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BARHAM: THE OLD AISLED HOUSE

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The ancient village of Barham lies some six miles south-east of Canterbury, close to the historic Watling Street between Canterbury and Dover, now a busy motorway. The oldest part of the village nestles around the church, whose green, copper-covered spire above a wooded hillside presents a very attractive picture. The rest of the parish extends further down the lovely Elham valley, and has in all some fifty listed buildings, several of which would merit an article on their own.

The manor of Barham is a very old one, being held soon after Domesday by a family who took their name from it, and in 1171 by Lambert de Barham who was assessed on one knight's fee, although he acknowledged only half a fee. The manor continued in this family until 1597, when it was conveyed with the lordship to Charles Fotherby, then Archdeacon, and later Dean of Canterbury. After this, *circa* 1609, the oldest wing of the present Barham Court was built, probably by Fotherby for his son.¹

The history of the manor from this time has recently been the subject of an article published in *Archaeologia Cantiana*.²

THE OLD HOUSE

This stands in Church Lane, near the lychgate, and there is not much doubt that this was the manor house in medieval times. Firstly, its position close to the church, and the fact that it had ancient farm buildings close to it, but most of all the quality of its construction and its timbers leave little doubt that it was a house of considerable importance.

¹ P.H. Blake, 'Barham Court, History and Development', *Arch. Cant.*, cvi (1988), 28.

² *Ibid.*

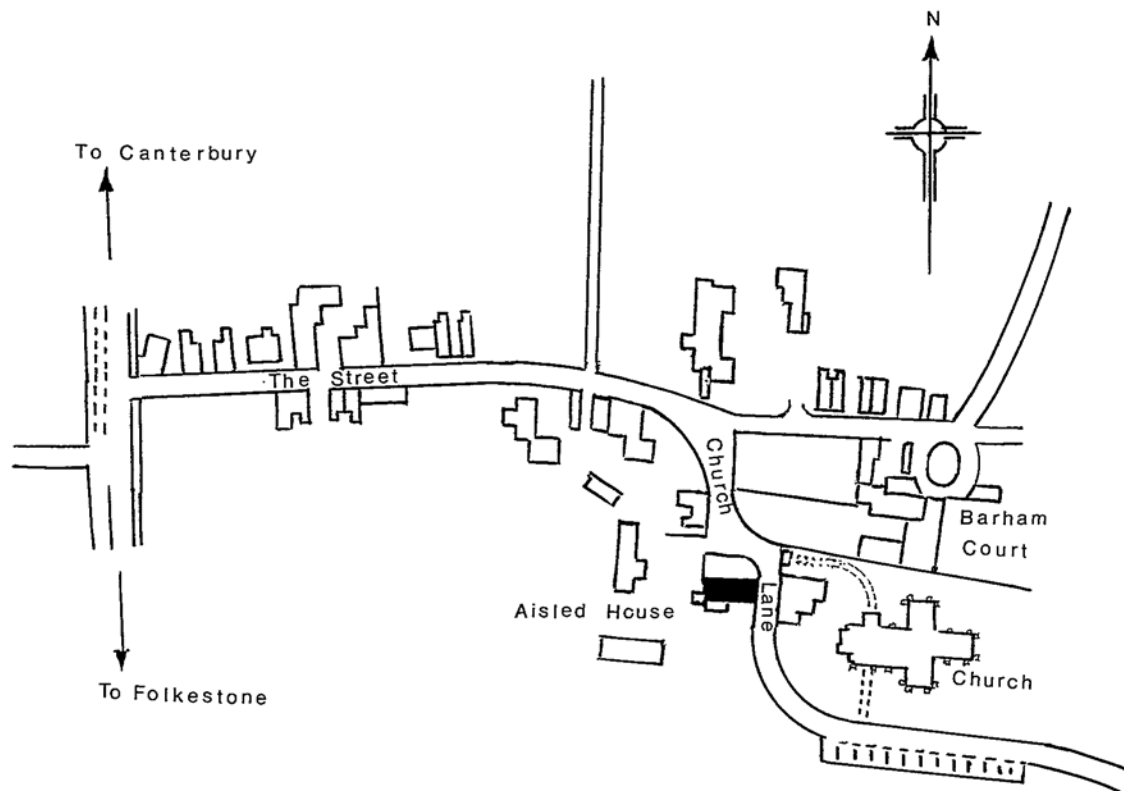


Fig. 1. The Old Village of Barham, showing location of the Old Aisled Hall.

