor to a tenant or farm it through a steward. In 1485, on the death of the last Thomas Chaworth, the manor passed to Thomas's cousin Joan, married to John Ormond of Alfreton, and subsequently to their three daughters. In 1494 Joan Ormond leased the manor to John Goodman of Medbourne. William Payne bought half the manor in 1551, and his son Thomas Payne bought the remaining half in 1563. Thomas's son William Payne held the manor until his death in 1615, when it passed to his son Robert, who sold up to Henry Nevill of Holt in 1631.

4. The thirteenth-century cross passage doorways

5. View of cross wing and hall from north-east

The house was then occupied by tenants of the Holt estate, held by the Nevills until 1868. The Holt estate was bought by the Cunard family in 1876. When Sir Bache Cunard became master of the local hunt in 1878, the house was renovated for use by the huntsman, because the diversion of the Holt road (brought about by the new 'Medbourne Curve' railway line) made it difficult to use it as a farm, the last tenant farmer being Thomas Hextall.

The medieval house: the hall

The early roof structure of the hall, which has been recognised for some time (VCH, V, pp.232-5; Alcock and Barley, 1972), provides the key evidence for the medieval house. However, its form and development are particularly puzzling, and dating by dendrochronology has been important in the attempt to gain an understanding of the complex sequence (Howard, 1999). The surviving hall roof timbers have two bays, with a central truss. The upper roof structure survives fairly complete, and consists of rafter couples of straight, square scantling with notch-lapped collars braced by soulaces (illus. 6). The rafters have housed seatings into longitudinal plates. These plates are square-set like arcade plates on both the west and east sides, and are heavy timbers of *c.*250 x 250mm. Both plates have splayed and tabled scarf joints near the central truss, of early type, with several face pegs.
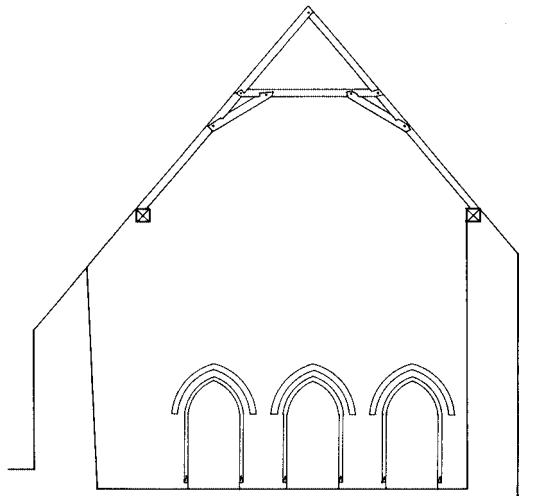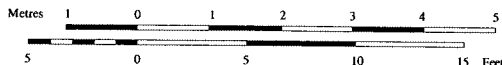

Section C - C1
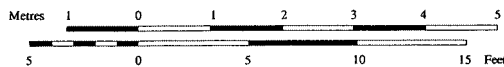
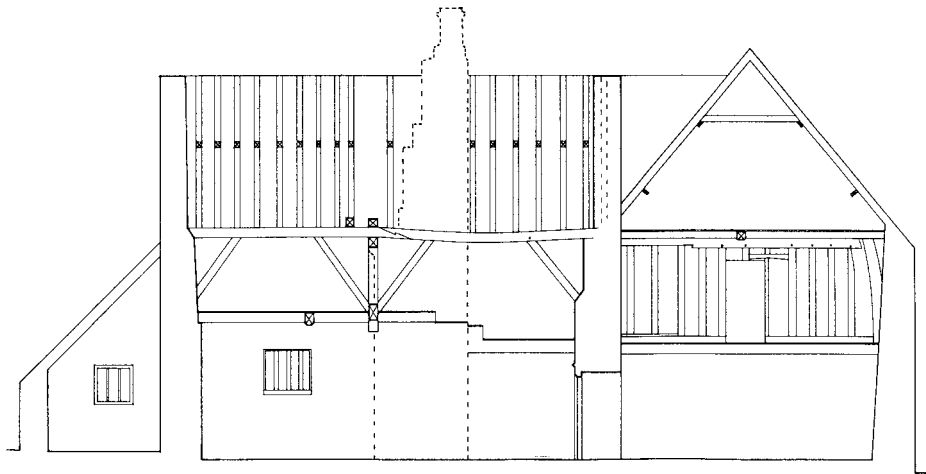6. The Manor House, Medbourne. Section C, with notch-lapped common rafters
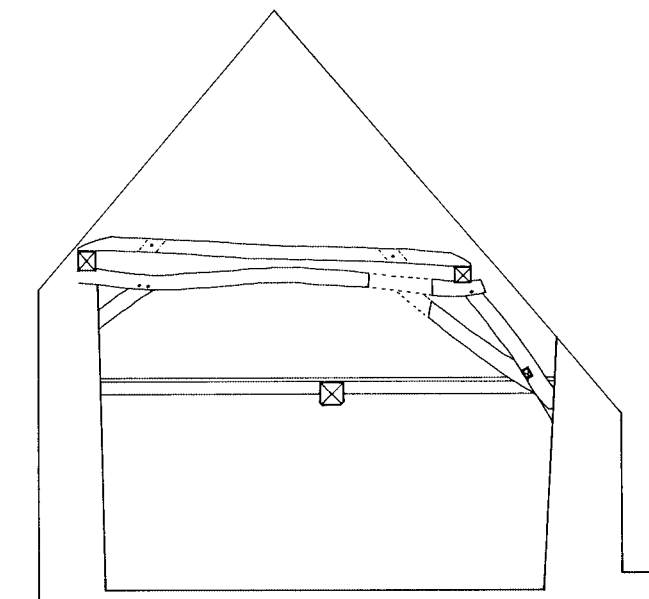
Section A - A1

7. The Manor House, Medbourne. Section A, with 'short principal' truss

The central truss (Truss A, illus.7) is of base cruck/short principal type, but has only one surviving base cruck blade, as the west aisle has been removed and the front west wall rebuilt underneath the arcade plate. Evidence of smoke-blackening to the underside of the arcade plate and of seatings for aisle rafters confirms that there was formerly an aisle here. The truss has two tie-beams which sandwich the arcade plates, but the upper tie-beam is clearly re-used, as it has trenches for former passing braces, relating to its earlier position. The single blade is slightly curved, of square (*c.*210 x 210mm) section and has a tenoned joint to the tie-beam. It disappears into the thick stone wall at a high level and at a considerable angle, and must therefore be a 'short principal' bearing onto the stone wall rather than a base cruck reaching further towards the ground (See Alcock and Barley, 1972, p.147-8 for the introduction of the term 'short principal'). Confirmation of the identification as a 'short principal' is that there is a stop to the chamfers where the principal meets the stone wall, and a flat seating on the underside of the principal, where it bears into the wall. This point is of particular significance, as it implies that the Truss A structure had walls of stone and not of timber. A heavy square brace runs up from a tenoned joint in the blade to join the tie-beam. The underside of the tie-beam and braces have plain chamfers. On the east side, the arcade plate is

