

**A RAPID BUILDING SURVEY OF
No. 16 SMITH STREET, DARTMOUTH**

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INTRODUCTION

Occupying a site immediately south-west of the graveyard of St Saviour's church, No. 16 Smith Street lies near the centre one of the oldest streets in Dartmouth (SX 8775 5130; Fig. 1). In this position one would expect occupation from an early stage in the development of the town in the 12th or 13th centuries. Documentary evidence relating to various individual tenements in the street survives from the late 14th century (Watkin 1935, 66, 72, 168, 173); this is unusual in a Devon town at such an early period. The maps of Dartmouth of 1559 and 1619 (again unusually early sources) depict a continuous strip of houses on this and adjacent sites. They are shown with roofs parallel to the street; this may be purely conventional, rather than an accurate depiction of the house forms (Figs 2–3).

The house is a Grade II Listed Building. In 2006 Nomad Construction undertook the renovation of the building. This entailed the stripping and replastering of some walls, the exposure of an abandoned oven in the northern room of the ground floor, the erection of new partitions, and the provision of an upper gallery in the northern (rear) room of the first floor. A condition of Listed Building Consent was that a rapid archaeological building record should be made. This was carried out by the writer on two visits in May 2006; the present document describes the findings made at that time.

HOUSE DESCRIPTION

THE EXTERIOR

The Smith Street frontage

The site slopes steeply downward both to the east (down Smith Street) and to the north, towards the churchyard. The Smith Street frontage (Fig. 4) stands three storeys high; it is now covered with modern pebbledash. The ground floor retains the remains of a corbelled party wall beside No. 14, and there is a pronounced change in wall thickness between the ground and the first floors at the left (western) side of the frontage, suggesting the survival of early masonry on the ground floor. Above the ground floor the front is flat; it could not be seen at any point during the site visits, having been repaired and repainted, but its form suggest a 19th-century date. The first and second storeys each display a pair of modern windows – tall cross ones on the first floor, smaller ones above – arranged unevenly in the front.

The rear of the house

On the north side (Fig. 5) a tall asymmetric gable four storeys high faces onto the street. At ground floor level is an old stair of stone rubble; it is now enclosed by a timber-framed covering structure, discussed below. To the south (left) of the stairs is one of the town's water conduits, which bears the date 1852. This butts against the stairs of No. 16, showing that the stairs are older than that date. Above the conduit rises the plastered gable of the frontage, with modern window openings. This kind of treatment often covers a timber frame, and this proved to be the case in this instance. To its right (west) is a wall of rubble; behind it, at the centre of the house, is a second wall of small rubble supporting the eaves of the front block.

INTERIOR: THE GROUND FLOOR

Front room

At the time of our visits, the party wall with No. 14 and the central spinal wall were stripped of plaster but only a small patch of the front wall was visible. The ceiling was also stripped entirely, exposing the modern floor joists of the room above.

The oldest feature (phase 1) is the party wall with No. 14, which consists of small local shale rubble set in clay bonding; traces of lime plaster render remained. Only one feature was visible in the wall: it stepped backward close to the frontage (Fig. 18, point A). This kind of feature commonly represents the recess into which a door could be folded back. In this instance it is unclear whether this indicates that the front door was originally on this side of the room, or whether this is a survivor from an arrangement earlier than the standing house. It is not impossible that it represents an intention to build with a side passage on this side of the house but that this was abandoned when the house was built.

At the back of the room, a fireplace stack of late 16th- or early 17th-century type abuts the party wall (Figs 6, 19). As first constructed it consisted of a breast of local clay-bonded slate rubble sitting on a fine oak lintel, which in turn sat on a pair of projecting wooden consoles overhanging the stone jambs of the fireplace opening; the console to the right has been removed. The lintel has a chamfered soffit and stepped and chamfered stops; its vertical face was subsequently hacked with an axe to provide a key for plaster render. To the right of the jamb on the right side is a small and low cupboard recess which seems to be an original feature. In the late 18th or 19th century the original large opening of the fireplace was reduced by the insertion of a smaller brick fireplace, with attendant light softwood framing packing the area below the lintel, and on each side of the projecting stack, creating a flat face to the fireplace surround.

To the left of the fireplace stack, contemporary clay-bonded stonework extends only a few centimetres (Figs 6, 19); to its left is later lime-bonded walling associated with the insertion of a bead-moulded door frame of late 17th- or early 18th-century type. The door frame is intact but the door has been removed.

The partition between the passage and the front room, and the floor joists of the first floor, are both of softwood and of 19th-century or later date, belonging with the reconstruction of the floors above. Only a few stones in the front wall of the room were exposed.

Ground floor staircase

On the west side of the front room is a passage leading from a modern front door to a newel (spiral) staircase (Figs 7, 19). At the time of our visits the stone walling beside the passage had been plastered. The beefy and plain central pine newel post of the staircase, slightly tilted to one side and sawn off at the top of ground floor level, appears to be an original late 16th- or early 17th-century feature; it retains the pegs of the original stair treads, in a different position from those now visible. The present treads have a string (skirting) against the curving outer wall – not a feature of early staircases of this type – and coarsely handled wooden strips on the fronts and sides of each stair tread; clearly the original stair treads had been replaced in the 18th or early 19th century.

The ground floor rear room

A single room occupies the rear of the property. At the time of our visits the stone walls on its east and south sides (the party wall with No. 14 and the back of the fireplace) remained plastered and featureless (Fig. 8). The back wall, facing the church, had been stripped, exposing 19th-century brickwork below the sash windows (Fig. 9). The removal of plasterboard showed that the ceiling joists were all 19th-century or later in date (Fig. 8). The west wall, however, retains the impressive remains of a large 19th-century oven, far larger than a conventional domestic one and clearly a baker's oven.

