

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL BUILDING RECORDING
AND WATCHING BRIEF AT
GREAT BEERE, NORTH TAWTON, DEVON**

by
R.W. Parker and A. Farnell

Exeter Archaeology

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared for Mr and Mrs Williams, and presents the results of archaeological recording undertaken by Exeter Archaeology (EA) in 2008, at Great Beere Farm, North Tawton, Devon (NGR SS 6902 0337). It represents archaeological work required under a condition attached to the grant of planning permission for the conversion of a barn into a three-bed holiday let, office and ancillary residential accommodation (planning ref: 111299/2007/OKE, West Devon District Council).

1.1 General Description

Great Beere Farm lies above the Gissage Lake stream approximately two miles to the north east of North Tawton (Fig. 1). The farm buildings are approached by a long private driveway from Chubbs Cross, near Nicholls Nymett and are dominated by an impressively large whitewashed and thatched farmhouse facing south across the valley (Fig. 2). To the rear of the farmhouse are ranges of agricultural buildings which appear to be largely of modern date. The earlier farm buildings were situated in front of the house and consisted of long ranges of buildings flanking a rectangular yard. One of these long ranges of barns and lincays survives, and forms the subject of this report. A corresponding range of buildings, now demolished, sloped down the hill to the east of the farmhouse. At the southern end of the existing range was a further range of buildings, aligned east–west, of which no visible trace now remains.

All three ranges appear to have survived into the mid-to-late 20th century; they appear on a map included in an account of a deserted medieval settlement excavated at Beere in 1938–9.¹ The medieval settlement lay to the south-west of the present site; however, it was only partially excavated and its full extent was not determined. The possibility of further buried remains of early settlements in the area of the present farm are high; a large and relatively affluent population in the area during the medieval period is strongly suggested by the abundance of sites in the locality which may have formed manorial centres, as betrayed by the survival of (or the tradition of) medieval chapels. These sites include Great Burston, Nicholls Nymett, Ashridge, Crooke Burnell and Broadnymet, all within a two mile radius of Great Beere.

2. PROJECT SPECIFICATION

Specifications for archaeological recording were supplied by Devon County Council Historic Environment Service (HES). The principal requirements were as follows:

- To investigate and record any historic building fabric or architectural detail that is obscured, removed or otherwise affected by the development,
- To conduct a watching brief on groundworks associated with the development to allow exposed archaeological deposits to be investigated and recorded,
- Reporting and archiving as appropriate.

¹ Jope & Threlfall 1958, 113, Fig. 24

3. METHODOLOGY

Building survey

The building survey took place in two stages. The first stage was an appraisal of the buildings prior to the redevelopment. This involved the production of a written description and a rapid digital photographic record, which sought to establish provisionally the date, character and architectural interest of the structures in order to inform a decision as to the appropriate level of recording. The appraisal was then incorporated into a Method Statement which was submitted to the Planning Authority for approval.

The second phase took place during the redevelopment of the building and involved the implementation of the agreed scheme. This stage involved the addition of new observations to the written description; the production of measured drawings at a scale of 1:20, showing a cross section of the southern part of the building and a typical roof truss; the production of an annotated ground plan of the building at a scale of 1:50 and a further photograph record in both black and white print and digital format. Documentary research was not required by the brief and this area of research was consequently left unexplored. The results of the recording were added to the Exeter Archaeology Project Archive (EA 6444) which will be deposited at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum for permanent curation.

Watching Brief

The ground reductions were carried out using a tracked mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless grading bucket, under the direct supervision of the attending archaeologist. Machining was continued until formation levels for the proposed floors were reached. Standard EA recording procedures were employed during the works. Where any potential archaeological deposits were exposed, these areas were cleaned back by hand and then recorded. Due to the limited depth of the groundworks and the resulting lack of any significant exposure of archaeological deposits the observations were recorded on EA standard watching brief record sheets in the form of sketch plans of the areas investigated, with manuscript notes describing the results. A photographic record was also prepared in black and white and digital (colour) format.

4. BUILDING SURVEY

4.1 Description of the Building

The farm buildings under consideration are all contained within a single long range with a continuous roof, only the north end shows a different roofline, which is likely to result from later alterations (Fig. 3). The end gables are hipped at the south end and half-hipped to the north. The roof is covered with corrugated iron sheeting, except the northern end, which has a covering of modern slates. The walls are constructed of cob and stone rubble except for those sections which were formerly open; these areas were supported by timber posts. All the wall surfaces are rendered and there is much evidence of repair in brick or concrete blocks.

The southern section (open-sided linhay)

The south end of the building originated as a linhay, open-sided to the east and west and with two storeys. Its south gable wall is of cob over low stone footings, propped

with a large diagonal buttress and pierced by a square hatch or pitching hole, which seems an unusual feature in the context of an open-sided building.

The east wall was divided into three bays by two tall posts. The posts received the tenons at the ends of the first-floor beams in deep mortices in their rear faces. These mortices are larger than they need be and may have been altered. The posts have been truncated at first-floor level, just below the joints, only the upper sections remaining *in situ*. The lower parts of both posts have been replaced with iron or steel columns. The feet of the posts appear to have been designed to rest upon granite staddles buried in the ground. These remain in place, though they lie to the east of the line of the present eaves as though the building had shifted to the west (see below). The joints at the junction with the eaves are unusual in that they were not pegged; the tenons at the heads of the wall posts simply protruded into mortices in the undersides of the tie beams and there does not appear to have been any other means of securing these joints.