Section D - D1
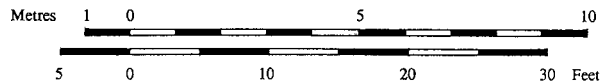
8. The Manor House, Medbourne. Section D: Long section of hall and cross wing.
The now missing 'floating' tie-beams in the hall south bay are shown dotted.

supported by straight, square braces, chamfered to the underside with run-out stops, and tenoned to the blade. Similar braces rise from the stone walls at the end of each bay to support the plate (illus. 8). The south brace is tenoned to the plate, but the next brace has only a birdsmouth joint; joints to the remaining two braces are not visible. The south brace, which bears on the stone wall over the early cross passage doorways, is aligned longitudinally with the arcade plate, whereas the other three braces are skewed at an angle to it. This arrangement of the south brace again suggests that the Truss A structure accompanied walls of stone, not timber. The skewed north brace indicates that the existing north gable wall of the hall is probably not the original end wall, but the location of a further truss.

The strangest feature of the roof is the asymmetric Truss B (illus. 9), which is located slightly to one side of the central Truss A. This has a tie-beam seated on the arcade plate, and a complex upper structure of rafters, collar and passing braces, all of square section timbers joined with notch-lap or straight lap joints. The passing braces on both the east and west sides are trenched right across the lower tie-beam and appear to have been cut off, suggesting that they continued downwards to join lower members, in the normal arrangement of such passing braces. It is evident that the upper tie-beam re-used in Truss A is of the same form as the tie-beam in Truss B, with trenches for former passing braces, though not for the other struts. The 'face' side of this truss (the upper side as assembled by the carpenter, and the side from which the pegs were driven into the joints) is on the south side, similar to that of Truss A. However, unusually, the 'face'
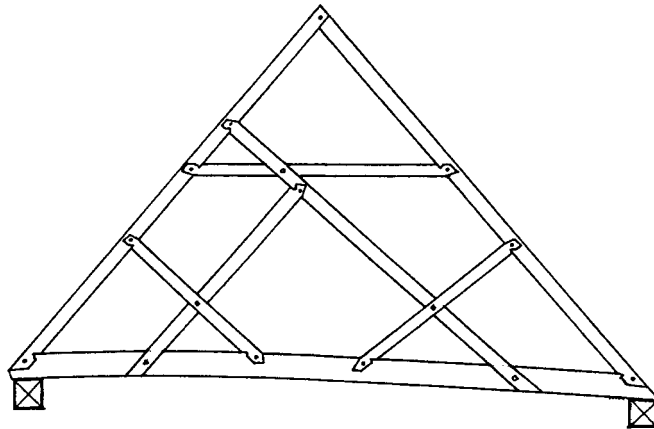
Section B - B1

9. Section B: the asymmetric roof truss

side of all the main rafter frames is on the opposite, north side, suggesting a re-arrangement.

The features of all of these roof timbers are characteristic of an early date. The base cruck/short principal form, common rafter roof, notch-lapped joints, passing braces, splayed and tabled scarf joints and the heavy square scantling of the principal timbers are all features typical of the thirteenth century. The dendrochronology results suggest that three different phases can be identified in the period (Howard, 1999). The first identified phase relates to the common rafter frames of the north bay of the hall roof, where four samples have a heartwood/sapwood boundary averaging 1197. Allowing for 15-35 sapwood rings, which Howard states as the 95% confidence limits found by the Nottingham laboratory for this part of England, this would give a felling date range of 1212-32. The second phase, with four samples from asymmetric Truss B (from tie-beam and braces) has a more precise felling date of 1237, as three of the samples retain full sapwood. Probably also included in this second building phase are one sample from a common rafter collar of the south bay, dated with full sapwood to 1238, and three samples from the south-west, south-east and north-east arcade plates with a heartwood/sapwood boundary average of 1213, giving a felling date range of 1228-48. The third thirteenth-century phase, with four samples from short principal Truss A (from lower tie-beam and both braces) can also be given a precise felling date of 1287, as one sample retains complete sapwood. Two samples from common rafters of the south bay may also date with this third building phase. Previous studies have established that construction dates for each phase would almost always be within a year or two of the felling date (Miles, 1997).

There are further complexities in the hall roof structure, which the dendrochronology results help to elucidate. On the underside of the north-east arcade plate, just under the splayed and tabled scarf joint at the south end, is an empty matrix for a lap joint (illus. 10-11). A similar lap joint was also found on the underside of the south-east arcade
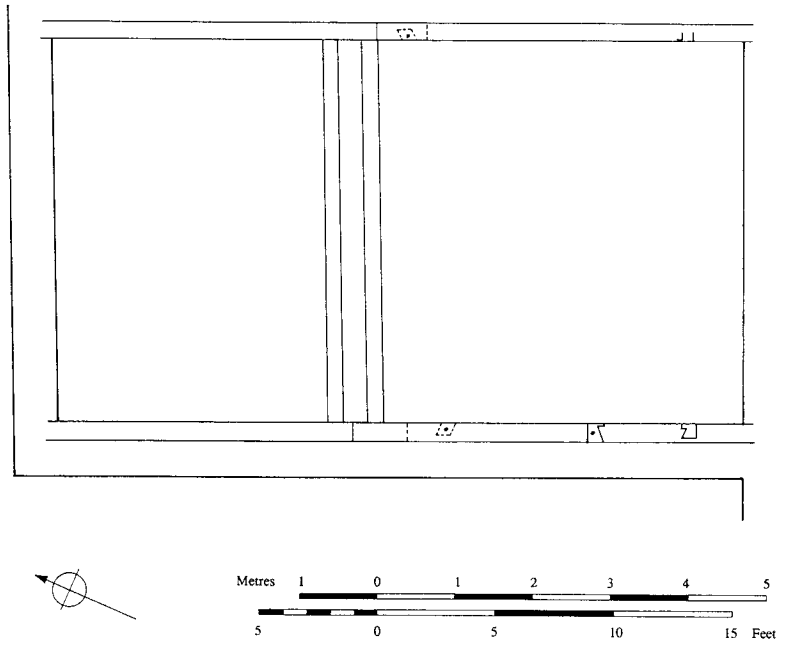
10. Plan of hall block at arcade plate level with tie-beams to trusses A and B and lap joints for former 'floating' tie-beams. Lap joints to the underside of the arcade plates are shown dotted.
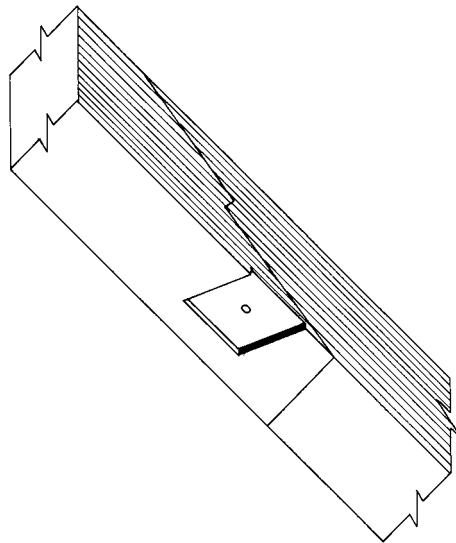
11. Underside view of north-west arcade plate, showing lap joint matrix