At first glance, the house appears to be a fine example of a 'Wealden' house of the fifteenth century (Plate I), but once inside it soon becomes apparent that it is much older than this, and of very great interest, for the back part is aisled, and the roof there supported by posts, as in a barn, – a very early type of dwelling first introduced into south-east England by tribes from north-west Germany who invaded this part of the country more than a thousand years ago, and of which examples can still be found, not only in Hesse in West Germany,³ but also in Kent and neighbouring counties.⁴ Such houses continued to be built for several centuries, despite obvious disadvantages. One aisled house called Fairfield at Eastry, near Sandwich, has been shown to date from after 1400. The reason why this design persisted in a region where oak forests once predominated is thought to have been because oak-timbering was not of sufficient length to span more than 6.10 m. (20 ft.) without aisles, whereas the more northern, Scandinavian tribes with their taller pine trees had no such problem.

A typical feature of an aisled house, viewed from outside, is that the hall roof comes down low, both at the front and at the back, leaving room only for small windows, whereas the later 'Wealden' design had much better fenestration.

A detailed study of the framework of this house shows clear evidence that it was built originally as an aisled hall-house, somewhere about the middle of the thirteenth century, and then, two centuries later its front was entirely dismantled, and rebuilt in the improved 'Wealden' style, doubtless to improve both its appearance and its internal lighting.

The plaster ceiling in the old parlour was removed in recent years, revealing the heavy oak joists, and showing quite clearly that the old timbers were cut up, and re-used to make a new dragon beam assembly at each corner of the front in order to provide jetties, or overhangs at both the front and the sides. Here we find re-used timbers showing redundant rebates and mortises which exactly match ones in the rear aisle assembly (Plate II).

Here one might hazard a guess at which owners were responsible for all this. If the aisled house was built in the middle of the thirteenth century, then it was Gilbert de Barham who at that time was settling estates on himself and his wife, and who died in 1254. Regarding the fifteenth-century alterations, these might have been the work of

³ Karl Baumgarten, 'Notes on the History of the German Hall House,' *Vern. Arch.*, (1976), 16.

⁴ Kathleen Sandall, 'Aisled Halls in England and Wales,' *Vern. Arch.*, (1975), 20.

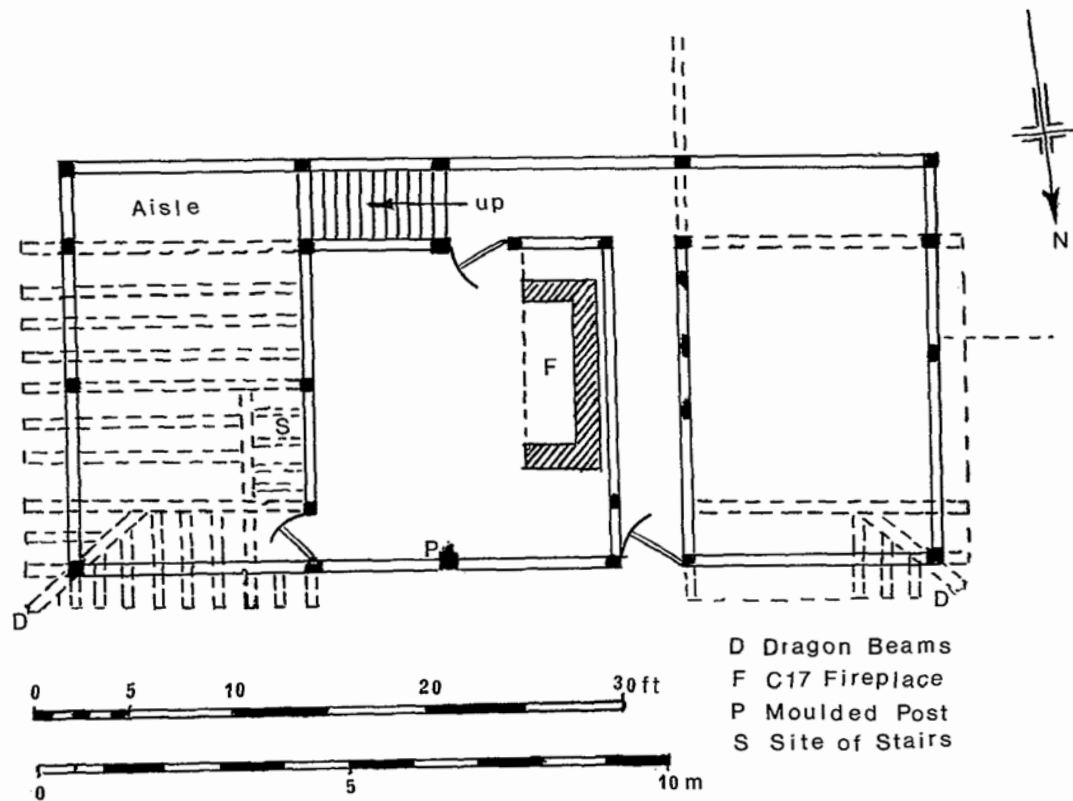


Fig. 2. Plan of the Old Aisled House.

