

A BASE-CRUCK HALL IN DENHAM

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In 1951 Mr. and Mrs. Moir, of the Old Bakery, Denham, embarked on an ambitious and imaginative programme of restoration at their home. The result was to expose to view, almost in its original condition, a large base-cruck hall with a collar-rafter roof, together with one of its wings. (The other wing is a modern replacement, its predecessor, another transverse wing, having been condemned by the local authority and demolished.)

It is remarkable that this important house should, for so long after its restoration, have remained unknown to students of mediaeval architecture — particularly since photographs had appeared in the local press. Nevertheless it was not until a social visit by Mr. Clive Rouse, early in 1978, that anyone recognised it for what it was. To Mr. Rouse, of course, its significance was clear, and he asked the present writers to investigate.

The house lies on the north side of the main street of Denham, at TQ 041 871, just where the street turns south-west, and a few yards from the gate of Denham Place. The accompanying drawings illustrate its main features, in particular the imposing curve of the base-cruck truss with its cranked, arch-braced raised tie; but a few points call for comment.

The first is that the apparent outer aisle on the north side is in fact a modern out-shut. The second is the unusual position of the 'centre' post in the west end of the hall (Fig. 1), a post which is in fact eccentric to the axis of the hall, because it also does duty as a principal post for the wing, mid-way along its overall length. Its position shows that the projection is original; but at first it projected only at first floor level: an under-built jetty is attested by shallow trenches in the soffits of the joists in the present entry. The shared principal post proves the contemporaneity of the hall and the wing (however much the latter may have been subsequently altered). The frame of the hall has been distorted by the loss of the bottom nine inches of the northern cruck-blade. The centre of the north side of the building has sunk correspondingly.

A point not shown in the drawings is that the lintel of the hall fireplace (otherwise a modern structure) is formed from the central portion of a cranked tie-beam, very like that in the open truss, and having a mortice for a crown-post in its apex. Mrs. Moir informs us that this came from the demolished east wing. Whatever space it spanned must have been open to the roof, and we tentatively suggest a kitchen. The 6" OS map shows that this wing extended far back beyond the north wall of the hall, and, if this were the original arrangement, the kitchen was perhaps in this northern extension. The presence of a well, close to the west side of the wing, may support this conjecture. Watercolours in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Moir show that both wings projected, and it is likely that both were jettied, but if the inference about the kitchen is correct,



Plate I The Old Bakery, Denham, c. 1900. From a postcard kindly lent by Mrs. Moir. Re-photographed by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments.

