

HOUSES IN HIGH STREET, CHALFONT ST. PETER

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UNTIL the autumn of 1966 a group of buildings mostly occupied as shops stood on the south-east side of the High Street in Chalfont St. Peter, opposite the east end of the parish church. Although some of these had suffered from neglect, most of the property had been well maintained and lent an indefinable but invaluable atmosphere of continuity to the old centre of the village. All this was swept away during the following winter and eventually replaced by a "modern" shopping development the charms of which must await a future generation to be appreciated. That the changes in the character of this area had been occurring over a long period of time and that none of these changes could be regarded as a visual improvement was clear from the archaeological evidence which emerged during the demolition; one of the latest changes, which will still be remembered by some, was the bridging over of the ford through the river Misbourne about forty years ago, a stream which in the latest redevelopment has suffered the added indignity of being confined to a precast concrete tunnel under the site of the modern emporia.

NOS. 43-47 HIGH STREET

The principal range consisted of Nos. 39-49 High Street (Plate I and Fig. 1), besides a few further buildings to the north, some of which although much altered and encased in brickwork retained considerable portions of timber-framed buildings concealed in their structure; these dated from the beginning

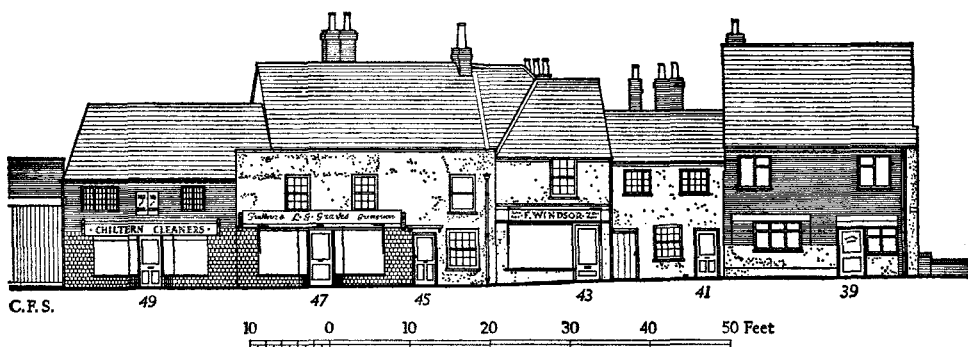


Fig. 1. Nos. 39-49 High Street, Chalfont St. Peter.

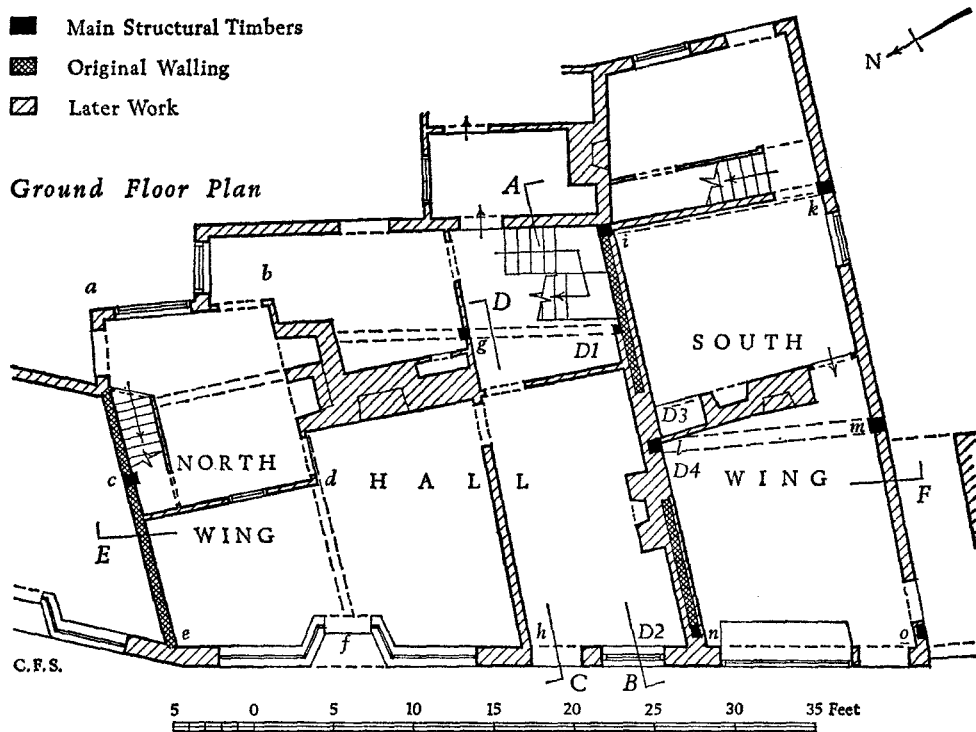
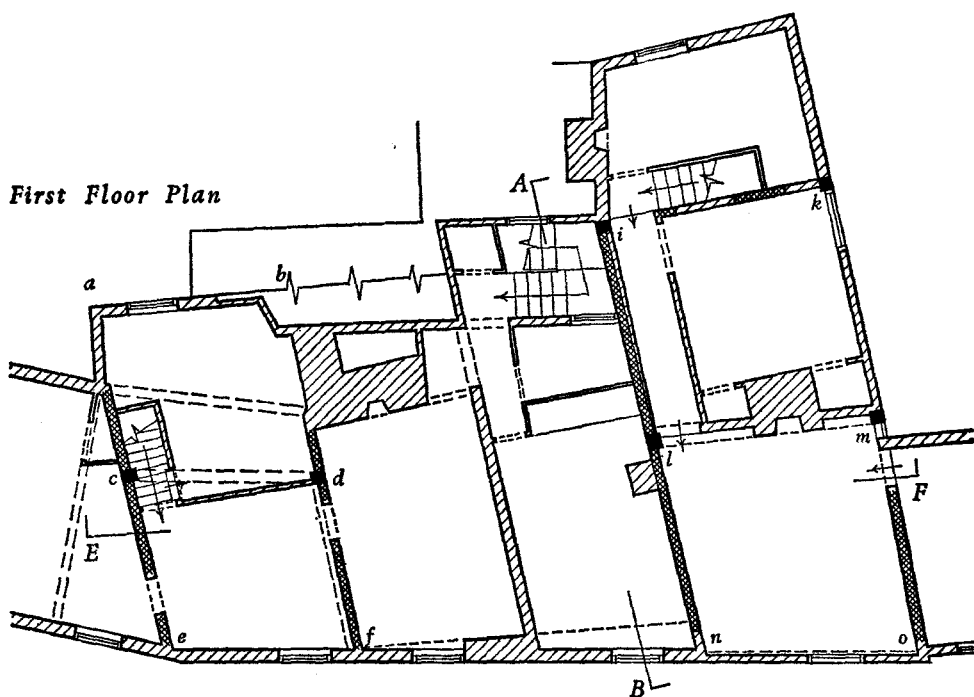


