# ELMODESHAM HOUSE – AN AMERSHAM LANDMARK FOR THREE CENTURIES

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*Elmodesham House, in High Street, Amersham, was built, it is suggested, about 1710. The staircase paintings on walls and ceiling, in the style of Sir James Thornhill, were probably added in the 1730s, when the present staircase was built. Later, after 1747, the present entrance hall was built in the space occupied by a carriage entry. The improvements were carried out by Isaac Eeles, who succeeded the original builder, his uncle, Charles Eeles.*

*After Isaac's death his son, another Isaac, sold the house. It was sold to a doctor, James Rumsey, and by Rumsey's heirs let to Benjamin West, a dissenting minister who ran a highly successful school in the house. His son moved 'The Academy' to Caversham near Reading in 1862, and thereafter the house was occupied by a succession of private owners until it was bought by the then Amersham Rural District Council for its offices in 1931. It is now divided into flats.*

Charles Eeles, Citizen and Cook, of London, died a rich bachelor in 1727. His family had been in Amersham and the surrounding hamlets since the middle of the sixteenth century, and in the seventeenth a number of branches had sprung up. These often had contemporaries bearing the same baptismal name, which makes it hazardous to attempt a family tree; but it is clear that his great-grandfather was Roland Eeles of Coleshill, a husbandman (small-holder).[1] His grandfather was probably William Eeles. Roland's elder son, born in 1569,[2] and described in 1621 as 'yeoman of Woodrow'[3]. Woodrow, like Coleshill, is a hamlet of Amersham. William was assessed for the subsidy on land worth 30s in 1594, and 20s in 1625[4] and in 1613 his poor rate was 8s 8d,[5] the highest in the hamlet of Woodrow and equal eleventh in the parish (Amersham). These figures represent a solid, though modest, prosperity. But Charles's father, James, born in 1608, was the youngest of William's four sons, and could not have expected much by way of patrimony. Why it should have been James that prospered and not his older brothers is not clear; but prosper he did, at least in comparison. In 1662 he was the only member of the family to feature in the Hearth Tax return for Amersham,[6] although a number of nephews, nieces and cousins at removes were being born there around this time. Their parents must have been exempted from the tax, and exemption was granted only to the poorest. (The membranes of the roll are defective, lacking most of the side on which the numbers of hearths are listed, but the part with the nominal roll seems to be intact).

Charles's baptism is not recorded in the Amersham parish register; nor are those of two of his siblings. This is hard to account for, as it is known that he was born in 1667,[7] by which time the register appears to have recovered from the slackness that affected it during the Civil War and Interregnum. Recorded baptisms of James's children are those of James junior, in 1656, Elizabeth in 1660 and Edward and Richard in 1665 and 1669 respectively. The unrecorded siblings are Isaac and Thomas. Nothing more is heard of Edward, and probably he died in infancy: infant burials are under-recorded until late in the century. The choice of James and Charles as font names suggests royalist sympathies in James senior.