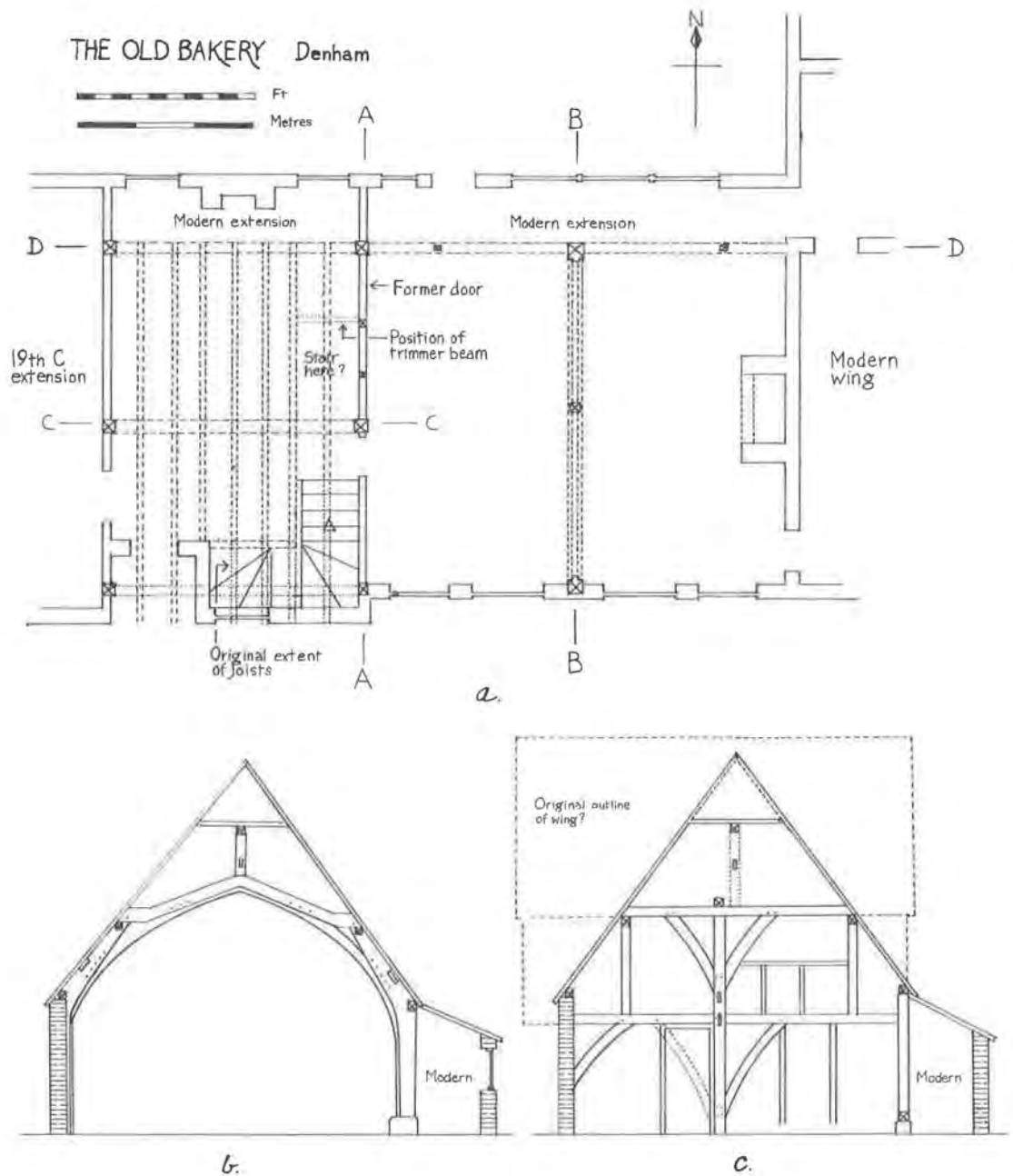


Fig. 1. The Old Bakery, Denham

a) Ground-floor Plan. b) Section at B — B, looking west. c) Section at A — A, looking west.

the west wing was the parlour. A transverse service wing may not have been original, however; in most surviving base-cruck halls the service rooms are in series. There is no evidence for a screen, but the loss of the east end of the north wall-plate makes it difficult to interpret the lower end of the hall.

In the west wing, the north-west post has had its inner face crudely hacked away below the rail. Before this was done the end of the rail must have rested on a ledge cut back into the post, although both ends now rest on modern (?) brackets. In the north-east post there is the upper part of a mortice for a brace; the lower part of the mortice was lost when the base of the post was sawn through in the course of some remodelling. Since the post now rests on the sill beam of the hall, and is moreover shared with the hall as a principal, this is a puzzling feature. The bearer beam in this room is also asymmetrically suspended; its east end rests on a ledge (in the post shared by the hall and the wing); the west end is tenoned in. Only the north part of the roof of this wing was accessible, and its sole visible feature is a long straight wind brace rising from the north-west corner. We were not able to see the upper surface of the central tie.

The sequence of alternating stud and stave mortices in the soffit of the north wall-plate shows that the wall was framed. The sequence is interrupted near the upper end by an almost square mortice, and this must be for the central mullion of a four-light window. There is a shutter-groove in the plate at this point, extending as far as the cruck-blade.

Vertical grooves in the sides of the northern cruck-blade suggest that the panels were filled with split oak rather than wattle.

No frame member anywhere in the house has any decoration more elaborate than a plain chamfer, but this is of generous dimensions and in most cases carefully finished.

Dating: the structural evidence

The Old Bakery contains a number of features with parallels in other buildings, for which dates have been suggested. Unfortunately the dates extend over a range from before 1280 to about 1500; and on the dating significance of some of them the authorities are not unanimous. These points will be briefly enumerated before we pass on to consider features which can be used to establish a narrower bracket.

