

# GRANGE FARM, WIDMER END

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## INTRODUCTION

Although not very far to the N. of High Wycombe, the upland site of Grange Farm (National Grid SU 883959) is still rather isolated. The house is timber-framed, but not very much framing can be seen from outside, because the walls have largely been rebuilt in red brick. In its present state, the house is one and a half storeys high, with a plain tiled roof, a flint-walled extension at one end, and a lean-to (continuous with the main walls) at the other. The main chimney stack is almost central, and the front door opens into a lobby. All exterior door and window frames are modern. The house is aligned N.E./S.W., but we will describe it as if the N.E. (gable) end faced N.

Grange Farm has perhaps two particular claims to attention. First, there is the nature of its timber structure, which reflects both cruck and box-frame building techniques. Crucks are most commonly associated with N. and W. England, and much of Wales,<sup>1</sup> while box-framing derives from counties in the S.E. and E. But there is a large area of overlap, including most of Buckinghamshire,<sup>2</sup> where both techniques were in use, not necessarily concurrently. At Grange Farm, however, cruck and box-frame features have been combined, in a most interesting way. Thus, the main structure depends upon three pairs of crucks. But the outer part of the roof consists only of common rafters, without any ridge-piece; an arrangement typical of box-frame construction.

Secondly, there is the plan which, in its original form, made so little allowance for either convenience or privacy. In fact, most of the building was taken up by a hall of two bays, probably entirely open to the roof, and certainly without any chimney. We can only suppose that this large space, draughty, and often filled with smoke, as it must have been, was divided up in some way, perhaps by moveable screens or hangings, so as to meet the domestic and working needs of the farm. But these arrangements have left no trace. What is clear is that the farmer and his family could have found privacy only in the room next to the S. end of the hall or, if that was a service room, in a chamber above this room, which no longer survives.

The alterations which we will date to the 17th century, were so extensive as to make this phase almost as important as the first. Yet the opportunity to take in more space for private use does not seem to have been pressed very far. In particular, when these alterations were complete, the main block was left, apparently, without a parlour (in the sense of a private room for the master of the house), although by that time parlours were quite common, in houses no bigger than Grange Farm, in counties such as Essex and Kent.

<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive list of crucks, by counties, is contained in *A Catalogue of Cruck Buildings* compiled by N. W. Alcock (1973). This shows widespread distribution also in the Midland counties.

<sup>2</sup> See map at p. 177 in the *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture*, R. W. Brunskill (1970).

GRANGE FARM, WIDMER END, BUCKS.