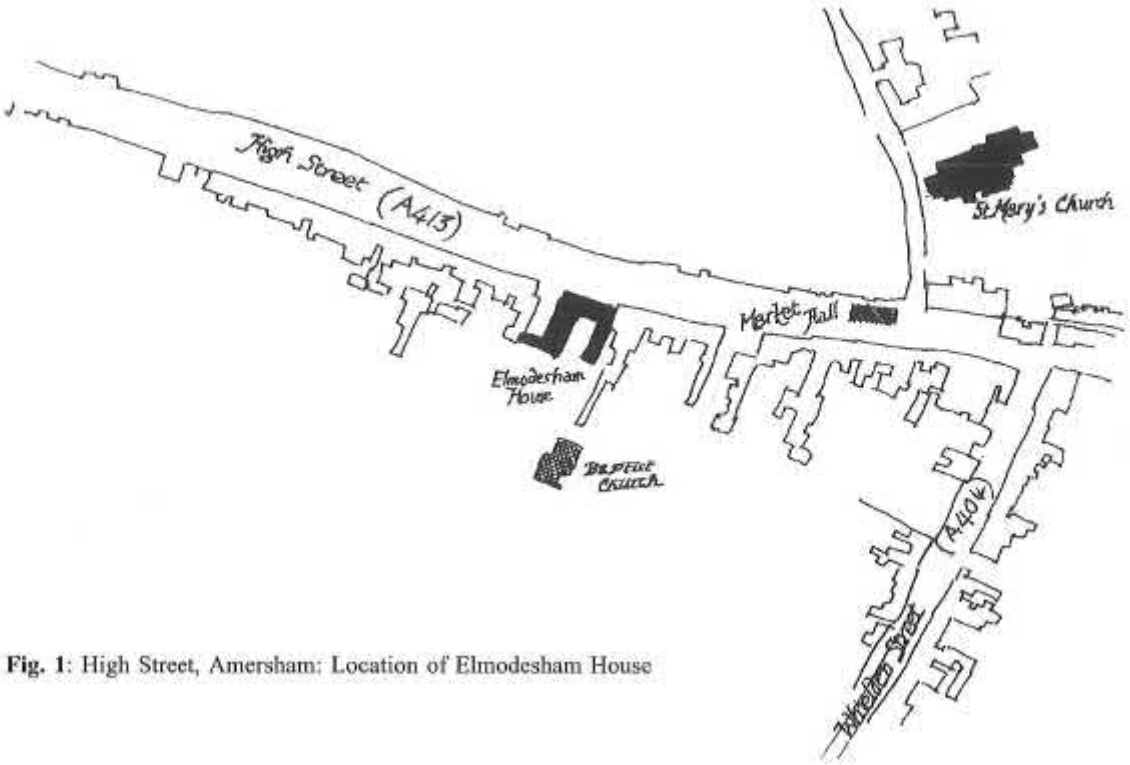


**Fig. 1**: High Street, Amersham: Location of Elmodesham House

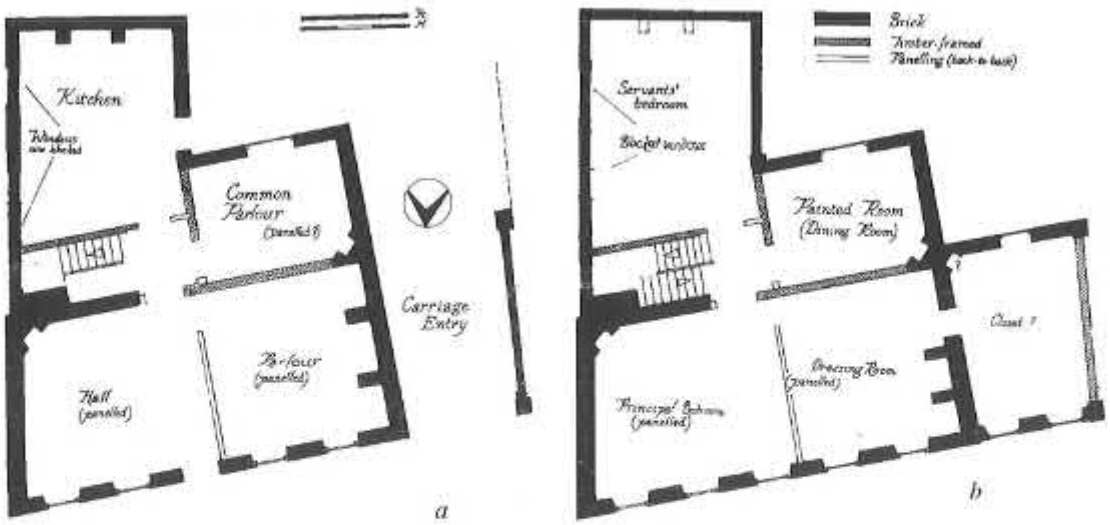


**Fig. 2**: Reconstruction plan of Charles Eeles's house: (a) ground floor; (b) first floor (Room names conjectural)

James junior died a yeoman in 1707; he may have inherited paternal acres, or a lease. Thomas, Isaac and Charles had to make their own way in the world, and Isaac and Charles did so with some success.

What became of Thomas is not known. He left a widow, possibly in reduced circumstances; of all Charles's relations of that generation it was she for whom his will provided most lavishly.[8] Isaac became a timber merchant in Lambeth; his elder son, another Isaac and already rich from the timber trade, became the remainderman under Charles's will.

Charles was apprenticed to John Hall of London, Citizen and Cook,[9] which means he was what would nowadays be called a caterer. He died childless in 1727, owning three inns in London and five other houses, as well as a smithy and a number of stables and coach houses there. He had a 42-year lease of a house in Amersham from Montagu and Jane Drake, and was the owner of four others there, besides his great pride, the subject of this enquiry, the 'new built house in Amersham', which he left in trust for Thomas's widow, with remainder to his nephew Isaac. His pride in it can be inferred from the terms of his will; his sister-in-law was to live there and keep it in good repair; it was not to be sold; and Isaac, the nephew, was to enjoy the contents only at the house and not elsewhere, and was not to dispose of anything, nor let the house.[10] The house was, in fact, the tangible expression of Charles's determination to set himself up as a gentleman in his home town, and his will sought to make sure that he would be remembered as such. His memorial in the church designates him 'Gent'.[11]

Whether Charles himself ever lived in the 'new built' house is not clear. At the time of his death he was lodging in a single room at the Haunch of Venison in Cheapside, attended by one of the servants there, to whom he left £20 and £10 for 'mourning', i.e. appropriately sombre clothes to wear during the conventional period of mourning for the departed. (There is perhaps a hint in this modest establishment of a frugality that may have helped him to amass a small fortune.) On the other hand when, in 1717, he was appointed a trustee of Lord Cheyne's Writing School in Amersham, he was described as 'gentleman, of Amersham',[12] and when, in 1725, he was recorded in the Shardeloes accounts as supplying timber to the Drakes he was 'of Amersham',[13] suggesting that he was living there. But he may have been living in the house he rented from the Drakes.

The house that Charles described as 'new built' in 1727 is the one we know as Elmodesham House, though it has grown enormously since then and was not known by this name until the present century. (When the present tense is used in the description that follows, what is being described is what was seen by the authors in 1987; for purposes of description the High Street is treated as running E–W.) The plot on which the house stands, on the S side of the High Street (Fig 1.) is unlikely to have been vacant when Charles acquired it. It had a frontage of about 40 ft (12m); this was generous by London standards, and Eeles exploited it to the full. The building was in the modern material, brick, in strong Flemish bond embellished by purple vitrified headers (now visible only on the back wall). Similar brickwork can be seen at The Market Hall, dated by inscription to 1682. and also at 'Whielden', on the E side of Whielden Street, where a plaque gives the date of 1685. These parallels press the building date back, and only a question mark over the source of Eeles's funds inhibits us from suggesting a building date of 1700 or even earlier; he was after all only 33 in 1700. It might be described as 'new built' for a generation.

Whenever built it must have presented a striking contrast to its neighbours, not only by its brickwork in a timber-framed street, but by its size: at three full storeys it must have dominated the street just as Elmodesham House, after the alterations of three centuries, still does today.

It was the perfect expression of Charles's aspirations. Although on such a restricted site, with the boundaries meeting the street at less than a right angle, the ingenious, even elegant plan provided all the essentials of a gentry house of the period, both inside and out. A large part of the cost of the house must have been accounted for by the panelling, some of it with decorative painting, which lined every room (except, probably, in the service wing) and formed some of the internal partitions. Light internal panelling partitions had commonly been

used in brick houses of the late seventeenth century. Another feature of the house, typical of that period but long out of date by 1710, was the arrangement by which the subsidiary rooms on the ground and first floors could only be reached through the adjoining principal rooms. (Fig 2a/2b)

The double-pile 5-bay plan was centralised around a small squarish lobby, defined and dignified by moulded wooden arches on all four sides. One of these, in the spine wall, gave access to and from the corner room. To the W there was what was probably called the 'common parlour', a family eating and living room. Through the E opening was a small room, above which there is now a staircase, leading from the first floor to the leads; this was not the original arrangement however: the S wall of the room meets the E wall at a point now occupied by the northern window of the kitchen; the room was originally much smaller – too small, in fact, to be anything but the ground floor of the staircase, which evidently ran from the ground to the leads. The window in the E wall of this room was the only source of direct light for the lobby. S of the lobby is the service wing, with the kitchen.

The service wing, running back along the plot boundary, was of suitably plainer brickwork and, to mark its lowlier status, of only two and a half storeys. It presumably contained the indispensable outside door, though owing to later alterations this is impossible to prove. There was one room, possibly subdivided, over the kitchen, and an attic under the eaves. The kitchen and the rooms over it each have two blocked windows on the E side. The lights now to be seen on the W side do not belong to the original build; evidently the service rooms could not overlook the S side of the main house, or the yard below its windows.

The ground-floor plan had an interconnecting hall and parlour on the street front, with the lobby S of the hall. The E room had two corners that were not right angles, a pattern repeated on all three floors, but made less obvious by corner firelaces in the SE corners, adjacent to the E stairs. The corner fireplace, a useful space-saving device, had become popular in gentry houses after the Restoration, and was a standard feature of the brick houses built in London after the Great Fire.[14] Its use here, complemented by the axial stack allowed almost every room in the house to be heated.