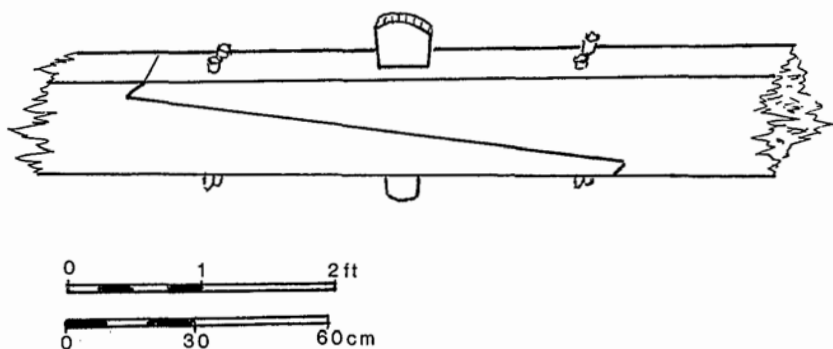


Fig. 3. The scarf joint in Little Oak Hall.

Richard de Barham, Sheriff of Kent, who was Lord of the manor from 1391.⁵

With few exceptions, the dimensions of medieval hall houses of this type seem to vary very little, and this house follows the usual plan. The overall length of the house measures 14.6 m. (48 ft.), and its width 6.40 m. (21 ft.), while the central hall, once open right to the roof is internally 5.49 m. (18 ft.) wide, by 5.80 m. (19 ft.) from front to rear including the aisle, which is just one metre (3 ft. 3 in.) wide between the plates (Fig. 2).

SCARF JOINTS

In many parts of the country, medieval aisled barns may still be found, where posts support arcade plates extending the whole length of the building, which of necessity had to be joined at some point. These so-called 'scarf' joints differ in design during various periods, and thus provide a very good clue to their age. Two such joints were found in the remaining arcade plate at Barham, and in technical terms should be described as 'stop splayed, with undersquinted butts, one face key and four pegs'⁶ (Fig. 3).

It will be seen that these joints have no tensile strength apart from their pegs, and being one metre long, (3 ft. 3 in.), were very wasteful in their use of heavy oak timber. The Essex expert on carpentry, Cecil Hewett, who visited this old house, said that the joints were certainly very early ones, probably of the thirteenth century.

⁵ P.H. Blake, in correspondence.

⁶ Cecil A. Hewett, *The Development of Carpentry*, (1969), 175.

A further clue to the partial rebuilding of the house in the fifteenth century may be seen in the front main post (P on plan), which supports the central tie beams. This is moulded in the style of the later century (Fig. 4), whereas the corresponding post in the rear, aisled part is quite plain.

The curious arrangement of two central tie-beams (Fig. 5) will also be noted. The upper one carries the old arcade plate, and is thus presumably the original one, the lower one having had to be added to facilitate the fifteenth-century alterations. The crown-post (Plate VII) may be seen in one of the upper rooms of the western half of the property, and its style again suggests the later period.

LIFE IN MEDIEVAL TIMES

When one sees uncovered details of such an interesting old house as this, one is led to picture some of the people who lived there, and of the life they led. Such houses are often called Yeoman's houses, but they were frequently built by the church, or by the lesser landowners, as in this case. Such houses always had a central hall which was the common room for everyone for dining, etc., and which was open to the roof, some 6.70 m. (22 ft.) here at Barham, where smoke from the central open hearth had to escape as best it could through the tiles, or perhaps a louvre.

There was little privacy except for the owners who had their own parlour, with their solar, or bedroom above. Here at Barham, a trimmer in the heavy ceiling joists of the parlour shows that the medieval stairs led up to the right, just inside the entrance doorway.