National Grid ref: SU883959

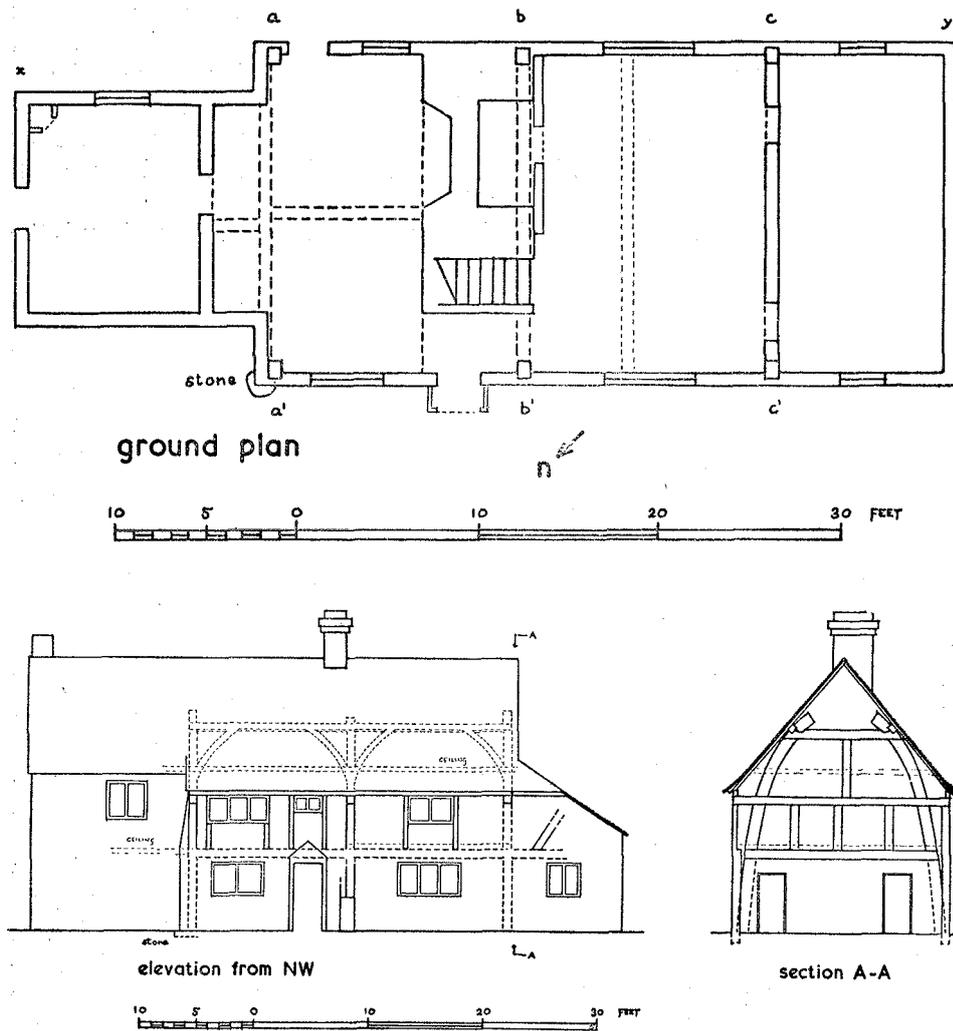


Fig. 1. Plan and elevation of present farm house.



PLATE IIIa. Grange Farm, Widmer End, Bucks from NW.

*Ian Johnson*

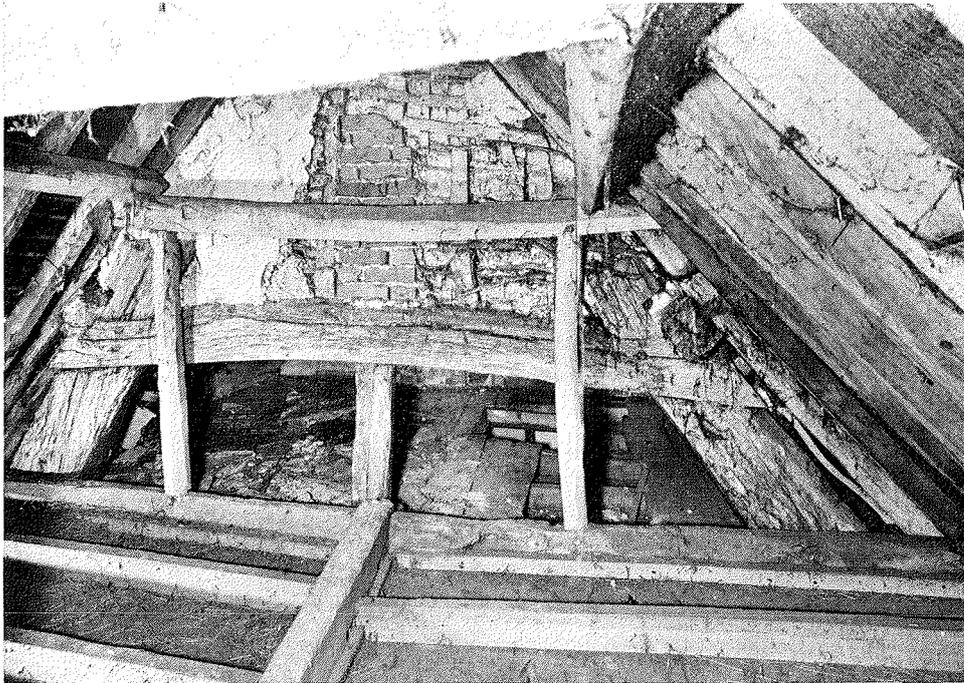


PLATE IIIb. Cruck structure of main roof space, looking S from roof of extension and showing original end wall and top of cruck blades in truss a-a'.

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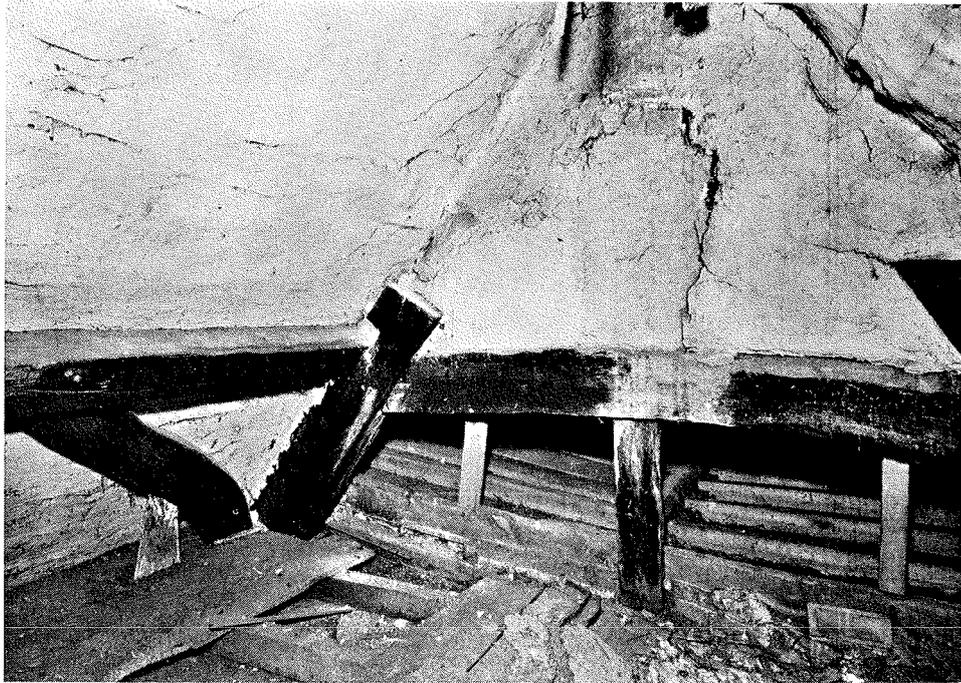