plate. The position of these lap joints indicates that the arcade plate must have been re-set, as their current location for such a lap joint is impossible on several counts. A shallow lap joint simply pegged to the underside of the plate would fall out; the lap joint right underneath the tapering end of a splayed scarf is obviously impractical; and the lap joint on the south-east plate must have been trimmed back, as it is now less than 10mm deep. This indication of re-use fits with the dendrochronological evidence, as both arcade plates are dated to 1228-48, equating to the *c.*1238 phase. What could the position of these two timbers have been in the *c.*1238 building? For such heavy timbers (*c.*250 x 250mm) there are only three possibilities: as tie-beams, arcade plates, or aisle posts. We already have two surviving examples of tie-beams from the *c.*1238 building, of different section (*c.*200 x 200mm), so this possibility can be dismissed. If used previously as arcade plates, the timbers must have been rotated through 90°, with the laps being for braces from arcade post to plate. Alternatively, they may have served as aisle posts, with the laps for passing braces, as illustrated in the reconstruction drawing of Truss B (illus. 13).

To add further complication, the south-west and south-east arcade plates carry another set of lap joint matrices on their top faces (illus. 10 and 12). Although the joints on the south-east plate have been cut back and survive only in part, there is enough evidence to confirm the former presence of two extra or 'floating' tie-beams (illus. 8), which must relate to the building of *c.*1288. 'Floating' tie-beams of this sort have now been found on a number of early buildings in Suffolk and Essex, with a similar type of housed dovetail joint (Walker, 1994, pp.134-6). Such tie-beams are usually found either side of the central truss or at the centre of bays, and may be a survival of the earliest Romanesque roof form, with a tie-beam to every rafter couple. A few examples have also been found with extra ties over the cross passage area, as at Medbourne: Purton Green, Suffolk (Walker, 1994) and The Woodlands, Brundish, Suffolk (Aitkens, 2001).

A final detail to note on the hall roof structure is the rafter couple located at the south end, over the stone cross passage wall (illus. 8). These rafters are heavily smoke-blackened, unlike the stonework now built up to them, and differ from all the other rafter couples in having only a high notch-lapped collar (now missing) which was pegged onto the south side of the rafters, not the north face as with all the other rafter
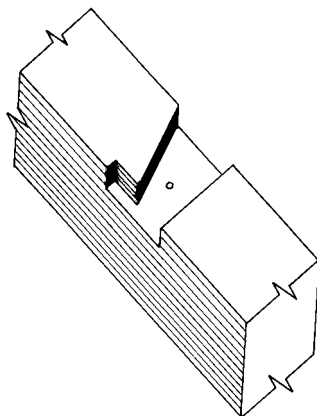
12. Top view of south-west arcade plate, showing lap joint matrix
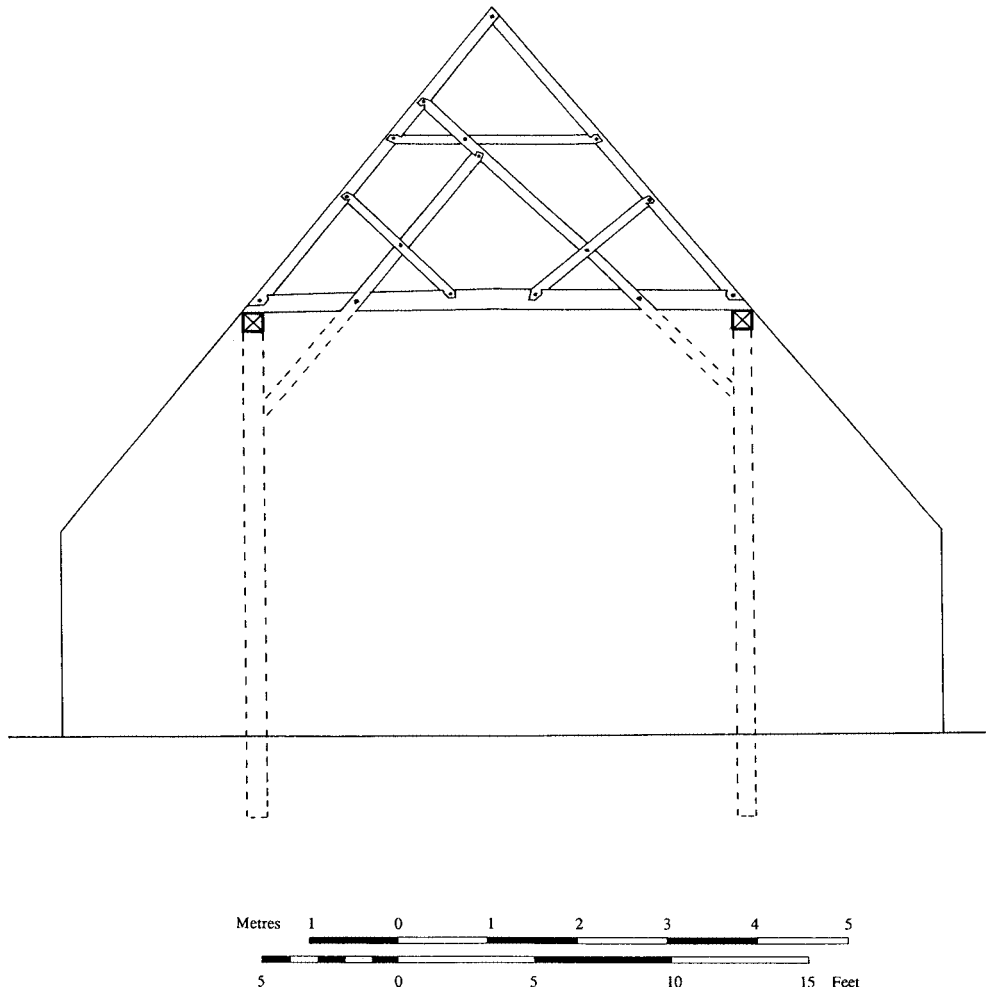
13. Reconstruction view of *c.*1238 at Truss B, with aisle posts

couples. This suggests these rafters may have marked the end of the original *c.*1238 hall roof, with a high gablet at the level of the collar, and a hipped end (illus. 17). However, one would normally expect a second collar at a lower level, which appears to be absent.