This consists of two superimposed chambers. The upper one, which was readily accessible, was the main circular oven, some 3.05m wide internally. Its floor is formed of plain unglazed square ceramic tiles measuring on average 0.3m (one foot) square, arranged in eleven rows, the tiles of each row being staggered in relation to the adjacent rows (Fig. 18). Around this floor rise walls of coursed brickwork standing 0.44m high, from which springs the vault, which consists of concentric bands of brick headers (Fig. 10). A stack of bricks six courses high and two bricks long stands at the centre of the oven floor, above which sits a cast iron bar which carries the weight of the centre of the vault, allowing the formation of an almost-flat ceiling (Fig. 10). Below the oven is the stoking chamber. This was full of ash and debris at the time of our visits, so could not be inspected fully. Its ceiling is formed by the bed of the oven above; one side of the springing of an arched opening below the bed of the oven was visible.

The heavy cast iron fittings of the oven had been removed from their original positions but dumped in the blocking of the oven when it was abandoned (?in the early 20th century), and were retrieved from backfill by the builders in 2006. They comprised five heavy bars with dished upper faces which appear to have formed a raised grate in front of the stoking chamber; three doors, two of which were those for the oven and stoking chamber; the massive surround to the oven door, with cast-in pintles for hanging the door; a trapezoidal plate which would fit on the floor of the area in front of the oven; and various lighter bars of iron (Fig. 11). This oven is an impressive piece of 19th-century building practice, and certainly deserves to be displayed. The massive cast ironwork suggests a date in the mid 19th century.

Inspection of the surrounding jambs shows that the 19th-century oven was built within an earlier large stone fireplace, of which the left jamb and the rubble stonework of the breast above had survived, including on the left side the first voussoir (arch stone) of the demolished fireplace lintel. Further plain rubble masonry extends on the northern side of the fireplace (Fig.18). These are all probably components of the 17th-century house.

INTERIOR: THE FIRST FLOOR

Front rooms

At the time of our visits these room had been freshly plastered, so little could be recorded. The eastern room (Fig. 12) retains a small fireplace; prior to our visit, its oak lintel, similar to that on the ground floor, had been visible and it is probable that the two are contemporary with one another, belonging to the late 16th or early 17th century. To its right (east) is a recess (Fig. 12); inspection of this feature from the rear showed that it was a secondary doorway cut into the wall, subsequently blocked up.

The room over the ground floor passage to the west contains a fireplace stack, within which is a 19th-century cast iron flue cover (Fig. 13); this may be presumed to have operated with a raised hob grate, now removed. No other features are visible. Although the structure of the stud wall between the two front rooms was not visible, this is a light affair and is very probably of 19th-century date.

Rear room

The first-floor room to the rear had largely been stripped at the time of our visits, allowing important observations to be made regarding the interpretation of the house. Its oldest visible wall is the party wall with No. 14, which consists of clay-bonded shale rubble overlain by lime plaster containing horse- or cattle-hair. The only visible feature in it was a horizontal strengthening timber; there certainly were no openings. The rubble wall dividing the front rooms of the house from the back, which incorporates the front room fireplaces, abuts this (Figs 14, 20). This wall rises high into the roof space; when first built it was featureless at first floor level but incorporated the corbel supporting the back of the projecting stack of the fireplace of the front room on the second floor (Fig. 20).

At first-floor level this dividing wall displays two distinct phases of masonry, distinguishable by the use of clay bonding in the earlier fabric and white lime mortar in the secondary work (Fig. 14, right; Fig. 20, phase 2 and 3 rubble). This change corresponds with the change between the two different phases at ground floor level, and likewise probably reflects changes to the access between the front and back rooms in the late 17th or early 18th centuries. The phase 3 stonework on the first floor marks the infilling of a feature at the back of the fireplace stack; it seems likely that this was a doorway. It is possible that the blocking of the earlier doorway was the insertion of a new doorway at the eastern side of the wall (Fig. 20, 'blocked doorway'). This too was subsequently abandoned, being infilled with three studs.

This room preserves much of its late 16th- or early 17th-century oak roof, which supports a series of later (probably 19th-century) rafters and battens below the modern slates. This roof could only be inspected from a distance, and further details of its construction should be added to the record as occasion allows. On neither side does it sit in the conventional way on the wall top. On the east side it sits on a long horizontal timber placed beside the party wall, with a gutter contrived above this to carry away rainwater. There is a timber in the corresponding position on the opposite side of the roof, but the roof drops away further to the east; unfortunately this part of its structure had already been covered at the time of our visits and was not explored.

At the centre of the room is an open 'A' frame truss with a straight collar, fixed to the principals at each side by two large wooden pegs (fig. 21). There are mortice holes for threaded purlins in the principals. The northern truss for this roof forms the top of the northern gable of the house; the southern truss, beside the chimney stack, has been replaced, but the scar of its collar and the lower parts of the principals are visible in the lime plaster still surviving above the modern ceiling of the first floor (Fig. 20, 'roof truss' and 'impression of collar beam'). In the apex of the roof, far out of reach, the principals can be seen to cross, with the ridge piece carried above them (Fig. 15); the form of joint could not be seen. An upper purlin survives on the eastern slope of the roof but the western slope seems to have been largely replaced. A new tie beam has been installed at the northern end.