Fig. 2. Plans of Nos. 43-47 High Street.

of the 15th century to the 16th or 17th centuries. The outline of the roofs of Nos. 43–47 was particularly symptomatic of the concealment of an earlier structure and the apparently anomalous relationship between the roof and front wall of No. 47 was further evidence that considerable changes had occurred in this part of the building. A timber post with curved brace attached was visible in No. 45 (Plate IV *c*) together with a cambered tie-beam immediately above it in the ceiling of the bedroom, but apart from an occasional post and small brace most of the remaining structure had been concealed by 18th and 19th-century alterations. The plans (Fig. 2) show that No. 43 had become a self-contained unit with three rooms on each of two floors, a shop in the front ground-floor room, the remaining accommodation being domestic and connected at first-floor level with a small brick-built cottage, No. 41, inserted in a vacant space in the early 19th century. Nos. 45 and 47 were also closely inter-connected; the northern part of the ground floor being used as a shop whilst the southern end and the rooms over were occupied as a private house.

The layout of the original building which embraced Nos. 43–47 became clear as demolition proceeded; it was that of a hall house with north and south wings, planned with some irregularity presumably from initial limitations in the boundary of the site which stretched from the road to the river. The hall was a parallelogram with 20 ft. sides with a screens passage at the south end having a doorway *D2* from the street and another *D1* in the back wall; two further doors *D3* and *D4* led into the south wing. The hall and wings all had crown-post roofs, but the roof of the hall had been very much altered in the 18th century when it was raised some six feet to give a full upper storey; the original tie-beam and crown post were, however, re-used and the post formerly supporting them at the east end survived as evidence of their former location. Most of the original common rafters were also reset at the upper level. The line of the former hall roof was visible in the south wall (Plate II *b*) and the seating for a brace at the north end of the collar purlin remained in the north wall. One half of the arched head of the doorway at the east end of the screens passage also remained. The *south wing* was higher than that to the north and was clearly of greater importance. The roof structure survived almost complete with a crown post with moulded capital and curved braces. The *north wing* was in a more fragmentary state but the crown post of the roof remained (Plate III *a*) with braces to the collar purlin of a quality much inferior to that in the opposite wing.

ADJACENT BUILDINGS

No. 39 High Street. A two-storied brick-fronted house, No. 39, lay to the south of the former hall house separated from it by the gap later occupied by No. 41. It had been very considerably altered in the late 18th century and more recently when the ground floor was converted to business premises. Only a few fragments of earlier work remained including a structural post at the south-east corner and chamfered ceiling beams with die-out stops; these suggested that the building may have originated in the 17th century as a timber-framed house, 21 ft. square on plan, though almost completely rebuilt in brickwork later. Traces of a wide fireplace remained in the north wall. The roof, into which attics

had been inserted, had collar-beam trusses with tie-beams, queen struts, and purlins clasped between the collars and principal rafters.

