

A Demolished Timber-Framed Building at Luton

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SUMMARY

A Luton timber-framed house, now demolished and known to us only from a photograph, shows two types of framing technique. It apparently consists of a hall with a storeyed end (possibly an extension). A sixteenth century date is argued for, although it is possible that the hall part is of the fifteenth century. The building is important in view of the extreme paucity of medieval and sub-medieval remains in the town.

INTRODUCTION

A photograph (pl. 5) facing page 178 of William Austin's *History of Luton* (vol. 1, 1923) carries the caption:

'Early fifteenth century House, Upper George Street, Luton (demolished)'.

No mention of the building occurs in Austin's text, and the photograph is the only record of it that we have. Although some details are obscured by shrubbery in the foreground and by later building, a good deal of information can be gleaned by a careful examination of the details shown in the photograph (pl. 5). Approximate elevations and a plan based on this view are given in figure 1 and a perspective of the timber-framing in figure 2. Enquiries by D.H. Kennett have shown that the building formerly stood on the south side of the street, on the site now occupied by Messrs. Connells' premises. The building occupies a long site running north-south at right angles to the street so that the building is taller at the street end than at the other end.¹

DESCRIPTION

The building is a long rectangular structure of two storeys at the south and three storeys at the north, the whole covered by one stretch of gabled roof.

Many of the original features of the north end have been covered by brickwork or rendering. The basement storey is of bricks, whose size suggests that they are non-primary; it forms a sort of plinth to the storeys above and has one window, apparently of late eighteenth or early nineteenth century date. The eastern side of this storey is taken up by a flight of brick steps with a wooden rail supported by posts rising from ground-level. The steps give access to the main doorway on the floor above. The details of this doorway are not clear in the photograph. West of it is a wide window of four lights divided by diagonally-set wooden mullions. This is late medieval — fifteenth or sixteenth century — in appearance.² The wall-frame is composed of fairly closely-set studs with a brick infilling; at the top of each corner-post is a curved bracket beneath the over-sailing part of each rail; the rails form the ends of the jetty.

The topmost stage of this end wall is jettied out over the storey beneath and, like the gable, is entirely rendered. The bressummer and corner-posts are either replacements or possibly planks covering the original beams. However, it is clear from the disposition of the timbers at the bottom corners of the wall — that is, at the jetty's ends — that the bressummer is fully-framed, that is to say the rails of the side walls and the joists of the first-floor are jointed into the back face of the bressummer, instead of the bressummer resting on the ends of the rails and joists. This storey is lighted by one window in the end wall; the window, of sub-medieval appearance, is centrally placed with a small hood. The window may be a replacement or may have been heightened, for its top appears to cut into the original tie-beam. This must have seriously affected the strength of the building, but such structurally unsound alterations to medieval buildings are by no means unknown.

In the gable the ends of two purlins — one each side — are visible rather more than halfway up the roof slope. The side-purlins are set in-pitch and are