The present west wall of the building is a modern wall of concrete blocks and metal 'Crittall' windows, but this replaces an earlier open front which was similar to the east wall in design, though differing in the details of its carpentry. The lower part of one of the supporting posts alone remains, still seated upon its stone staddle (Fig. 4). The upper sections of the posts have been replaced above the joint with the first-floor beams. The tenons at the ends of the floor beams passed right through the posts, and the joints were secured by two pegs (Fig. 5). The upper parts of the posts do not appear to have tenoned into the tie beams, as on the east side, but into a horizontal plate, the shadow of which is still visible in the underside of the tie beams.

The first-floor structure is borne on two large beams, only lightly chamfered and with crude stops at the west end only. This is perhaps because the eastern end of the beam has been altered or truncated. The first-floor structure appears to retain most of its original joists; these are large and square-sectioned timbers, most of which appear to be *in situ*.

The roof is of tie-beam construction, with its principal rafters seated in the ends of the horizontal beams. Above this, timber collars have been applied to form 'A'-frame trusses (Fig. 6) The existing collars appear to be additions, for empty sockets remain for earlier collars with 'notched lap' or 'dovetail' joints in their ends (Fig. 7). All the original timbers appear to have been pegged. The common rafters and purlins have unfortunately been lost, but the surviving sockets show that the purlins were trenched into the backs of the principals.

The southernmost truss is marked 'II' on the tie beam and on the foot of the rafter on the east side, and also '00' with two little scoop marks on both the collar and the principal rafter on the east side. The mark 'X' also appears on the collar. The vacant sockets for the original notched lap-jointed collar beam are located on the north side of the truss.

The next truss to the north is marked 'IIII', just above the level of the missing collars, on the north side. There are no marks on the replacement collar or on the tie beam. On the south side of the truss, on the west side of the roof are identical marks. The empty sockets for a notched lap-jointed collar beam appear on the north side of one of the

truss blades and in the south side of the other (Fig. 6). A collar spanning the truss in this way, fixed to alternate sides of the principals, is an unusual feature; this detail may suggest a mistake in the carpentry or, perhaps the reuse of the timbers.

The roof is oddly misaligned with the stone staddles which must have been intended to support the building (Fig. 8). The eaves on both sides of the roof lie at least 0.5m to the west of the staddles. The supporting posts would thus have had to incline steeply, or bend westwards, in order to link the staddles and the eaves. The reason for this misalignment is uncertain. If the projection on the west side was deeper because it was intended to oversail a mass wall the timbers would surely have been seated in the masonry or cob in the conventional manner and there would not have been staddles and posts on this side. The posts on both sides of the building certainly suggest that the building had two open fronts to west and east. It is possible that the structure of the west wall varied slightly; it certainly had a bresummer or plate beneath the eaves, unlike the east side, and this might have been associated with insubstantial walling such as timber cladding or weather-boarding. The wall might even have been fitted with a screen of timber louvres to allow ventilation but protect the stored crop from the worst of the prevailing winds.

Alternatively the misalignment of the roof and the staddles may be accidental; a consequence of the structural failure of the building. It is possible that these two bays had begun to collapse westwards, drawing the roof with them. In order to prevent the collapse of the building the present west wall was built further west to support the collapsing roof, the original supporting posts were partially removed, the first-floor beams truncated and the first floor beams adjusted to meet a new, vertical, east wall. This might explain the misalignment of the roof and why the present eastern wall lies well within the apparent footprint of the original structure.

The central section (barn)

The central part of the building is occupied by a large threshing barn (Fig. 9), which seems at one time to have had a horse engine, now demolished, in a projecting wing to the west, as shown in Jope's illustration.² The barn has solid masonry or cob walls to both east and west and is divided from the lincay in the southern end of the building by a cob wall rising into the apex of the roof. The north end of the barn has a timber partition in the apex but a cob wall below this. The roof is continuous to the north and it is clear that these parts of the building were constructed as one.

The main elevation of the barn towards the yard has a central doorway with massive buttressed jambs. The existing doors are relatively modern replacements. A corresponding doorway formerly existed in the western wall of the barn, but has been first narrowed, then blocked. The original threshing floor would have lain between the two doors which, when open, provided a through draught for winnowing. The western doorway was presumably narrowed and blocked after the addition of the horse engine, which may have powered a mechanical threshing machine. The rectangular window to the south of the blocked doorway may have allowed the drive shaft from the presumed horse engine to pass into the interior of the barn. The window at a high level in the east wall, to the south of the eastern doorway, may well have been a loading door or pitching hole for allowing corn to be loaded into the building for

² Jope & Threlfall 1958, 113, Fig. 24.

threshing. The northern half of the barn would have been used for storing threshed straw.

The interior of the barn was fully plastered to ensure cleanliness (Fig. 10). The space was not originally divided into storeys; although the interior is crossed by beams containing vacant sockets, these lie at an awkward level in relation to the tie beams, which suggests that the room was intended to be open to the roof. The lofts or mezzanine floors at either end seem to be later additions and the existing joists and flooring of these platforms are all modern.

The roof is similar to that of the adjoining linhay but with variations in detail. It is of tie-beam form, with the feet of the rafters and ties deeply embedded in the wall tops. The barn is divided into five bays by four trusses. The southernmost truss of this part of the roof is marked 'I' on the collar, on the principal rafters and on the collar beam. The collar is obviously a primary feature which is secured in position by both pegs and spikes. There are no signs of redundant sockets for earlier collars on this truss.

The adjoining truss to the north is marked 'II' on the south face on the eastern principal rafter, collar beam and apex (Fig. 11). This truss is also without sockets for earlier collar beams and the existing applied collar is presumably the original. To the north the next truss is marked 'III' in the same positions and also has a straight, applied collar. The northernmost truss over this section of the building is marked 'IIII' on both blades at the apex and on the collar and eastern principal. This truss has an applied yoke at the apex and also shows two vacant sockets for notched lap joints below the collar.