The frontage, although wider than that of many town houses, only just allowed for a five-bay house with the essential wagon or carriage entry occupying a sixth bay to the W. Above the entry was a room on each of the first and second floors. This was an old-fashioned feature and one not normally found in new-built eighteenth-century town houses, where symmetry was all-important. The paired windows in these rooms broke the rhythm of the fenestration in the rest of the house. Almost certainly the front door would have been in the centre bay, in line with the lobby within, but direct evidence is lacking owing to the later refronting of the house. Entry from the street was through the main room, probably still called the hall, in the traditional way. This arrangement, as noted, was becoming old-fashioned, but Winslow Hall, perhaps designed by Sir Christopher Wren as late as 1700[15a] for William Lowndes, Secretary of the Treasury, was still entered through the main rooms on each of the long fronts.

Above the two front rooms (Fig 2b) was a bedroom apartment consisting of a room with an axial fireplace, an independently-heated dressing room to the E and what may have been a personal servant's room to the W (the room over the entry), where there was probably another corner fireplace (the original brickwork of the SE corner has been removed). One door led from the first-floor lobby into the E room of this apartment, with connecting doors to the its other two rooms. This suite, presumably intended for Charles Eeles's own use, had decorative panelling in both the larger rooms.

Between the front rooms and those behind was a partition only one brick thick, strengthened and levelled by timber studs. This extended all the way up through the attics to the roof, and was clad in panelling throughout.

*Summing up: the house as left by Charles Eeles*

Charles Eeles's house had one stair – the E one – and no paintings on the walls or ceilings. There was a front door in the central bay, and a 'glide' from there through the lobby. There was a 'common parlour' on the ground floor, reached from the lobby on the E. Above this was a first-floor recep-

Fig. 3: The ceiling painting over the stairwell.

tion room, perhaps a dining room for company. We suggest that this house was built *c.* 1710.

*After Charles Eeles*

It is not thought likely that any major change would have taken place in the house before Isaac Eeles was in possession, whether or not he was living there. It is certain that he was not living there until about 1750. All his children were born in Lambeth, the youngest, another Isaac, in 1749.[15b] But we do not know when he took physical possession, because we do not know when his aunt Elizabeth died.. Her burial is not recorded in the Amersham parish Register and her will has not been traced. However, the mid 1730s furnish what we think is a likely date.

The house of which Issac became the owner would have seemed impossibly out of tune with the gentlemanly conventions of the 1730s or 40s. What had been a compact and smart town house in the early 1700s must by the 1740s have appeared merely poky. In particular the lack of a good central staircase would have made rebuilding imperative if he wanted to live there.

The only way of providing such a staircase for this house was to substitute it for the S rooms on the ground and first floors, leaving the E stairs to serve the second floor and the leads (Fig. 4a). The staircase now occupying the stairwell thus created has been substantially remodelled since it was built (see 152), but it has been possible to recreate its likely form. And here the house displays the feature that sets it apart from houses of comparable size and status.

*The decorative scheme*

Over the stairwell was a ceiling painting in the baroque manner, showing the meeting of Bacchus and Ariadne on Naxos. This was a theme used by Antionio Verrio at Euston Hall, Suffolk, *c.* 1675, and later in the Banqueting Hall at Hampton Court; Laguerre and his followers also took it up[16] The same theme was used over the staircase of a comparatively modest post-Restoration London House, 99 Great Russell Street. The baroque style, and the theme itself were also adopted by Sir James Thornhill, perhaps the last prominent exponent of the style in England. The painting exhibits all the chracteristics of Thornhill's work: the light pleasing palette, the weak drawing, and the soft outline (Fig 3), and Sir Oliver Millar has in fact attributed it to him[17] If it be asked whether a fashionable knighted painter would have accepted a commission from a London bourgeois to decorate a small house in a small provincial town, the answer must be "Good question". It does seem in the highest degree unlikely. Thornhill is not known to have accepted any painting commissions after Moor Park, Hertfordshire, completed in 1728.[18] He died in 1734.

When the house was investigated, not only the ceiling but also the walls of the stairwell bore figurative paintings, though those on the walls were only briefly visible. They had been covered with wall paper, of which a few small areas were removed, but the walls were shortly afterwards entirely covered up again, this time with gloss paint. The conservators formed the opinion that the walls and the ceiling were in the same style.[19] Certainly the same palette seems to have been employed on both: in the course of investigating the lower part of the wall, in the cupboard under the stairs, traces of pigment were found under the gloss, of the same colour as the cloaks of some of the figures on the ceiling.

This was not the only display of wealth in the house. Traces of three sets of decorated panels were found: one shows mythological scenes; another is a series of landscapes in a similar style; these are both polychrome. The third, of which none are now on display, was in a pinkish sepia monochrome, skillfully painted in a style that suggested sketches for more finished works. The polychrome panels were seen *in situ* when some were stripped of the cream paint that covered them. The mythological scenes were in the dressing room, the landscapes in the bedroom. The monochrome panels were not seen *in situ* by the writers. The representative of English heritage stated that it was unique in his experience to find decoration on the back of partition panels.[20]

It is hard to parallel such a display of wealth in such a modest house. But there was, of course, nothing modest about the Eeles's intentions. (The