PLATE IVa. Main roof space looking N showing top of cruck blades in truss a-a'.  
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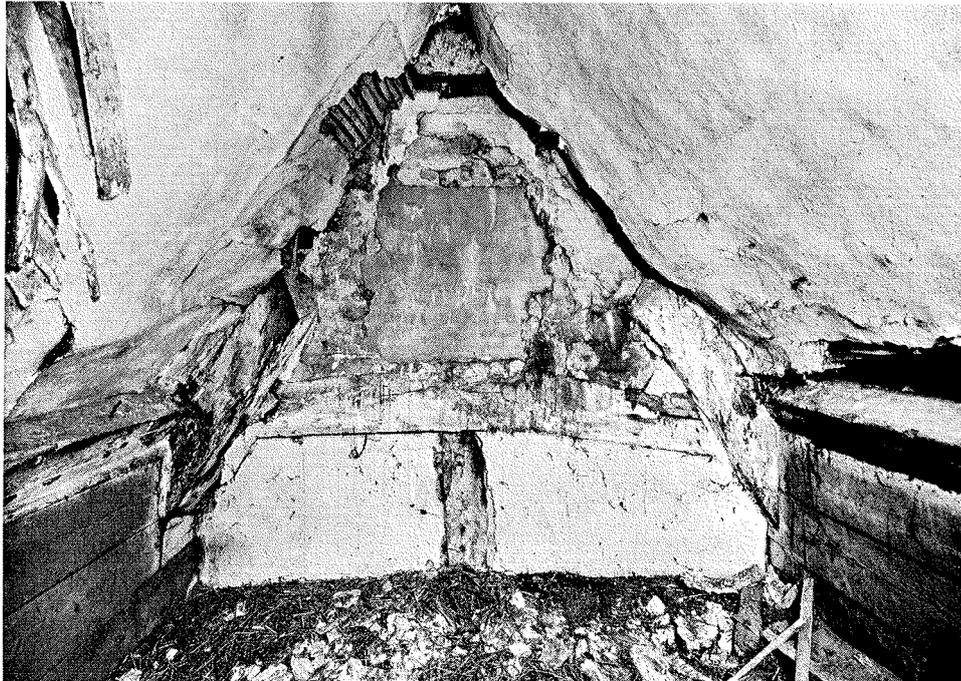


PLATE IVb. South roof space looking S showing top of cruck blades in truss c-c'.  
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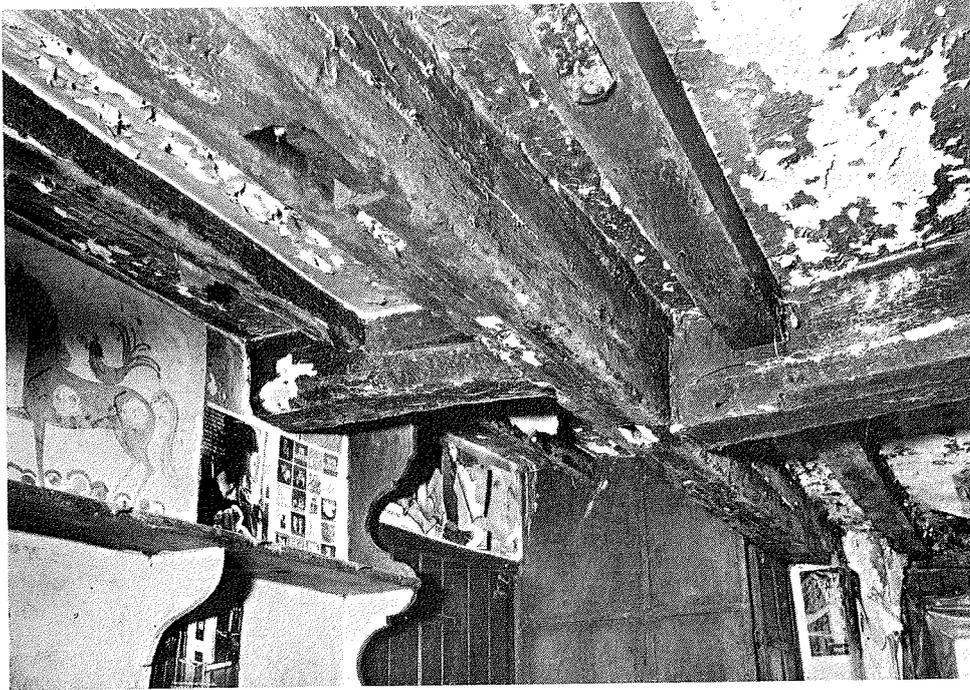


