

# DOMESTIC WALL PAINTINGS AT No.1 LONDON END, BEACONSFIELD

E. CLIVE ROUSE, F.S.A.

THE presence of wall paintings of some kind in No. 1 London End, Beaconsfield, formerly leased as a shop with rooms over to Perrymans, had been known by tradition for a long time (see site plan, Fig. 1, a). But until 1966, for many years past, nothing was visible as the walls were limewashed and wall-papered,

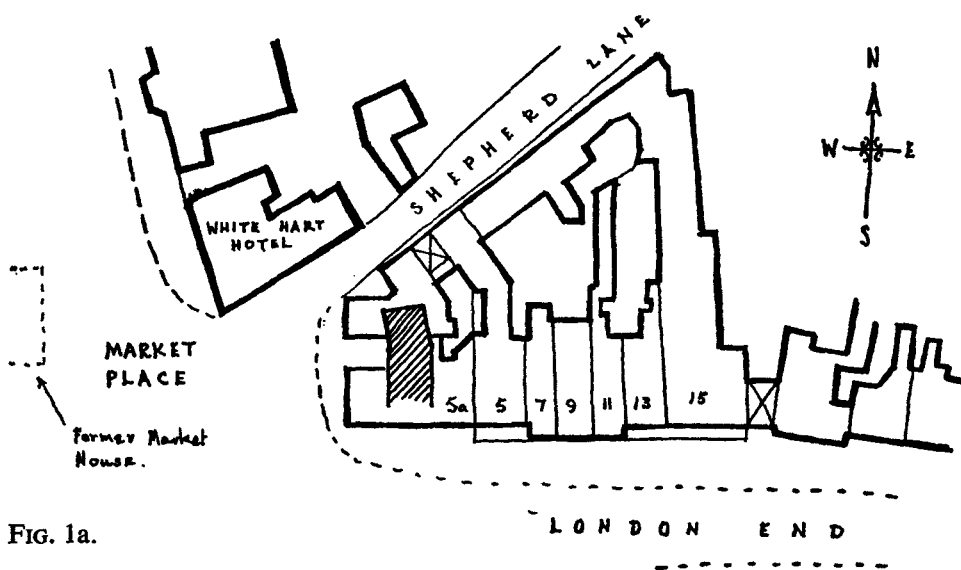


FIG. 1a.

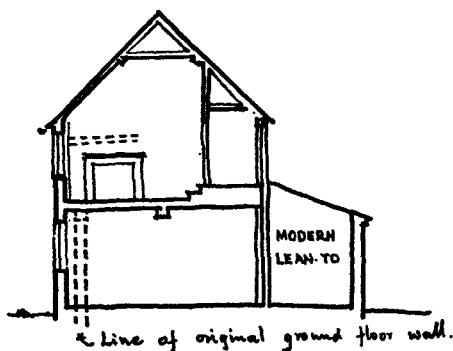


FIG. 1b.