For example, a crown-post braced to the collar purlin only, would on one typology belong to the period before 1310:¹ but some Hertfordshire houses in which it occurs have been tentatively dated to about 1450.² A crown-post with a slight chamfer, as here, has been held to be 'not particularly early' by one authority; pre-1280 by others.³ The sharply cranked profile of the tie has been called a 'late' feature;⁴ its section — almost square — an 'early' one.⁵ In fact the best Buckinghamshire analogy for this timber, with its three well defined angles (less apparent on the west side than the east), was in the early fifteenth century hall of North End Farm House, Long Crendon,⁶ but this was not associated with a crown-post, and the tie was halved to the cruck-blades.

The brackets under the central tie-beam in the wing have a good parallel in the demolished house at 43–47 High Street Chalfont St. Peter, for which the earliest date suggested was 1400.⁷ The profile of the bearer in the wing has analogies in Hertfordshire, at Fabdens in Standon, and Rumbolds in Cottered,⁸ which have both been

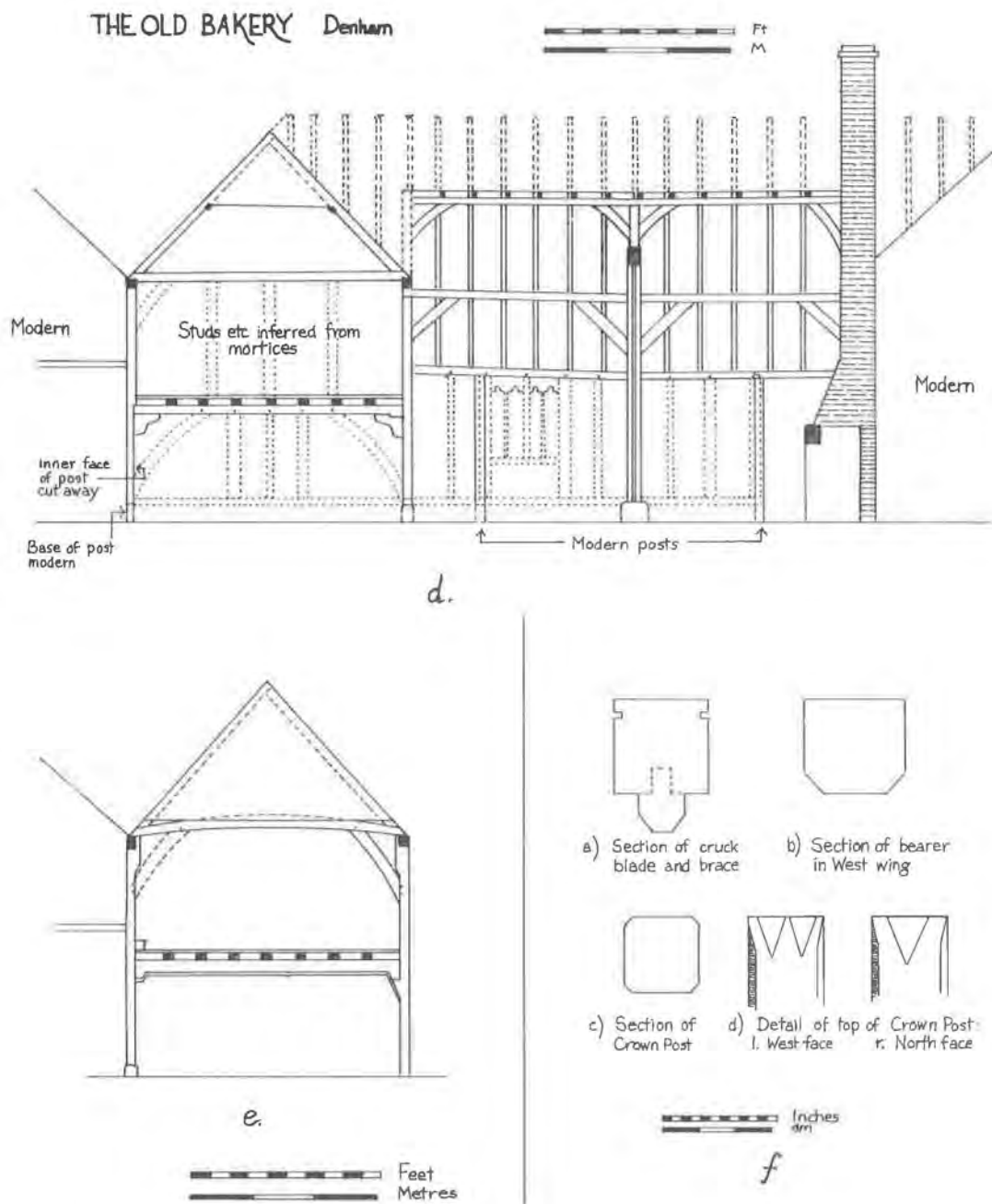


Fig. 2. The Old Bakery, Denham
 d) Cut-away view looking north to line D – D. e) Section at C – C, looking north.
 f) Details.

dated to about 1500. But the roof of the wing has been reconstructed at least once (in its present form it seems to be eighteenth century), and we have noted above a number of points which suggest that other parts are not as originally built. It would be unsafe to rely on the wing for dating.

On the whole it seems safest to say that the general characteristics of the open truss (a single tie,⁹ cranked and arch-braced, plus short crown-post with curved braces) place it in Fletcher and Spokes's Period III, 1310 – 1360; and the absence of braces between rafters and collars suggests a date towards the end of this period. The plainness of the building, lacking any decorative mouldings, suggests deliberate simplification, which may also point to its being late. 1360, however, is rather an arbitrary date, and we are really talking about the half century between 1350 and 1400.