The floors of the lower rooms were of beaten clay, said to be often mixed with ox blood to produce hard surfaces capable of being

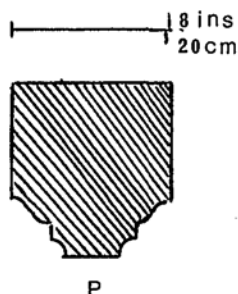


Fig. 4. Section of the central fifteenth-century post.

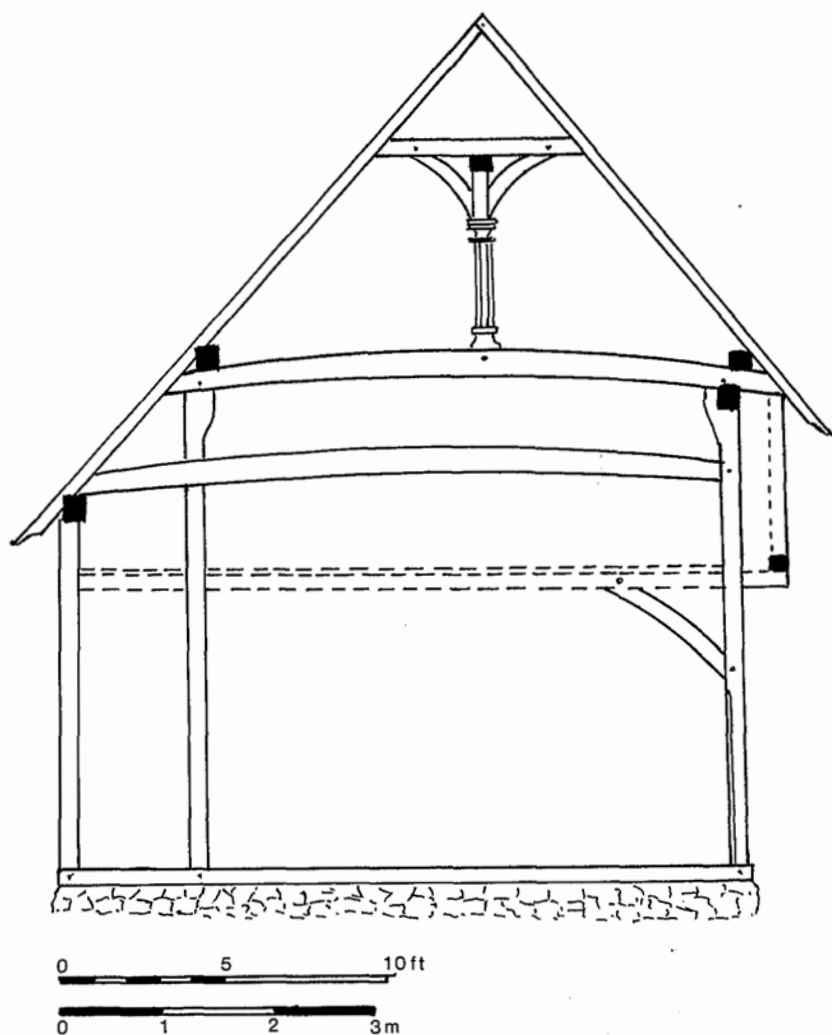


Fig. 5. Vertical section of the house.

polished. When an ancient hall-house in the village of Petham was to be renovated,⁷ the floors at ground level were found to be paved with Elizabethan brick, laid on sand. When all this was being removed, it was found that the medieval clay floor was still there, underneath. This was in surprisingly good condition, except for some signs of wear

⁷ Then known as 'The Thatched Cottage.'

near the doorways. The site of the old central hearth was very obvious, for, although the flagstones had gone, the clay underneath was burnt a bright red, and was surrounded by a black ring.

At the far, service end of the hall was the cross passage, with outer doors both front and back. This is still to be seen at Barham, although the short wooden screen or speer inside each door has gone. This was designed to shield the hearth from draughts.⁸

In the centre at this end were always to be found the twin doorways of the buttery and pantry, but at Barham these were plastered over when the house was divided into two dwellings. The word buttery, of course, is a corruption of the old French word *bouteillerie*, or place for bottles, and pantry comes from the French *paneterie*, for keeping bread.

A third doorway at the rear end of this side usually enclosed a second staircase leading to another room above, a room said to have been reserved for the women and children of the household. Any men servants left over had to sleep on the floor of the hall, around the central hearth.

Several such medieval stairways have been found in Kent and elsewhere. They usually have solid oak treads of triangular section nailed on to sloping bearers, as discovered when Bridge Farm at Bridge, near Canterbury, was demolished in 1962.⁹ An existing example is in the Old Bell Farm at Harrietsham near Maidstone, where the whole of the fifteenth-century service wing of a very fine Wealden house was found to survive intact.