SECTION

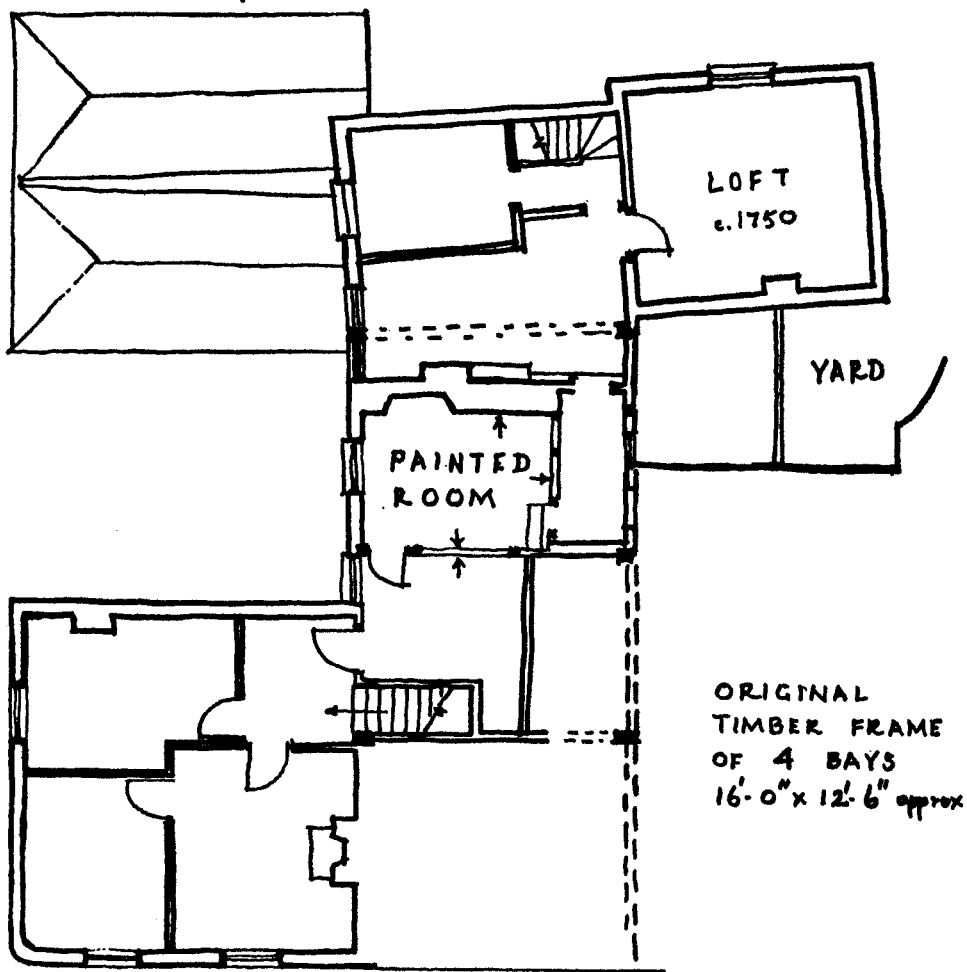
and the room on the first floor in which the paintings were supposed to exist had for long been used as a store, so that no tests could be made, and there was no certain knowledge of the nature or date of the paintings. In 1966 the lease of the property, owned by Lord Burnham, fell, in and it was possible to carry out a full investigation before the conversion and modernisation of the premises into flats.

Most grateful thanks must here be given to Lord Burnham in the first place, and his agent, Major Rimmer, for giving permission for the work on the wall paintings, and for providing every possible facility and co-operation, even holding up the work of modernisation to enable the paintings to be fully uncovered and actually removed for presentation to the Aylesbury Museum. Mr. O. S. Puckle, the Chairman of the Beaconsfield and District Historical Society, and many helpers, under my guidance, were indefatigable in their efforts to get the work done, and raise funds for the removal costs, Enid Lady Burnham often herself helping in the uncovering and cleaning. Mr. J. D. Broadbent was tireless in his efforts also on the practical side, and in consultation with myself was responsible for the successful removal of the paintings and their transport to Aylesbury. The plans for the conversion of the building made it undesirable or actually impossible for the paintings to remain *in situ*. The whole exercise was a most happy example of what can be achieved by sensible co-operation between several interests. Others who rendered great assistance are Mrs. K. B. Holden and Mr. Christopher Gowing.

The house in which the paintings occurred seems to have been part of the house, No. 17, listed by the Royal Commission,<sup>1</sup> and with No. 16 described by them as having been "built originally late in the sixteenth century, and now re-fronted, covered with plaster and almost entirely modern. . . . The second house retains only an original chimney stack which has three octagonal shafts with moulded bases; the tops are missing." The fireplaces connected with this stack are in the adjoining premises; and the room in which the paintings were found was re-fronted in brick in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and all the windows, of sash pattern, were inserted at this date. The interior, however, is heavily timbered and must be of late sixteenth century date with perhaps seventeenth-century alterations. On account of its unpromising exterior the house was not listed or noticed in any way.<sup>2</sup>

The paintings occurred in two adjoining rooms facing west on the first floor. The principal apartment measured about 10 ft. × 12 ft., the original size of the bay (12 ft. × 16 ft.) having been reduced by the insertion of fireplace and passage wall, and was completely painted on a hair plaster set over wattle and daub and timber framing, the design being carried over wall and ceiling timbers and partly on the slope of the plaster ceiling. The scheme consisted of a geometric design frieze, almost of stencil pattern, with floral and diamond-shaped panels below in some areas, at the top (Plate IXa and b). The main wall space was covered by free foliage scroll-work with birds, and fruit and exotic flowers in the manner of a "verdure" tapestry, with a border about 3 ft. from the ground, and panels containing figures, framed by the same borders, and measuring about 3 ft. 6 in. to 4 ft. × 2 ft. 6 in. to 3 ft. Only three figures survive but there may well have been more, as one wall is broken by a bricked-up

C.19 SINGLE-STOREY  
SHOP ↓



C.18 TWO-STOREY  
ADDITION

FIRST FLOOR PLAN

FIG. 1c.



