

HILL FARM, CHALFONT ST. PETER

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WHEN the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments carried out its survey of South Buckinghamshire,¹ the Commission had been established for barely two years and although its first Inventory, of the county of Hertford, had already been published it is hardly surprising that some buildings prior to 1700, on which alone the Commission was then directed to report, were missed by its still recently recruited staff. Alterations affecting the external appearance of a building have frequently been found to conceal significant earlier work, the only clues to which may be an unusual pitch of roof, a low-proportioned elevation or merely a general assymetry unlikely to be the work of a single builder. The division of large properties into smaller units has not assisted the thorough investigation which is often necessary to determine the original layout of a building and it is often only when a house is about to be demolished that the opportunity arises of a detailed examination. Such was the case in the shops recently demolished in High Street, Chalfont St. Peter, where a fifteenth-century timber-framed house with open hall and wings emerged from behind its nineteenth-century mask only to be cast unceremoniously, but fortunately not unrecorded, on the contractor's bonfire. It is hoped to publish a full report on this building at a later date.

A quarter of a mile north-east of the village lies another and even earlier concealed antiquity, also hitherto unknown but fortunately recognised by Mr. E. Clive Rouse in time for it to be preserved, although at the time of writing its future is still uncertain². Hill Farm stands 100 yards north of Joiners Lane and comprises a house, formerly a farmhouse, and three barns or out-buildings east and north-east of the house. The house is of two storeys with walls of brickwork incorporating some timber-framing and a tiled roof. The principal elevation (Plate IXa) faces south-east and includes a low central range flanked by gabled cross-wings and with a more recent extension to the south-west. The south-west and north-west elevations are largely masked by modern additions, but a timber-framed wing remains visible to the north-west. The north-east end of the house is partly obscured by a low outbuilding. Two barns stand to the east detached from the house and set at right-angles to each other; they form the north-east boundary of a partly walled garden which was laid out in recent years against the principal front of the house, and earlier they probably formed two sides of the farmyard.

The structure dates from the fourteenth century, the oldest portion being a hall of two bays with an open cruck truss in the centre (a-b on plan, Fig. 2) having chamfered arched braces below a collar. The cruck blades—of which the lower part of one is missing—taper from 11 in. square at the base to 7 in. square at the apex where they are linked by a heavy yoke, 10½ in. by 2 ft. 3 in.



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PLATE IXa. CHALFONT ST. PETER, BUCKS. Hill Farm from south-east.



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PLATE IXb. CHALFONT ST. PETER. Hill Farm. Roof of south-west wing.



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PLATE Xa. CHALFONT ST. PETER. Hill Farm. Apex of cruck truss.



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PLATE Xb. CHALFONT ST. PETER. Hill Farm. Interior of hall from north-east.

(maximum), on the face, and which supports a square-set ridge (Plate Xa and b, and Fig. 1).

There appears to be a spur-tie just below the angle of the cruck blade, which carries the front wall-plate. A curved brace $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. by 6 in. rises from one side of the cruck to support the underside of the purlin—the latter remains throughout the original length of the hall and retains evidence of further braces rising from the end trusses and from the other side of the cruck. These terminal trusses do not survive but were presumably of similar construction to the open truss; that at the south-west end would have been approximately in line