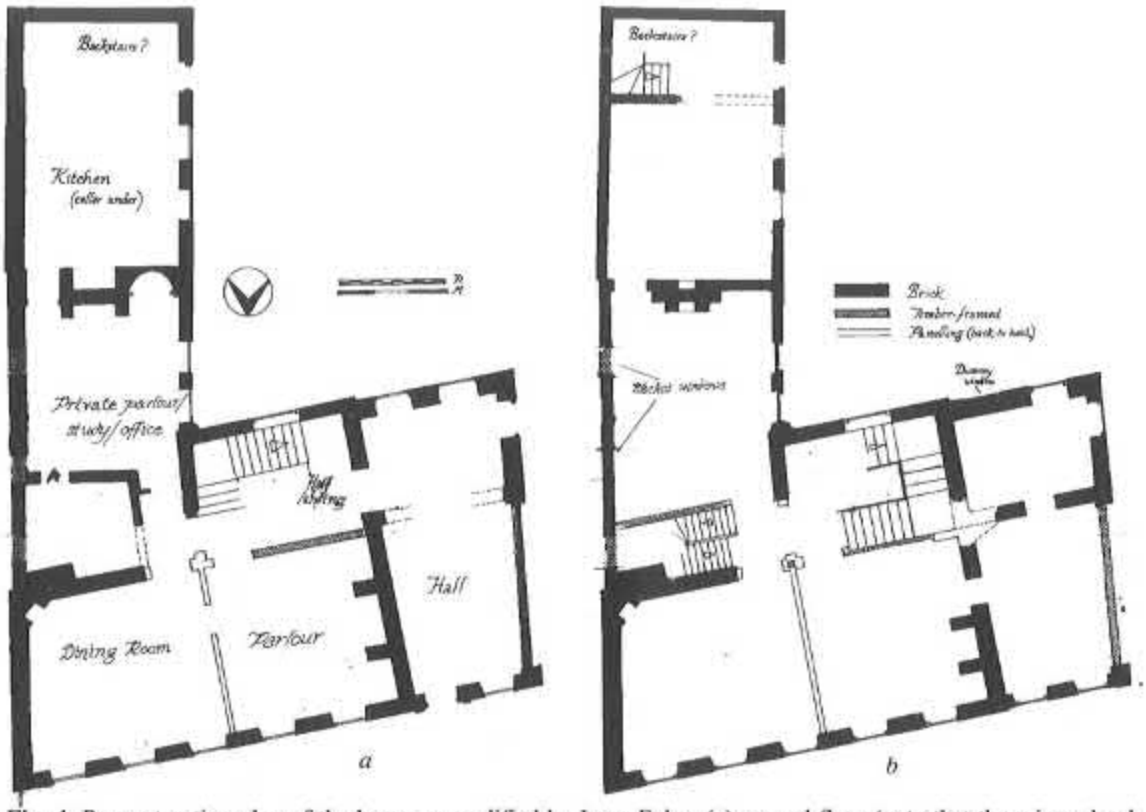


**Fig. 4**: Reconstruction plan of the house as modified by Issac Eeles: (a) ground floor (note that there is no hard archaeological evidence for a doorway in the NW corner of the stairwell. It is inserted there because the presence of the half landing means that there is no other practicable place for it.) ; (b) first floor. (Room names are conjectural)

painted panelling may have been a feature of Charles's house.)

A start had been made on cleaning off the paint obscuring the painted panels when four of the cleaned ones were stolen, and have not been recovered.[21] When the rest were taken down to be stored in safety it was found that they had been reordered and reset more than once already. Four cleaned survivors have now been reset in a group on one wall.

One other alteration, made by Isaac when he inserted the stairs, must be noted: this was a southward extension of the service wing, making room for a new kitchen with a cellar under it. The former kitchen was turned into what was probably a smart office or business room. Isaac continued in the timber trade after his move to Amersham,[22] and would have needed such a discreetly sited place to conduct business, with a door to the yard. The abandonment of the E stairs allowed their ground floor to be enlarged by moving the S wall of their well further to the S, thus gaining a useful annex for an office.

To turn it into a business room the former kitchen was given two large windows looking inwards onto the garden, the earlier ones to the E being blocked. It was also given handsome moulded panelling, and the frame of a blocked doorway in the N wall ('A' on Fig. 4a) has a reverse cyma moulding. The depth of the window seats provided for the new windows suggest that this wall too has at some time been refaced. The outside door, which such a refacing might have been expected to block was probably represented by a 'casement window', which was present in 1912.[23]

We think this alteration was part of the same building campaign that produced the 'grand' stairs, because their insertion involved the loss of a parlour; the 'business room' would have replaced it.

It was not, however, the last change effected by Isaac. In 1747 he was able to acquire a 99-year lease of two plots immediately W of the house, both with houses on them.[24] This allowed a development that must have been highly desirable to someone with Isaac's aspirations: to make a new carriage entry W of the house and turn the former covered carriage entry into an entrance hall, thus removing at one stroke the remaining deficiences of his house: the need to enter the house by a passage room, without getting a view of the staircase.

To overcome this it was necessary to make a door in the W wall of the stairwell, and there was only one place where this was possible. Fig 8 shows the problem: until the staircase was remodelled early in the present century there was a half landing, just below head height, along most of the W wall. The only point at which it would have been possible to pierce a door was in the extreme NW corner where evidence for head height is absent, and we suggest that this is where a door was made. (Fig 8d)

Concomitant changes to the outside of the house included the replacement of the carriage entry by a new front door from the street and a window to its right (Fig. 6). The original brickwork , with its vitrified headers, had become popular locally at a vernacular level. The house was accordingly transformed by the addition of an outer skin of two-toned brickwork (visible in a window splay during the recent building operations) with quoins, string courses and a cornice, and a panelled parapet to conceal the pitch of the roof. The brickwork was, and is, of high quality with fine gauged brickwork over the windows.

At the back of the house the existing brickwork was left exposed, and indeed carefully copied for the extension over the entry. This extension, forming the back (S) end of the entrance hall, contained a door to the garden, but because of disturbance to the brickwork round the present door and its flanking windows it is not possible to know the original arrangement. In the case of the staircase window it is probable that the top of the opening is still that of the original first-floor window; it is the widest window in the house, and its top is distinguished by a small lead-covered brick cornice, marking, we suggest, an important room behind. There would have been a window immediately below to light the ground-floor room, with a sill lower than that of the existing stair window. The closing bricks on both sides of the present window show no signs of disturbance; their neatness is of a piece with the standard of the other brickwork that we attribute to this phase.

The programme of reconstruction outlined above is inevitably short of archaeological evidence, but it has a logic which we hope will be found convincing. From a stylistic point of view, all that can be said is that none of the surviving features attributable to Isaac's rebuilding is inconsistent with a date in the 1740s.

In the late 1770s, long after Isaac was dead, there occurred a development that sheds a bright retrospective light on him and his activities: his son, Isaac junior, was 'pricked' as sheriff for 1780.[25] Isaac senior could never have been sheriff himself: he was 'in trade'; but it was an ambition that he could and, we suggest, did harbour for his son. And almost as soon as the boy was born he took the first step towards realising it. One of the qualifications for being sheriff was to own freehold land in the county, and in 1750 Isaac acquired an interest in Cokes Farm, near Amersham Common, with 146 acres (60.8 ha).[26] Study of the documents puts it beyond doubt that he did not buy it to live in: what he bought was only a one-third share which had come to the vendor by marriage to one of three heiresses; the other two thirds remained with the other two heiresses or their heirs, and were bought out piecemeal over the next thirty years. The process was completed by Isaac's son, another Isaac, in 1786.[27]

Isaac senior had died in 1763, and Isaac junior moved to Wilmington, Kent, in 1786.[28] His four sisters removed to London,[29] probably after the death of their mother in 1784,[30] and in 1786 he sold the property to James Rumsey, surgeon and apothecary.[31]

The conveyance states that the building was 'some time since new-built or rebuilt', but very