PLATE XIa. BEACONSFIELD. 1 London End. General view of the painted room.



PLATE XIb. BEACONSFIELD. 1 London End. Details of decorative painting, frieze, etc.



PLATE XIIa. BEACONSFIELD. 1 London End. Lute-player.



PLATE XIIb. BEACONSFIELD. 1 London End. Falconer.



PLATE XIIIa. BEACONSFIELD. I London End. Woman holding book or mirror.



PLATE XIIIb. BEACONSFIELD. I London End. Fragment of decorative painting in room adjoining the main painted room.

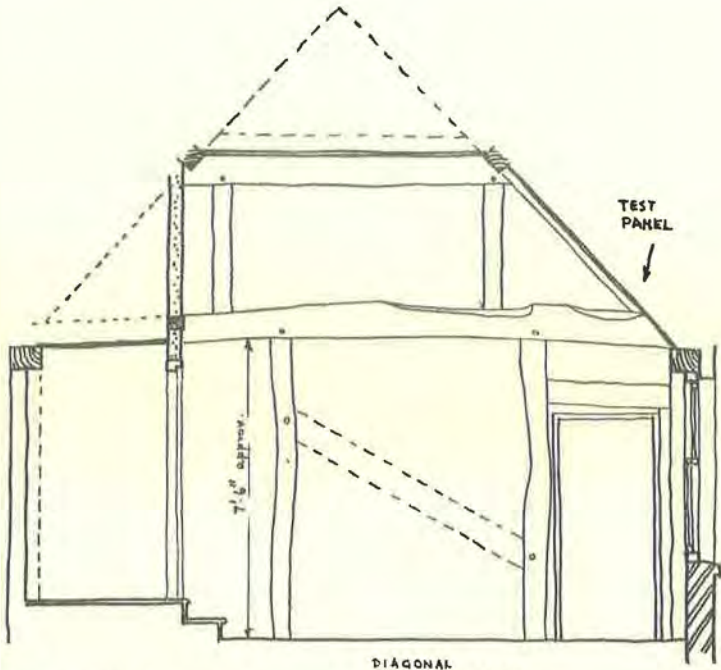
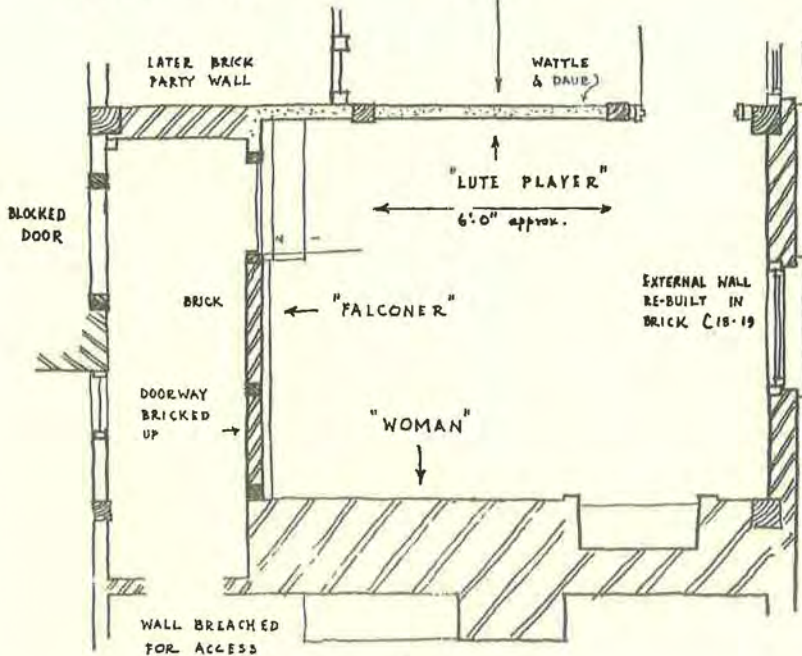


FIG. 2a.