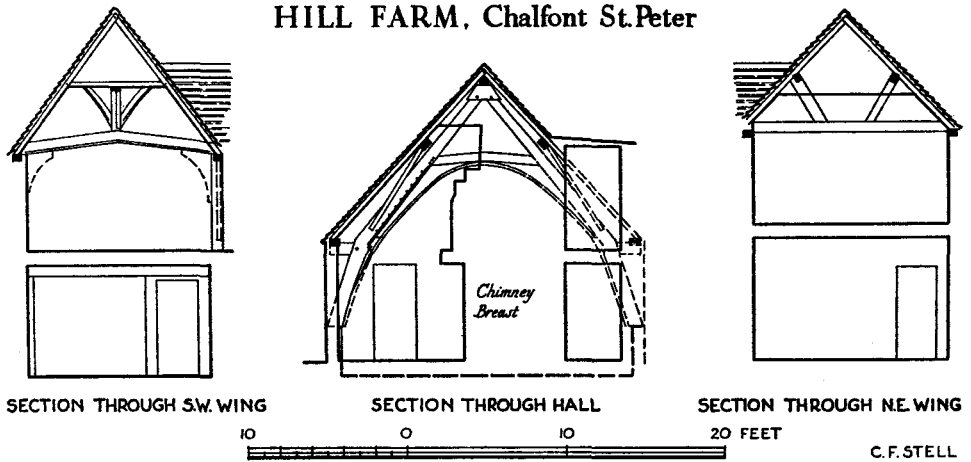


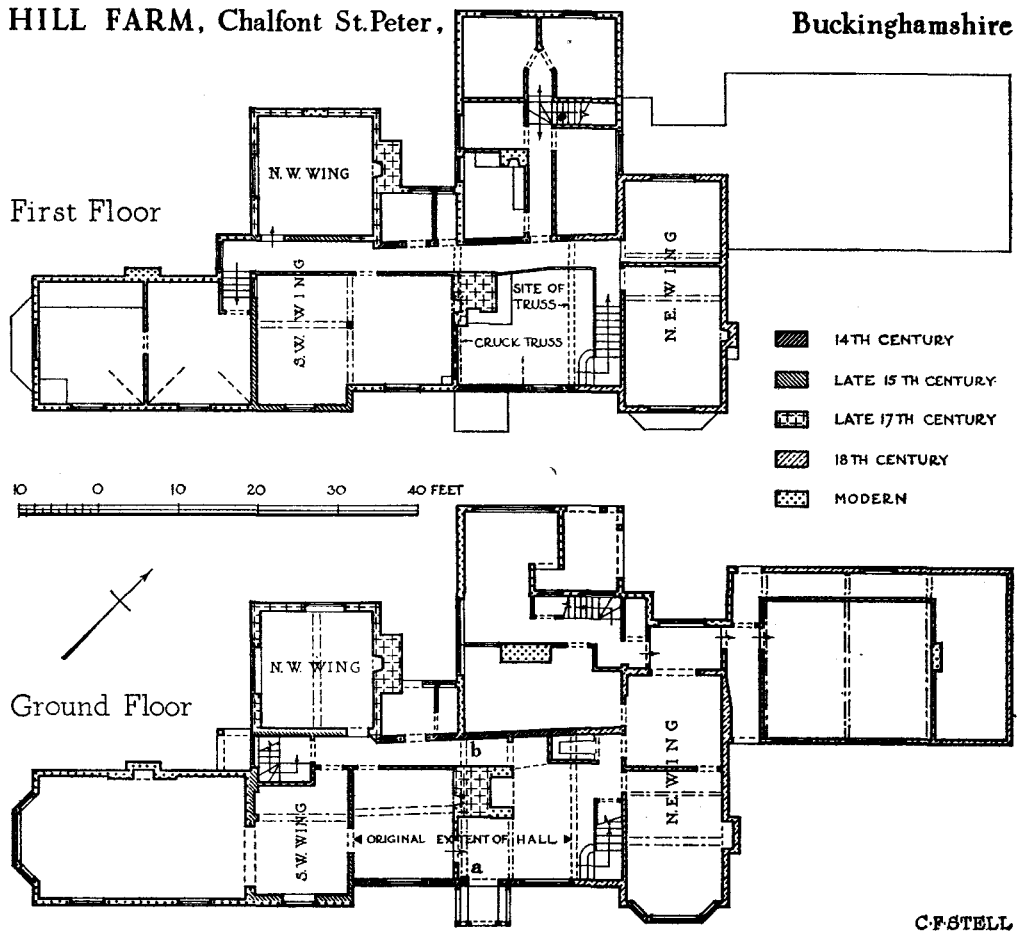
FIG. 1.

with the inner wall of the south-west wing but that to the north-west was about 6 ft. inside the present end of the hall, as indicated by the extent of the ridge-piece and of the purlin visible in the hall—this last was spliced and extended when the end truss was removed and it is this alteration, perhaps of eighteenth-century date, which is responsible for the broken appearance of the purlin. The upper section of the blades and the other timbers which are visible in the roof space, including some common rafters, are covered with a black gritty deposit, the result of smoke from an open fire. The present entrance hall occupies the north-east bay of the hall and has a fireplace to the south-west, against the open truss, which stands on the site of the original hearth; it is possible that some remains of this hearth may still survive below the fireplace. No visible remains exist of any wings clearly contemporary with the cruck hall and it may be that the building was merely of two bays; the removal of the original end trusses of the hall, however, has destroyed all likely evidence.

In the fifteenth century the south-west wing was built, perhaps replacing inferior fourteenth-century apartments. This wing is timber-framed and was gabled to the south-east and north-west but the latter gable has been broken through to provide access to a later roof. The roof (Plate IXb, Fig. 1) is supported by a central truss with an angularly cambered tie-beam formerly stiffened at the ends by short brackets (similar brackets were noted in the fifteenth-century

house in High Street referred to above); the tie-beam carries a square-sectioned central crown post from the foot of which rise four curved braces, two support a collar and two rise to a collar purlin which is also supported at its south-east end by a similar brace in the surviving gable. The roof has no ridge-piece; the original rafters with collars halved and pegged to them survive almost complete. Most of the original structure of the walls probably remains embedded behind the plaster: the thickness of the south-east wall to the ground floor suggests that the upper floor may have been jettied at this end and later underbuilt; both posts supporting the open truss remain—that exposed in the upper floor bears traces of wide braces in the side walls between the post and the wall-plate.