As invariably happened to all medieval houses which survived, the old central hearth at Barham was replaced early in the seventeenth century by a wide brick fireplace and chimney, enabling an upper floor to be put into the hall. This was probably done by the Rev. Charles Fotherby who owned the manor at the time, and who built the earliest brick part of Barham Court.

The insertion of an upper floor into the old hall at Barham made the two medieval staircases unnecessary, and these must have been removed and replaced by the present stairs at the east end of the rear aisle.

Following the fifteenth-century alterations to the old aisled house at Barham and the later erection of new buildings known as Barham Court, the old house became Barham Court Farm, and was occupied by the manager of the estate, remaining so until after the death of G.E. Dering, Esq., in 1911, when it was bought by Mr N.E.W.

⁸ E.W. Parkin, *Arch. Cant.*, lxxvii (1962), 84-5.

⁹ E.W. Parkin, *Arch. Cant.*, lxxix (1964), 137 and 141.

Stainton, in whose possession it remained until 1941, when it was sold to Mr L. Groombridge of Nonington. It was he who divided the old house into two dwellings and sold them in 1965 as separate freeholds, although he retained the farm. They were known for a time as Barham Court Farm Cottages, but are now entirely separate, the eastern half, closest to the church is known as 'Little Oak Hall', and the western half as 'Corner Cottage'.

A WEALDEN RECONSTRUCTION

In order to view a fifteenth-century 'Wealden' house in its original state, one could not do better than to visit the Weald and Downland Museum at Singleton, four miles north of Chichester in Sussex. Here the very fine hall house called Bayleaf, which came from Bough Beech in Kent, and now in a beautiful setting, has been fully restored and furnished in the sparse manner of the fifteenth century, with its central hearth usually alight, its trestle table and benches, its loom in the parlour, its buttery and pantry, its solid block staircases with bedstead above, and the fine crown-post roof visible from the hall.

Outside there has been planted a herb garden in keeping with those times, and behind the house a farmyard and an old barn, with such animals as the owner might have had. Singleton now has thirty or more old buildings.

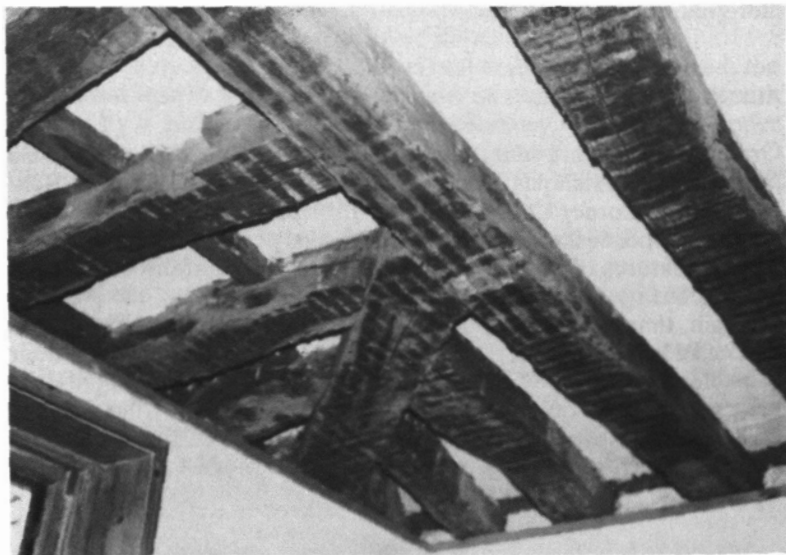
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks are due, firstly to the present owners of these properties, Mr Nicholas Tapley of Little Oak Hall, and to Mrs. Rex-Hamilton of Corner Cottage for allowing such a detailed examination of their properties, and for the care they have taken to preserve the historic features of this very important house, and of discovering yet more about it.

Again, thanks are due to Mr K.W.E. Gravett, M.Sc., F.S.A., and to Cecil Hewett, the Essex expert on medieval carpentry for their valuable help and advice; also to Mr P.H. Blake who holds the present Lordship of the Manor of Barham, and who thus has the greatest interest in the history and the buildings of the manor and provided much of its story and its previous owners.



