

OLD ST ALBAN'S COURT, NONINGTON: AN ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY

HOWARD AUSTIN JONES

... but wise men, wise men, choose, and mend with care,
Never, your house, let bungling workman touch,
They do too little, or they do too much ...

William Hammond 1752-1821, owner of Old St Alban's Court

In 1986 the KCC's Teacher Training College at St Alban's Court, Nonington, was closed. This led to the breaking up of the associated estate and the selling of various buildings and parcels of land as separate lots. The original brick-built sixteenth-century manor house (Old St Alban's Court), located below the imposing Victorian mansion that superseded it (designed by architect George Devey), was purchased for re-use as a private residence (**Fig. 1**). Under the new owners, Peter and Victoria Hobbs, Old St Alban's Court underwent extensive renovation work between 1997 and 2001. Within the house, most of the interior walls had to be stripped of their plaster and substantial areas of flooring needed replacement. This work allowed a detailed architectural and archaeological examination of the building to be undertaken by members of the Dover Archaeological Group. There was also an opportunity for investigation outside the building, ahead of service trenching and the landscaping and replanting of the adjoining garden areas. Surprisingly little had been previously published concerning this interesting and important Kentish manor house. However, three articles have since appeared in *Archaeologia Cantiana*;¹ and an updated and expanded entry has appeared in latest *Buildings of England* volume.² This report is concerned with details of the surviving remains of the historic building.

The Site

The historic mansion of St Alban's Court was originally the focus of a substantial farming estate that constituted the manor of Eswalt, situated on the east Kent chalklands roughly mid-way between Dover and Canterbury. The house shelters in the bottom of a dry valley about one kilometre to the east of Nonington parish church. (NGR TR 2631 5252.) It stands at an elevation of about 32m AOD, upon a clay and flint gravel sub-soil (Nailbourne deposit).

The medieval house revealed by the archaeological excavation possessed gardens that have been identified on a Rent Roll of 1349, and the St Albans Abbots Roll