The picture which emerges from all this is as follows. A timber-framed aisled hall was built in *c.*1238, with evidence for at least a three-bay building, containing Truss B with its passing braces jointed to the aisle posts (see reconstruction drawing, illus. 13, also 16 and 17) and a second similar truss, again with passing braces linked to aisle posts, of which only the tie-beam now survives, re-used in Truss A. Evidence for a still earlier phase of 1212-32 comes from the dendrochronology results from the common rafter frames of the north bay, suggesting an earlier aisled hall of the same roof span. However, the overall structure at this date is unclear and it is possible that these timbers

belong to the *c.*1238 phase, and had unusually extensive sapwood or were stockpiled for a few years before construction started.

The whole building was then substantially rebuilt in *c.*1288, again as a three bay hall, with the short principal Truss A bearing onto stone side walls, and a stone cross wall at the south end which contains the three cross passage doorways (See reconstruction drawing, illus. 14, also 18 and 19). There are interesting lines of earthworks discernible in the grassland immediately to the east and north of the house, suggestive of an early enclosure sweeping around here, as might be expected for such an early date, but the scale of other changes here with the farmyard and railway cutting make interpretation uncertain.

The medieval house: the cross wing

The fine set of three doorways in the cross passage have previously been dated stylistically to *c.*1300 (VCH, V, p.230) and can now be more closely ascribed to the
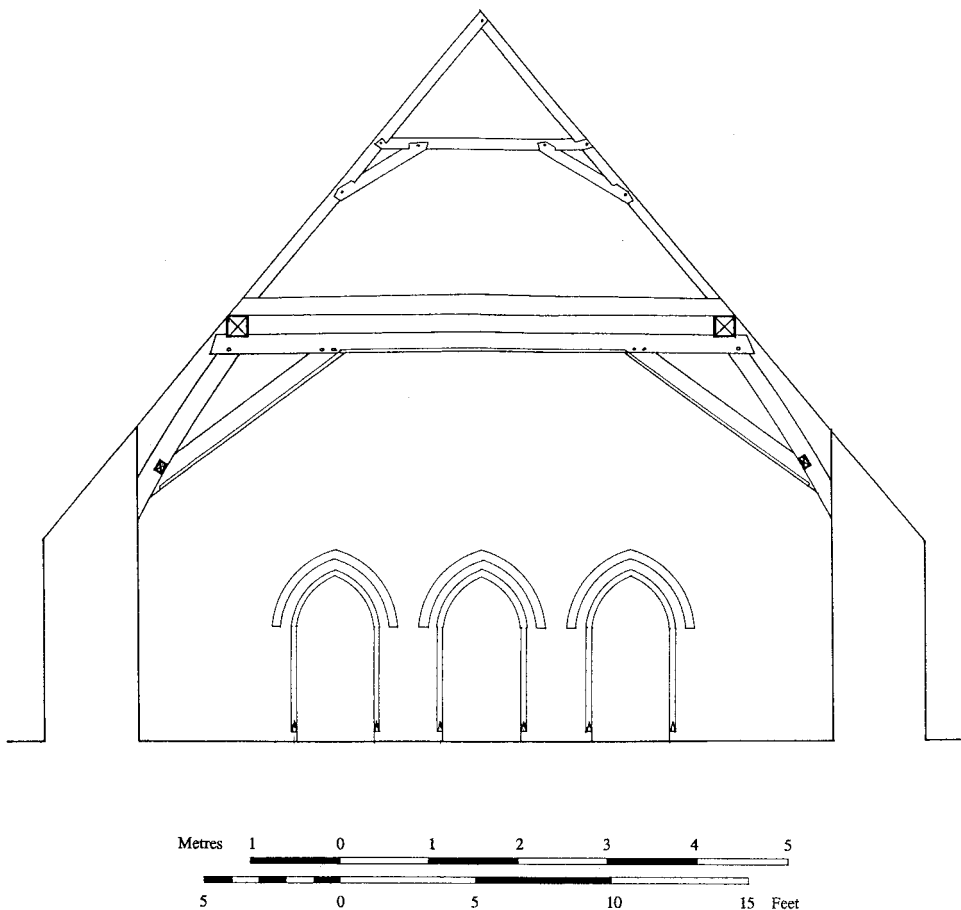
14. Reconstruction view of *c.*1288, with 'short principal' truss and aisles

*c.*1288 phase. They are well built, with two-centred arches of Weldon stone set in a very thick wall, and their impressive appearance, unparalleled in the locality, points to the early importance of the house. The doorways have plain chamfers with big pyramid stops at the foot, and plain chamfered hood mouldings (two now missing) above. The account of the visit in 1858 by the Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society describes how they found the current tenant engaged on chipping away the hood mouldings, and tried to persuade him to desist; perhaps the one surviving example is due to their intervention.

The cross-wing roof has been completely replaced with a purlin and rafter roof of late nineteenth-century date. At first floor level two slightly curved timbers against the south wall must be cruck blades from an earlier structure. The stone walls have been built to accommodate and support the blades below first floor level, and they have both been cut off at first floor ceiling level. Formerly, however, there was further evidence visible here, as reported on the visits from the Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society in 1858 and 1878: 'The two arched timbers of the roof still remain, and they have on one edge of them nail head ornaments, that is, the nail heads are formed simply by bits of the beam being left on, instead of the whole being chamfered off' (TALAAS, v, p.172). Late nineteenth-century architectural experts can be relied on for accurate identification of nail-head ornament, so this would suggest that these timbers date from the thirteenth century, when nail-head was a common component of the Transitional/Early English style. A parallel example of nail-head ornament was found at Loddington Hall (Northants) on the collar and braces of a base cruck truss in the hall, thought to be of late thirteenth century date (Heward and Taylor, 1996, pp.273-6). Here the nail-head was also on one side only and widely spaced, though in this case set either side of a large roll moulding, rather than centrally on the chamfer. The most likely use of the phrase 'two arched timbers of the roof' would be for a pair of matching arch braces. The nail-head ornaments on one side only certainly suggest a purpose to display decoration towards the more important face only.