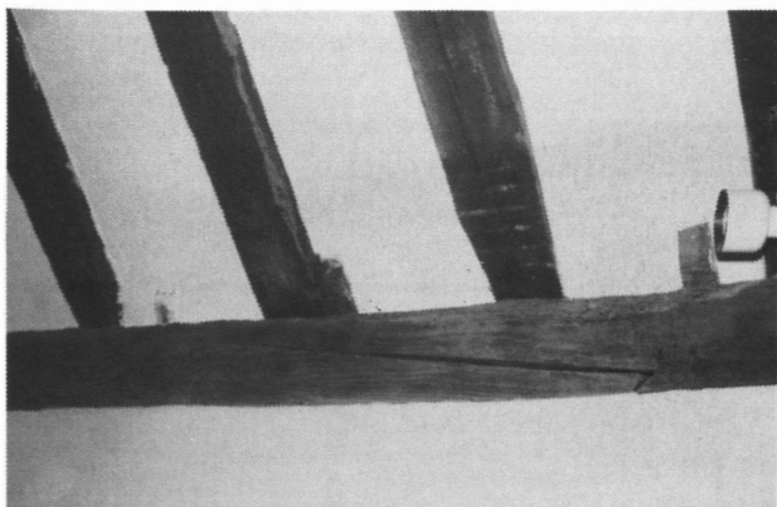
Barham, the Old Aisled House, north front.



The dragon beam assembly, east corner, showing redundant mortises.



Dragon beam assembly, west corner.



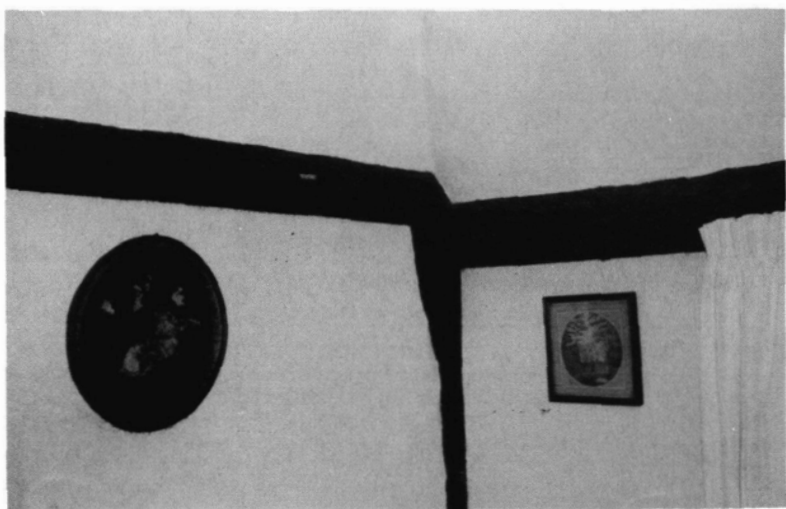
The scarf joint, in Little Oak Hall.

PLATE V



Frame assembly, next to front recess, seen from west wing.

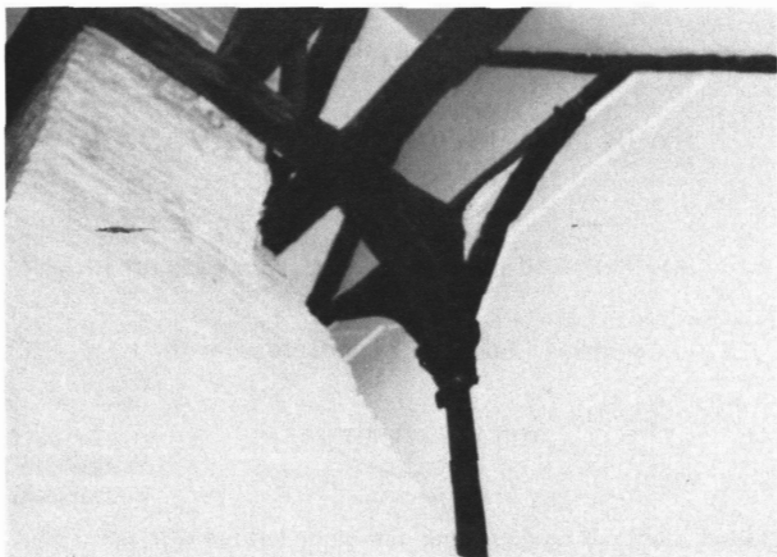
PLATE VI



Frame assembly, seen at extreme west end.

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PLATE VII



The crown-post and part of the roof.

PLATE VIII



The old barn at the west of the house, and the bungalow built on the site of old farm buildings.