SOUTH WALL

DIAGONAL  
FRACE ON BACK  
OF WALL



PLAN

FIG. 2b.

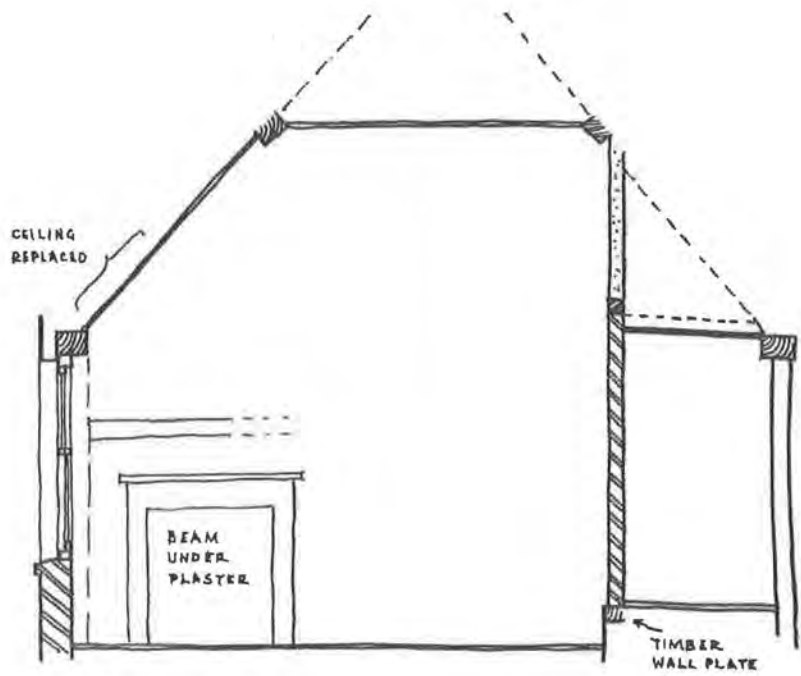


FIG. 3a. NORTH WALL

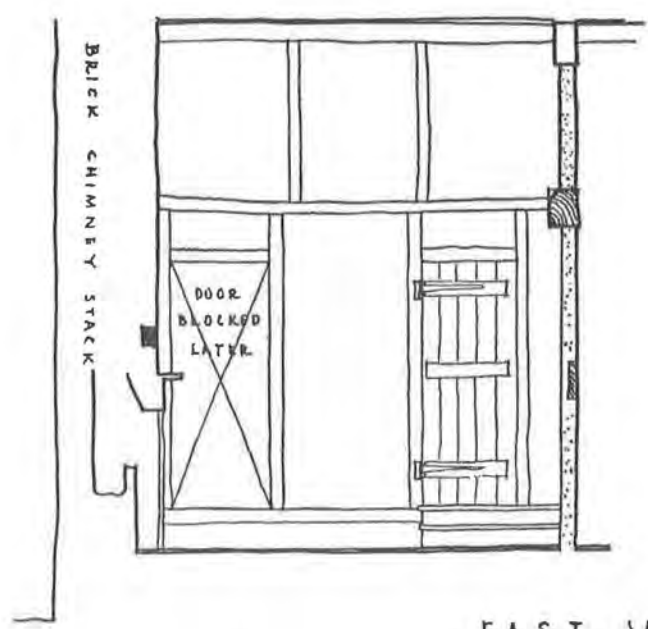


FIG. 3b. EAST WALL



doorway and another by a modern window (Plate XIa). See also plans and sections drawn by Mr. Broadbent (Fig. 2, a and b, and Fig. 3, a and b).

From the lower border to the floor the space is occupied by a representation of panelling with an intricate design in the centre, in a style with which one is very familiar in Buckinghamshire (Plate XIa). Its exact finish at floor level is uncertain, as the floor has been raised, and modern skirting boards or timbers placed at the base. The foliage is thinly outlined in black, and the colour-range is restrained.

Of the three figures, two are male and one female. On the South wall a young man plays a lute. He wears an elaborately feathered soft hat of "Rembrandt" type, and has full breeches, and hose tied at the knee with ribbons, or garters (Plate XIIa). The feet are crossed almost in a dancing attitude.