The end truss in this section is a closed truss infilled by a timber partition with an integral ventilation slit in the apex, overlying a cob wall. The truss is marked 'V' on the south side, on one of the principals. It is provided with a yoke at the apex and has no redundant sockets. The tie beam of this truss rests on the top of the cob wall to the north of the barn. Above this, the upper part of the truss as far as the collar is closed by a partition constructed of timber framing infilled with cob panels (Fig. 12). The cob is held in place by cleft laths applied to the northern side of the truss, and nailed to the timber uprights. This technique of wall construction is well known from 17th-century contexts in Devon³ but appears to have gone out of use in the early 18th century. The apex above the collar is closed by laths except for a central ventilation slit.

The northern sections (linhays)

The northern parts of the building have been altered, but appear to have been originally designed as linhays. This part of the building was divided by a solid wall into two distinct areas; a linhay of two bays and a linhay of three bays at the north end of the building (Fig. 9).

The northernmost linhay has already been partially converted and is now fully enclosed, but the linhay immediately adjoining the threshing barn has only been partially enclosed. This part of the building is storeyed, with a first floor supported by a massive chamfered beam and retaining some of its original joists. This area appears

³ Blaylock 2004, 135; 192; Fig. 8.28, iv.

to have been open towards the farm yard only with a solid cob or stone wall towards the west.

The original eastern front of this linhay is supported by a tall post, which survives *in situ* (Fig. 13). This post appears to be tenoned into the tie beam of the roof, like those in the southern part of the building, and rests on a stone staddle. The post receives the tenon at the end of the first-floor beam in a large open mortice in its western face. The tenon passes through the centre of the post to project beyond it for some distance and is secured externally with a large cleat. This does not seem to be the original fixing; two redundant peg holes are visible in the sides of the post to accommodate pegs securing the original joint. One of the first-floor joists rests on the tenon, extending the first floor beyond the post.

At a higher level in the post a second open mortice of similar size is visible, though without any peg holes. Corresponding with the height of this latter mortice, a series of joist sockets are visible in the cob walling of the adjacent barn (Fig. 14). These sockets show that the first-floor level was at one time higher than at present, so high in fact that it was almost within the roof structure. A damaged strip of plaster in the north wall of the linhay and a chase in its west wall for packing under the beam end also show the distance the floor has been moved.

The absence of peg holes in the side of the mortice at the higher level and the redundant peg holes at the lower level are a puzzle. It is perhaps possible that the first-floor was originally at its present level, but was subsequently raised to the higher level, with the modification of a cleat rather than pegs to secure the joint. The loft floor seems to have been subsequently returned to its original position, retaining the cleat as a fixing in preference to the pegs.

The roof truss over the loft is of the type already described. The principal rafter on the east side is marked 'VI' near its foot and also on the tie beam nearby; at collar level on both the principal and the collar and also on both principals at the apex. The collar beam of this truss is an applied collar. There was no evidence of earlier collars in this truss.

Both of the first-floor levels would have been awkward in relation to the roof, since the tie beam linking the feet of the principals would have crossed the loft above floor level. The higher level would have been so high within the roof structure that a lucam or other loading hatch would have to have been added to allow external loading. No evidence of such a structure remains. No stairs or ladders to the loft survive; the upper floor is now only partially accessible due to the condition of the floor. The difficult access seems to preclude the use of the loft as a hayloft. As it has plastered walls and a ventilator, the loft might have served as a granary. There are many geometrical marks, known as 'Daisy Wheels' or 'Witch Marks', scratched in the plaster of the north wall (Fig. 15); these marks are of uncertain meaning, though it is traditionally supposed that they were intended to ward off evil and protect the gathered crop.

Part of the ground-floor frontage incorporates a small separate enclosure, perhaps a calf house or bull pen. This is clearly a modern addition as it is constructed of concrete blocks. No fixtures survive on the ground floor and its function cannot be determined with confidence; it may perhaps have been a stable or a shippon.

A solid wall between this section of the linhay and the northern part of the building may show that these areas had distinct functions. The northern area has long been partially converted into a storage area or workshop; it has a large double door opening into the ground floor room and a small window alongside. On the first floor is a long, low window, but this is a modern insertion. The fabric of the front wall is rendered and it is no longer possible to tell to what extent and at what date it was rebuilt in its present form. Parts of two supporting posts can be seen at first-floor level in the east wall; these may suggest that this area was formerly a three bay linhay with an open front. A large part of the west wall has also been rebuilt. The southern part of this wall is of stone and the northern part of concrete blocks. The large areas of rebuilding raise the possibility that this part of the building was also formerly open on both sides like the southern linhay. Unfortunately insufficient evidence remains to determine whether or not this is the case.

Inside this part of the building the floors have been renewed. The first floor now extends for two bays and incorporates an original floor beam; however, it is probable that there were originally three bays and that the floor beam is reused in this position. The walls are plastered and no early fixtures now remain. The first-floor has also been extensively altered; the roof is a modern replacement supported by king-post trusses on raised eaves and it is likely that the whole roof has been renewed (Fig. 16).

5. WATCHING BRIEF

Ground level within the central cob barn and the southern Linhay was reduced by *c.* 250mm over the whole floor area. A modern concrete surface had been removed prior to arrival. The typical sequence of layers observed consisted of natural subsoil encountered at a depth of 100mm, overlain by modern stone levelling. No archaeological features or deposits were observed during this work. The base of the stone footings was exposed revealing that the building had no foundations of any depth.

6. DISCUSSION

This structure is a most substantial range of purpose-built farm buildings which was probably constructed in a single phase. The original form of the buildings comprised a central threshing barn and northern and southern lincays, parts of which may have functioned as open-sided barns. The scale of the building is extremely impressive for a vernacular farm building, though the size of the farmhouse also reflects an exceptionally large and prosperous farming establishment.