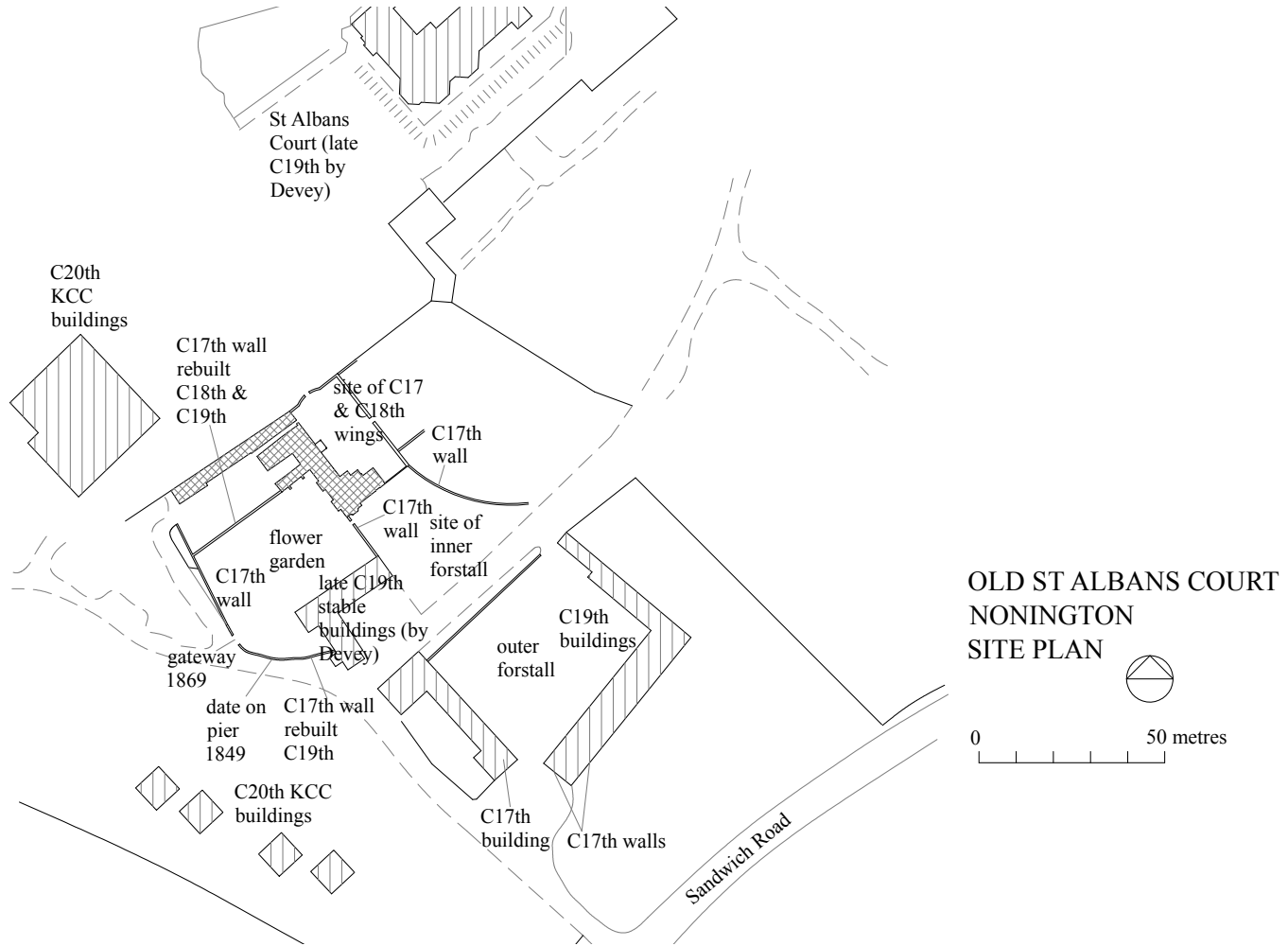


Fig. 1 St Alban's Court site plan with the surviving Old St Alban's Court shown in cross-hatch (including outbuildings at north-west).

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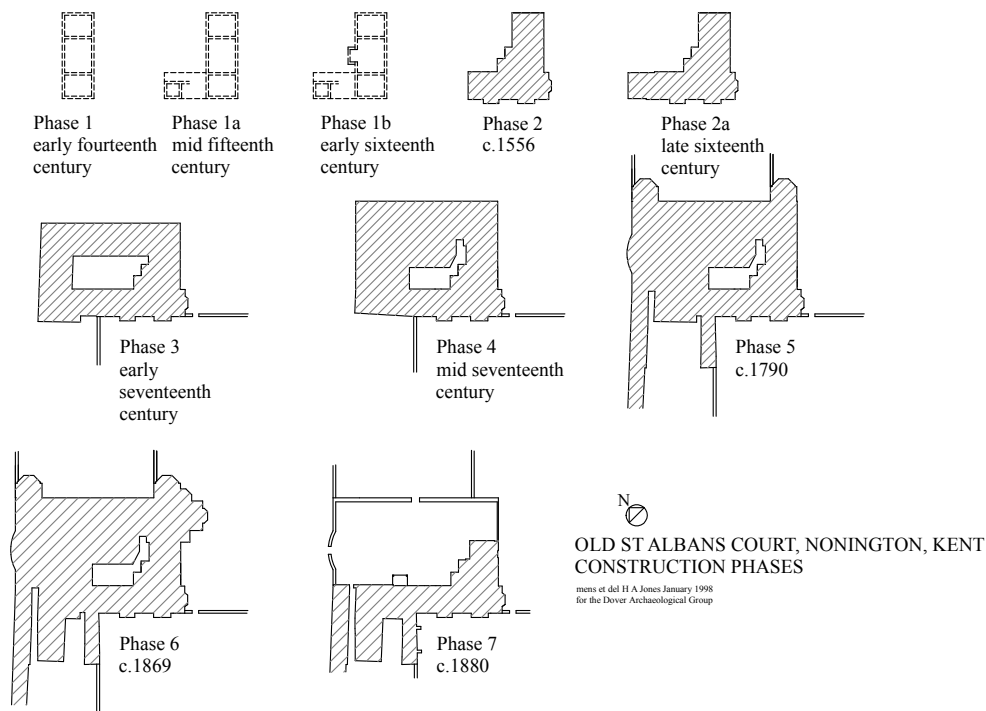


Fig. 2 Old St Alban's Court, construction phases.

records it was repaired extensively in 1399. The pottery evidence is slim, but a construction date of *c.*1315 would seem feasible.

Analysis of the surviving fabric of the house provided a basic outline of its structural history and further refinements to this sequence have been possible through archaeological excavation and the use of documentary records. Taken together, the evidence indicates a fairly complex development to the structure (**Fig. 2**), with regular – perhaps almost continual – alterations, additions and changes being made from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, when much of the house was demolished (**Fig. 3**). Most importantly this included the complete demolition, probably in the late 1870s, of the main range. Records suggest this was originally built *c.*1665 and itself completely reordered *c.*1790. Prints and an early photograph survive of the showing the principal north-east façade of the house, in the classical style of that time; a detailed plan of the extant structure was prepared by the architect George Devey before this demolition work began. This now provides an extremely valuable record of the former extent of the mansion (**Fig. 4**).

The portions of the original house that were kept seem closely to correspond with the earliest parts of the structure which, retaining the *c.*1869 coach yard, together formed a picturesque collection of medieval style buildings to be viewed from the new house.



Fig. 3 The 1878 replacement St Alban's Court

Description of the Surviving Fabric of the Building

As surviving, the general plan of Old St Alban's Court is in the form of a Z, with the principal axis being north-west by south-east (Fig. 4). Five rooms and an upper storey lie along this axis, with a Drawing Room to the south-east and Kitchens to the north-west. A garage and opposing ranges of store rooms lie at the north-west end, projecting south-west, and a Hall and entrance lobby, again with a first floor, are situated at the south-east end of the principal axis and project north-east. In the angle and set within a courtyard is a stair tower, with a walled garden beyond to the north-east. A curving brick wall extends away from the east corner of this garden (Fig. 1), flanking an area of lawn in front of the house. On the opposite south-west side is about an acre of what was by the 1870s a garden for flowers and exotic fruits, enclosed by tall brick walls.