Plate Va. Original end wall beam with mortises. Ground floor N room.  
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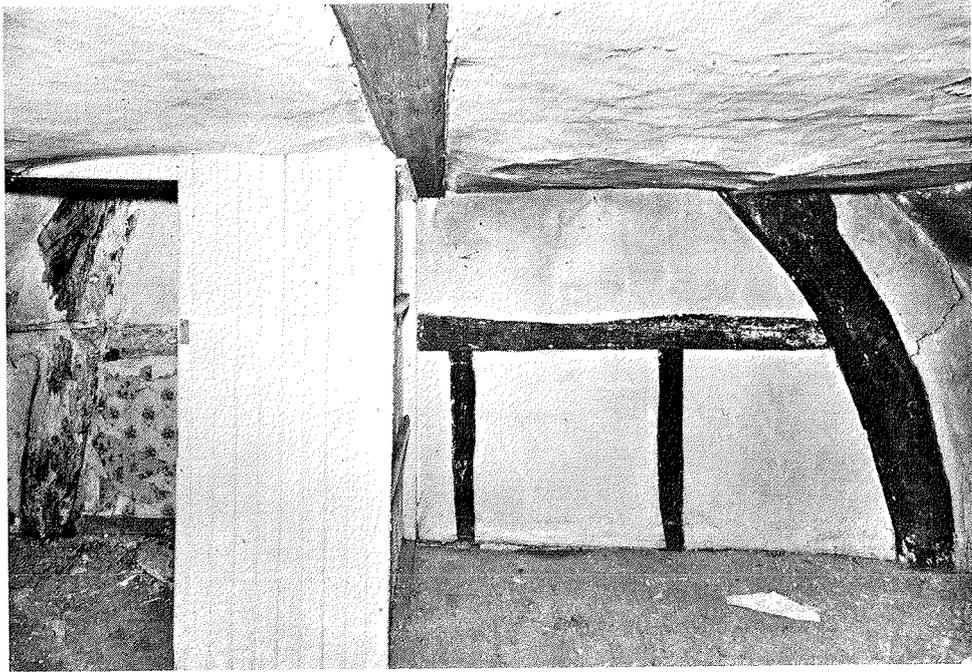


Plate Vb. S room looking S, showing cruck-framing in truss c-c'.  
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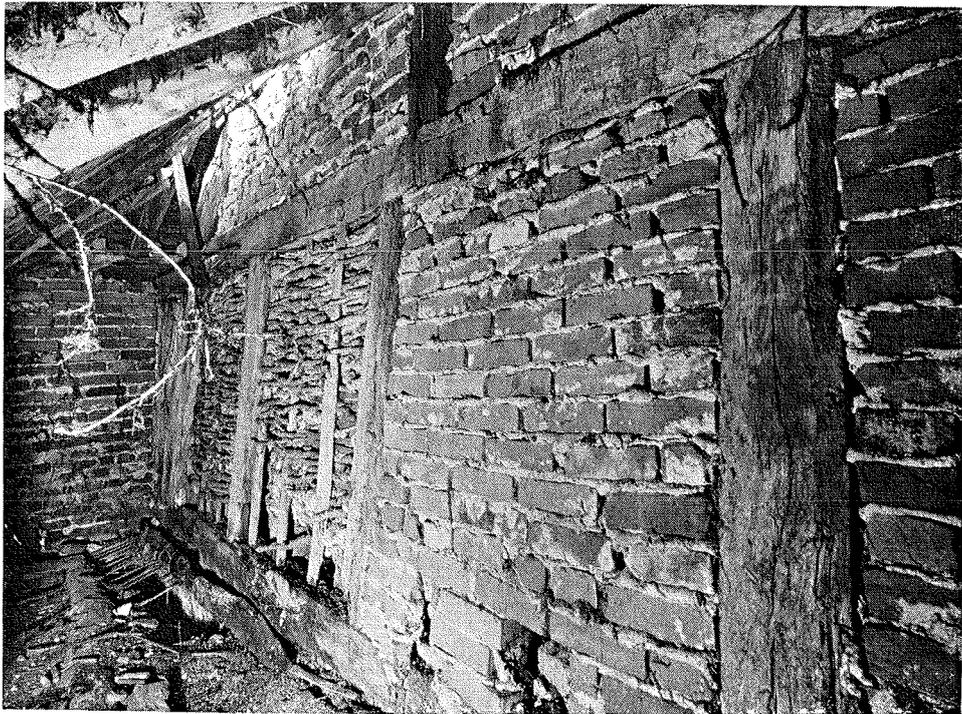


PLATE VIa. External framing on S end wall, from inside lean-to.