Further evidence for early work in the cross-wing, a stone window in the upper east gable, was noted in the Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society account of 1858: 'At the east end of this apartment there remained one of the original windows. Previously to the present alterations this window was quite concealed internally by plaster, etc., and a modern kitchen chimney was built up against it externally. When we were there, this chimney had just been pulled down, and one of our members climbed up and poked out the sut [sic] which nearly filled up the stonework. This window consisted of two pointed lights, separated by an octagonal mullion with a moulded capital. The morning after our visit the gable and window fell to the ground.... Mr Goddard [of the well-known family of Leicestershire architects] produced from his sketch-book a drawing of the upper part of the mullion and capital and remarked that the window had never been glazed'(TALAAS, 1, pp.216-18). This description sounds like a very early window, quite probably of the thirteenth century, and certainly unlike any of the surviving windows. The moulded capital to the central mullion suggests that the window was of transitional or very early gothic form, before the development of proper bar tracery.

Both the arched roof timbers with nail-head ornament and the two-light pointed window in the east gable strongly suggest that this space formed an impressive solar, occupying the whole of the cross-wing first floor above the service rooms, and of late thirteenth-century date like the rebuilt hall block and the cross passage service doorways. The high quality moulded stone window of *c.*1500 (see below) in the west

15. West gable of cross wing, with deeply moulded solar window

gable at first floor level indicates that the use of this space as a fine solar probably continued through the fifteenth century. The current stone window here may well be a replacement of another thirteenth century window, similar to the one discovered in the east gable.

It would be convenient if the dendrochronology had established a thirteenth-century date for the surviving cruck blades in the cross-wing, but the picture is once again more complex than this. The one sample dated, from the south-east blade, produced a felling range of 1482-1502. This suggests that the cross-wing roof was rebuilt with two cruck trusses in the late fifteenth century, but it seems extremely unlikely that the nail-head ornament could be of that date. Comparable examples of nail-head, or the similar Early English dog-tooth moulding on timber are all early, e.g. Loddington Hall, Northants, late thirteenth century (Heward and Taylor, 1996); Almshoe Bury, Herts, mid-thirteenth century (Smith, 1992, pp.12-14); Bishop's Palace, Hereford, 1179 (Vernacular Architecture 20,1989, p.46). The most likely explanation is therefore that the fifteenth-century rebuild preserved some of the thirteenth-century timbers, either in their original position, or re-used.

After the substantial reconstruction of *c.*1288, with the stone-walled hall block and cross-wing, the Manor House probably underwent little alteration for some time. In 1482-1502, marking perhaps the transfer from ownership by the Chaworth family in

1485, the two cruck trusses were inserted into the cross-wing, though retaining some of the earlier roof timbers. Around the same time, the fine Weldon stone window was introduced in the west gable of the solar on the first floor (illus. 15). This two-light window is deeply set into the wall with big cavetto mouldings to the outer surround. The jambs and mullion are also cavetto moulded. There is a heavy cavetto hood mould, with turned down ends. The big cavetto jambs and heavy hood mould are very similar to an example at Nassington Manor House dated to the early sixteenth century (RCHME, North Northants, 1984, Plate 77). However, the straight rather than shaped head is unusual for such an early date. The hall continued throughout this period as an open hall with a central hearth.

Post-medieval development

The next major development probably occurred in the later sixteenth century, the period when the manor was owned and occupied by the Payne family (illus. 21-2). A great chimney stack was inserted in the hall, replacing the open hearth. Such development was commonly accompanied by the insertion of a first floor in the hall, but there is reason to believe that this did not occur until a little later here. The dating of this later sixteenth-century phase is made possible by reference to a report in the Transactions of the Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society (*TLAAS*, 5, p.172). A fine wallpainting scheme was discovered during renovations by Sir Bache Cunard: 'The frescoes appear to have been done about the reign of King James the First, and the subjects were painted in panels, surrounded by borders. The most perfect one was that of an esquire of the period in his feathered cap, doublet and trunk-hose; another, not so complete, a lady with her arms extended, with a morion and feathers on her head. The frieze which went around the room was really very beautiful, the details of which were drawn from classical sources, Sirens holding medallions with the letters M.P. and T.P. in the centre of them.' It is unfortunately difficult from this account to establish which room the paintings were in, although it is possible that the wallpaintings survive under later decoration; given Sir Bache Cunard's evident interest in them in 1878, it seems unlikely that they would be wholly destroyed by his renovations. Another room was noted in 1878 with an old inscription over the door and one over the fireplace. The initials T.P. must be Thomas Payne (with M.P. presumably his wife) who held the manor from *c.*1563 into the later 16th century; the wallpaintings are therefore Elizabethan rather than Jacobean. As such, they would be a rare survival, with the classical influence in the frieze of particular interest. The finest surviving English series of domestic wallpaintings of this period, at Hill Hall, Essex, dated to *c.*1570, is also painted in panels with borders and classical influences (Simpson, 1977).

One fragmentary area of wallpainting survives, probably of this period. This is located in the roof void area of the east aisle of the hall, on the north face of the inserted cross wall for the stack. The lime plaster has traces of surviving early painted decoration, now in poor condition but with faded colours in linear patterns. At the top is a reddish band, a little further down a brown/yellow band, followed by more indeterminate decoration, and then at the base a red band with small circular motifs below it. The wallpainting stops abruptly at what seems to be a ceiling level, about 800mm above the current first floor level, and the red pattern at the base is cut across by the inserted first floor joists. It thus appears that this wallpainting area must pre-date the insertion of the floor in the hall, but accompanies the building of the chimney stack, as this wall forms its substrate.

It seems likely that this surviving fragment is the upper part of the scheme discovered in 1878. The hall for which the paintings were created would then have been a large room (before insertion of the back corridor), with a high ceiling and large fireplace.

Not long after the creation of the hall chimney stack and wallpaintings, the first floor was inserted in the hall. It may have been at the same time that the west side of the hall was removed, and a new front wall built under the arcade plate, narrowing the hall by the width of the aisle. The purpose of removing the aisle would be to allow good windows in the front wall at ground and first floor level, and to reduce the span of the beams necessary for the new first floor. The considerable thickness of this wall, and the very random stone coursing suggest an early date for this work, and it certainly pre-dates the more regular stone facing work of the seventeenth century. The stonework runs right across at the north end of the hall block into the current lean-to block without a joint. The later large, mullioned window and other re-facing have obscured any evidence of original windows in the new front wall. The heavy beamed ceiling in the hall has a big spine beam with chamfers and pyramid stops, and two subsidiary beams with chamfers and run-out stops. The hall was also probably truncated at this point (if not earlier), with the insertion of a stone cross wall. In a reversal of roles, the hall probably became now the kitchen block, with service rooms to its north, beyond the new cross wall. In the cross-wing, an impressive parlour took the place of the former service rooms, with a fine wide four-centred arched fireplace and a heavy beamed ceiling. The fireplace has a fine projecting lateral stack (an unusual position locally, most stacks being axial), with plinths and offsets rising to a square shaft. The earlier cruck-framed roof structure, though probably cut off at ground floor level at this time, was retained, as well as the

16. Tithe map of 1847, showing the farmyard and buildings before construction of the railway and road (LLRRO: Ti/218/1)

fine first floor stone window. On the first floor, two chambers were created in the cross-wing, apparently unheated, with further accommodation (also unheated) over the former hall. The first floor over the hall where visible is of gypsum plaster type not boarded, a material commonly used for upper floors in the locality. Oak stud partitions of sixteenth- to seventeenth-century date divide the cross-wing chambers, with a flat Tudor arch head to one doorway, though the remaining carpentry is unrefined, without proper pegging to the joints.