No. 49 High Street. A range of building was added against the north end of the hall house in the 18th century, of which only No. 49 remained at the time of demolition. The ridge of the roof was at the same height as that of the north wing and probably antedated the increase in height of the hall roof. The lower floor of this property had been converted for use as a shop and the upper floor was incorporated into No. 45; no earlier work remained inside.

Grocer's shop. Further north, and formerly connected with the hall house by the 18th-century range described above, lay a two-storied house with brick walls rendered at the front and the roof covered with slates at the front but tiles at the rear; the ground floor had been completely altered for the purposes of a grocer's shop, but a lower wing at the back incorporated a few fragments of timber framing suggesting that this may have dated from the 16th century.

BUILDINGS EAST OF THE RIVER MISBOURNE

The narrow stream of the Misbourne flowed immediately east of the shop just referred to. On the east bank stood another two-storied house, partly converted to a chemist's shop, with brick walls, a slated and tiled roof, and a rear wing. The front portion of the building incorporated a timber structure of two or three bays of which some of the posts and wall framing remained internally. The building seems to have had two ground-floor rooms, the larger to the west being a living room, with a parlour to the east. The roof had a collar-beam truss with tie-beam, queen struts, and clasped purlins, and was without an original ridge-piece. The building was extended to the west in 1857—the brick gable wall here had two bricks with this date and the initials J.P. and W.P. and another with the initials I.K.(?). The south wing of this building was of more recent date, also of brickwork, and a further building to the south parallel to the front range had a brick inscribed "H. hancock 1835", presumably the date of erection.

Further to the east across a lane were a few buildings attached to the south end of the George Inn. Immediately south of the Inn was a shop, possibly dating from the early 18th century but too much altered to permit further deductions. This was attached by a later 18th-century or early 19th-century infilling to an earlier structure set back from the lane and originally free-standing. The external appearance of the latter was that of a range of two or three brick-built cottages of two storeys with tiled roofs and a three course plat-band at the front marking the level of the first floor. Over the doorway of the northernmost cottage was a brick with the initials and date "N.C.1835". Demolition of these cottages exposed most of the structure of a timber-framed house of three bays, the roof structure having purlins clasped between collars and principal rafters and curved wind-braces below the purlins. The framework of the walls below the trusses was stiffened by curved braces between the upper parts of the posts and the main beams of the first floor.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF NOS. 43-47 HIGH STREET

THE HALL

Front (West) wall. No original timbering of the wall survived in the ground floors of Nos. 45 and 47. A wall-plate supporting the roof in its raised position was visible in the first floor (Fig. 3) but the possibility that this might have been the former wall-plate re-used could not be determined. Evidence for the existence of the outer doorway to the screens passage remained in the east face of post *n* where the mortice for the door-head was visible and similar to that surviving in door *D1*, together with the seating for the wall-plate above it.

Rear (East) wall. Nearly all of the former wall-plate remained in its original position, the north end only being cut short by the insertion of a fireplace in the north wing. The reconstructed section (Fig. 5) shows the features indicated by the mortices in its soffit. In the north bay was a groove for the sliding shutter of the hall window; the window was probably in the middle of the bay and may have had a separate head to take diamond mullions as for the surviving window in the east wall of the south wing; the mortices in the soffit of the wall-plate were for rectangular wall studs, possibly filling the space above the window head. In the south bay a curved bracket remained between the wall-plate and the post at its southern end. The site of a corresponding bracket between the wall-plate and a second post indicated by surviving mortices showed that this formed the head of the doorway at the east end of the screens passage. The remaining half of the head was chamfered on its outer face only. The intermediate post *g* formerly supporting the open truss of the hall also remained in this wall together with most of the curved brace to the tie-beam, though this had been cut short at the top. The base of the post rested on a very decayed timber, 6 ins. by 2 ins., which may have been the survival of the original ground cill or possibly a later packing to take its place, below which was old brickwork though also possibly a replacement.

North wall. This was also the south wall of the north wing. The lower half including part of post *d* had been entirely removed and the upper portion which had in consequence dropped considerably (this settlement is not shown on Fig. 5) was supported by a steel joist. The upper part of the wall remained almost entire apart from the cutting through of a doorway. The original plastering remained, with some smoke blackening on the south face. The post forming the east jamb of the later doorway, immediately west of the main post *d*, had a mortice to take the end of a brace which formerly supported the collar purlin of the hall roof. The line of this roof was faintly visible on the rough plaster surface at the west end. The infilling of this wall which was similar to that elsewhere in the building was of rectangular vertical studs with a lattice of horizontal laths across the back of them; the ends of the laths fitted into grooves in the sides of the principal timbers and vertical laths were nailed to the face of the horizontals. The only portion of interwoven wattlework found, in the south wall of the hall, appeared to be a later replacement.