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PLATE VIb. Front (W) elevation. Detail of cruck b-b' with  
brick pier.

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## DETAILS OF THE STRUCTURE AND PLAN

### 1. *The first phase*

The main features should be clear from the drawings. Three cruck trusses define the two bays of the hall (marked ab, bc on the plan). Both bays are of exactly the same length. In all essentials, the outer trusses are identical. The central truss is very similar to its neighbours, unless the lower rail—now supporting a ceiling—was not original to the structure. But the blades are narrower here, typically about 10 inches wide, as against 12-15 inches in both outer trusses. All the blades are about 9 inches thick, and have been underbuilt in brick. A sarsen stone is ledged under the W. end of Truss a-a' and a similar stone lies 6 feet from the W. end of Truss b-b'. No other large stones lie under, or near, cruck blades.

No clear evidence was found to suggest that there was originally a third cruck-framed bay, to provide accommodation which might be expected to accompany a two-bay hall. (Here we should mention the two-bay cruck-framed house recently recorded in Stoneleigh Village, Warwickshire,<sup>3</sup> of which the authors remark: "The placing of the fireplace in an extension makes it almost certain that the original house was of two bays only".) However, despite uncertainty as to its form, we think that Grange Farm probably did include, in addition to its two-bay hall, a further bay, now represented by the lean-to, cy. This view is supported by the fact that Truss c-c' is smooth on both sides, whereas the outer face of Truss a-a' is heavily weathered, indicating that the house ended there. The third bay may have contained no more than a small parlour, especially as there is no clear indication of an upper floor. On the other hand, end bays of two storeys, containing a chamber above service accommodation, are not uncommon. It is just possible that one existed here.

Returning to the hall, we note that, in all three trusses, the cruck blades end just above the collar-beam. As already indicated, the outer roof consists only of common rafters. Each pair is halved and pegged together at the apex. Smoke-blackened rafters occur in bay ab, and probably also in bay bc, where the poor condition of the roof made examination difficult. There is unmistakable smoke-blackening on the cruck blade to the E. of the stack, but this could be accounted for by the fact that an aperture about a foot square has been made in the stack, probably to create some sort of smoke chamber at first floor level. It is possible too that what appears to have been an aperture in the gable at the N. end, and now filled in with brick, was a vent to draw off the worst of the smoke. Blackening occurs in cracks in the plaster infilling, in the same general area.

There is no sign of a ridge-piece, or of anything that might have supported one. The rafters are supported mainly by the side-purlins. These have been trenched into the backs of the cruck blades, where they also bear upon the ends of the collars: an effective way of dealing with the compression exerted by the outer roof. Wind braces between crucks and purlins follow the slope of the roof. This is an unusual way to construct a roof. Generally, where crucks are used, the blades continue upwards, so that they can support a ridge-piece, either directly, or via a saddle or other intermediate timber. An alternative

<sup>3</sup> Alcock, Braithwaite & Jeffs, *Trans. Birmingham Archaeological Society*, Vol. 85, 1971-3, p. 187.

arrangement, perhaps only to be found in buildings of style and importance, is the base cruck. Here, the cruck blades end usually at a collar set fairly low in the roof, there being no tie-beam. There is quite a wide distribution of base crucks.<sup>4</sup>

Grange Farm conforms to neither pattern. We did wonder whether this could simply be the result of alterations or repairs to a cruck roof which had started life in a more usual form. In support of this view is the odd way in which the blades in Truss a-a' have been cut off at different angles. But we could find nothing else to suggest alterations of any consequence. Viewed as a whole, the roof timbers give the impression that the original structure has not been interfered with.<sup>5</sup>

In arriving at a date for the first phase of building at Grange Farm, we have found Guy Beresford's detailed account of Northend Farm, Long Crendon,<sup>6</sup> most helpful. This house was demolished in 1965. Here also was a two-bay open hall, slightly larger than at Grange Farm (about 30 ft. by 21 ft., compared with 28 ft. by 19 ft.). As it possessed neither rails nor tie-beam, the central truss at Northend Farm could almost be considered a true base cruck. However, in general construction it was not unlike the trusses at Grange Farm, and included cruck blades terminating just above the collar. (Overhead, a ridge-piece was clasped between the rafters and a yoke. It is a pity that no outer truss survived to be recorded). The collar was supported by rather elegant four-centred arch-braces. Mr. Beresford proposed an early 15th-century date for this hall.