With the sale of the manor by Robert Payne to Henry Nevill of Holt in 1631, and occupation by a Nevill tenant, the manor's greatest period was over, and it was subsequently eclipsed by several other larger houses in the village. Piecemeal development continued throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with various new stone mullioned windows and re-facing of walls. One unusual survival from this period is a four-light window in the rear east wall of the hall block which has plain diamond-set mullions of oak, a rarity in the locality, probably seventeenth century. The service end to the north of the hall, having declined in status, may have been further reduced to a single storey in this period, with the further extension of the cross-wing to the east. The house was renovated in 1878 when it passed out of use as a farmhouse, with the loss of much of the farmyard to the new road and railway line (illus. 16). This was probably the point when the former cruck-framed roof structure to the cross-wing was replaced; one of the sawn-off blades, slightly curved, may have been used as the lintel for the new front porch. The two external buttresses, to the hall and cross-wing, are not historic features but were added in 1971 (Jones, pers. comm.) to support the stone walls. Major roof repairs were carried out in 1974 (date on timbers), with three new replacement oak rafter couples to the south end of the hall block.

Discussion

The building of c.1238

Drawing together the evidence presented above, a development sequence is suggested in the reconstruction drawings of each major phase (illus. 17-23). The form of the house built (or rebuilt) in c.1238 is somewhat conjectural, but it seems that it was a timber-framed aisled hall of at least three bays, since parts of two trusses with evidence for aisle posts survive. This house must have been built and occupied by William de Chaworth who, as noted above, was first mentioned in Medbourne in 1235-6. The coincidence of these dates strongly suggests that William de Chaworth substantially rebuilt the manor house very soon after his arrival in Medbourne, as the founder of the Chaworth manor which was to survive into the late fifteenth century. For an ancient house and principal manor of the village, the manor house is strangely located right on the edge of the village, some distance from the centre. Perhaps this may be because the secondary (Kirkby) manor in Medbourne, which belonged to the king's soke of Great Bowden, held the very valuable advowson of the church, at the centre of the village (VCH, V, p.232).

The c.1238 building (illus. 17-18) probably had a central truss (Truss B) of more decorative form than the other, plainer trusses, since the surviving tie-beam re-used in Truss A shows passing braces, but no other struts. The high collar to the rafter couple now over the stone cross passage wall suggests a hipped roof with a gablet, a typical form found in early timber-framed halls. Reconstructing a roof of this form gives a three bay hall containing a cross passage, and a service end to the south, an arrangement
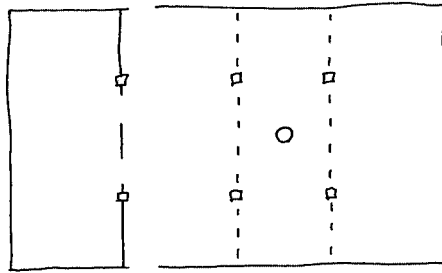
17. Reconstruction plan *c.*1238: the aisled timber building
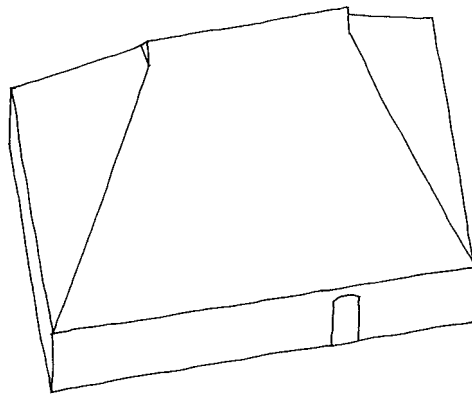
18. Reconstruction view, *c.*1238

perpetuated in the later thirteenth century. If the existing arcade plate timbers did previously serve as arcade posts, it is interesting to reflect on the implications of this. The reconstruction of the section of this building (illus. 13) shows that the aisle posts may have been earth-fast, not set on padstones above ground. The clearest case for this is with the north-east arcade plate, whose existing length when transferred to an aisle post position indicates it extended around 900mm below ground. While the approximations of a reconstruction drawing are obviously not precise, this certainly does seem to suggest that the aisle posts were earth-fast. Unfortunately, this post is encased in the later structure, so it cannot be examined for evidence of being set in the ground. If this conjecture is correct, it seems that the aisle post was removed from the ground after fifty years, and re-used as an arcade plate; perhaps its location inside the building rather than at its external wall meant that it suffered little decay, as Smith (1992, p.12) suggests in discussing the survival of early aisled buildings.

The building of c.1288

Around 1288, this timber-framed building was substantially reconstructed with stone walls. William de Chaworth's son Thomas had built up the position of his family in the locality, with the grant of free warren on demesne lands in 1257, the grant of a market and fair in Medbourne in 1266, and the acquisition of the secondary Medbourne manor by 1290. Now, fifty years after the construction of the new house by his father, Thomas clearly felt it time to demonstrate his growing status and wealth by reconstructing the manor house in stone, with a large new cross wing. We can now be fairly confident of the form and extent of this house, as illustrated in the reconstruction drawings (illus. 19-20). The hall was of three bays, with the wider bay incorporating the cross passage, similar in plan to the timber-framed hall it replaced. It was aisled, with stone side walls carrying two trusses of 'short principal' type, which spanned right across the hall, enabling the space to be cleared of the previous aisle posts. The hall, like its predecessor, would have had an open hearth, without a chimney, somewhere near its centre. Accompanying this stone-built hall was the fine cross-wing. The wall of the cross passage contained three stone doorways, for access to kitchen, buttery and pantry, and also supported the arcade plates of the hall roof. The central service door may have led via a corridor to a detached kitchen, in the common medieval arrangement. Above the service rooms was a fine solar, a large open space probably of three bays, with fine mullioned stone windows to each gable end. The stair to the solar may have led off from one of the cross passage doorways. One would expect a fireplace to this room, perhaps in the centre of the south wall, but there is now no evidence for this. The roof structure incorporated large arch braces, decorated with nail-head ornament on the most important face. The form which this roof took is puzzling, but may have been of 'short principal' or cruck-like type, since the fully-developed arched-brace truss form developed at a rather later date.