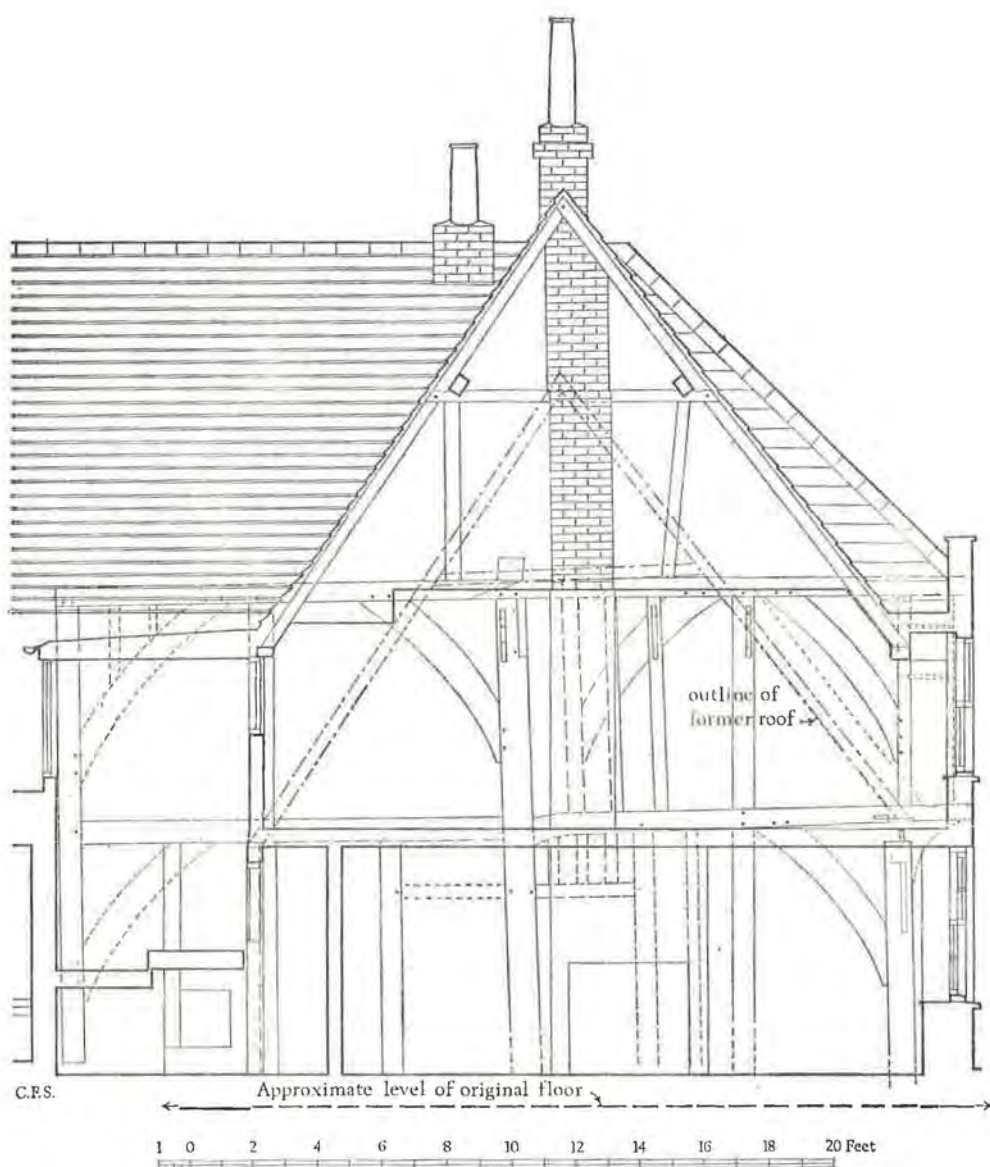


Fig. 3. Section A-B, No. 45 High Street

South wall. This was the best preserved of the original walls in the building (Fig. 3), although the lower part had been encased on both sides in later brickwork and was only seen with difficulty during demolition. It was structurally the north wall of the south wing, the most prominent feature being the post 1 supporting the roof truss of the wing; this had a curved brace to the wall-plate on its east side. A cutting on the west side near the top of the post appeared to be an original patching or replacement of defective timber. At the top of the north



PLATE I (a). Nos. 39-49 High Street, Chalfont St. Peter.



PLATE I (b). Rear of Nos. 43-49 High Street.