On the east wall there is a man with a hawk or hooded falcon on his right wrist. He wears similar hose and ribboned garters, but has a waisted doublet with projecting shoulder-pieces. He wears black shoes with a long tongue-piece, and his legs are straddled apart (Plate XIIb).

The third figure on the north wall is very fragmentary, but can be seen to be a woman in a full, long skirt, very full sleeves, and a kind of "comforter" over the bodice. She may have a kerchief over her head. She holds what may be either a book or a mirror (Plate XIIIa). The figures are in full colour solidly painted, a great deal of green and brown being used, with a certain amount of red and pink.

The decoration changes slightly over the fireplace in the north-west corner, and one had hopes of an inscription panel here. But the condition of both plaster and painting in this position was very fragmentary. The fireplace, though modernised, is certainly in its original position.

Considerable difficulties arise in the interpretation and dating of this scheme of decoration. The basic elements—the frieze, the meandering foliage, birds, fruit and flowers, and, above all, the painted imitation of panelling—are consistent with a late-sixteenth or early-seventeenth-century date (Elizabethan or Jacobean). And the heavy timbering disclosed within the house would make this perfectly acceptable architecturally speaking. But the thin and rather spindly drawing of the foliage and its lack of solid colour suggest a rather later date.

When one comes to the figures, especially where the features are preserved, one has renewed doubts whether these can really be Elizabethan. The features are small and delicate, and the rendering of the costume looks more like an eighteenth-century idea of Elizabethan dress, the whole having a rather Watteau-like air. Nevertheless, these figures are clearly an integral part of the whole scheme, and the foliage cannot be later than the seventeenth century. So one must accept this as an unusually sophisticated work of about 1600.

With the painted representation of panelling one is on surer ground, and this, extraordinarily similar to that in the post-Reformation room at Piccotts End, Hemel Hempstead, Herts., must be in the quarter century 1595–1620.<sup>3</sup> Many similar examples can be found in Reader's admirable analysis and comparative sets of such painted panelling in *Arch. Journal*, Vol. XCVIII, Plates XII (opp. p. 201), XIII (p.206), XIV and XV. The Beaconsfield example is not very clear, but the central motif seems very complicated, as in Pl. XII, No. 3, or

Pl. XIII, No. 6, where a geometrical border is shown, or Pl. XIV, Nos. 2 and 5.

It remains to say something of the scheme as a whole and what the figures represent. No very coherent or underlying theme can be at present detected. It is likely that there was something of the sort, for odd figures were hardly chosen at random merely as decoration, and, as in the Middle Ages, it was customary often to show series of figures like the Nine Worthies (as at Amer-sham<sup>4</sup>), the Muses, the Virtues, the Five Senses, the Seven Liberal Arts, the Seasons, and so on. Figures representing Virtues and the Arts and Sciences are most often found on sculptured monuments at this sort of date. The matter is complicated at Beaconsfield by not knowing exactly how many figures there originally were: there may have been four or even five and no really connecting link can be traced. The young man with the lute may represent music or dancing, and the lady with the book (if book it is), literature or learning. If she holds a mirror she could be Truth, or Vanity. The man with the hawk seems merely to represent just that: and so it may be that polite accomplishments, sports or pastimes of the period are represented in a "verdure" setting. At any rate the room must have been an elaborate and even sumptuous one—curiously so when one considers the fairly humble character of the house. And it is most satisfactory to have recovered it in such comparative completeness.

In an adjoining room, on the other side of the party wall on which the lutenist is painted, another fragment of a different scheme came to light. This was in very bad condition, but can be seen to have consisted of a deep frieze in pale blue at the top on which is painted a crude plain scroll in heavy white, with red ornament at the intersections of the scroll members, and a double line at the base. The rest of the wall seems to have been coloured a dark blue on which there is another "tapestry" pattern in heavy white and a sparing use of pink, consisting of exotic flowers, foliage and tendrils carefully and solidly shaded in contrast to the more open, delicate and spindly work on the other side of the wall. Like the other, it is carried over the timbers—in this case an upright in the corner and a curved brace or strut across the main portion of the wall (Plate XIII b). This painting was previously unknown, and was found, during the investigation of the premises, by S. C. Wartnaby.