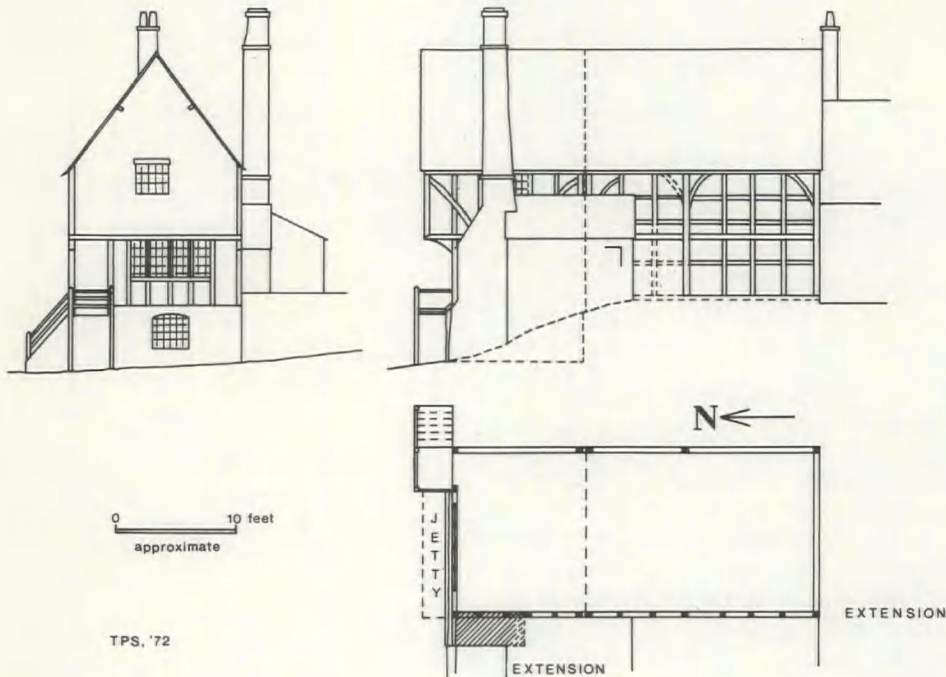


Fig. 1 Conjectural plan of timber-framed building in demolished Upper George Street, Luton.

presumably butt- (rather than through-) purlins. The verges project slightly and there are no barge-boards. The roof-pitch appears to be approximately 50° .

Since the west (side) wall of the building is un-rendered, more details of construction are visible. The southernmost half of the wall (that furthest from the camera) is of square-panel construction. There are two bays to this half of the wall, the more southerly being rather shorter than the other since it has three horizontal divisions whilst the latter has four; the principal posts are clearly visible in the photograph (pl. 5). The southernmost principal (corner-) post has a slightly curved arch-brace rising from it and passing the topmost rail to meet the wall-plate. The central principal post of this part of the building has a similar arch-brace on its south side, though none is visible on the north; it is, however, likely that there was originally a brace in this position. The other, northernmost, corner-post is not all visible in the picture, but again appears to have been braced in similar fashion, except that the brace was structurally weaker in that it passes from post to adjacent stud rather than to the wall-plate.

No windows can be seen in this half of the building although there must have been some originally. No details of the roof are known; the roof covering is of hand-made tiles, but it must not be assumed that these are a primary feature.

The northern half of this same side wall is of markedly different character. A later — or just possibly contemporary — chimney stack and an even later outhouse obscure much of the wall, including the whole of the lower storey. The basement extended beneath at least the northern part of this half of the building and probably beneath the whole of it: it is shown thus by the broken lines in Figs 1 and 2. The storey above the basement corresponds to the ground-floor further south. The most southerly feature is a principal post which is contiguous to that which forms the northernmost feature of the southern half of this side wall. At the top of this post a slightly curved tension-brace butts against it, and this must rise from the middle rail of the wall, although only the top of the brace is visible. There is a similar slightly curved tension-brace to the other, northernmost, principal (corner-) post. All but the foot of this brace is visible; it passes one of the intermediate

studs into which, presumably, it is halved. These tension-braces contrast with the arch-braces further south in the building, and another contrast is in the method of wall-framing, which here is of vertical panels separated by fairly closely-set studs, similar to the construction of the end wall. One window is visible in the photograph, just south of centre of this half of the wall and next to the chimney stack. The window may well be in the *position* of an original, although it is of eighteenth or early nineteenth century type. The roof covering of this half of the building is again of hand-made tiles.

Throughout its length this side wall is unjettied, and the nogging is of bricks, which appear to be 'statute' bricks.³

Also of such bricks is the chimney stack at the side of the northern half of the building. It is very wide at the bottom, about 5ft judging from the number of bricks *per* row, but diminishes to about 3ft at about the level of the middle rail by a sloping and tiled offset. A change to inferior bricks at about this level perhaps indicates that the upper half of the stack has been rebuilt. The stack has a band at eaves level and another towards the top; the short stretch of work above, with its slightly more elaborate banding, is probably a later — eighteenth century — augmentation.