The northern gable of this room was only partially visible. It is apparent that the apex has been renewed in the recent past: new battens and fresh render cover the old principals and collar (Fig. 15 but inspected from a distance). Lower down the

structure, beside the first-floor windows, there are also signs of recent repairs, but on the east side a the massive oak post is just visible behind older lime render, making it clear that there are at least some remnants of a substantial timber-framed façade of the late 16th or early 17th century. Should this frontage undergo further repairs in the future, this would deserve fuller investigation.

Running through the room partition on the western side of the room is the 19th-century brick stack of the baker's oven on the ground floor. Just above the present floor boards there survives at the foot of the stack a cut-back area of local rubble, clearly earlier in date than the 19th-century fabric. This appears to be a continuation of the chimney breast on the ground floor; it might have formed part of a first-floor fireplace but this was not established firmly.

Changes to this room are evident in the dividing wall between the front and rear rooms, but these were high in the roof and inaccessible. The stone stack of the late 16th- or early 17th-century house rose above the adjacent rubble wall. Subsequently the adjacent walling was raised in brick (Fig. 20, 'later brickwork') – possibly to provide a slightly higher roof for the front block when it was rebuilt in the 19th century, or perhaps to replace a timber frame supporting the roof.

INTERIOR: THE SECOND FLOOR

Front rooms

At the time of our visits these room had been freshly plastered, so little could be recorded. The partitions are almost certainly of 19th-century date, as is the fireplace in the west wall. No sign is now visible of the early fireplace whose corbelled rear face was noted in the roof space to the north. Beside its projected position is an alcove, in which the underside of the slope of the modern roof can be seen.

The roof above the front block, which runs parallel to the street, is of 19th- or early 20th-century type.

SUMMARY OF THE STRUCTURAL HISTORY OF THE HOUSE

Phase 1: before No. 16 was built

It is apparent that No. 16 was built after its neighbour No. 14, lower down the slope. Its relationship to No. 18 upslope could not be seen, but an explanation of the unusual roof structure could be that No. 16 infilled a space between two pre-existing houses.

Phase 2: the late 16th or early 17th century house

Although it has undergone extensive changes, the house is essentially an Elizabethan or early Stuart structure, and far more of the fabric of this period has survived than has been appreciated hitherto. It consisted of a stack of three rooms on the Smith Street frontage, with a two-storeyed rear block. The initial ground plan may have incorporated a side passage leading to the stairs, as survives nowadays, or there may have been separate access to the front room from the eastern end of the frontage. Each room in the front range was heated by a fireplace in the chimney stack at the rear of the room. At the rear, the evidence for a large fireplace in the ground-floor room suggests that this was a kitchen before it was converted in the 19th century into a bakery. The room above this was the largest in the house, initially open to the roof.

The dating evidence for this house can be summarised as follows: The house has an early modern layout, with stacks of rooms served by fireplaces rather than the

medieval arrangement of a hall with an open fire, open to the roof. It has an oak roof with 'A' frame trusses, wooden pegs and threaded purlins. The fireplaces have wooden lintels with spurred chamfered stops; the staircase is a newel with a plain pine mast. These features in combination suggest a date in the late 16th or early 17th century.

It should be emphasised that, although the ground plan of the house consists of just two rooms, this was by contemporary standards a substantial house. Its position on one of the oldest of the town's streets at the centre of the town, where the wealthier members of the community had tended to congregate since the later Middle Ages, alone suggests some affluence. With either four or five hearths it would have ranked among the top 25% or so of Devon town houses of the 17th century.

Phase 3: alterations in the late 17th or early 18th centuries

During the late 17th or early 18th century the arrangement of doorways between the front and the back rooms was changed. This may have been because access to the kitchen through the space below the treads of the newel stair was found inconvenient, requiring a new doorway on the ground floor. At the same time the doorway from the stair to the rear room on the first floor was moved.

Phase 4: the Victorian bakery

The front range underwent a major reconstruction in the 19th century, when its first- and second-floor rooms were rebuilt, with a new street frontage, floors and stairs. This may have been because these rooms had become derelict or perhaps were fire-damaged; their predecessors would have been timber-fronted and would have been vulnerable to decay or fire.

Around the middle of the 19th century a large new baking oven was installed on the ground floor and it seems clear that the house had become a bakery. Bakeries had thrived in Dartmouth in the 17th and 18th centuries because there was great demand for baked bread for use on ships (ships' biscuits etc), alongside the regular supply of townspeople; this kind of trade was however starting to die out in the mid 19th century.

A note on the drawings

The ground plan is that of the architects; the elevations were prepared on site by the writer and drawn up on computer by Tony Ives of Exeter Archaeology. These were prepared by direct measurement using hand tapes but without the use of surveyed level lines; modern floors were presumed to be flat. The drawings will inevitably contain some inaccuracies.

APPENDIX 1: COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC PROPOSALS

1. The removal of a tie beam at the northern end of the first-floor roof

In the new scheme it is proposed that a mezzanine floor will be inserted in the northern first-floor room, entailing the removal of a tie beam in the present roof. The beam is a repair of the 19th century; we see no reason to object to its removal.

2. Installation of Velux conservation roof lights in the eastern slope of the roof above the mezzanine

The roof purlins and battens here are all of 19th-century date. The old purlin of the 17th-century roof should be avoided.

3. Removal of the structure covering the stairs to the rear (north) of the house

It has been explained (above) that the flight of stone steps leading down towards the churchyard at the back of the house is of some antiquity; it could well be part of the late 16th/early 17th-century house. The roofed wooden structure covering it is not of such an early period: its wall, sitting on the steps, is built of thin sawn lengths of softwood, simply nailed together. The structure is likely to be of 19th-century or later date, although fairly crude and simple things of this sort are hard to date. Photographic evidence or study of topographical drawings might show whether it is the successor to an earlier structure doing the same job.

