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A MEDIEVAL HALL-HOUSE AT NORTH CRAY

By P. J. TESTER, F.S.A.

THE building which forms the subject of these notes stood end-on to the east side of the main road (A223) through North Cray (N.G.R. TQ 48817229). As its removal was required in the interests of road widening, it was taken down in 1968 with the intention of re-erecting it elsewhere, though at the time of writing the timbers are still in store and there seems to be no immediate prospect of its reconstruction. Before the dismantling, I was able to make a detailed examination of the house and, from the evidence so obtained, it is possible to reconstruct its original arrangement and subsequent modifications.

As may be seen in the accompanying photograph (Pl. IA), there was little in its latter external appearance to suggest its antiquity or architectural interest, the sides being weather-boarded and the ends partially renewed in brickwork. The part nearest the road served as a grocer's shop and the rest was divided into two cottages. When the local authority purchased the place for demolition in 1967, I obtained permission to examine the interior and was rewarded by discovering, above the attic ceilings, the heavily soot-encrusted rafters of a medieval crown-post roof. In the following months, I was able, with the help of some friends and the full support of Bexley Council, to strip-out the interior and reveal and record the features of interest. Considerable public interest was shown in what was brought to light, and the Council undertook the expense of careful dismantling in order that the house could be rebuilt elsewhere as a place of historic interest. Their subsequent unwillingness to provide the funds necessary to complete the project caused disappointment to those whose voluntary labours had been responsible for the discovery.

Despite the fact that much of the original timber-framing of the walls had long since been modified or removed, it was possible from the evidence of mortices in the surviving members to make a complete reconstruction of the south-west side, as shown in Fig. 1. In this drawing the only elements which cannot be proved from remaining evidence are the four-centred form of the door-head and the lower window in the north-west end bay. The framing was typically Kentish in character, with long curved braces revealed on the exterior, the studs being set back and concealed by daub applied to riven laths nailed across the studs. The roof was very well preserved and was smoke-blackened

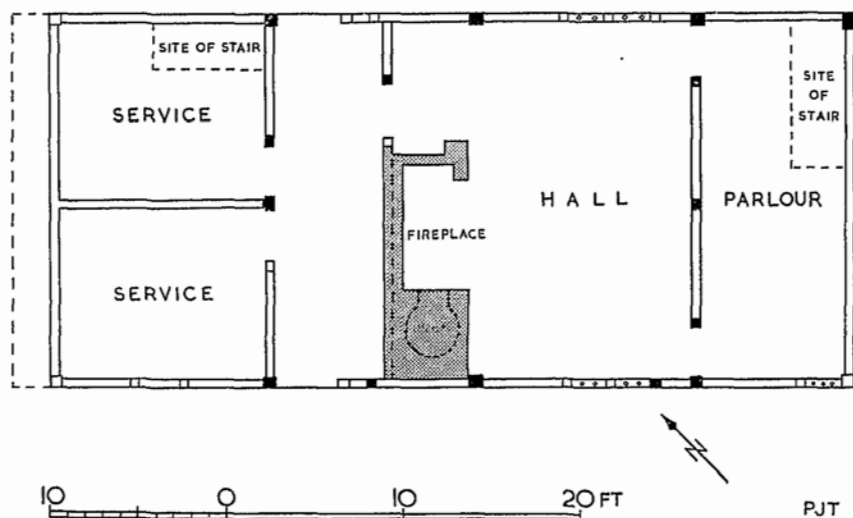
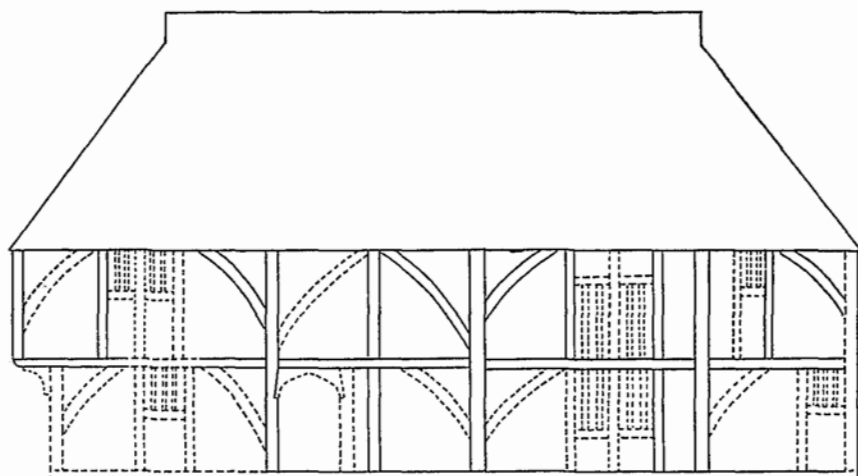
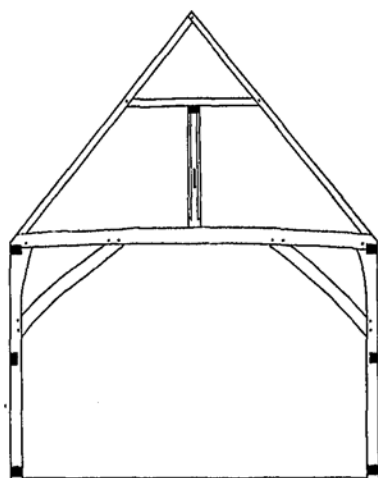