The character of the roof carpentry, which incorporates a mixture of applied collars and notched lap-jointed collars with pegged and spiked joints, suggests a date for the building in the late 17th or early 18th century. Some of the trusses however, particularly those featuring redundant sockets for notched lap-jointed collars, may have been reused from an earlier structure. The purpose of the notched lap joint is to prevent the collar joints pulling as a roof spreads. In the case of this building, where tie beams were employed to link the feet of the rafters in every truss, this danger was negligible. The earlier joints are not consistent throughout the roof; they do not appear in every truss and it thus seems certain that they do not relate to the present form of the roof.

Although this conjecture of reuse might be taken to invalidate these distinctive joints as dating evidence for the present structure, the trusses are all so similar in appearance, finish and scantling that they must surely also be of similar date. The form of the timber-framed partition with cob infill between the threshing barn and the northern linhay is also suggestive of a 17th- or 18th-century date and this *must* relate to the present structure. It is possible that the design of the roof was revised during construction to incorporate tie beams, abandoning an earlier scheme for an 'A'-framed roof. Perhaps a smaller, slightly earlier building was enlarged soon after construction, its roof being removed, reconfigured and augmented by the addition of extra trusses to cover the enlarged structure.

The form of the southern linhay, with a first floor and two open sides, is most unusual. If the conjecture that this was originally a fully open-sided building is correct, the nearest parallel known to the author would be the cloth-drying shed or Dry House, dating from *c.*1731, which stood, until recent 'restoration', on the Shilhay in Exeter. This two-storeyed open-sided shed provided a covered drying area on two storeys for cloth manufactured at the mills nearby. The role of North Tawton as a considerable centre for the woollen industry in the late 17th and early 18th centuries make such an interpretation of the building tempting;⁴ however, the distance from the fulling mills there and the absence of any 'tenter hooks' for the suspension of cloth within the building makes an agricultural use far more plausible.

Another comparable building of the same period is perhaps the two-storey open-sided barn which survives at Pinbrook House, Pinhoe, near Exeter (Fig. 17).⁵ This building also probably dates from the late 17th or early 18th century. The buildings at Pinhoe and great Beere may have functioned for storage of fodder and straw in a way similar to a modern 'Dutch' barn.

At Great Beere the central barn appears to have been designed for hand threshing, with a central threshing floor and opposed doorways designed to create a through draught. A projecting structure to the west of the building, which was probably added in the 19th century, may represent a horse engine house to provide power for mechanical threshing. At this time the western doorway was reduced in size; it was eventually entirely blocked. Corn sheaves were probably delivered to the threshers through the pitching hole in the south end of the barn. Processed straw was probably stored in the northern part of the barn and grain in the loft above the adjacent linhay.

The original form of the northern linhay is uncertain due to the extent of modern alteration. Some of these alterations, particularly the changes in the floor levels, are extremely complex and might also be interpreted as evidence that the building has been dismantled and reassembled, perhaps more than once. It is possible that the northern section of the building was also formerly open sided. It was presumably enclosed to the west with stone walls in the 19th century to form a conventional shippon or linhay. It has also been re-roofed, though it is highly likely that the original roof formerly continued across this building too.

⁴ Hoskins 1954, 490

⁵ Parker 1997, 2; Figs 1, 3,4

The building may have formed part of a phase of formal replanning and improvement of the farm buildings at Great Beere, perhaps in the early 18th century. The other ranges of buildings shown on Jope and Threlfall's plan may have been added at the same time, though they have unfortunately been demolished in the 20th century. If the proposed dating of the barn is correct this would be an early example of the formal replanning of a Devon farmyard to create a 'model farm'. The buildings are of high quality and suggest a period of considerable prosperity at Great Beere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The archaeological recording was commissioned by Mr and Mrs Williams and carried out by EA staff in 2008. The project was administered for EA by J. Valentin and S. R. Blaylock. The site works were carried out by A. Farnell and K. Tyler, the building survey by R. W. Parker and G. Young. The Drawings were prepared by S. Blackmore and T. Ives. We are grateful to the building contractors and to the residents of Great Beere for assistance on site during the appraisal and the subsequent recording works.