APPENDIX 2: THE LISTING DESCRIPTION

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IoE number: 387337
Location: 16 SMITH STREET (north side)
DARTMOUTH, SOUTH HAMS, DEVON
Photographer: Mr Brian Head
Date Photographed: 16 July 2001
Date listed: 23 February 1994
Date of last amendment: 23 February 1994
Grade II

DARTMOUTH

SX874510
673-1/8/222

SMITH STREET
(North side)

DARTMOUTH SX874510 SMITH STREET 673-1/8/222 (North side) No.16 GV II Two small houses, now united as a single house; the Smith Street end one probably with a ground-floor shop originally. Date uncertain, the Church Close end looks C16 or C17 and the Smith Street end is probably C18 or earlier, both somewhat disguised by C19 and C20 modernisations. Mixed construction; stone rubble side walls, but plastered front and back walls are mostly timber-framed; left end and rear lateral stacks with painted brick chimney shafts with pots; slate roof. PLAN: The Smith Street front block has a former ground-floor shop with a side passage on the left side; house above with one-room plan. Rear block projects at right angles back to Church Close, thought to have been a separate house formerly. Narrow courtyard along left side of the rear block filled by later lean-to. EXTERIOR: Front block is 3 storeys and lower rear block is 4 storeys. Plastered plain 2-window front to Smith Street is superficially early C20; it is stone rubble at ground-floor level and timber-framed above. Left side passage doorway down a couple of steps contains a C20 part-glazed door and the couple of low wide C20 windows to right are thought to have replaced a former shop window. C20 casements above. Plain eaves to parallel roof which is gable-ended and slate-hung to right. The Church Close front is also plain, plastered and contains C20 windows (including a pair of horned 4-pane sashes) but the steep pitch of the gable suggests C16 or C17 (maybe earlier) structure. INTERIOR: Not inspected but likely to be of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Langwells Developments for commissioning this work; to Daryl Fleming and Darren Hunt for their helpful cooperation; and to Richard Gage and Graham Tait who administered this project respectively for South Hams District Council and Devon County Council.

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Watkin, H.R. 1935 *Dartmouth: Vol. 1: Pre-Reformation*, The Devonshire Association Parochial Histories of Devon, No. 5 (Exeter).



Fig. 1 Location of site (black). Scale 1:2500.

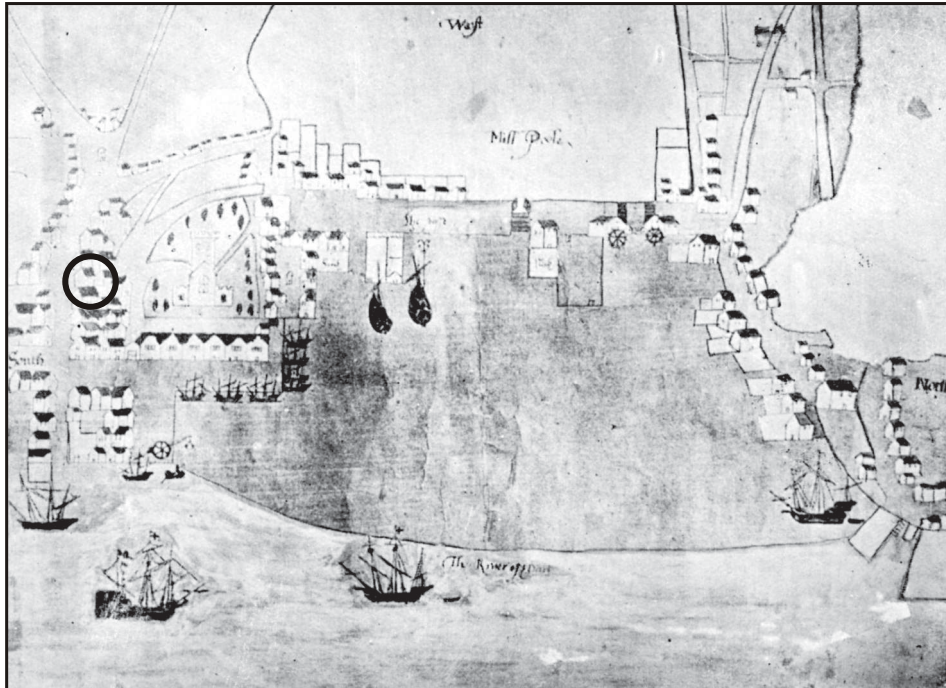


Fig. 2 The map of Dartmouth of c.1559. The approximate site of No. 16 is ringed. (Reproduced from Watkins 1935, frontispiece).