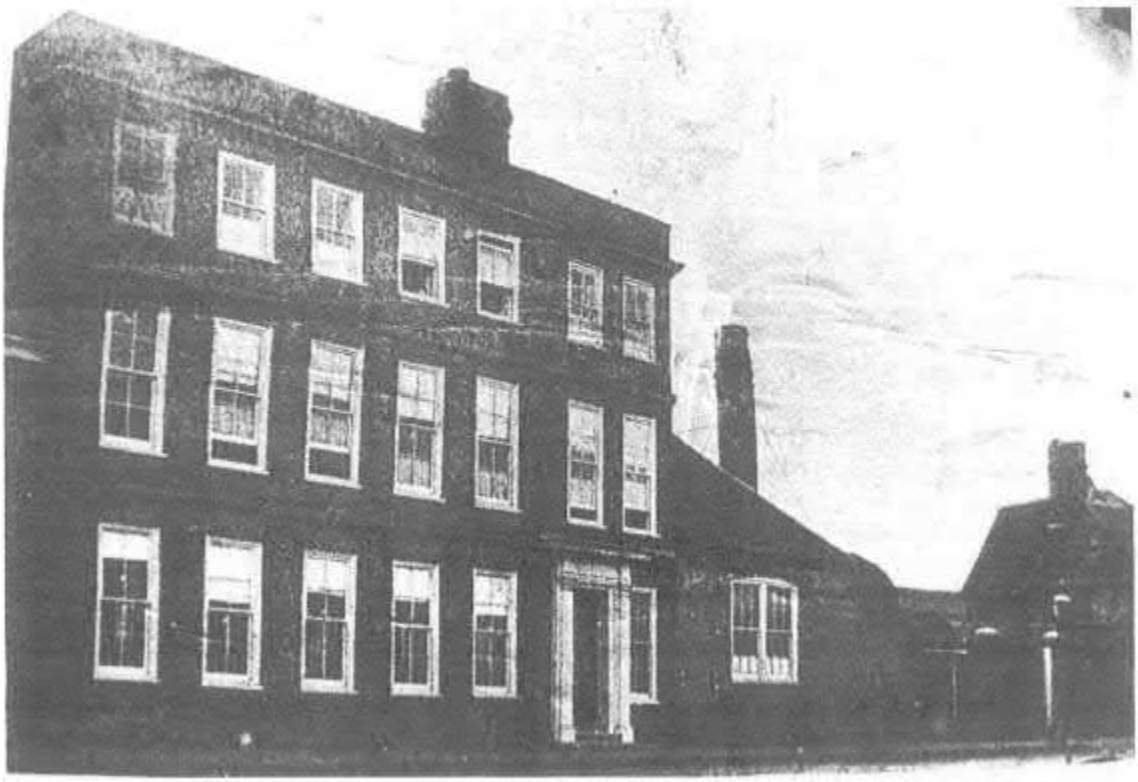

**Fig. 5:** The house as left by the Wests; from a photograph pasted to a crumpled conveyance of 1862. Courtesy Messrs Robertsons, Amersham. The single-storey structure on the right possibly built by Dr Rumsey post 1786. (copy-neg Ian Freeman)

little weight can be attached to this; the phrase could continue to be applied to an altered house for a generation or more; it was used of Ceely House, Aylesbury, more than 50 years after it was rebuilt in 1756.[32]

Apart from Rumsey there was no other doctor in Amersham, and no doubt he had a busy practice. He had two apprentices, who, in spite of having the surname Rumsey,[33] were not his sons.[34] We suggest that it was Dr Rumsey that was responsible for the single-storey structure at the W end of the house (Fig 5); he would have needed a surgery, and would not have wanted patients going to it through his front door. It is the structure labelled 'kitchen' on the sketch plan of 1862, (Fig 6) and no doubt it was used as such by the school which had occupied the house for the previous thirty years (156). Eventually it was converted to two storeys by building up the outside walls from the string course upwards.

Dr Rumsey died in 1824,[35] and neither his sons nor his apprentices carried on the Amersham practice, though the association of the name with medecine continued. The Dr Henry Rumsey who had a practice in Chesham in the 1830s[36] was no doubt the Henry Rumsey who was one of the apprentices of 1798. The eventual heirs to Dr Rumsey's estate, in 1862, were both surgeons, perhaps grandsons, but one was in Clifton, Glos. and the other in Oporto, Portugal.[37] For five years after 1824 the house stood empty; it was then let to a Mr West, who was remembered forty years later as having made 'many alterations'.[38]

Ebenezer West had been appointed minister of the Baptist church at Chenies in 1821, when he was 42.[39] In 1829 he informed the church that he 'was about to remove his dwelling to Amersham' and proposed to continue his ministry part-time for half the stipend.[40] He was in fact planning to set up a school there or rather to move an existing school. A

prospectus issued in 1825 announced that 'Ebenezer West, Dissenting Minister having for the last four years received into his family 4 or 5 young gentlemen under 12 years of age to be educated with his two sons, Ebenezer and Charles, proposes to receive double that number'. The terms for board and education were given as 25 guineas p.a. for boys under 12, and 28 guineas for those over 12, so presumably boys could stay for as long as their parents wished. Washing was 2 guineas a year extra. Each young gentleman was to bring a knife and a fork, one spoon and three towels, to be returned to him when he left.[41]

Ebenezer West I died in 1836, after several years of ill health,[42] but his son, Ebenezer II, then aged only 20,[43] carried on the school; it is likely that it was he, and not his father, that enlarged the building. In 1841 it was known as The Academy and had 28 boarding pupils,[44] of whom 13 came of Buckinghamshire families, and two bore the old Amersham name of Allnutt. There were two assistant masters, both French, and the household was completed by the young Ebenezer's wife, Jane, together with a young lady described as 'independent' and three maidservants. Ebenezer junior and his brother Charles were each left £1,000 under their father's will, interest on which was to be paid to their mother until they were 25. Jane was to pay her mother-in-law £50 p.a. clear. She held a mortgage on the school worth £3,000;[45] the funds must have come from money she brought to the marriage. It can be inferred that the school was modestly prosperous: a probate valuation of Ebenezer's estate[46] gave a total of over £8,000, including over £600 cash.

By 1851[47] the school roll had swollen to 42, plus Ebenezer II's two young sons; Fewster Johnson West was 9, but Alfred Slater West was only 4, though described in the census return as 'scholar'. The ages of the other pupils ranged from 10 to 17, and all but one of them came from outside Buckinghamshire; their homes were all over the kingdom, from Tewkesbury to Bradford, from Louth to Crickhowell. The Bucks-born boy was William Weller, perhaps a member of the Amersham brewing family. There were now more pupils than the school buildings could house; four boys, two assistant teachers and two maids (now the entire domestic staff) were lodged in 'Meeting Yard' (no doubt the lane leading to the Baptist Chapel). The assistants were a 25-year-old French woman and a young Englishman. a 'teacher of drawing'.

Even with four boys in Meeting Yard there were still 38 to be accommodated in the main school building; and though the top floor of the main house had been cleared of maids and assistant teachers, saturation point must have been close, and Ebenezer moved the school to Caversham, near Reading, where it reopened in 1861 under the name of Amersham Hall. However what precipitated the move to Caversham was probably the collapse of plans to bring the railway through Amersham.[48] Ebenezer died in 1895, having closed the school in 1892, and is commemorated in the Baptist chapel in Caversham.