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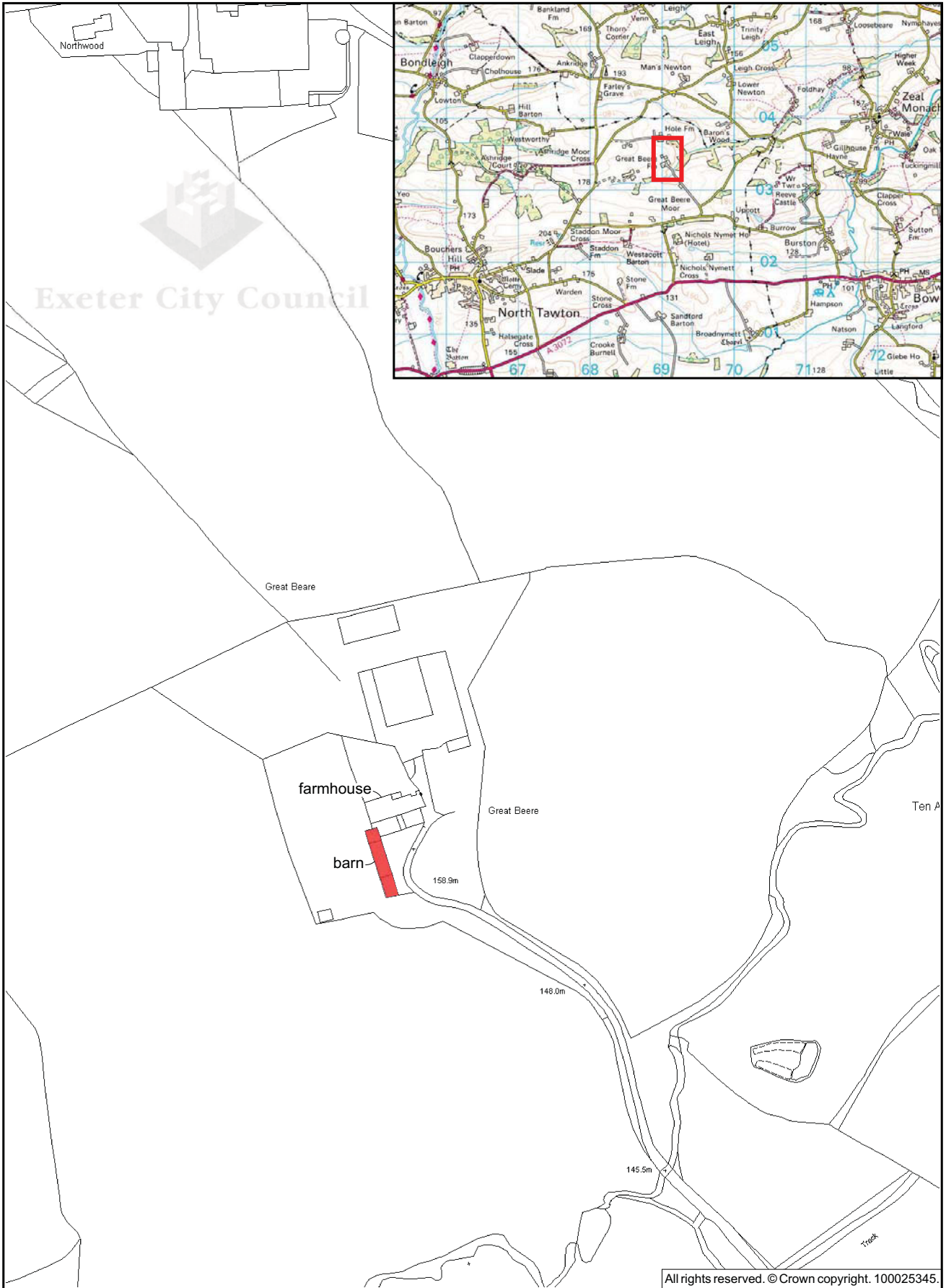


Fig. 1 Location of site.



Fig. 2 General view of the buildings, looking north, showing the farmhouse with the barns lying along the western side of the former farmyard.



Fig. 3 General view of the farm buildings, looking south east, showing the rear elevation prior to conversion.

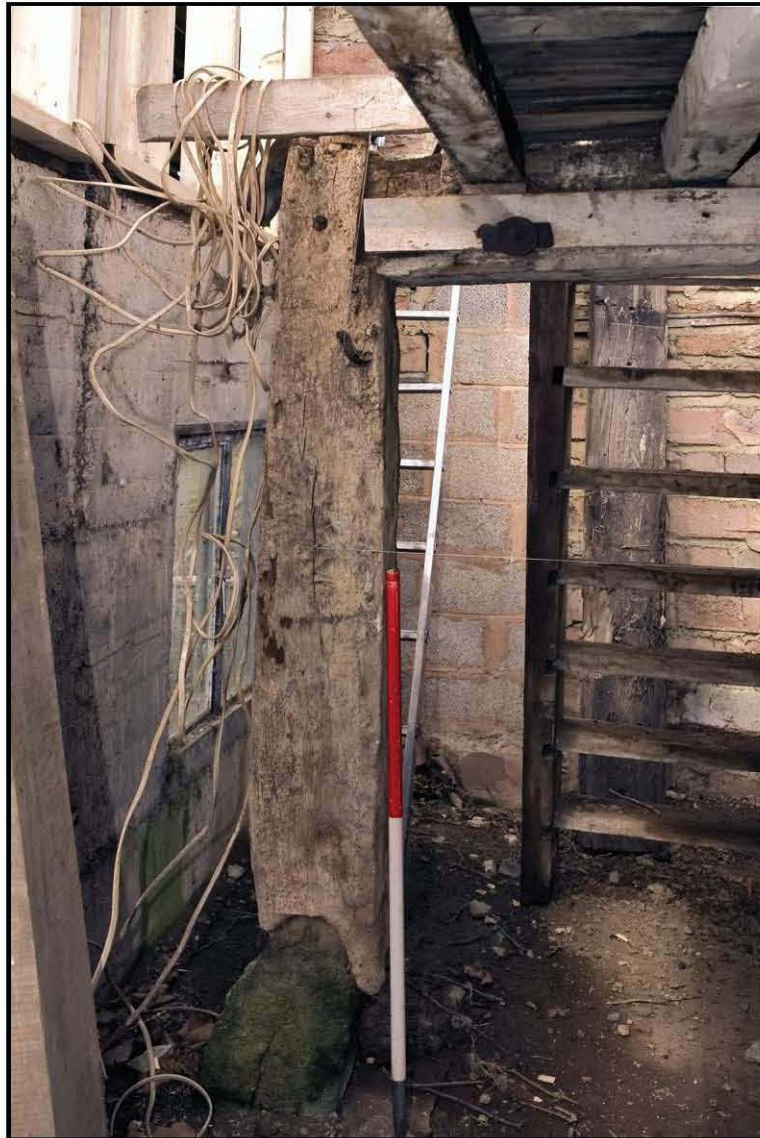


Fig. 4 Detail of the assembly of the southern linhay, showing the staddle stones and the truncated posts.