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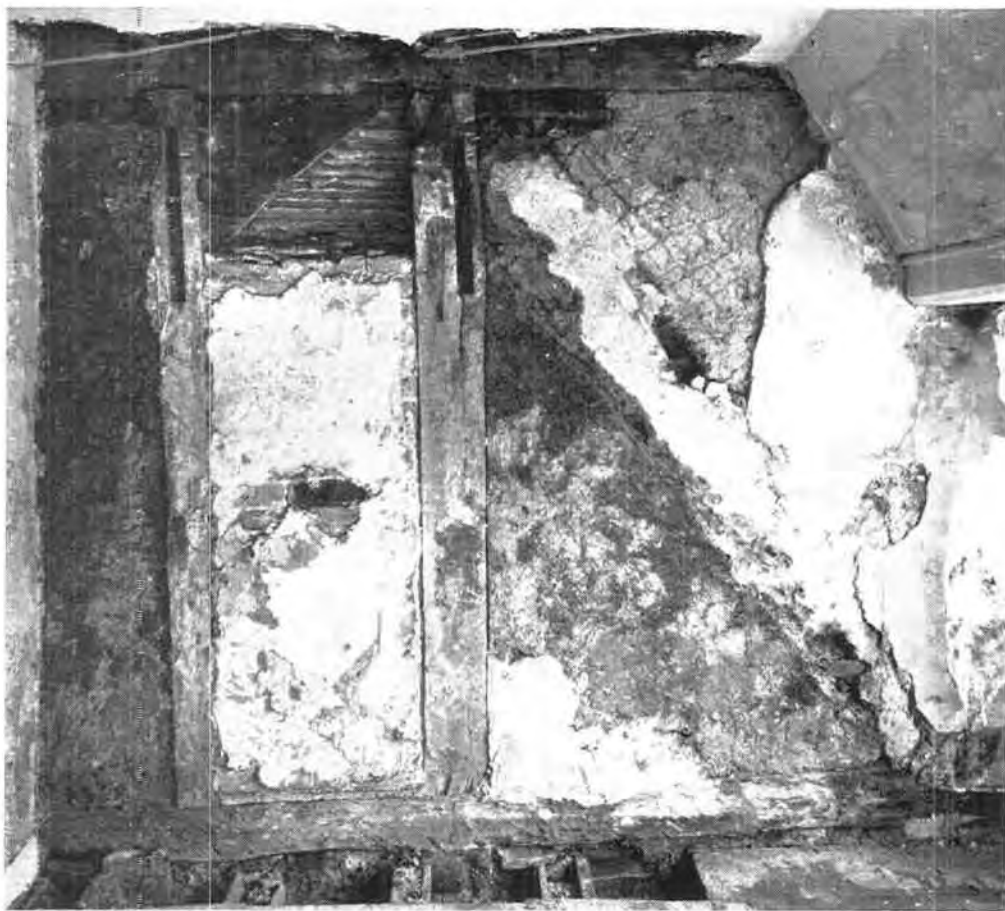


PLATE II (a) South wall of hall, first floor. (a) Left of chimney (b) Right of chimney.

(Photographs: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. Crown Copyright.)



PLATE III (a). Crown post in north wing.



PLATE III (b). Crown Post in hall.



PLATE III (c). Crown post in south wing.

(Photographs: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Crown Copyright.)



PLATE IV (a). Hall from south-east after demolition of south wing.



PLATE IV (b). Bracket at end of jetty, front wall of south wing.



Plate IV (c) Post g from south-east.

face of this post and of two exposed posts to the west (Plate II and Fig. 3) were mortices for brackets, of which the broken-off tenons remained. The purpose of these was not apparent though they may have been intended to give support to some form of louvre in the roof. The plastering of this wall was heavily smoke blackened, much more so than the opposite wall of the hall, indicating that the fire and possibly the smoke exit was at this end. An intriguing stepped outline free from smoke blackening also appeared on the back of post *l* (Plate II *a*) but the possibility of its being the outline of a smoke hood is negated by the presence of the screens passage and the uniformity of the smoke blackening