It has a somewhat earlier appearance than the work in the main room, though it is probably not far removed in date. The use of the scroll as a decorative feature at this date is very unusual, and I do not recall another instance, nor does Reader illustrate one, except on the Bodleian timbers, 1600–18.

It is hoped that these panels will in due course be re-mounted and exhibited in the Museum at Aylesbury, which will also give opportunity for the display of a number of other specimens of Elizabethan and Jacobean domestic wall paintings from Bosworth House, Wendover and elsewhere, that the Museum possesses and which languish (like *all* the fine examples from Essex and Suffolk that the Saffron Walden Museum owns) unseen in the basement.

<sup>1</sup> *R.C.H.M.*, Bucks., South. (1912), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Broadbent's structural account of the house is given below, on p. 85, and he also prepared a full explanation of the technique of removal, which is not printed here.

<sup>3</sup> For the whole question of domestic wall painting of this period reference should be made to F. W. Reader's series of authoritative papers in the *Archaeological Journal*, Vol. LXXXVII (1931).

71-97; Vol. LXXXIX (1933), 116-173; Vol. XCII (1936), 243-286; Vol. XCIII (1937), 220-262; Vol. XCV (1939), 112-125; Vol. XCVII (1941), 88-95; Vol. XCVIII (1942), 181-211. Papers on similar subjects by Mr. Reader and myself have been printed in *Records of Bucks.*, Vol. XII (1927-33), 225-238 and 368-398; Vol. XIII (1934-40), 42-47; Vol. XV (1951-2), 87-96. All these are fully illustrated.

<sup>4</sup> *Records of Bucks.*, Vol. XII, 378-382 and plates.

## THE STRUCTURE

### J. D. BROADBENT

THE actual building in which the paintings were found is almost entirely encased by later building, which has also resulted in considerable alteration to its interior. The exterior gives no hint whatever of the original structure.

The first floor containing the painted chamber appears to have consisted originally of a heavy oak frame of four bays approximately 16 ft. wide by 13 ft. long, though this dimension varied. For some undisclosed reason the northernmost bay is somewhat distorted westwards (see plan, Fig. 1, c). From the jointing, it would appear that the whole frame was erected at one time.

Originally, all the walls were of wattle and daub and the roof was ceiled up the slopes and across collars above purlin level and somewhat above half roof height (see section, Fig. 1, b).

The southernmost bay and part of the next have become absorbed by the adjoining property and could not be inspected other than in the roof space.

The partition of the painted room seemed to be later and consisted of a stout timber plate 14 in. above floor level, carrying a timber stud frame nogged with 4½ in. brickwork in lime mortar. The floor of the small area of passage outside was raised above general floor level and, from a blocked doorway in the outer wall, it may be presumed that this was in order to have access from the adjoining building.

The chimney stack, on which the third figure is painted, seems to have been built later than the original frame and probably contemporary with the partition.

When the staircase, in the adjoining room, was demolished to allow for the removal of the painted walls the whole of the frame was revealed, from which it was clear that originally the whole of the west side of the first floor oversailed the ground floor wall by some 15 in. (see section). It would appear that the whole west wall including the timber framing (except for the main uprights and the wall plate at eaves level) were demolished in the eighteenth century and replaced by a 9 in. brick wall. There is no evidence of painting on the interior of this brick wall, though the ceiling above it is decorated so that the paintings must certainly ante-date this change probably by a considerable time. This brickwork appears to ante-date the late eighteenth-century two-storey shop built just west of the south end of the main frame.

The timber frame is heavy, oak, and clearly carefully made for this particular building (no second-hand timber) and could therefore well be sixteenth century.

The painted room was therefore formed in the first floor of an older timber and wattle building oversailing over the pavement and overlooking the Market Place and the Market Hall (which formerly stood where the small green now is).

It was connected, evidently specially, by a passage to an adjoining later, taller building, which could not be examined.

It is interesting to note that the Market was purchased between 1622 and 1624 by Anne Waller, the mother of the poet, the first local resident to own it since the Dissolution of Burnham Priory. She seems to have retained the interest until about 1631 when it passed to her son, to be retained in the family until the Market failed around 1811. It is tempting to suppose that she might have had the room prepared during this period to oversee the operation of the market. It is difficult otherwise to explain such costly decoration in so humble a dwelling already old by that date.