Grange Farm is smaller than Northend Farm, and no attempt was made to refine the carpentry. Taken together, these are indications of lower status and (probably) later date. One feature common to both houses has also been noted elsewhere. We refer to the presence of side-purlins, in conjunction with wind braces in the plane of the roof (approximately so, at Grange Farm). This also occurs in some Essex houses,<sup>7</sup> admittedly in the context of rather a different tradition of carpentry.

Taking everything into account, we are unable to suggest a date earlier than the second half of the 15th century for the original structure at Grange Farm. The building may in fact have been erected as much as a century later. In the absence of decorative detail, it is very hard to date a timber structure more closely from the archaeological evidence alone, unless one has recourse to such techniques as radio-carbon analysis.

## 2. *Rebuilding, and an extension*

The years from about 1575 were to see an extraordinary spate of building activity in the southern half of England. The impetus came largely from the

<sup>4</sup> Alcock & Barley, "Medieval Roofs with Base Crucks and Short Principals", *Antiquaries' Journal* LII (1972), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> The same type of cruck truss, with the blades terminating just above the collar, can also be seen in a cottage at Nearton End, near Swanbourne (National Grid SP 805270), where what was evidently a central truss is now exposed at the gable end of the house. This feature was covered with plaster when the RCHM reported on the building, in 1912.

<sup>6</sup> *Records of Bucks*, Vol. XVIII, Pt. 2 (1967), p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> See p. 140 in *The Development of Carpentry, 1200-1700*, C. A. Hewett (1969).

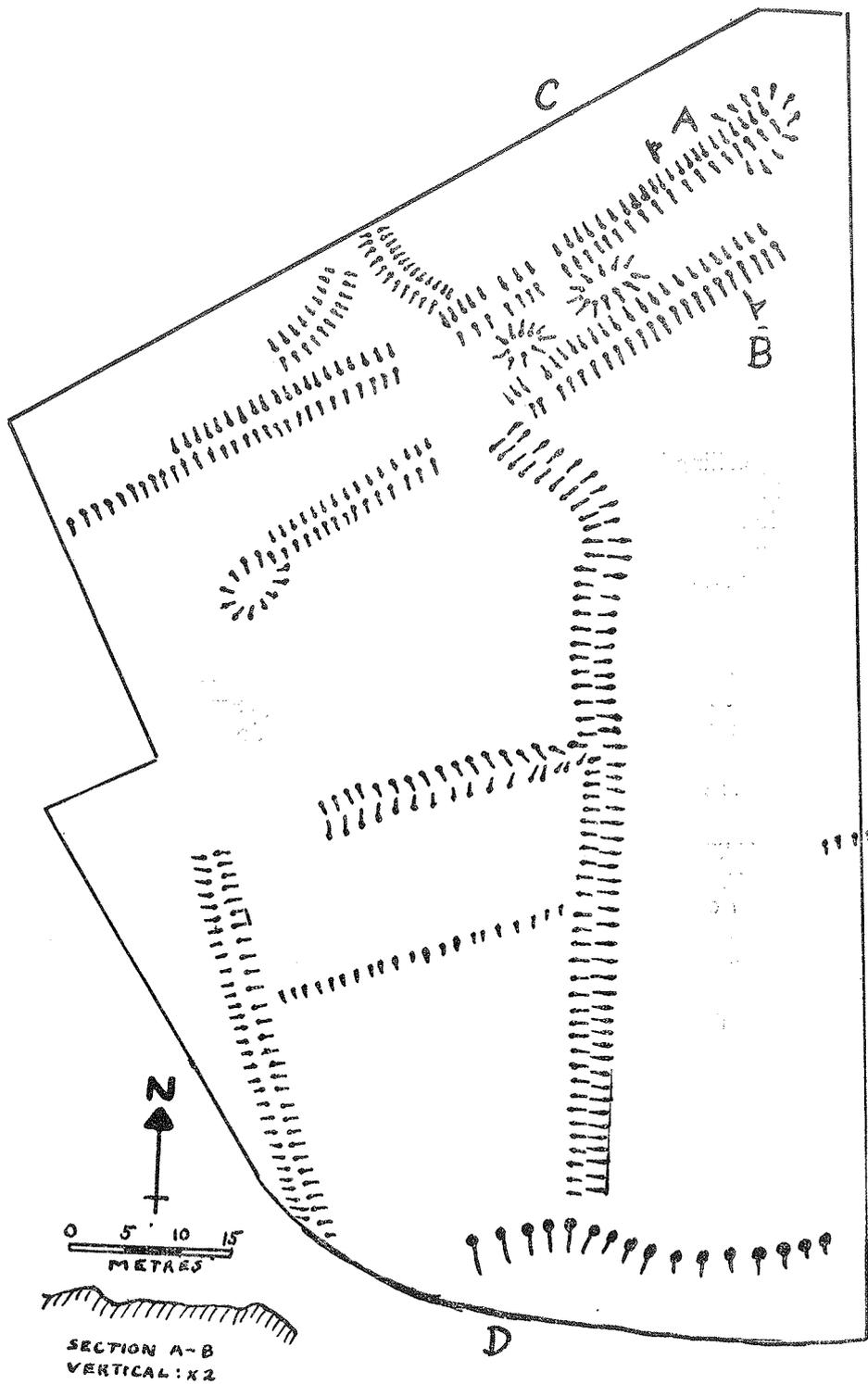


Fig. 2. The deserted hamlet of Pirenore.