Can we do anything to narrow this gap? Two features may hint at a date in its first half rather than its second. The setting of the side 'purlins', square to the vertical, shows that they are really arcade plates, vestiges of the aisled hall type of house from which base-crucks are derived; and the straight wind-braces are also early. But we are not on very firm ground here. To arrive at a closer dating it is necessary to appeal to other kinds of evidence.

Dating: the historical context

The social status of the Old Bakery is defined by its dimensions. Of the ninety base-cruck buildings known in 1972¹⁰ sixty five were domestic. There were eighteen manor houses, four clergy houses, and forty three other houses. Of the manor houses the average internal width was 23 feet 6 inches, and the median 25 feet 6 inches. The clergy houses fall within the same range. Of the other houses the average was 20 feet 2 inches and the median 20 feet. Subsequent discoveries are unlikely to have affected these figures significantly. The Old Bakery, with an internal span of 19 feet 4 inches between wall plates, was smaller than the smallest manor or clergy house. In any case the locations of Denham's two manor houses, and of its mediaeval rectory, are known: the main manor, demesne of Westminster Abbey, had its manor house at Denham Court; the other, whose lords were the Durdent family, had its manor house at the Savoy; the mediaeval rectory is securely located at today's Old Rectory by a field name, La Sere, which appears next to it on a late sixteenth-century estate map,¹¹ and also in a fourteenth-century document in which it is said to be opposite the rector's gates.¹²

The Old Bakery could have been the house of a rich franklin (a yeoman, to use an only slightly anachronistic term), a burgess or lawyer on the way to becoming a gentleman, or the local agent of a great landowner. At Denham in the late fourteenth century only three men are known to have answered any of these descriptions: James Andrew, Andrew de Bledelawe, and whoever was steward of the Abbot of Westminster.

James Andrew was a citizen and cloth merchant of London, with shop property in the City¹³ and land in Amersham.¹⁴ In 1358 he began building up a considerable landed estate in Denham, and one of the properties he bought there was a messuage on the north side of the village street,¹⁵ a position corresponding to that of the Old Bakery. There is no evidence of his ever having lived in Denham (he is always referred to as 'of London') but he might have built it with the intention of doing so.