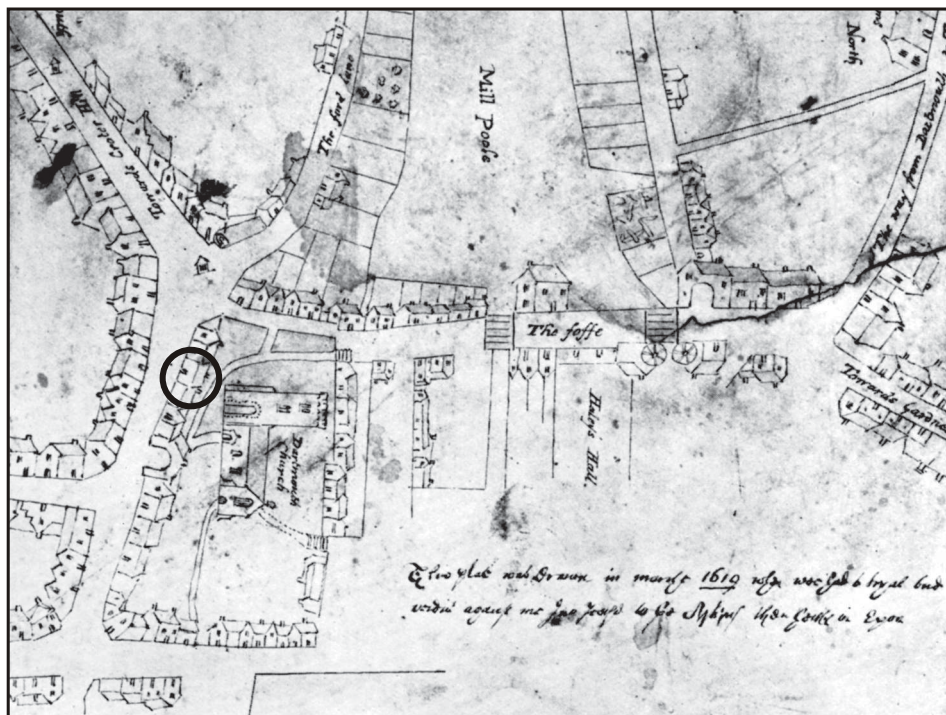


Fig. 3 The map of Dartmouth of 1619. The approximate site of No. 16 is ringed. (Reproduced from Watkins 1935, frontispiece).



Fig. 4 The frontage on Smith Street.



Fig. 5 The rear of the property.



Fig. 6 The ground floor front room showing party wall (right), 17C fireplace with 19C fireplace below (centre) and 17C/18C doorway (left).



Fig. 7 The staircase at ground floor level: front and back views.



Fig. 8 The rear room, ground floor at the time of recording, showing party wall (left), back of chimney breast, and modern joists.



Fig. 9 The rear room, ground floor, showing modern brickwork below the window.



Fig. 10 Bakery oven, showing floor, central pedestal and bar supporting the vault.



Fig. 11 Bakery oven: cast iron fittings.



Fig. 12 Front room, first floor at the time of recording, showing 17C fireplace (left), and later doorway cut through adjacent wall (right).



Fig. 13 Front room, first floor: 19C fireplace in party wall.

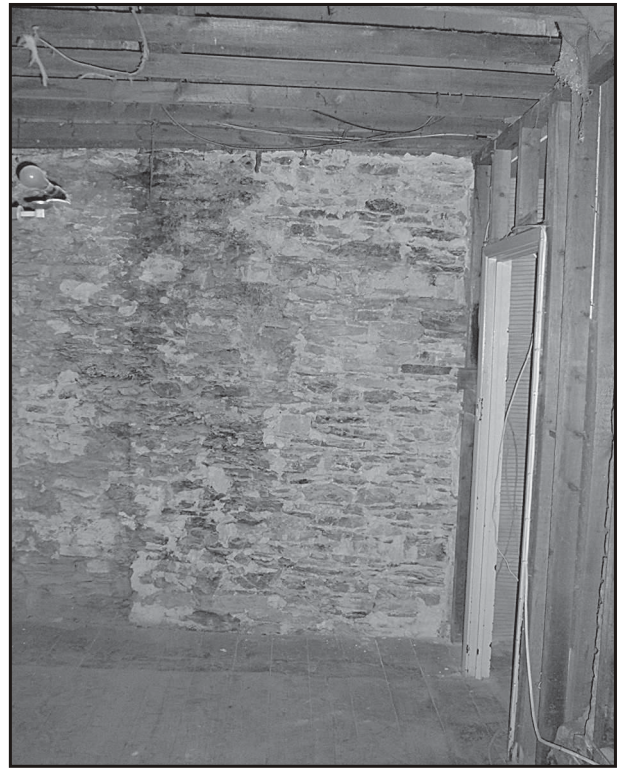


Fig. 14 Rear room, first floor, showing party wall (left) and rear of 17C stack. Note change in mortar in the centre of the right hand view.



Fig. 15 17C roof over rear room looking north, showing old trusses and purlins (arrowed), with recent re-roofing and rebuilt back wall.