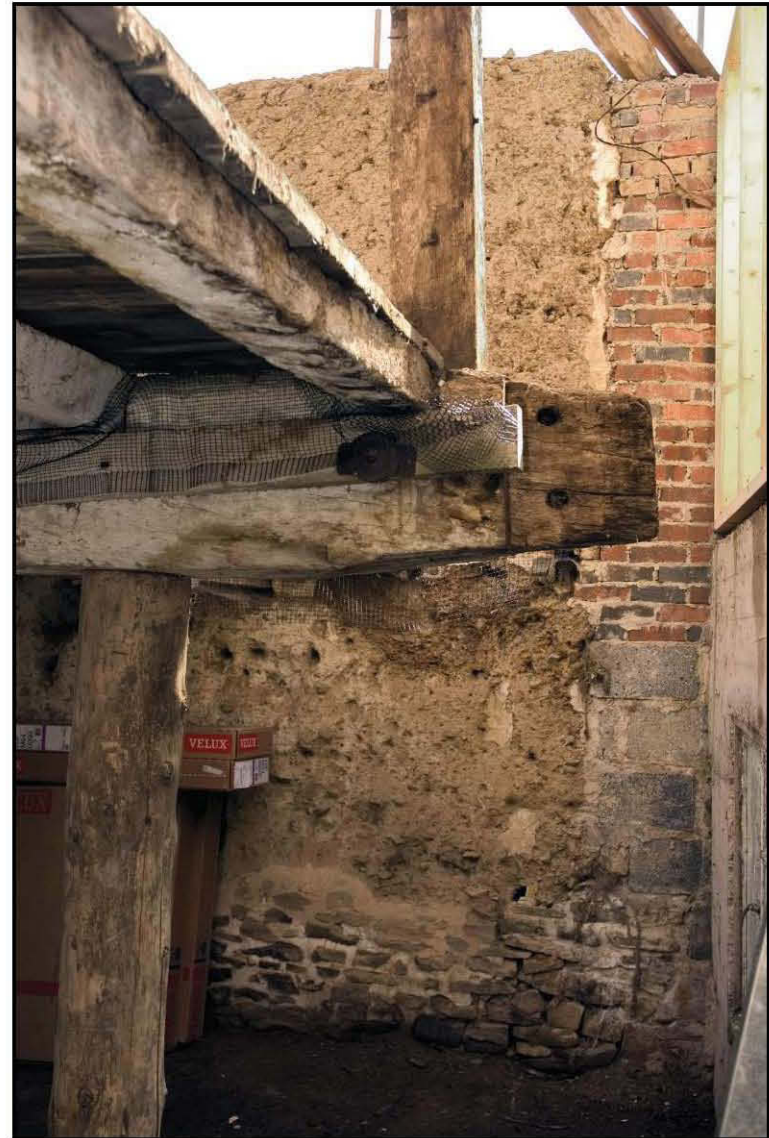


Fig. 5 Detail of the assembly of the southern linhay showing one of the tenons on the first-floor beams revealed by the removal of a post and its replacement by a modern timber prop.



Fig. 6 View of the upper floor of the linhay showing the roof construction and the cob wall with areas of modern patching between the linhay and the barn.



Fig. 7 Detail of one of the roof trusses showing carpenters' marks, redundant sockets for the collars and for trenched purlins and the fixings of the applied collars.