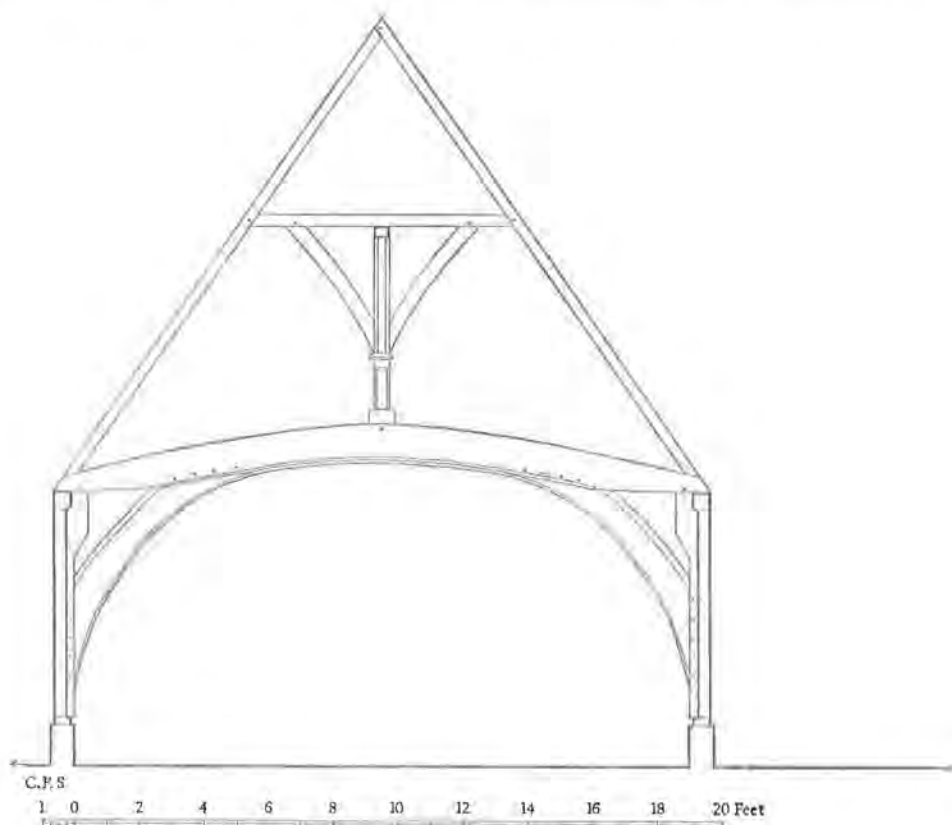


Fig. 4. Reconstructed section through hall, *C-D*.

on either side. The outline of the former hall roof was clearly visible in the rendering at the west end of this wall (Plate II *b*). Of the two doorways in the south wall of the hall each side of post *l* only that to the west remained complete, with jambs chamfered on the north side only, but evidence from mortices indicated the site of the other.

The roof structure. The post *g* with its surviving brace were clearly the support for one end of the tie-beam *g-h* which remained in the later roof about 6 ft. above