FIG. 1.

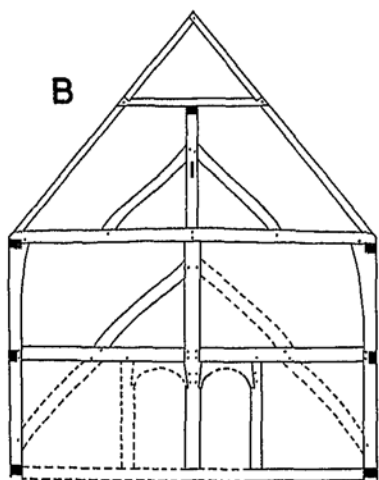
(Above) Reconstruction of the south-west Elevation of the North Cray Hall-house as originally built.

(Below) The Plan includes the later Partition across the Hall to form a Screens Passage. This was in turn partly underset by the Brickwork of the late-sixteenth-century fireplace.

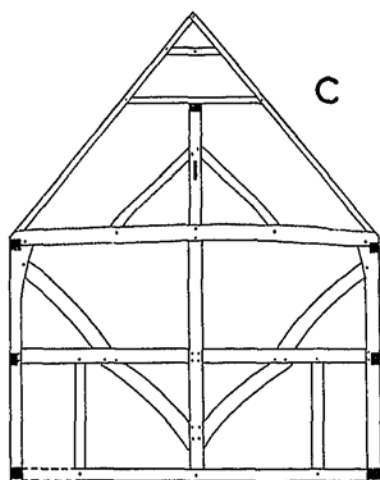
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A



B



C



PJT

FIG. 2.

- A. Open Truss across Hall.
- B. Closed Truss between Hall and Service Bay.
- C. Closed Truss separating Hall from Parlour and Solar.

throughout, even in the hipped ends over the upper rooms in both terminal bays. In construction, it possessed the usual tie-beams at the division of each of the four bays supporting plain crown-posts braced up only to the collar-purlin and on the closed trusses also downward to the tie-beam. Each pair of rafters was halved and pegged at the apex and the collars were dovetailed into the rafters. At each end of the roof were gablets for the outlet of smoke from the open fire in the hall, that at the northern end being obscured externally by modern alterations to the roof.

As first built—possibly early in the fifteenth century—the hall was entered directly by two opposite lateral doors and there was no screens passage. Adjoining the entrance were the two customary service rooms entered by doorways set close together at the centre. Above the service was a single large room, jettied toward the road and open to the rafters. Access was by means of a ladder-stair from the room below, as shown by the trimming of the floor-joists on the north-east side. The evidence of a missing brace clearly indicated that this stair was not originally accessible directly from the hall. At the 'high' end there was a narrow parlour with the solar above. The partition separating hall and parlour had an opening at each end, neither bearing any evidence of having originally possessed a door. That at the north-east end gave access to the solar stair, the position of which could be determined from the trimming of the joists, while the other gave admittance to the parlour itself.