Andrew de Bledelawe was a member of a successful legal family, two members of which, John and Thomas (possibly Andrew's father and brother), were busy attorneys

in the Common Pleas.¹⁶ He himself had land in Farnham Royal¹⁷ as well as in Denham, where it is quite certain that he was resident.¹⁸ But the only property known to have been held by him in the village itself was in 'South Street',¹⁹ which must have been the street running south-west from the corner on which the Old Bakery stands. He may of course have had other property in the village, and cannot altogether be ruled out.

It remains to consider the third possibility. The Abbots of Westminster were lords of the manor of Denham, which had been granted to the Abbey in 1290 and subsequently allotted to the Abbot's portion. The Abbots were as conservative in matters of estate management as most monastic landlords, and were slow to adapt to the social changes brought about by the Black Death. It was many decades before they followed the example of other landlords and let their demesnes at farm — in fact at Denham this did not happen until the 1430s.²⁰

But Denham had suffered particularly severely in 1349. Mr. Colin le Messurier has calculated, on the basis of the entries into villein tenements recorded in the Manor Court Rolls,²¹ that two thirds of the population perished. And if the Abbots were for a time able to solve the problem of labour shortage, the dearth of tenants was another matter. For this, in the middle 1360s, Abbot Nicholas de Litlington adopted a drastic solution: he turned the manor into what would nowadays be called a sporting estate.

Two hundred and thirty years later, in about 1590, a compact block of fields, covering 120 acres to the south of the Oxford road, bore names containing the word 'Park'.²² North-west of the village a number of areas of woodland were designated as 'Warren', with or without qualification. Both words denoted, in the Middle Ages, land reserved for the lord's hunting. And for both, as will be seen, we have dates in the 1360s.

In 1375 the Abbot was presented in his own Manor Court for stopping up a path *in novo parco*,²³ and the use of the Latin phrase in a group of documents which invariably gives place names in English shows that 'New Park' was not yet a name (in which role it could have persisted for centuries) but a description. In 1375 the New Park really was new. How new we can see from one of the Abbot's household accounts: the park was being embanked from 1367 to 1369.²⁴

The presence of a park implies visits by the Abbot to hunt in it, and visits imply a house in which he and his retinue could stay. There was a Manor House, but Abbot Litlington was not in the habit of visiting it: when he died in 1386 an inventory was made of his goods in the Manor House at Denham, and there is nothing at all of his in any living room.²⁵ There are utensils and fixed equipment in the service rooms, and some assorted lumber in the chapel, which was clearly not in use; but nothing else at all. On his visits to Denham he must have lodged somewhere else, and it is most unlikely that any suitable home was available in Denham, whether on his demesne or for purchase. He would have had to build, and not only for himself: the reorganisation of the manor must have involved new arrangements for its supervision, and a steward or agent must have been installed, in addition to whoever was farming the demesne, and presumably occupying the manor house.

Two separate bouts of building activity are recorded in the Abbot's household accounts for these years. Under the accounts for the year Sept 1364 to Sept 1365 we find *Et Roberto Broun servienti de Denham per talliam pro factura novi edificii ibidem £21, 3s, 2d.*²⁶ And for Sept 1367 to Sept 1368: *Et comp' se liberasse Roberto*

*Broun servienti de Denham ut in diversis custibus factis circa nov' edificac' ibidem et circa clausaram parci et in denariis ut patet per parcelas £56, 12s, 7½d.*²⁷

We suggest that one of the buildings here recorded was a hunting lodge for the Abbot and the other a house for his steward. There was somewhere in Tudor Denham a house called 'Lodge', and it had a warren appurtenant to it.²⁸ It was not a mere warrener's cottage, for its then occupant, John Bugbard (to choose arbitrarily one of the numerous spellings), was paying £3 15s a year rent for it, and was assessed for tax on goods worth £3 8s — well within the range of quite substantial yeomen in other townships.²⁹ An estate map in the County Record Office³⁰ shows 'Bagbeare's Warren' north-west of the village. Its name must be identical with Bugbard's and it is in an area significantly close to a property known in modern times as Andrew's Farm. It is probably also significant that 1366 produces the first reference to an abbatial warren in Denham.³¹

This house 'Lodge', wherever it may have been, must have been the Abbot's hunting lodge. But it was not the Old Bakery. No magnate would live in, or hunt from, a house in a village street; and in any case the Old Bakery is not a lordly house. As a steward's house, however, it is perfectly in character; and as we have seen, there were two houses built in the 1360s.