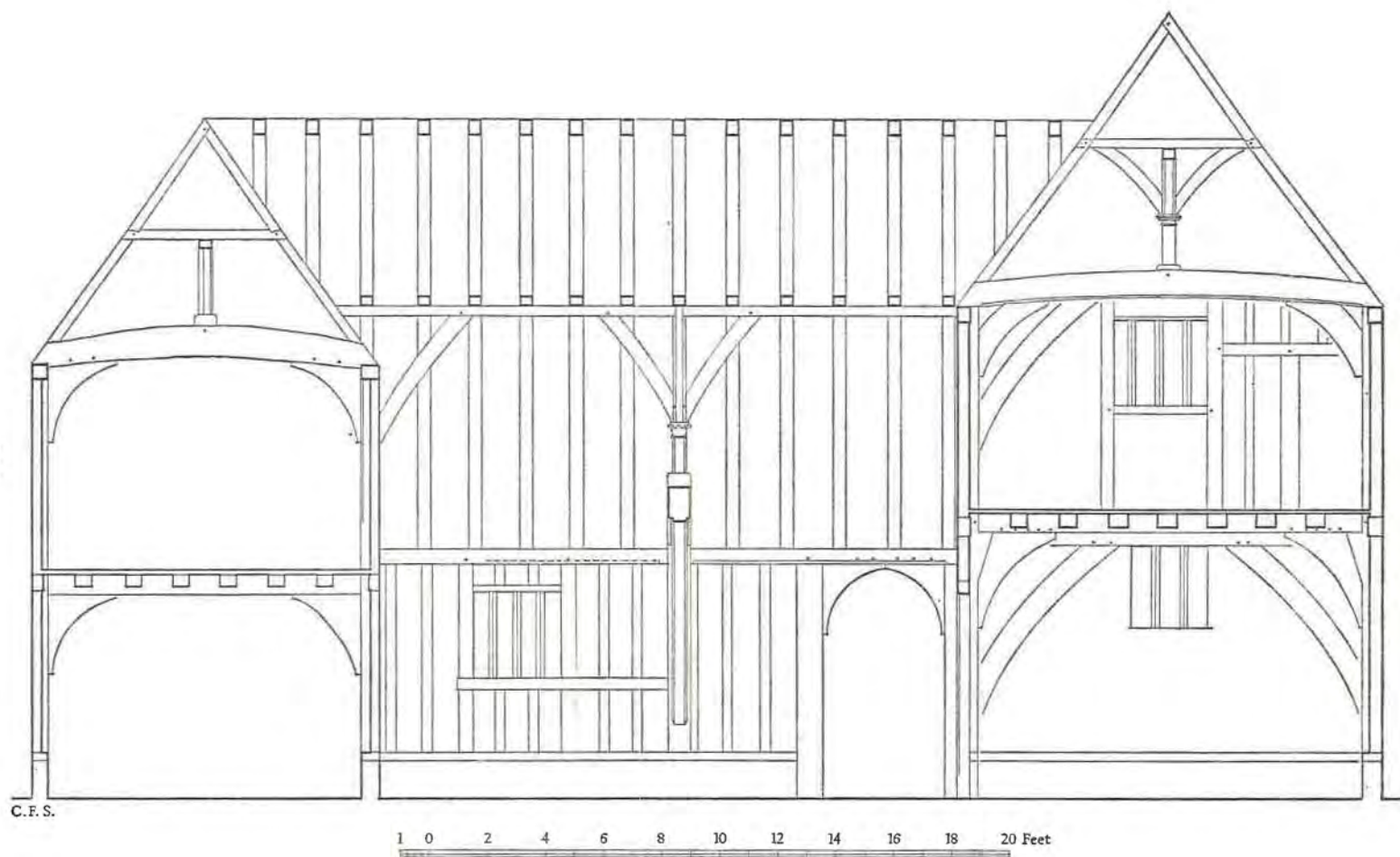


Fig. 5. Reconstructed longitudinal section, *E-F*

its original position. The tie-beam was cambered and doubled-chamfered (Fig. 6) and had mortices in its soffit for braces at each end (Fig. 4). It continued even after re-use to support a crown-post (Plate III *b*) from which the mouldings of the capital had been hacked away, and with mortices for four braces above it. The common rafters had also been re-used at the upper level and were heavily smoke-blackened, but the collars by which each pair had formerly been braced were missing and collar-beam trusses formed, with queen struts and clasped purlins. The collars of the trusses formed at the north end of the hall and at *g-h* appeared to be made from sections of the former collar purlin, $4\frac{1}{2}$ ins. by $5\frac{1}{2}$ ins., and had mortices for braces corresponding to those shown in Fig. 5.

Later alterations. The hall fireplace with its massive brick stack (Plate IV *a*) was built in the 17th century, clearly before the roof of the hall had been raised. Its unusual situation inside the hall seems to have been dictated by the provision of a fireplace in the north wing at the same time. Neither fireplace retained any significant features, but the stack where it formerly emerged from the roof had a vertical nib of brick on its south face; the other face had been altered at a later date.

THE SOUTH WING

Front (West) wall. The wall facing the street had been entirely removed with the possible exception of the tie-beam of the gable truss. The original wall had a jetty at first floor level, the wall of the lower storey being in line with that of the hall. The bracket supporting the south end of the jetty remained at *o* (Plate IV *b*) and the mortice for a similar bracket was found in the corresponding post *n*. The tie-beam which remained above the window of the first-floor had a groove in the soffit for two shutters sliding to left and right indicating a window in the central section of which the upper mortices remained for the jamb; the head may have been a lower member as in the east wall (see below). The upper surface of the beam had been cut down to allow it to take the ends of the later rafters of the hipped roof, and no clear indications remained of a central crown-post; the presence of inclined mortices for principal rafters and inner braces parallel to them confirmed the former presence of a gable.

Rear (East) wall. Much of the upper part of this wall remained, protected by the eastward extension. The features for which sufficient evidence survived are shown in Fig. 5, with curved braces to the tie-beam and floor beams. There was no jetty at this end. The jambs, head and cill of a four-light window with diamond mullions remained to the first floor together with slighter indications of another window below it, where one mutilated ogee-moulded wooden mullion remained. To the south of the upper window evidence from surviving timbers and mortices indicated a narrow doorway leading to a closet, or less likely a stairway, projecting beyond the east face of the wing. This was confirmed by mortices in the east face of the post *k* and in the outer face of the south jamb of the window.

North wall. The principal features have been described above, including the two doorways to the ground floor of the wing. In addition to these a small

window formerly existed east of post *n* in the first-floor room (see Fig. 3).

South wall. Little of the original walling remained apart from the main posts *k*, *m*, *o*. A small window similar to that referred to above had existed east of post *o*.

Flooring. The main floor beam *l-m* remained together with fragments of the sawn-off ends of the former floor joists as shown in Fig. 5. The beam was supported by heavy curved brackets.

The roof structure. The roof truss *l-m* remained almost complete, with square crown-post with moulded capital (Plate III *c*, Fig. 6) and four braces of which that to the east had been removed when the chimneystack was inserted. The collar-purlin remained in the eastern section and was braced from the gable truss; in the western section of the roof it was attenuated by the construction of the hip, possibly in the 18th century.