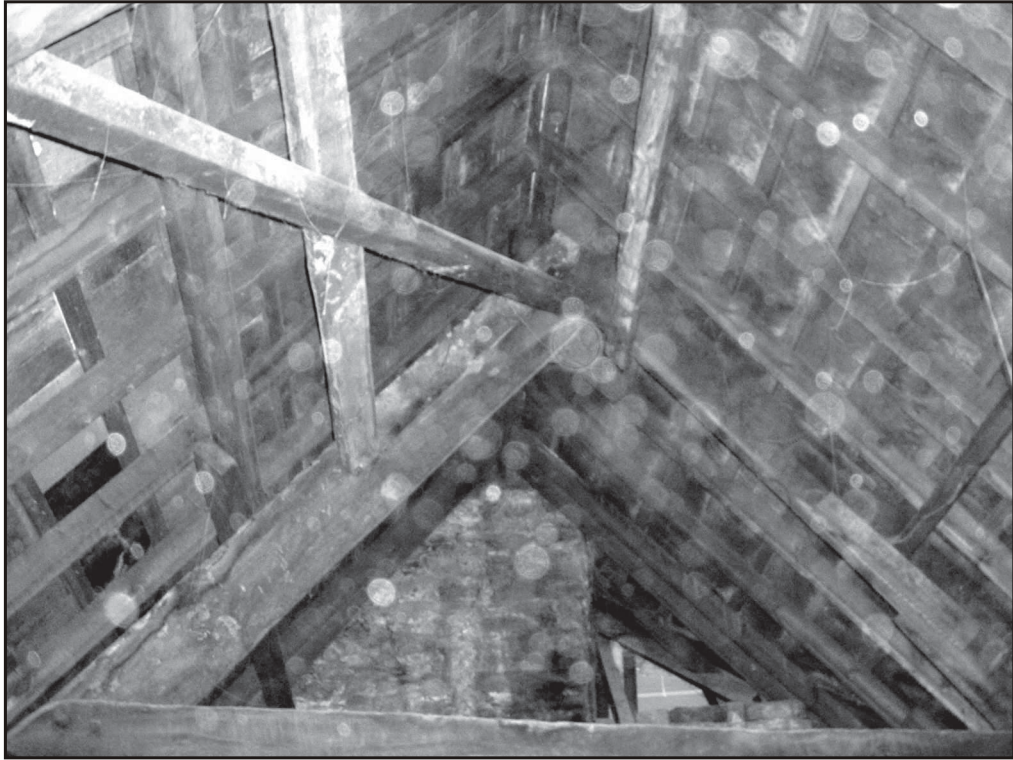


Fig. 16 17C roof over rear room, looking south.



Fig. 17 The rear stairs.

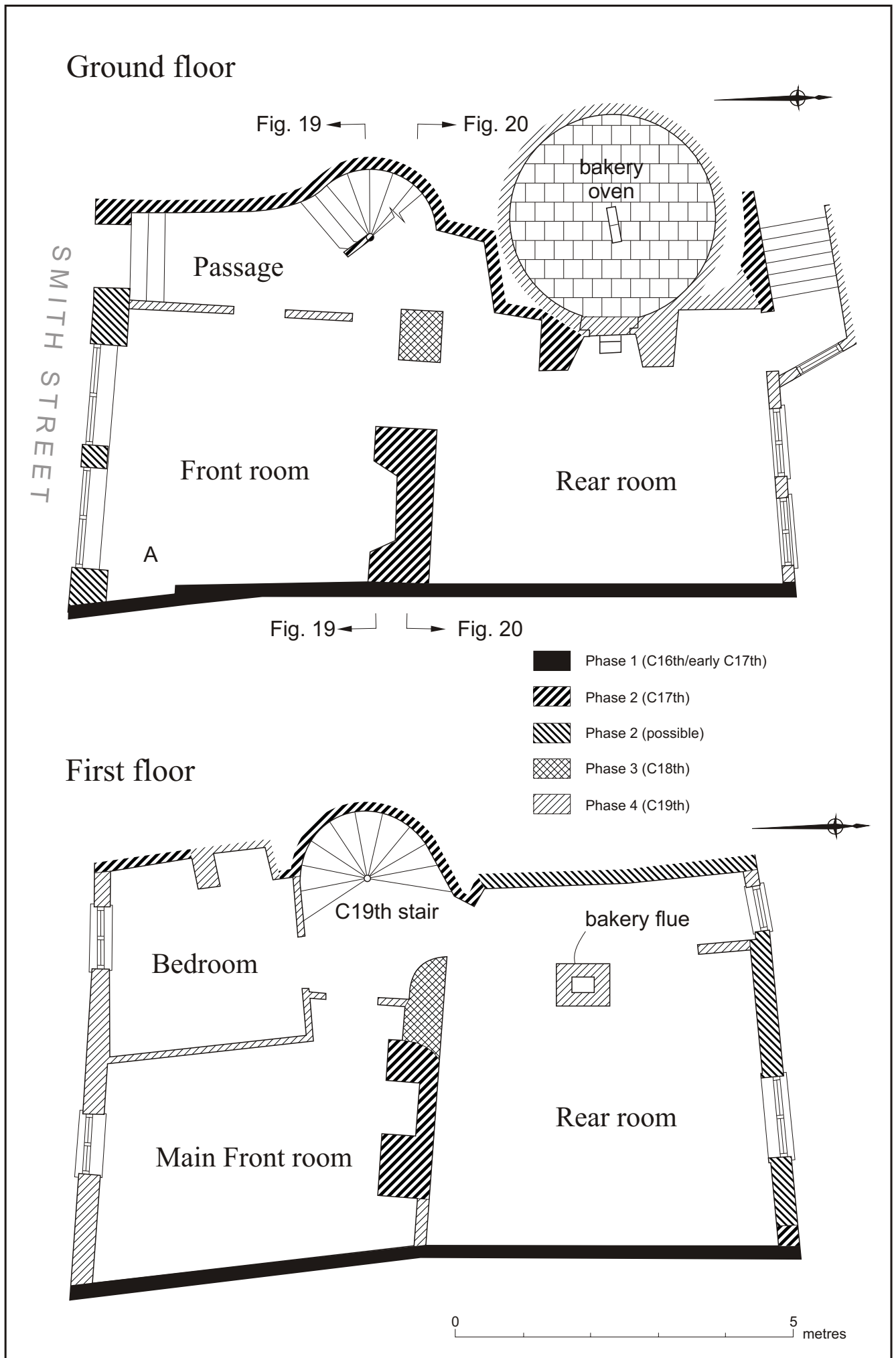


Fig. 18 Plan of ground and first floor.