Max Davies

sudden affluence of farmers, as primary producers during a time of inflation.<sup>8</sup> This is the background to the virtual rebuilding of the house, which we will now describe.

First of all, a brick stack was built against the central truss. Its single hearth was directed towards bay bc (which we will now call the S. bay) of the hall. The present entry was perhaps established then. Probably at the same time, a ceiling was put into bay ab (the N. bay). It has substantial joists. Only the main, axial, joist is chamfered. There are stops, of run-out type, next to the rail of Truss, a-a', which supports one end of the joist. The other end of the joist is lost inside the later addition to the stack which serves the N. bay and no stops can be seen., The soffit of the rail just mentioned reveals two sets of mortises. The earlier set presumably held the studs of the gable wall of the original house. The later set was for close-studding, perhaps another aspect of the general improvement scheme. A slightly higher ceiling over the S. bay probably followed later, but the existing ceiling is modern. This bay, warmed by the large hearth, no doubt contained the now reduced hall. It is odd that the studded partitions, of rather poor quality, which now form the walls of the upper rooms on either side of the stack, should appear to be of the same date. Even without an upper room in the S. bay, however, the partition walls would have improved the appearance of the hall, and reduced draughts from the entrance lobby, which was presumably provided with doors into both bays, at ground-floor level, from the first. The jambs of the door closing off the stairs, the only non-structural woodwork in the house which is not modern, have a 17th-century appearance. They have had modern jambs attached to them, to take the existing door. The staircase was presumably built in its present form when the S. upper room was added. When these alterations were complete, the N. bay seems to have been an unheated parlour.

The next stage involved the provision of a hearth for the N. bay, behind the larger hall fireplace, and the building of an extension at the far end of the N. bay. The wall contained by Truss a-a' was destroyed, at any rate at ground floor level, so that the room occupying the N. bay could take in part of the new extension. It was probably this upheaval that displaced from its truss the rail supporting the end of the ceiling. The rail is now held, at either end, within the short lengths of flank wall, where cruck house and extension meet.

In the roof of the extension, the longitudinal beam into which the rafters are jointed has probably been reused, but it has clear assembly marks (Roman numerals) which correspond with the existing joists, some of which have been replaced by newer timbers. This is a queen-post roof. The rafters themselves are also replacements, and have been altered fairly recently to allow for a modern brick stack, at the N.E. corner.

The extension was to be rebuilt later, perhaps with no change of function. Probably it always provided a service room, such as a dairy, on the ground floor, and a chamber above. Of the original structure, a heavy chamfered joist supporting a ground floor ceiling, still runs from the house towards the service

<sup>8</sup> The conception of the "Great Rebuilding" is of course due to Professor Hoskins, and was first formulated by him in "The Rebuilding of Rural England", 1570-1640" in *Past and Present*, No. 4, 1953, pp. 44-89. The widest survey of farmhouses of the period is in "*The English Farmhouse and Cottage*", M. W. Barley (1961).

room, where it disappears behind a later ceiling. More important, the queen-post roof survives, on top of the later flint walls.

Clearly, the use of the N. bay as a parlour had been abandoned. The new hearth contains a bread oven. We think that this room could now be regarded as the kitchen, which is its purpose at the present day.

We do not know what use was made of the room in the lean-to, during this period of change. Whatever may have happened along the way, it probably ended up as a small parlour.<sup>9</sup>

Of the two new upper chambers, the better woodwork is to be found in the N. bay, where the stops in the axial ceiling joist are of pyramid type. The chamber over the hall was perhaps at first only intended for storage.

These alterations may have taken a generation or so to accomplish. We suggest that they all took place within the 17th century.

When rebuilding was begun, the house, although perhaps not much more than a century old, must have seemed remarkably old-fashioned, by standards then current. The alterations were carried through, most likely, by men of the same class of yeomen farmers who had built the house in the first place. But changes of outlook, over three or four generations, had been profound. It was not only that the renovators had more money at their disposal, and the opportunity of adding such amenities as a brick chimney, which were out of reach of their ancestors. However we account for it, their aims were very different. The desire for a large hall, at high cost in terms of convenience, belonged to the medieval order of things. By the end of the 17th century, if not earlier, farmers in Buckinghamshire, as elsewhere, were seeking domestic convenience in their houses. The need for additional accommodation may also reflect a change in their households.