Later alterations. No evidence remained for any original dividing wall on the line of the floor beam *l-m*; the under side of the beam was without any trace of mortices, although some division between the two doorways may be supposed. The later brick wall incorporating fireplaces seems to have been inserted in the 18th century, although little evidence for its actual date was seen. The lintel of the fireplace to the west ground-floor room was formed from half of the stone lintel of a 7 ft. wide 15th-century fireplace, with moulded four-centred head and a blank shield in a quatrefoil in the surviving spandrel; the extrados rose to a point in the centre below which was carved the monogram *ihs* in black letter; there were also several later scratchings.

THE NORTH WING

Front (West) wall. This had been completely rebuilt and the front posts *e f* had also been removed so that no satisfactory evidence remained of its structure or whether the first floor was jettied as in the south wing. It is possible that this wing was not jettied, as the lower level of the upper floor might have caused an obstruction at the street frontage.

Rear (East) wall. This also had been completely removed, and its position at *a-b* is only conjectural.

North wall. The main post *c* remained and some of the original walling to

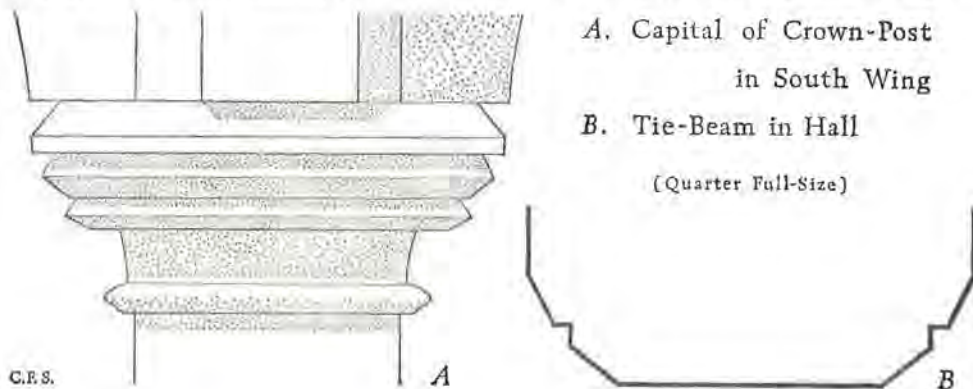


Fig. 6. Timber details

either side; this was of similar construction to the other surviving older work. It was not possible to inspect this as closely as the south wing but no traces of windows were found at either level.

South wall. The south face has been described above (see Hall); the studs of the infilling were exposed on the north side of the surviving upper portion.

The roof structure. The centre portion of the roof with the truss *c-d* remained, although cut away at back and front. The tie-beam carried a short square crown-post without capital (Plate III *a*) from the base of which two braces rose to the collar purlin.

CONCLUSIONS

An earlier form of building construction has already been referred to in vol. XVIII of this *Journal* at Hill Farm, Chalfont St. Peter, where an important cruck-trussed house still survives. The crown-post structure of the roof of the south-west wing in that house, for which a 15th-century date has been suggested, may be regarded as contemporary with the older parts of Nos. 43-47 High Street. The crown-post at Hill Farm has braces springing from all four sides as in the two better-quality trusses in High Street, but is without any moulded capping since the braces spring from the base of the post. In this respect it is more nearly comparable to the post in the north wing at High Street, although that had been reduced to the barest essentials with only one pair of braces. This last feature is perhaps more common in barns, e.g. the barn at Croxley Hall Farm, Herts., but it also occurs in houses, e.g. Bandons, Herts. where it has been tentatively dated to the mid 15th century (G. Bailey and B. Hutton, *Crown Post Roofs in Hertfordshire*, Herts. Local History Council (1966)). The simple square section of the crown posts in the two wings and the slight chamfer of that in the hall do not indicate a particularly early date. The rather squat proportions of the hall itself (Fig. 4) may be felt to be more in keeping with the 14th century and therefore a date of *c.* 1400 might be more acceptable. It is possible that the crown-post at Hill Farm may also be slightly earlier than has been suggested.

The group of buildings described here presented an interesting illustration of the development of English building construction and were an example of the way in which basically satisfactory buildings can by a long process of piecemeal alterations become not only inconvenient in their planning but changed in outward appearance almost beyond recognition. Whether the general tendency to demolish such property is the correct solution should be a matter for serious consideration; the alternative treatment of removing the worst of these additions and so returning, in some degree to the original layout should at least not be too lightly dismissed.

Nothing now remains standing of the buildings described but, through the good offices of Mr. and Mrs. J. Bennell, some fragments have been preserved including the crown post and braces of the south wing and the re-used fireplace lintel now in the County Museum at Aylesbury. The writer wishes to express his thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Bennell for drawing his attention to the buildings and for assistance in recording them, to Mr. E. Clive Rouse for his assistance and encouragement, and to the developers and demolition contractors for their cooperation.