What were the 'many alterations' made by the Wests? If Ebenezer I had, say, 10 pupils when he moved to Amersham they could no doubt have been accommodated in the rooms over the service wing, (Fig. 4b) and if the former kitchen became a classroom, this would explain the presence of a kitchen in Dr Rumsey's new extension. But Ebenezer I's move clearly presupposes plans for expansion, and for this more room would be needed. An invaluable sketch plan dated 1862 (Fig. 6) shows a long narrow range running back from the W end of the house, labelled 'Dining Room, Billiard Room and Offices' (A vinery is attached to it at the far end). This appears to have been shortened and at least partly replaced by 1912. A Sale Catalogue of that year describes the area as occupied by a 'museum or art gallery' and a 'very lofty billiard room', probably the single-storey structures now on the site. The 'Museum or Art Gallery' is all that is left of Ebenezer West's wing; the billiard room, built on a different alignment, is evidently later. There is no sign that a two-storeyed structure has ever been attached to the main house at this point. It is suggested that the long wing provided a boys' dining room and classrooms, possibly with dormitories beyond. But with the family sleeping on the first floor of the main house, and the assistant masters and servants on the second, the rooms over the former service wing, and its extension, would have been available for dormitories. They provided 368 square feet (*c.* 33m$^2$).

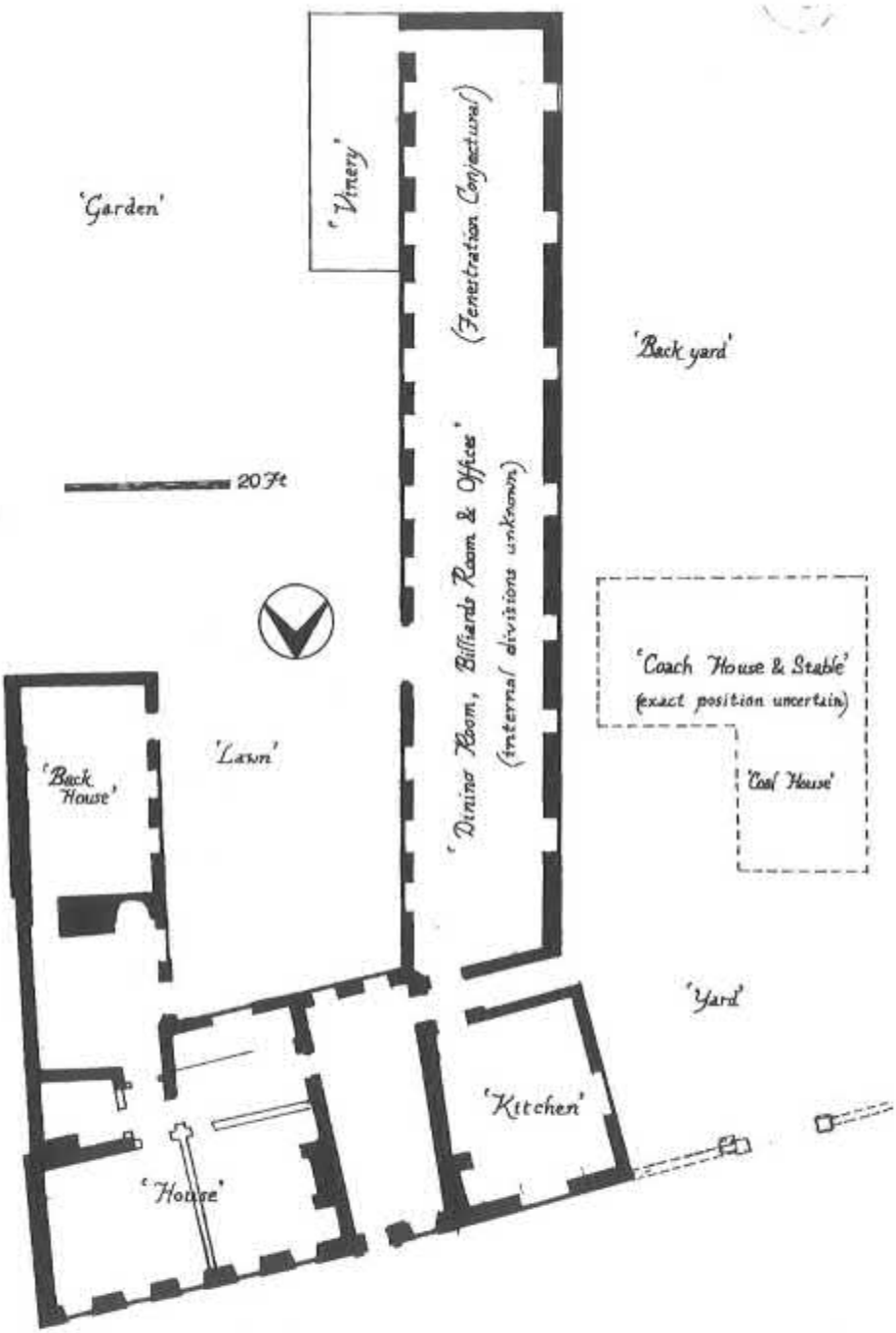


**Fig. 6:** The house as left by the Wests; redrawn from sketch plan of 1862, incorporating the school buildings; room names after sketch plan.

There would have been ample room in the new wing for the three class rooms implied by a teaching staff of three, (or even for four, if Mrs West also took a class) plus a dining room, even if, as recently, it was single-storeyed. The school would thus be entirely separate from the headmaster's house, but it is not clear how the first floor of the former service wing was reached.

Probably all this building was financed by the mortgage from Jane West.

In the year following the removal of the school, 1862, the heirs of Dr Rumsey conveyed the house to T.H.Morten,[49] a local chemist of whom nothing is known (though a Morten, Bucks-born, had been a pupil in 1841). He owned it for 11 years, selling it in 1873, under the name of Woodville House, to John Cheese,[50] who in turn conveyed it to Clement MacMichael Cheese, his son, a local solicitor.[51]

In 1907 C.M.Cheese sold Woodville House to Major J.Y.Stephen, retired, of H.M.Militia, who was already living in Amersham.[52] In 1912 Major Stephen's executors put up for sale at auction 'a genuine old Georgian House', to which someone had now given the name of Elmodesham House, choosing the least well-attested form of the town's name, from the most unreliable source (The French-speaking scribes of Domesday Book regularly garbled the uncouth vocables of their Saxon informants).

According to the sale catalogue the house had been the object of considerable expenditure within the last four or five years, the late owner having 'enlarged and considerably improved it'.[53] The work must have been going on throughout Major Stephen's ownership. At the time of his death there remained some unfinished buildings in the yard (Fig. 9).

*The Staircase remodelled*

It was probably at this time that the principal staircase achieved its final form. It has already been mentioned that it is not now in the form in which it was first built, and a number of considerations point to the early twentieth century as the period when it was altered.