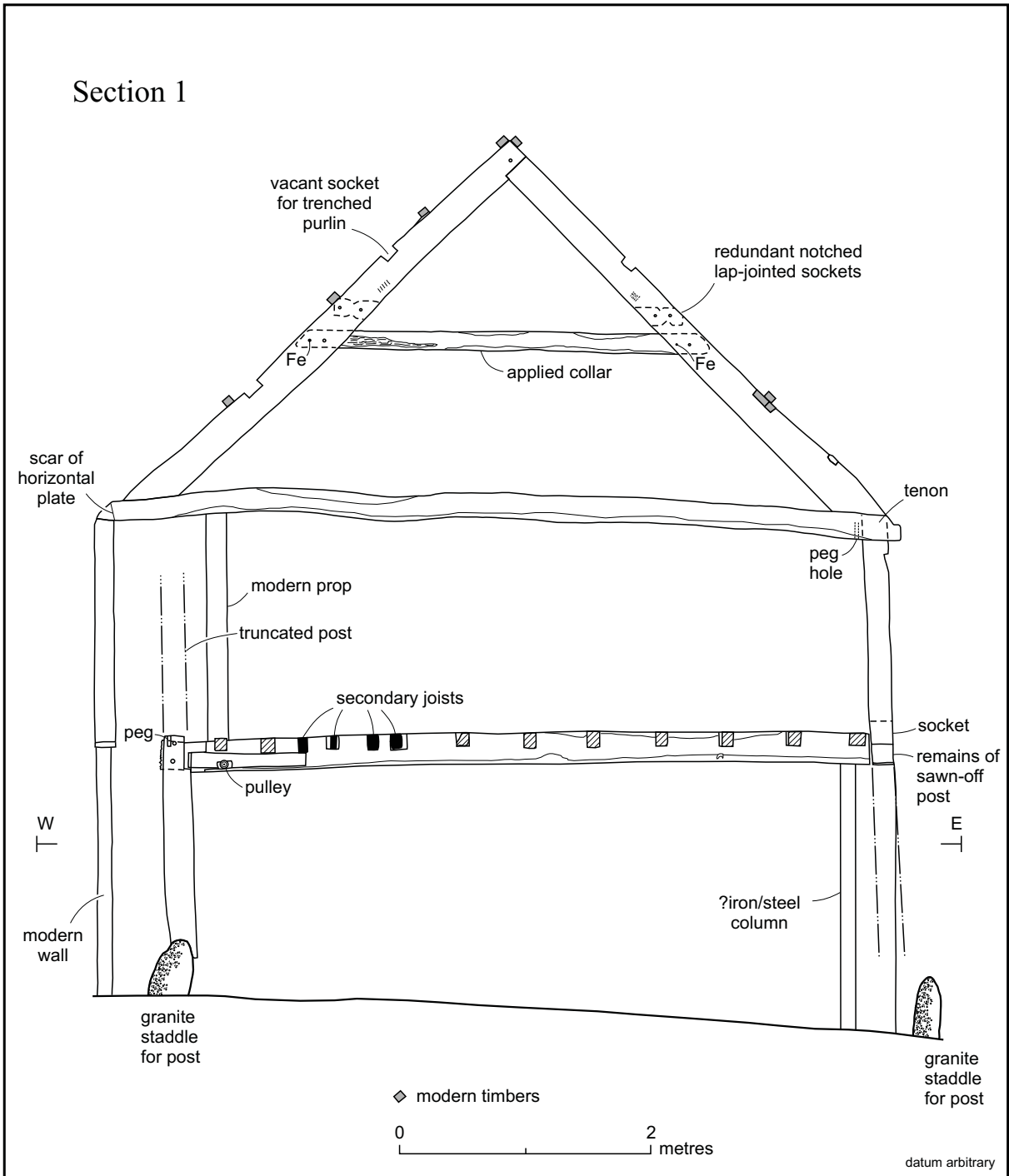


Fig. 8 Section of the southern part of the building showing a typical roof truss. Note the mis-alignment of the roof trusses and the staddles.

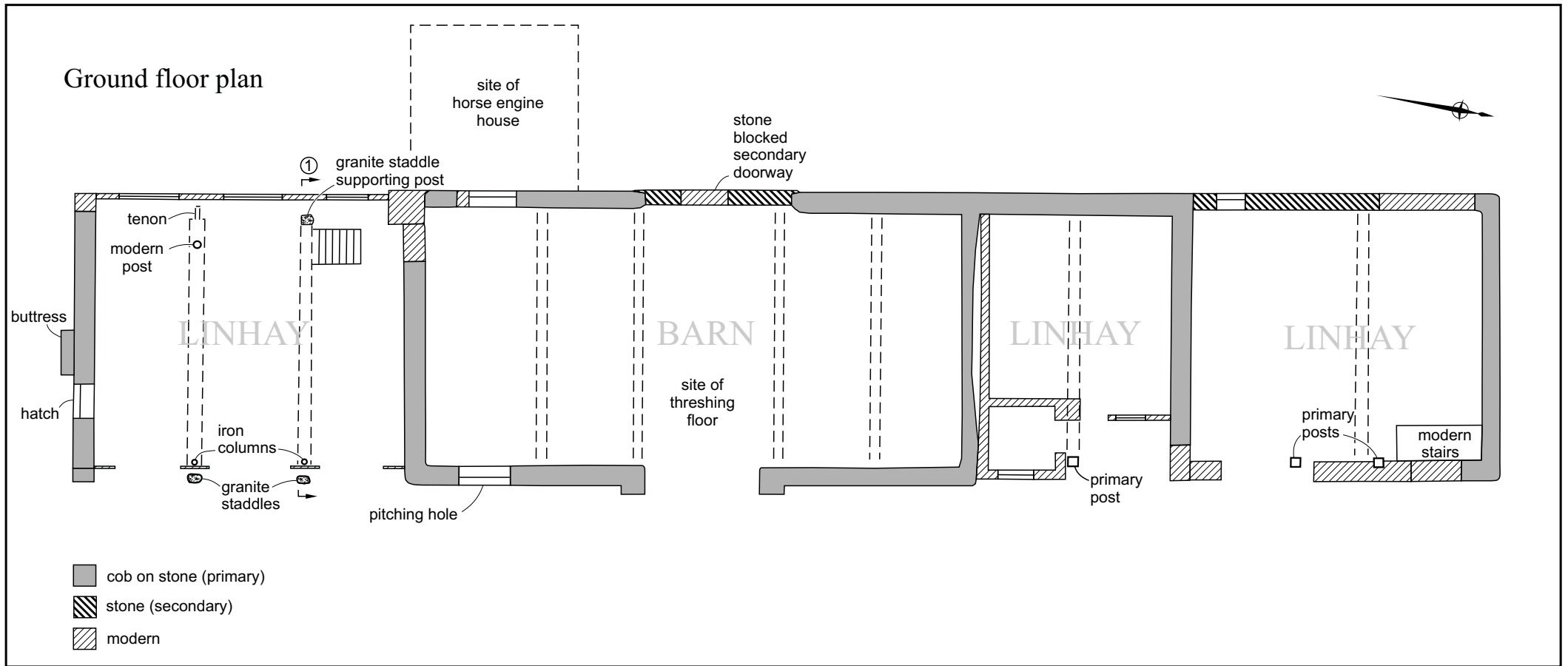


Fig. 9 Sketch plan of the building at ground floor level indicating the suggested phasing of the fabric. Scale approximately 1:125.



Fig. 10. View of the interior of the barn showing the character of the roof, the plastered walls and the blocked openings and stone intrusions in the west wall.