Both end bays were closed from the hall by stud-and-daub partitions extensively blackened on their faces towards the hall. In the first phase of occupation, the smoke from the hall fire escaped from the gablets at each end of the roof. At the north-west end the triangular space above the collar of the truss between hall and service was left open so that smoke could enter the upper part of the room above the service and so make its way out through the gablet. Later, this space above the collar was lathed across and daub applied from the service side, this being more readily accessible, the daub being left unsmoothed towards the hall where it became soot-encrusted like the older parts of the partition (Pl. IIA). From that time the only smoke outlet was presumably the gablet at the south-east end. Smoke-staining on the rafters over the solar was very pronounced and can be explained by assuming that smoke penetrated to the upper level from the hall through the opening for the solar stair. As the gablet at this end was on the line of the solar truss, smoke could escape directly without entering the solar, in contrast to the arrangement at the service end previously described.

Considerable modification was made to these arrangements at a subsequent period, possibly in the early sixteenth century, by intro-



A. North Cray Hall-house viewed from North-west, 1967.



B. Upper part of North-west side of Partition between Hall and Room above Service.



A. Space above Collar on line of Service Truss, showing Daub Filling unsmoothed towards Hall.



B. Decoration on limewashed Daub Filling between Studs in lower half of Partition shown in Plate IB.

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ducing a partition across the hall to form an entry-passage. This partition was formed by inserting two transverse beams, resting on the wall-plates and bresssumers respectively but not tenoned into them. Evidence of mortices in these beams showed that stud-and-daub filling had completely shut off the shortened hall from floor to roof and heavy soot-incrustation on the hall side proved that the open hearth was then still in use. The filling of this partition, where it survived, was seen to be constructed with bark-covered rods in place of the split laths used to secure the daub in the older parts of the house. Entrance to the hall was effected by an opening towards the north-east end of the partition where one side-post remained bearing the mortice for an arched lintel. Closely spaced stud mortices in the underside of the lower transverse beam proved that there was no other opening between hall and passage. As part of this conversion, the floor of the room over the service was extended above the entry-passage, access to this new first-floor accommodation being obtained by an upper opening against the central post of the service truss where a rebate was cut for a door. In its modified form, with shortened hall, the house now resembled the common type of late-medieval hall-house with a structural 'undershot' entry-passage.

In the late sixteenth century a brick chimney with a wide fireplace and circular oven was constructed at the low end of the shortened hall. As was usual, a floor was laid across the hall so as to afford continuous first-floor accommodation throughout the whole length of the house.

The medieval windows can be reconstructed from some remaining timbers and diamond-shaped mortices under the wall-plates and in the bresssumers where vertical wooden bars had been situated. In the hall there had been a large unglazed window in both side walls towards the high end, while similar, smaller windows could be traced in parlour, solar and the room over the service. Rebates for side-hung internal shutters occurred in the hall windows and also at the upper level of the north-west end wall.

Doors into the service rooms and also the south-west hall entrance had traces of arched lintels, though insufficient remained to show if they had been four-centred, three-centred or ogee.

Joists supporting the room over the service were roughly finished and of considerable size, about 8 in. in width, so that the intervals between them were not greater than the joists themselves. They were laid parallel to the longitudinal axis of the house and at the north-west end they formerly projected 2 ft. to produce a jetty. This feature had been bricked-in below at a later date but the position of the original ground-floor end wall was plainly evident on the undersides of the joists. The parlour ceiling was similarly constructed except for the jetty, the scantling of the joists being slightly less than those in the service bay.

Original daub filling of the frame in all external walls had been almost entirely removed but it remained in the internal partitions and consisted of brown clay liberally mixed with chopped straw. The surfaces were thinly plastered and lime-washed. In the room over the service some decoration remained in the form of red spots crudely applied to the lime-washed surface (Pl. IIB). This suggests that the room was at one time used as more than a storage loft, despite its inconvenient access, a conclusion supported by evidence of attempts to exclude smoke entering from the hall, as previously described.

None of the timbers was moulded or otherwise treated with decorative carving. The central crown-post was merely chamfered at the edges, each chamfer terminating in a half-pyramid stop a few inches above the tie-beam. A scarf-joint in the wall-plate on the south-west side of the house was of the 'normal' horizontally halved form commonly found in medieval hall-houses in this area.

In conclusion it may be noted that after the site had been cleared, an excavation of the area was undertaken by our member, Mr. D. T. Jones, the results of which can suitably be described in a separate report.