Even before any detailed investigation it gave a strong impression of having been remodelled. To begin with, the painted ceiling is almost entirely hidden, from anyone entering the stairwell from the lobby, by the first-floor landing. This landing is cantilevered out from the N wall to such an extent that it has had to be supported by an inserted prop. Originally, we suggest, the landing was as shown in Fig 8b, and the view of the ceiling from the W door of the staircase well was uninterrupted. And finally the southern half of the ceiling is coved, while the rest has a moulded cornice. Cove and cornice meet, rather awkwardly, over the S end of openings in the E and N walls. Hard evidence for remodelling is to be found in the cupboard under the stairs, in the form of scars in the brickwork where some projecting feature has been removed. The scar begins as a horizontal feature about 250 mm wide, at a level equivalent to four risers above the first half landing: it runs as far as the W wall, which it then follows for *c.* 1 m. before turning upwards through *c.* 30° and continuing thus upwards for *c.* 1 m and returning to the horizontal until interrupted by the doorway giving access from the entrance hall into the stairwell. The scars have been roughly 'bandaged' with portland cement. Careful scraping with a scalpel revealed pigment under the gloss paint above the band of portland cement; it was a deep red resembling that on the robes of some of the ceiling figures. Under the paint below the cement there appeared to be a surface of stucco, scribed to simulate ashlar.

These features can all be explained if the staircase had originally been as shown in Fig 8, with the final flight against the N wall, and a cove all round the ceiling. The scar in the brickwork is interpreted as marking the original line of the stairs, and it will be seen from Fig 8, c and d, that there would have been headroom for a door in the W wall at only one point: the extreme NW corner. We therefore think that, when an entrance hall was made in the former wagon entry, the house must have been entered from here.

A *terminus post quem* for all this is suggested by the fact that the first floor of the block that succeeded the West's kitchen (Figs. 5 and 6) was not at the same level as that in the Eeles house. Eventually this block was rebuilt to conform with the rest of the building. This cannot have been before *c.* 1890,

**Fig. 7:** Elmodesham House *c.* 1890, showing the house at the time of the Cheeses.

when the block was still present (Fig. 7), and probably did not happen until the changes of *c.* 1912. Confirmation of a late date is provided by the portland cement, which did not come into use until after 1800, and was rare until fifty years later.

Elmodesham House was by now more than double the size of Charles and Isaac Eeles's house (Fig 4). To the W of the entrance the extension that succeeded the West's kitchen, had in turn been replaced by a four-bay extension in the style of the Eeles house (Fig. 10). It provided a vast new dining room panelled in 'Jacobean' style. Behind it lay a new staircase and a corridor to the butler's pantry, a new kitchen and other offices, in a new single-storey wing. Above the dining room were three bedrooms on first and second floors, with a bathroom and WC also on each floor. No attempt had been made, however, to add these amenities to the eighteenth-century part of the house. To quote the catalogue, there were now 'thirteen bed and dressing rooms in all'. Two bedrooms were designated servants' bedrooms, but their position is not specified. They were perhaps over the old service wing. The only major alteration to the Eeles's house was the removal of the partition between the two front rooms on the ground floor, to make the 'elegant drawing room, measuring over 30 ft by 15 ft. and lighted by five large windows'. In the service wing behind, Charles Eeles's kitchen was now called the morning room and contained a 'casement to garden'. This had disappeared by the time we investigated the house. Isaac's kitchen still had a 'large wine cellar under', and was known as a business or store room.

The new brickwork, said to have been by Keen's of Amersham, was of a quality to compare favourably with the eighteenth-entury work. On the street front the rhythm was continued, the

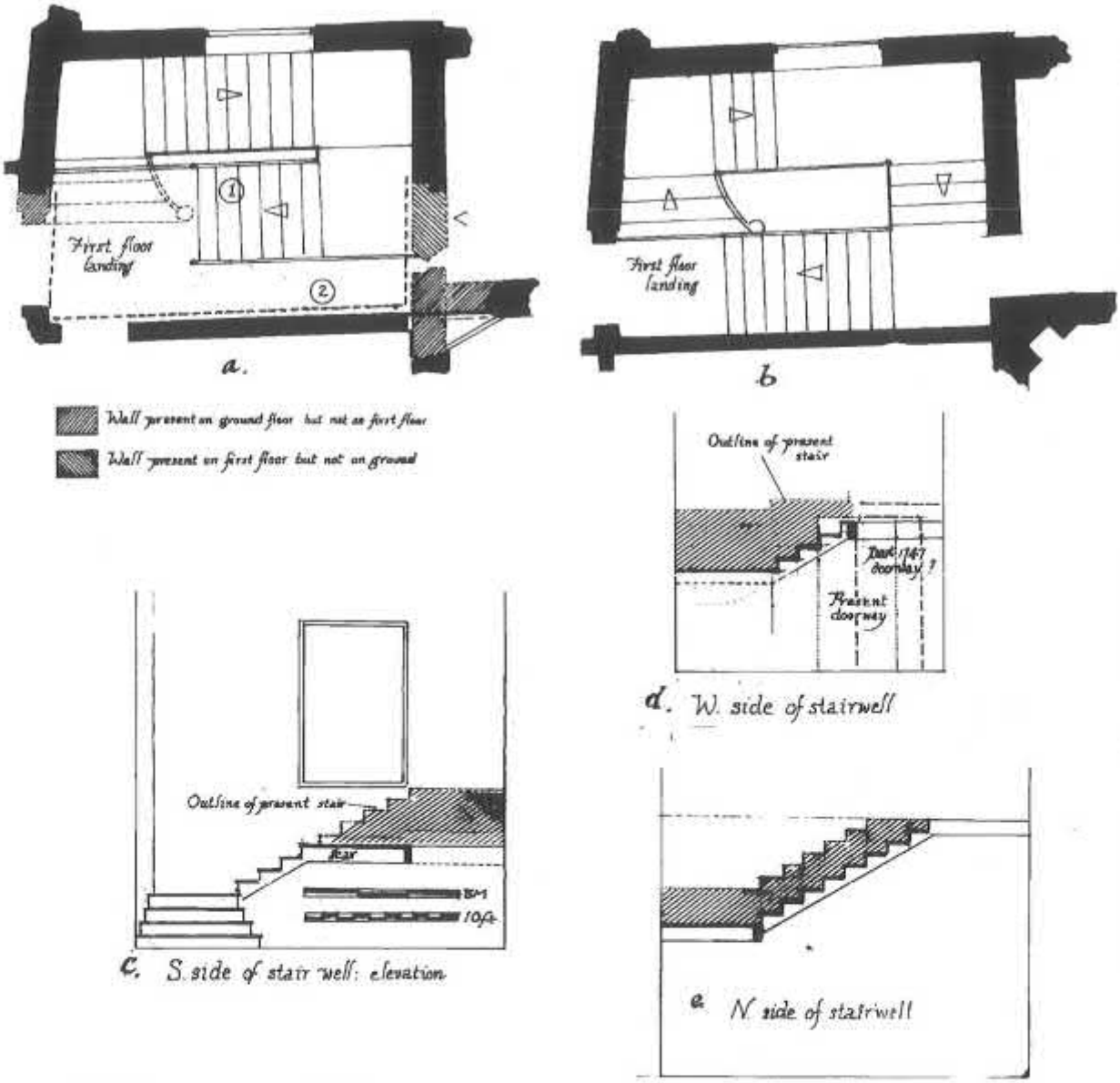


**Fig. 8:** *The staircase remodelled.*

[a.] Present (1987) stairwell, showing (1) stair and gallery cantilevered out beyond engineering tolerance, with steel prop to support gallery (2), leading to opening made in W wall; no view of ceiling from entry from lobby. Note that the cornice (broken line) has replaced the cove in just those areas affected by the alterations: over the W wall where it was broken through; over the E wall where the opening was made wider to allow the stairs to come up *c.*0.5m further to the S.