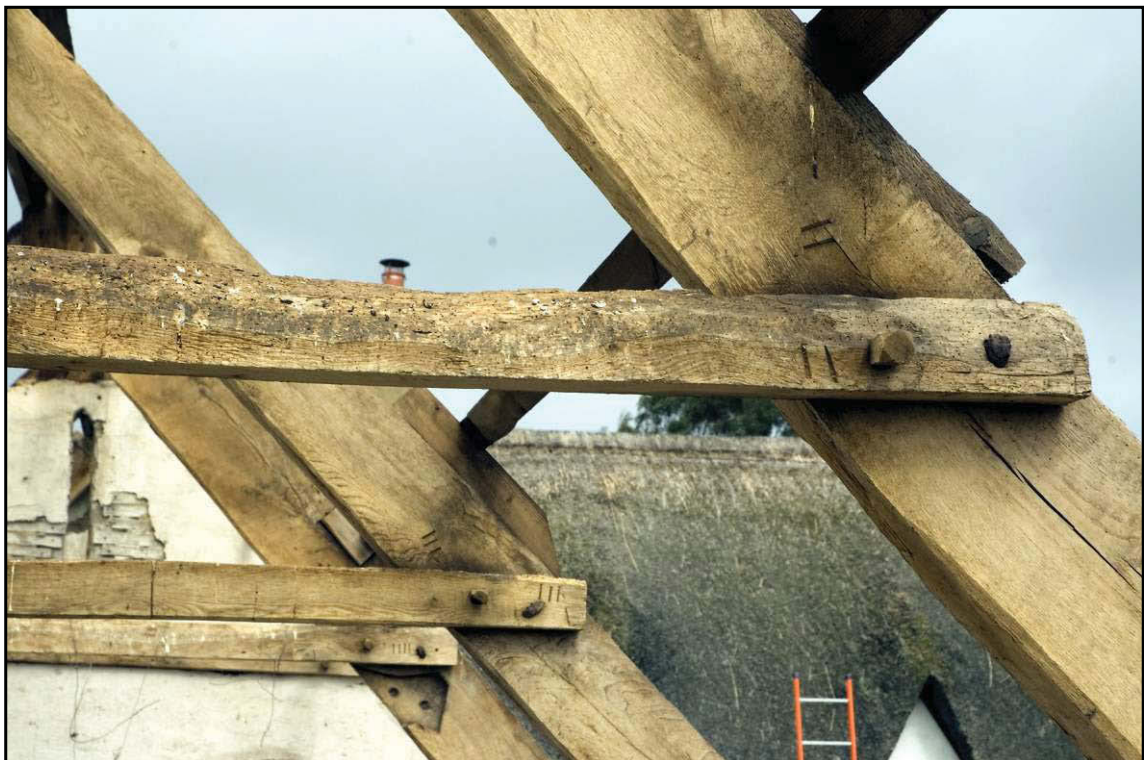


Fig. 11 Detail of the roof trusses over the barn, showing their markings and the details of their collars.



Fig. 12 View of the timber-framed partition at the north end of the barn showing the cob infill held in position by cleft laths and the ventilator at the apex.



Fig. 13 Detail of the construction of the linhay to the north of the barn showing the post resting on a staddle, the projecting tenon at first-floor level and the mortice betraying the former high level of the floor.



Fig. 14 View at first-floor level showing the sockets for the raised floor level in the linhay north of the barn and its relation to the roof structure.

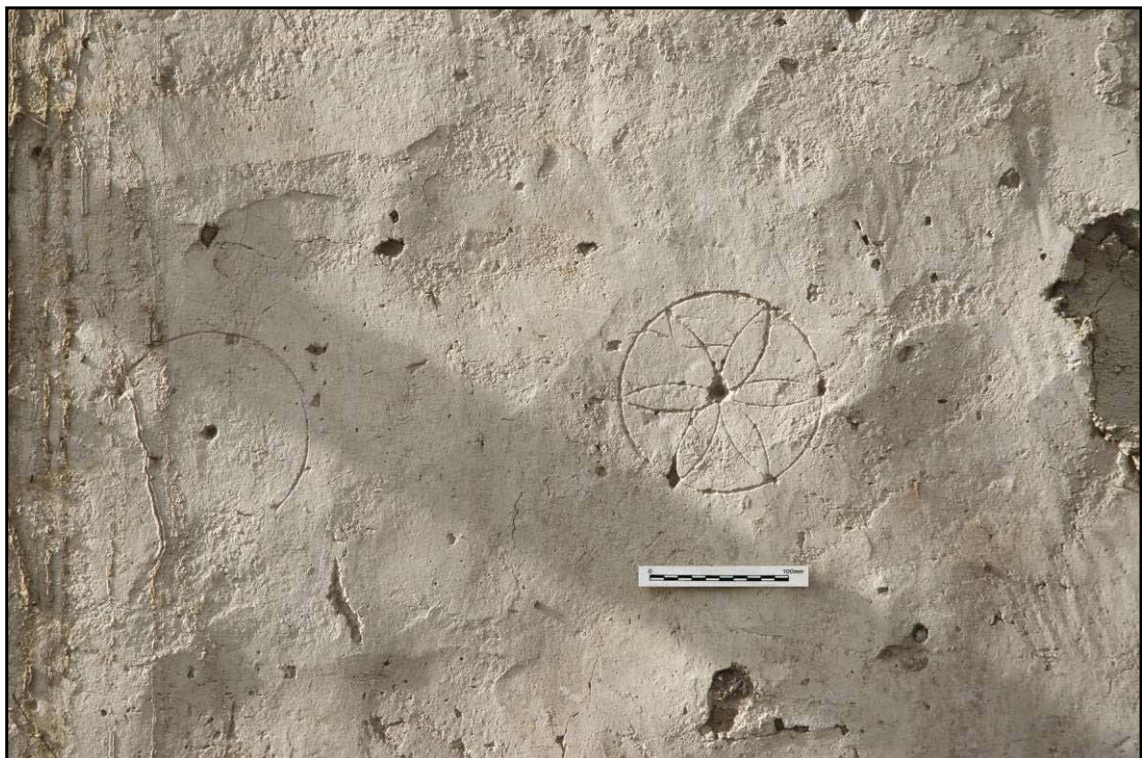


Fig. 15 Detail of some of the 'daisy wheels' or 'witch mark's in the plaster of the upper floor.



Fig. 16 Detail of the replacement roof trusses over the northern end of the building.



Fig. 17 View of the 17th- or 18th-century open-sided barn or linhay at Pinbrook House, Pinhoe, near Exeter, photographed in 1996. Included for comparison with the southern part of the building under discussion.