In 1366 Abbot Litlington had bought the Denham property of James Andrew,³² amounting to 128½ acres of arable, plus woodland and meadow and two messuages and a toft in the town. It included, as we have seen, a plot answering to the site of the Old Bakery. If one of the buildings recorded in the accounts was indeed erected there, it must have been the second of the two, since the Andrew land was not bought till 1366. There is no means of knowing how much of the £53 12s 7½d was devoted to building the second house and how much to embanking. The £21 3s 2d recorded as the cost of the first would have been quite sufficient to build a house considerably grander than the Old Bakery, if the abbot had provided the timber.³³

Nicholas Litlington was unusual among abbots in being well-born, and it is no surprise to find him taking an opportunity to provide himself with the pleasures of the chase. We think there is a very strong case for saying that his purchase of James Andrew's land was part of his plan for reorganising the manor, and that having already built a hunting lodge for himself, he used part of his new purchase as the site for a house for his steward — the Old Bakery. The weight of the historical evidence — unusually ample in Denham — is thus consistent with the archaeological evidence, and enables us to suggest a firm date, 1367-8, for the building of this house.

Acknowledgements

We owe heartfelt thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Moir for allowing us to penetrate with our tape measures into every corner of their beautiful house. Indeed for their labours on it all who care about such things are deeply in their debt. We gladly acknowledge our indebtedness to Miss Barbara Harvey, who knows more about the estates of Westminster Abbey than anyone else, and to whom we owe the piece of evidence that clinched our hypothesis. We are also grateful to Mr. Richard Harris and the late Mr. Stuart Rigold, who visited the building, pointed out a number of details which we had missed, and commented helpfully on our conclusions. Mr. Colin Le Messurier generously gave us access to the fruits of his long study of Denham's history. None of these people however, is in any way responsible for what we have written.

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2. C. F. Stell, 'Houses in High Street, Chalfont St Peter', *Records of Bucks, XVIII pt 4* (1969).
3. Stell, *op. cit.*; Fletcher and Spokes, *op. cit.*
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8. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, unpublished MS report.
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10. *Ibid.*
11. Bucks Record Office, Estate Map, Ma W 98. The map is catalogued as late seventeenth-century, and was certainly revised and added to then, but it contains matter which seems to belong to c. 1590.
12. R. H. Lathbury, '*History of Denham*', privately printed, 1904.
13. *Cal. Pat. 1370 - 74*, p. 162.
14. PRO, De Banco Rolls, CP 40/440/598.
15. Westminster Abbey Muniments, *Liber Niger Quarternus*, (W.A.M. 1), f xli (v).
16. PRO, CP 40.
17. CP 40/425/482d.
18. Lathbury, *op. cit.*, Various lists of fourteenth-century inhabitants.
19. CP 40/425/330.
20. B. F. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates*, O.U.P. 1978.
21. Abstract of Court Rolls from fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, now in the possession of the Rector and churchwarden of Denham.
22. BRO, Estate Map, Ma W 98.
23. Lathbury, *op. cit.*, p. 394.
24. W. A. M. 24512 and 24513. We owe this reference to Miss Barbara Harvey.
25. Lathbury, *op. cit.*, p. 125, citing Harley 84, f 51.
26. W.A.M. 24511.
27. W.A.M. 24512.
28. PRO, Patent Rolls, (38 Elizabeth I), C 66/1444/15.
29. PRO, Subsidy Rolls, E 179/79/216. Cf (in same roll) John Child of Amersham, John Balam of Penn, and, in E 179/121/259, William Child and John Warren of Coleshill. The last lived in a house which in 1662 had 6 hearths.
30. BRO Ma W 98.
31. W.A.M. 1, f xlii (v); *Cal. Pat. 1364 - 7*, p. 328.
32. PRO Coram Rege Rolls, KB 27/424/5.
33. L. F. Salzman, '*Building in England*', Oxford (1952), p. 206.