This plan form, with the fine solar chamber over the services and no further accommodation beyond the high end of the hall, differs from the normal medieval arrangement, where the solar is placed at the high end, often over a low, vaulted undercroft. This of course raises the question as to whether there was indeed further accommodation beyond the high end at Medbourne, since evidence is lost here. On balance, this seems unlikely, since such considerable effort went into creating a fine solar/service block. A solar cross-wing at the high end would have had to be even finer, and this together with its complete disappearance, seems implausible. This then was an 'end hall house' (Faulkner, 1958) for which Wood (1965, pp.72-5) gives a number of comparable examples, including that at Yardley Hastings, Northants of c.1340-48 (Heward and Taylor, pp.328-30). Smith (1992, pp.25-6) also gives a number of examples of early low end cross-wings in Hertfordshire, although the cross-wing at Medbourne, with its considerable projection to the east, is surprisingly confident for its date.

The local context

It is interesting to set the manor house at Medbourne into its surrounding context, and in particular to compare it to other early houses built along the limestone belt in this part of the Midlands. A brief survey of houses built before 1400 quickly determines the pattern of which Medbourne is part. In Rutland (see Pevsner, 1984) there are: Oakham Castle (late twelfth century); Flore's House, Oakham (thirteenth to fourteenth century); College House, Oakham (recently dendro-dated to 1319-39); Quaintree House, Braunston (dendro-dated to c.1307, Vernacular Architecture 22,
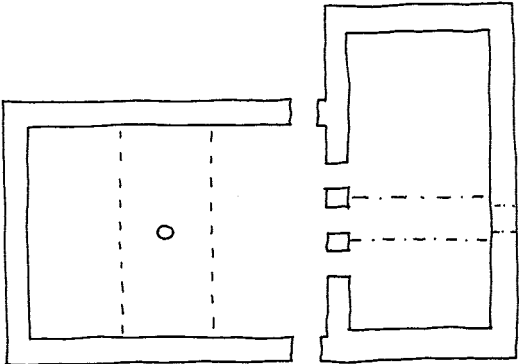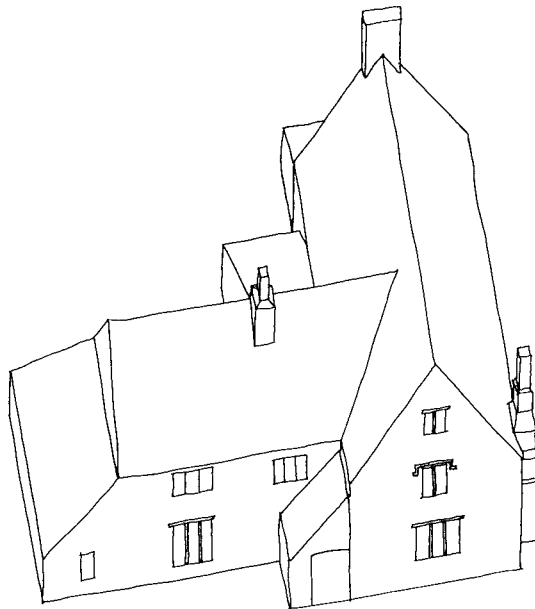
19. Reconstruction plan *c.*1288: the stone building
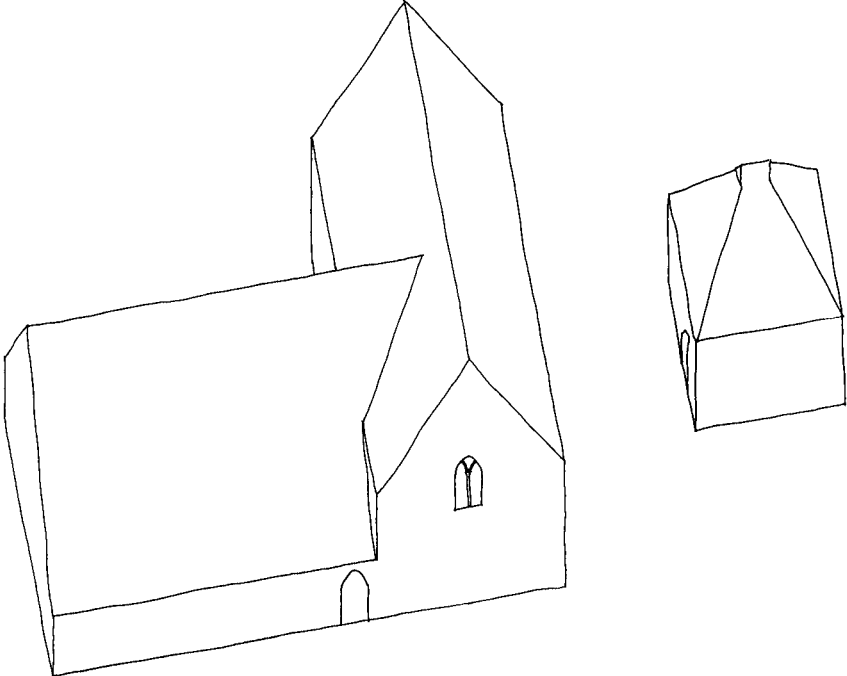
20. Reconstruction view *c.*1288, with conjectural detached kitchen
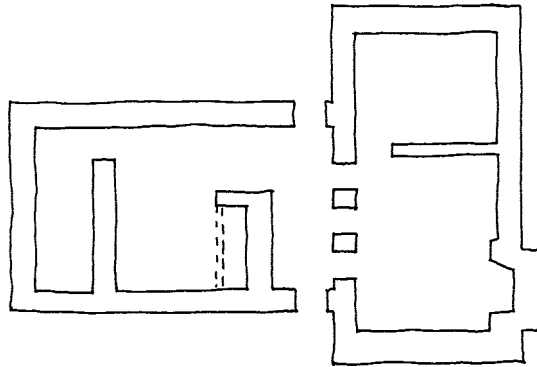
21. Reconstruction plan of late sixteenth century