### 3. *More recent changes*

These call only for a summary.

Probably in the 18th century, the main walls were largely, but not quite completely, cased in red brick. The lean-to was rebuilt. So was the extension. Here the walls are of flint, but red brick has been used in the quoins and dressings. The top of the main stack was rebuilt, to contemporary outline. The entire roof was covered with plain red tiles.

More recently, iron-framed casements have been put in, and there has been further rebuilding of the main wall, on the garden side.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### HISTORICAL NOTE

About the middle of the twelfth century, Ravening, a landowner of Saxon descent,

who held half a knight's fee in Little Missenden,<sup>1</sup> purchased a small estate in Brand's Fee,<sup>2</sup> lying, however, in Hughenden. In 1159 he and his heir-apparent conveyed this land to Missenden Abbey, subject to a rent charge in favour of one of his younger sons.<sup>3</sup> The gift was confirmed later by Roger de Missenden, to whom Ravening's inheritance had by then descended, and from his charter we learn that the hamlet on which these lands centred was called Pirenore.<sup>4</sup> Though deserted many centuries ago, the cluster of dwellings that composed it is clearly discernible there today.

At about the same time the abbey also acquired Peterley, which lay in Missenden,<sup>5</sup> and throughout most of the thirteenth century it sought to enlarge this estate by buying up every small holding in Kingshill which appeared in the market.<sup>6</sup> The process ended about 1275 with the purchase of Brand's Fee when it was forced on to the market by John Brand's indebtedness to Jews.<sup>7</sup>

From the first, no doubt, the abbey established a demesne farm at Peterley, and usually incorporated into it the lands that it bought. Pirenore, however, retained its identity, and was not absorbed into Peterley; until the latter part of the thirteenth century it appears to have been demised to farm. The earliest tenant of whom we have mention is Baldwin de Pirenore, who flourished during the latter part of the twelfth century.<sup>8</sup> He was succeeded by his son Geoffrey,<sup>9</sup> and he by Martin,<sup>10</sup> who was of sufficient standing to marry a wife who brought him a caracute of land in the neighbourhood.<sup>11</sup> Finally, about 1275, Martin's son Nicholas de Pirenore surrendered his leasehold rights to the abbey, and conveyed to it other land that he had in Brand's Fee.<sup>12</sup> There is no direct evidence as to what the abbey did with this estate when it obtained possession, but the object of the transaction must have been to commence demesne farming there, and we may suppose that it did so.

All the abbey lands in Kingshill seem after the Dissolution to have passed to the Dormers, and we can pick them up again in their court rolls in the early years of the seventeenth century.<sup>13</sup> At that time separate courts and views of frankpledge were held for Peterley Stone and for Raveners Meare—the corruption of Ravening's name had not proceeded very far in nearly five centuries. At the latter court in 1617 there were eleven suitors present, and four essoins, one of whom, it is interesting to notice, was a John Ravening. Another view was held for Raveners Meare in 1628, but after that there is no trace of the lands in Brand's Fee being separate from those of Peterley. The name of Pirenore does not appear, but in 1648 William Widmer, gent.,<sup>14</sup> and others surrendered a messuage called Copshrewes, with Sevatts Close and le Homeplatt both adjoining Graunge Grove, and Great Costland adjoining a tenement called le Graunge Grounds, all to the use of Ralph Cock of Chalfont St. Giles, bricklayer. Grange Farm itself never figures as the name of a messuage in any of these rolls, but here as elsewhere it was more usual to refer to a house by stating the name of its present or late occupant. It is, however, unnecessary to pursue the matter further, for it cannot be doubted that Grange Farm is the successor of the capital messuage of the estate at Pirenore that Ravening gave to Missenden Abbey.

G.R.E.

<sup>1</sup> He held it of the Bolebec fee (*Red Book of the Exchequer*, ed. H. Hall, p. 317).

<sup>2</sup> Brand's Fee was held in 1086 by three men who had held it before the conquest (D.B. fo. 153b.). It is likely that each of these men's lands preserved its identity, and that Pirenore was one of the three.

<sup>3</sup> *The Cartulary of Missenden Abbey*, ed. J. G. Jenkins, vol. I, no. 182.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, no. 181.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, no. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, nos. 110–200.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, no. 116.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, no. 180.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, no. 183.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, nos. 135, 179.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, no. 173.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, no. 179.

<sup>13</sup> Warwickshire County Records Office, Warwick, CR 895. The rolls of earlier courts have perished.

<sup>14</sup> William Widmer was a member of the firm of Beaconsfield lawyers whose senior partners were, one after another, the stewards of the manor of Peterley Stone.