Built against the south face of the stack and the west face of the main structure is a late eighteenth or nineteenth century single-storey pentice-roofed outhouse of standard sized bricks and with a slate roof. At the south end of the building is another chimney stack, with pots, probably eighteenth century. Also at this end is a lower extension to the main building; this has a tiled roof, but no dateable features are discernible.

The dimensions of the building can only be estimated from the disposition of the bricks. The width is approximately 14-15ft, its length roughly between 30 and 35ft. Each storey — including the basement — appears to be about 6ft in height.

DISCUSSION

The difference in the methods of wall-framing, particularly in the types of bracing, between the two halves of the building possibly indicates two phases of construction, the southern half being the older, and some support is given to this conjecture by the contiguous principal posts at the junction of the two framing methods; when extending a timber-framed building it was usually found easier

to erect an additional set of principal posts rather than to frame into the existing set. On the other hand (J.T. Smith, private communication) it is possible that the two posts, and therefore the two halves of the building, are contemporary, the differences in framing being due to difference of function — that is, southern hall and northern storeyed end.

The square-panel construction and the short, only slightly curved arch-braces of the southern half of the building belong to what J.T. Smith has defined as the western school of timber-frame construction.⁴ The main concentration of buildings of this school lies to the west (and south) of Bedfordshire, so that the Luton building must be an outlier. The arch-brace which runs from one vertical member to another (*supra* p 74) is significant in this respect, for it relates the building to others in East Anglia. That this brace is an *arch*-brace and not a *tension*-brace would seem to support J.T. Smith's suggestion that such bracing should be regarded as a separate type and not as a variety of tension-bracing.⁵ The southern half of the building thus consisted of a two-bay structure of western school framing, but related to the East Anglian school. Of the original fenestration nothing is known. The height of the rails is peculiar (Fig 1) and the arrangement makes it unlikely that the building was originally of a single storey open to the roof; it is more likely that the whole structure was divided by a floor from the outset. It is highly probable that the panels of the wall-frame were originally filled with wattle-and-daub, which would have been plastered, the brick nogging being a later alteration. Of the original roof construction nothing is known. Fig 2 indicates a crown-post roof with collar purlin, but this is conjectured. Whether or not the roof was of this type depends to some extent on its date: if it is earlier than the northern part and so perhaps of the fifteenth century then such a roof is likely. In north Bedfordshire even late medieval houses may have such roofs, and in one instance a building as late as the sixteenth century has a crown-post roof,⁶ though this is exceptional. If, on the other hand, this half of the building is contemporary with the northern half (sixteenth century), then a side-purlin roof like that of the northern half is much more likely.

By way of contrast, the northern half of the building belongs to the eastern school of tall vertical panels, fairly closely-set studs, and curved tension-braces.⁷ Luton lies well within the main concentration of buildings of this school. This half