22. Reconstruction view of late sixteenth century, with chimney stacks inserted to hall and
new parlour in cross wing

1991, p.45); and the Green Dragon, Ryhall (thirteenth century). In east Leicester-
shire (Pevsner, 1984), there are only Medbourne Manor House and the nearby Nevill
Holt (probably 1288, Hill, 1999). In Northamptonshire (Heward and Taylor, 1996)
there are: Drayton (early fourteenth century); Hardwick (early fourteenth century);
Loddington (late thirteenth century); Nassington (early thirteenth century); Rocking-
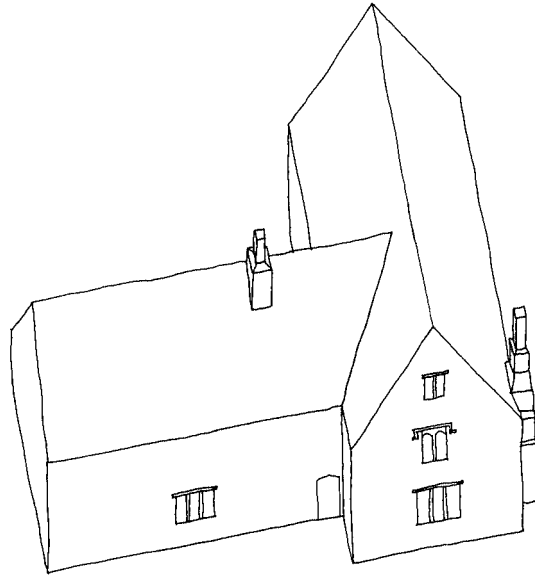
23. View of *c.*1900

ham (thirteenth century); Southwick (early fourteenth century); and Yardley Hastings (mid-fourteenth century). In terms of size, Medbourne at 11.5m x 8m ranks below the largest halls like Drayton (16m x 9.8m) and Yardley Hastings (14.4m x 10m), but just above others such as Loddington (11.5m x 7.7m) or Southwick (11m x 6.8m). The comparison with Nevill Holt, only one mile away to the east, is extraordinarily close: like Medbourne, it was built *c.*1288, with stone walls and a base cruck/short principal roof. However, although the hall at Medbourne was originally larger than that at Nevill Holt (11.5m x 6.9m), Medbourne is now a minor manor house, whereas Nevill Holt became engulfed within a major country house.

Of these houses, every one was built of stone, except perhaps for Quaintree House, Braunston. Even at Braunston, although it was reported as a timber-framed structure, the lower parts are encased within stone walls, and it seems there was no clear evidence for timber walls (Gibson, pers. comm.). Of the eight examples where the original roof survives, seven are of base cruck or 'short principal' type, with College House, Oakham the only exception, where tie-beams on the stone wall carry a crown post roof. Clearly, there is a very strongly defined regional type here, not fully recognised previously, with stone walls and a base cruck/short principal roof structure to the hall, of which Medbourne Manor is a typical example. The construction of these substantial houses, built of stone, emerges in the thirteenth century (after the early, very high status example of Oakham Castle) and flourishes from the late thirteenth century up to the mid-fourteenth century. The building boom of this period, which was brought to a close by the catastrophe of the Black Death, forms a well-known national pattern (Pearson, 1997), but is usually associated with building in timber rather than in stone.

But here, in the Midlands stone belt, the evidence undeniably indicates that this first 'great rebuilding' was of stone, not timber. It can be no coincidence that the great flowering of stone-built church architecture in the region also occurred at this time. As W. G. Hoskins said, 'In this period falls practically everything of the first class in Leicestershire' (Pevsner 1984, p.21). Timber remained henceforth an alien material to this stone belt region, with examples of external timber-framed walls practically non-existent outside towns.

The predecessors of these surviving stone buildings are almost entirely lost, so the evidence of the earlier phase at Medbourne Manor is very precious. It points to an aisled structure with a timber frame, whose low side walls were probably of timber rather than stone, though full evidence is lacking. The aisled hall is of course well established as the earliest surviving type of post-Conquest house in England. An inventory of 1986 identified evidence (including those now lost) for 171 examples, mostly pre-1350 (Sandall, 1986). However, surviving examples securely dated to before 1250 are very rare. A recent review of the evidence (Walker, 1999) cites only seven examples with secure tree-ring dates before 1238, which emphasises the significance of the precise dating of the structure at Medbourne, and of the possible even earlier phase of 1212-32. There is evidence that the earliest aisled halls had earth-fast aisle posts, as in the conjectural restoration for Medbourne (illus. 13). The earliest tree-ring dated example at Fyfield Manor (Essex) of 1167-85 had one remaining aisle post set around 1m into the ground, while at the late twelfth-century Brome manor house (Suffolk) and the twelfth-century east hall of the royal palace at Cheddar (Somerset) earth-fast aisle posts were found in conjunction with timber side walls raised clear of the ground on slightly built ground cills (Smith 1992, p.12). The possible depth of the former aisle post at Medbourne below ground, at 900mm, is comparable with other examples. It is often presumed that the buildings which preceded the construction of these early aisled halls were of fully earth-fast construction, and short-lived; the earliest phase at Medbourne may have been of this type.

By the early fourteenth century, aisled halls were fast falling out of favour, and the clearance of the awkward aisle posts from the hall has long been associated with the introduction of the base cruck (or short principal) roof structure, which gave a clear span (Smith 1958). The developments of *c.*1288 at Medbourne, with the removal of the aisle posts and replacement with stone walls and 'short principal' roof are thus typical of the period, though it is rare to find such a closely dated example. The closest comparable example in this stone belt area to all these early developments at Medbourne is at the Prebendal Manor House, Nassington (Northants), where the unusual opportunity to excavate within a surviving early building has found striking evidence for continuous occupation and rebuilding from the ninth century onwards (Foster *et al* 1989). Here, a single-aisled timber hall was built *c.*950-1050, with aisle posts set in pits 900mm deep. The side walls were of timber, one set on a cill beam above ground, the other with timber studs set into a trench. In the early thirteenth century all the walls were replaced in stone, though it seems the aisle posts were not removed until the late thirteenth century. Perhaps excavation at Medbourne would reveal similar evidence for early phases stretching back towards the Conquest.

The alteration works of c.1288

The form of Medbourne Manor at its two principal early phases of *c.*1238 and *c.*1288 has now been explained, but there remains the difficulty of understanding the method

of transformation from one building to the next. If the upper roof structure of the earlier building was retained, why was it not possible to retain the previous arcade plates in their original position? And why – the fundamental puzzle in the building – was the asymmetric Truss B re-used in such a peculiar and redundant position? Our understanding of the practical methods used by early builders in altering buildings is perhaps one of the least explored avenues of historic building analysis, and the modern mind finds it difficult to comprehend the approaches of the past. For example, one of the commonest alterations to a medieval church was the replacement of a side wall with an aisle; but surviving masonry often shows that the medieval builders somehow contrived to retain parts of the upper walling, despite the wholesale transformation wrought below. Perhaps something of this complex sort occurred at Medbourne, a metamorphosis which involved radical change, with the wholesale construction of new walls, removal of aisle posts and repositioning of arcade plates, but which did not involve demolition of the entire structure in a single operation. Instead, a sequential programme of alteration and rebuilding may have been followed, with the retention close to their original positions of rafter frames, Truss B and the former end gablet rafter couple. In addition, perhaps, we should also bear in mind that not every action can be explained purely by rational, structural considerations; maybe Truss B, with its distinctive patterning, was retained at the centre of the new hall simply because its owner liked it and thought it belonged there.

Acknowledgements

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