North-west of the south-west wing is a square two-storeyed addition of the late seventeenth century with timber-framed walls and a roof at right angles to the earlier wing; the roof has no ridge-piece, the common rafters are supported by purlins clasped between the rafters and the collars in the gable trusses. The purlins are supported at the corners by straight wind-braces. An original



window remains in the north-west wall at first-floor level, though now blocked, and a similar window below has been enlarged.

The north-east wing is later in structural form, though still apparently timber-framed originally; the roof (Fig. 1) is supported by a straight tie-beam, 7 in. square, with V-braces of very flat section, about 3 in. by 10 in., which carry purlins notched into the ends; there is no original ridge piece. The gable trusses remain, although covered by tile hanging or later brickwork. The north-west gable has a collar which rests above the ends of the clasped purlins. The date of this wing is uncertain but the absence of a ridge-piece together with this type of clasped purlin suggest work of the first half of the eighteenth century. The wing was built about 6 ft. north-east of the hall so that the latter, divided in the seventeenth century, might be increased to a more convenient size.

No further major alterations appear to have been carried out until early in the present century when, with the increasing demand for property within easy reach of London, an extensive programme of renovation and extension was carried out. At this time a servants' wing was built at the rear of the house and a large drawing room with attic accommodation above was built at right angles to the south-west wing; minor fittings were also entirely replaced and the older walls at the front largely rebuilt or encased in brickwork.

Of the three barns or outbuildings, that lying farthest away, on an axis parallel to the hall, is the oldest; it is possibly of late seventeenth-century or even early eighteenth-century date, in three bays with timber-framed and weather-boarded walls resting on flint and brick dwarf walls, in part replaced by modern breeze blocks, and with two tie-beam trusses with braces below their ends and V-braces above with purlins clasped at the top of these braces in a manner similar to the north-east wing of the house. The two other buildings, of which that adjacent to the house is partly converted to domestic use, are also timber-framed and weather-boarded but the framework is largely carried out in softwood and probably dates from later in the eighteenth century. Of these, the barn at right-angles to the house is much the larger; it has a projecting porch with hipped roof in the middle of the south-west side and half hips to the main roof. The structure next to the house is low built and probably served some minor farm purpose; it seems to have been built slightly away from the house with which it has since been linked.

The particular archaeological significance of Hill Farm lies in the cruck truss which is a form of construction commonly found in the northern and western counties of England, and in Wales; few examples have, however, been noted in southern and eastern England and although additional information is continually being sought on this problem it seems likely that Hill Farm must always be regarded as very much on the fringe of the area of cruck construction.³ The somewhat complex history of additions and alterations to the house may also be thought of as advantageous in the study of the development of building techniques, since it has left in one building the whole story of roof construction from the early use of purlins and ridge-pieces as seen in the hall, through the period of the collar purlin and crown post to the return of side purlins but without a ridge, the purlins either clasped between a collar and the principal

rafters as is frequently found in this and adjacent counties, or propped by V-braces, clearly a cheaper and therefore probably a later development.

The changes that have come about in the plan are less readily assessed, since we cannot tell what may have been lost during alteration or enlargement. The two-bay open hall may have stood alone or have had a further bay at one end, probably of the same construction, to make provision for a parlour and maybe a sleeping loft above. The fifteenth-century wing of two full storeys indicates a desire by the master of the house, or his dame, for more spacious private rooms while still keeping the old two-bay hall with its open fire in the centre for communal use. When the open hall was finally abandoned at Hill Farm is not certain, but it is likely to have taken place in the post-Restoration years when accepted standards of comfort seem to have changed rapidly; the old hall was then divided into two rooms, and a floor inserted, probably over both rooms, though now removed in the present entrance hall. Why further rooms were needed at the north-east end we cannot say, while the requirements of civilised society of 60 years ago need not be discussed here.

The ancient skeletons thus rising from their graves, half-hidden by modern shrouds, have surely a warning to pass on to us today. Never again must we assume that modern clothes mean a modern building, nor that, however carefully a district may seem to have been combed, nothing further of importance is likely to be discovered. The scientific study of standing buildings in the same elaborate detail as is now lavished on excavations has as yet hardly commenced and may indeed not be possible except in a few isolated cases, but it is a development which can never take place unless buildings such as Hill Farm are recognised in time to prevent their hasty demolition and brought to general notice through the medium of this or other journals.

¹ R.C.H.M., *Buckinghamshire, South*, (1912).

² As a result of a public enquiry, the preservation order placed on the house has been confirmed. But no use has yet been found for the building.

³ Several examples of cruck construction, though mostly in cottage-type buildings and not a hall truss, have been identified in Long Crendon. It is hoped that an account of these will be published at a later date.