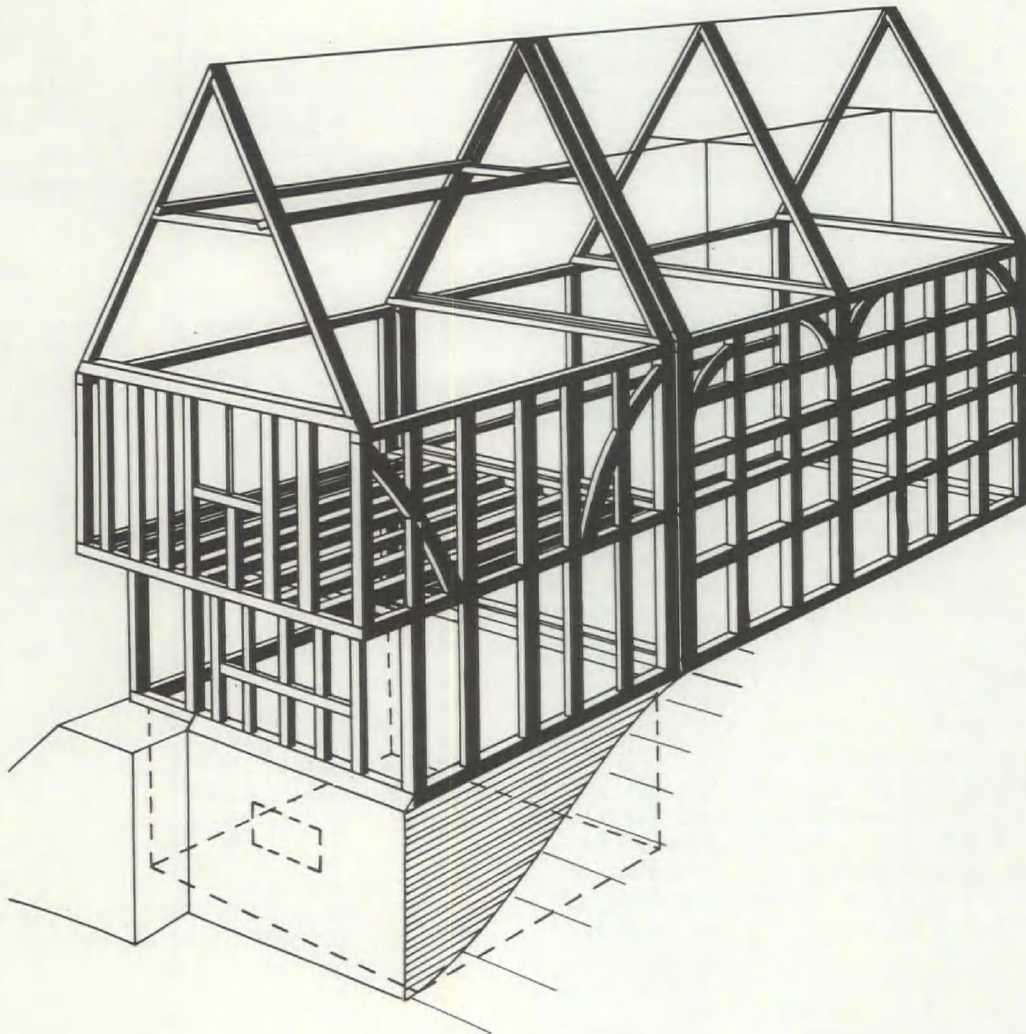


Fig. 2 Isometric reconstruction of timber-framing of demolished building in Upper George Street, Luton.

of the building formed either a storeyed end contemporary with the southern half, or a storeyed extension of later date. It was of one bay and was jettied on its end wall. The slope of the site permitted (or necessitated) a cellar which was probably of brick, and above this were two further storeys. What is known of the fenestration has been noted above; the doorway is in the usual position for a building with a cellar of the type exhibited here. Little is known of the roof structure except that it had the in-pitch side-purlins already mentioned, perhaps with collars above these.

The northern half of the building may be dated to the sixteenth century. The fully-framed bressummer on the end wall may pretty safely be assigned to that century. C.A. Hewett has shown that in Essex this method of framing the bressummer was in vogue for a period of about fifty or sixty years from c.1530.⁸ Extrapolation from one region to another should never be indulged in lightly, but Bedfordshire is sufficiently close to Essex for a broadly similar date to be accepted for this feature in south Bedfordshire buildings, and a sixteenth century date may accordingly be acc-

epted. The nature of the tension-bracing, the wide four-light window in the end wall, and the roof construction incorporating side-purlins in-pitch are consistent with this dating. In this area side-purlin roofs probably began to supersede the earlier crown-post roofs at the end of the fifteenth century. They are a common feature of those post-medieval houses in north Bedfordshire examined by N.W. Alcock,⁹ and are present in Bedfordshire's best timber-framed building, the Moot Hall, at Elstow, which Stuart Rigold dates to c. 1500 (with seventeenth century additions and alterations).¹⁰ The features of the southern half of the Luton building could be of this date or somewhat earlier (fifteenth century).