Broken line shows extent of cornice; remainder is coved.

[b.] Preferred reconstruction: does not involve exposing unpainted areas of wall, or former points of attachment of stairs. Gives unobstructed view of ceiling.

[c.] S wall of stairwell, elevation. Painted area is hatched; scar of former attachment is immediately beneath it.

[d.] W wall of stairwell, elevation. Even before the alterations there is just room under the half landing for a door in the NW corner, and nowhere else.

[e.] N side of stairwell, elevation. Did the panelling on the N wall disguise the extent of an area of painting covered by the new stairs?

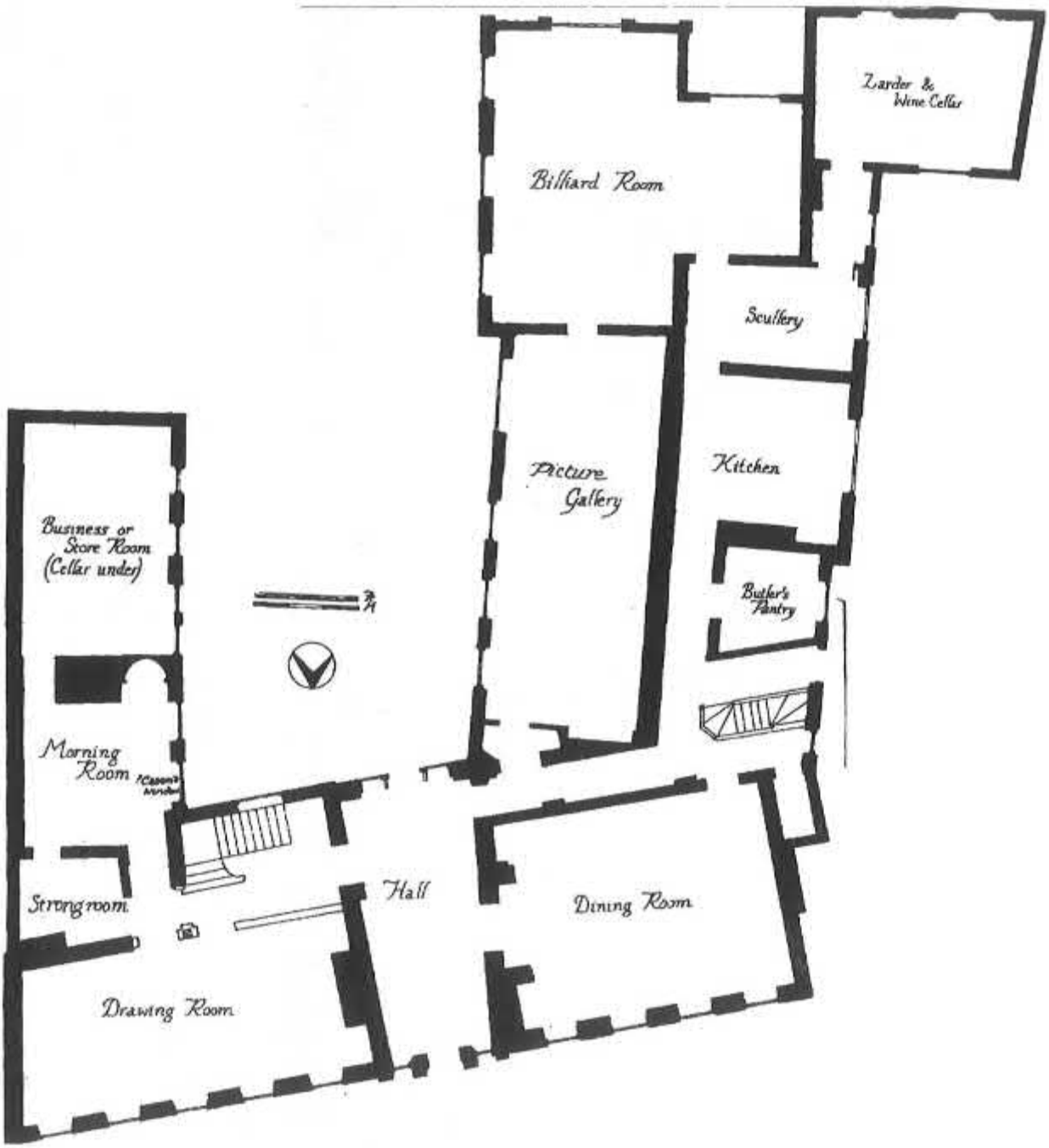


**Fig. 9:** Elmodesham House in 1912; based on information in the 1912 catalogue and the1987 survey plan.

**Fig. 10:** Elmodesham House *c.* 1910, N elevation.

brickwork being closely matched with that to the left of the entrance. Now, with the passage of time, the casual eye cannot detect the difference. In a photograph of unknown date, but perhaps *c.* 1910, the change is still clearly visible (Fig. 10). Approximate symmetry was restored to the front, and it was probably at this stage that the front door was given greater prominence by being centred under the windows above it. The door was given a stately tripartite doorcase in convincingly eighteenth-century style. The existing doorcase, seen in Fig. 10, appears to have been re-used, or at least copied, with the cornice and frieze extended on each side and pilasters against the wall. These allow room for two narrow windows flanking the door. All the additions at the back were in contemporary style.

The buyer (in 1913) after the death of Major Stephen was Arthur William Steuart Cochrane, who paid £1,900 for it.[54] Perhaps it had failed to sell at auction, for according to the sale catalogue the reserve price had been £2,500. A.W.S. Cochrane, appointed KCVO in 1937, was a member of the College of Heralds, where he had been Rouge Croix Pursuivant since 1904.[55] It seems unlikely that he made any significant changes to a house so recently modernised. He sold it to Ernest Matthews, CVO, in 1925.[56] After Mr Matthews' death his two unmarried daughters lived on in the house, until they disposed of it to Amersham RDC as council offices.[57] That council and their successors, Chiltern District, occupied the building, together with various temporary structures at the back, until the building of the new council offices at Amersham-on-the-Hill.

In June 1986 the site was bought for conversion into flats by Messrs Harman of Chesham. The work they undertook provided an unrepeatable opportunity to study the structural history of a building that reflects the social aspirations and professional activities of Englishmen nearly 300 years.

## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

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