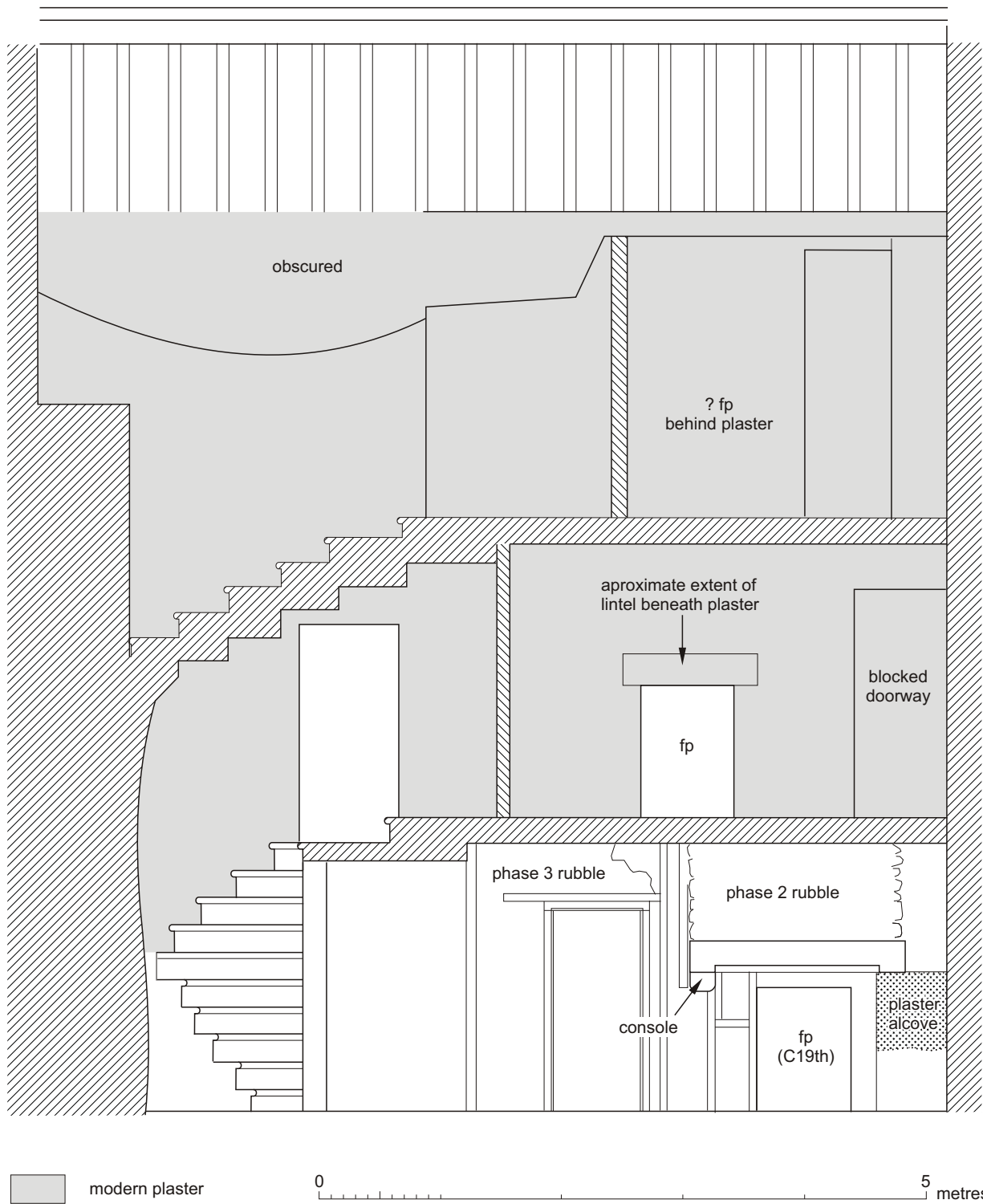


Fig. 19 Elevation of rear wall of front range.