From its position against the side of the building the brick chimney stack would appear to be a later addition, though just possibly it was put up in such a position as part of the original build. The stack is typically late sixteenth or seventeenth century, and is very similar to the gable-end stack of this date at the Moat House, Biscot, Luton.¹¹

The building was not a town house, for the medieval and immediately post-medieval town of Luton did not extend as far as present Upper George Street. Presumably it belonged to the class of 'many good sized farm houses occupied by yeomen farmers and maltsters,' mentioned by Austin.¹² The significance of the building lies in the fact that Luton is as devoid of material remains of its past as any town in England, and this building is, together with the Moat House at Biscot, the earliest Luton vernacular building of which we have visual evidence. Its appreciation, even through the medium of a photograph, is therefore a matter of importance in the study of the history and development of the town.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to D.H. Kennett for allowing me to make use of his researches into the site of this building; to J.T. Smith, and Helen Clarke for reading an earlier draft of this paper and for making many invaluable comments and suggestions, of which I have made use in a revised draft. The photograph (pl. 5) is reproduced by kind permission of Mrs K.M. Milner, to whom my grateful thanks are due.

NOTES

- 1 The building on the extreme east of Austin's photograph may be identified with 'The Clarence' public house, thus allowing the site of the timber-framed building to be located. Immediately to its west is a large garden, which appears as a large blank space on an 1855 map of the town. *Ex inf.* D H Kennett. Upper George Street was formerly known as Dunstable Street.
- 2 For such windows cf. R W Brunskill, *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture* (1971), 118-19.
- 3 The bricks appear to measure roughly 8-9in by 4-4½in by 2-2½in. The 'statute' referred to is that of Edward IV of 1477; cf. C F Innocent, *The Development of English Building Construction* (1916, reprinted 1971), 152; also A Clifton-Taylor, *The Pattern of English Building* (revised ed., 1972), 249; for brief notes on early brick in Luton *vide* T P Smith, 'Someries Castle', *Beds Arch J*, 3, (1966), 49.
- 4 J T Smith, 'Timber-building in England', *Arch J*, 122, (1965), 133-58; also Brunskill, 54-5, 178.
- 5 J T Smith, 147-8.
- 6 N W Alcock, 'Timber-framed Buildings in North Bedfordshire', *Beds Arch J*, 4, (1969).
- 7 J T Smith, 133-58; also Brunskill, 54-5, 178.
- 8 C A Hewett, *The Development of Carpentry 1200-1700: an Essex Study* (1969), chap.7, and especially 52.
- 9 Alcock, 47 and *passim*.
- 10 S E Rigold, 'Elstow Moot Hall', in *The Moot Hall, Elstow* (Beds C.C. publication, 1969), 5-8. There is good reason to believe that the side-purlin roof developed in the West Midlands; cf. K W E Gravett, 'Smaller Houses under the Tudors - a Period of Transition', *Proc Royal Inst of Gt Britain*, 43, (1970), 161-9. A demolished West Midlands example at Chorley House, Droitwich, Worcs. is illustrated in Clifton-Taylor, 310 (drawing by F W B Charles), dateable to c. 1400. Away from the West Midlands they occur progressively later, but reached (e.g.) King's Lynn by the early sixteenth century; a fine example at Thoresby College in that town and is dateable from documents to c. 1510; *vide* V Parker *The Making of King's Lynn*, vol. 1 (1971), 73 and Fig. 17, p75. It is not unduly surprising that the type reached as far as Kent only late, 'arriving at the county boundary about 1530 and slowly travelling eastwards reaching Canterbury and Sandwich by about 1600...': K Gravett, *Timber and Brick Building in Kent* (1971), 10-11.
- 11 A J Hales, 'The Moat House, Biscot', *Beds Mag* 11 (1968), 143-6.
- 12 W Austin, *History of Luton and its Hamlets*, vol. 1 (1923), 220.