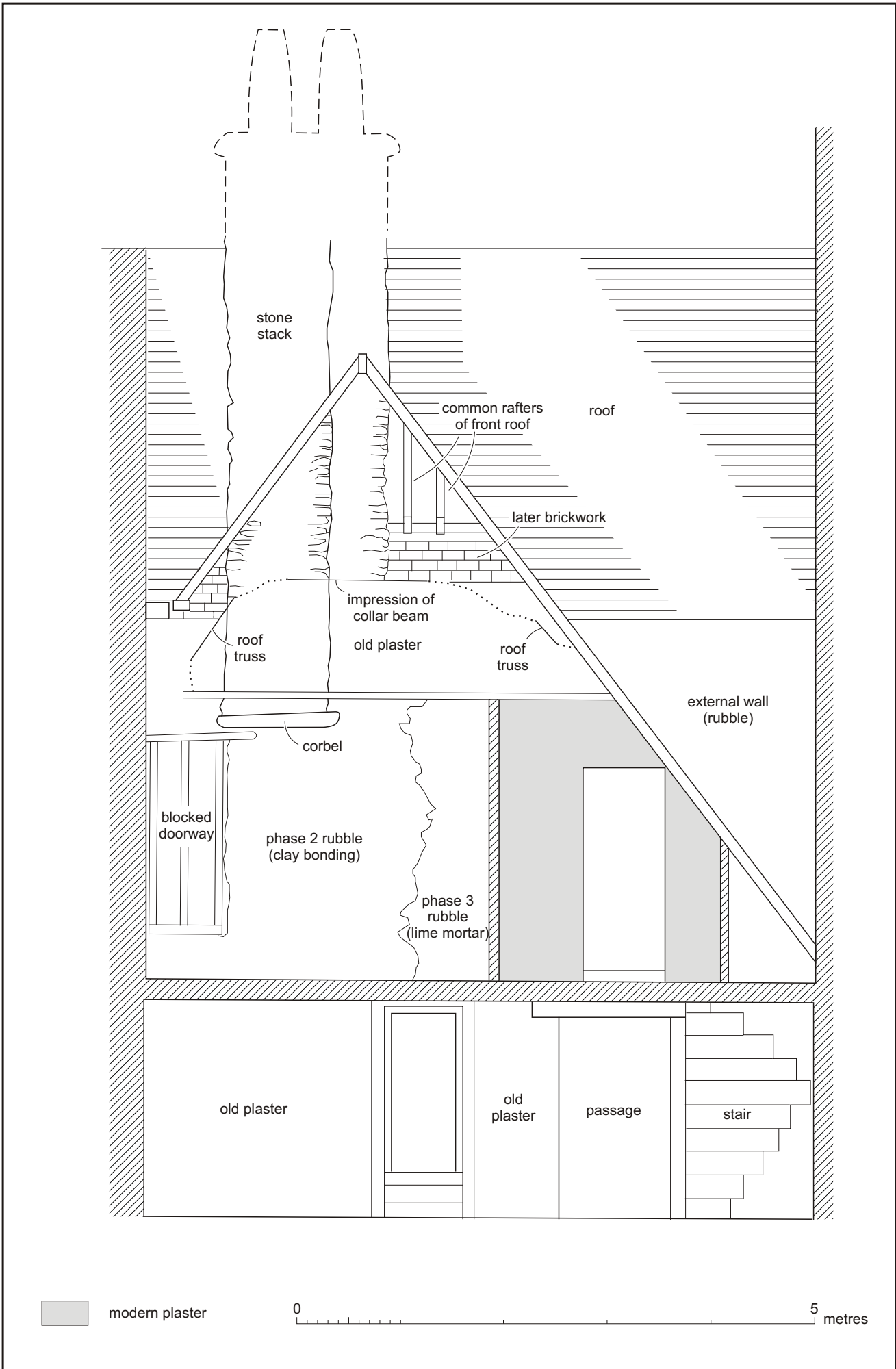


Fig. 20 Elevation of rear wall of back range.

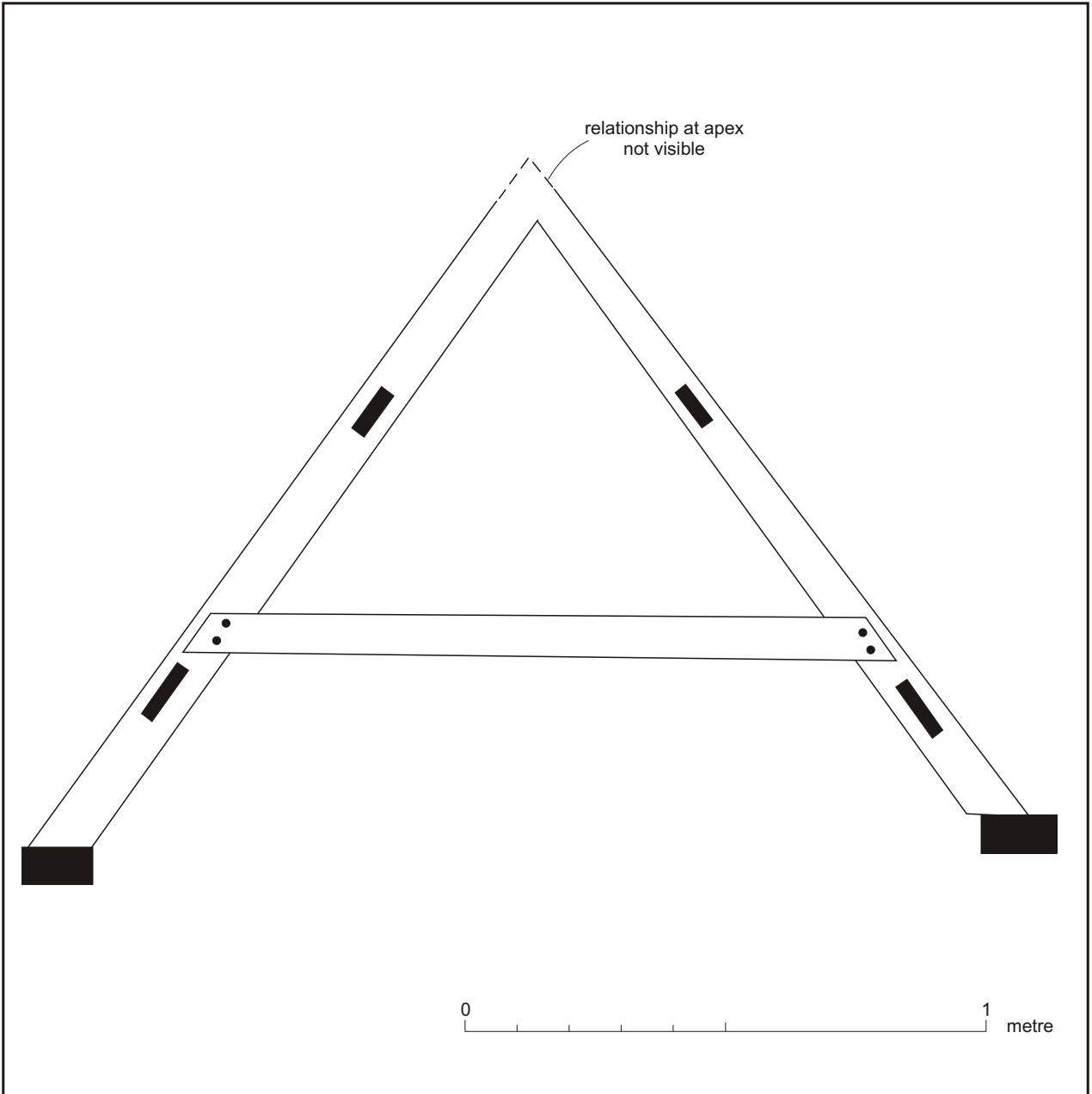


Fig. 21 Roof truss of rear block.