South-east (front) elevation (Figs 5-7)

Facing onto the lawn, the south-east end wall of the house is quite thick (75cm), and built of small, thin orange-pink bricks off a base plinth with a chamfered top. All the brickwork is laid in English bond and has been repointed subsequently with cement mortar, but the original white lime mortar survives behind. Abutting and projecting from its south-west end is a tall (c.4m) kitchen garden wall running

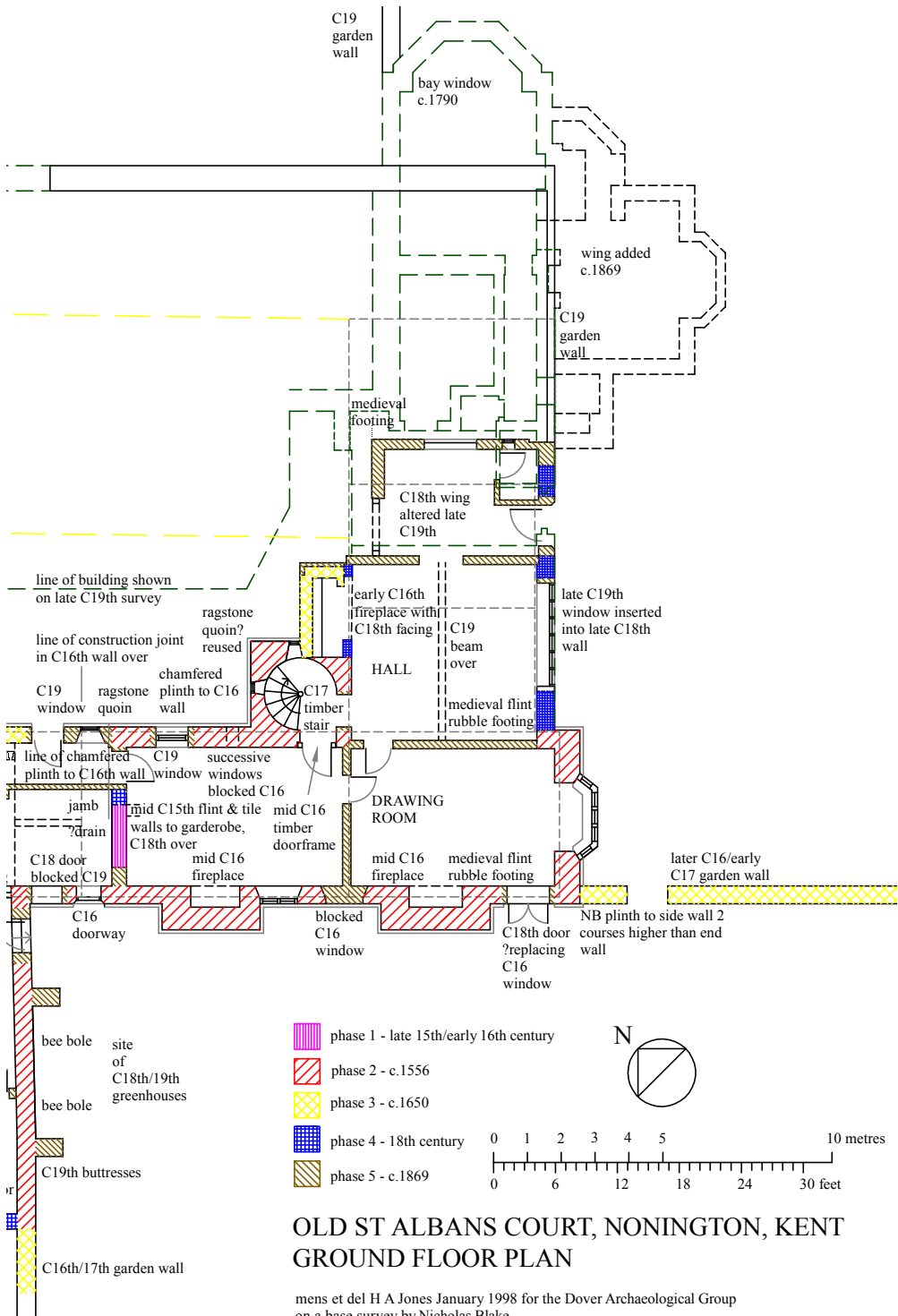
north-west by south-east, up to Devey's stable block of c.1869 beyond to the south-east.

Positioned at the south-west end of this elevation but centrally with respect to the Drawing Room it lights is a two-storey angled bay surmounted by a tiled hipped pentice roof. There is a window of six front- and two angled side-lights respectively to each floor of this bay, with brickwork between and quoins to the comers. These, and the jambs, mullions and transoms which are cavetto in section, are formed of reused Caen stone. It is not known from where this was sourced – Canterbury or Dover would seem the most likely places – but it certainly appears it could not have come from earlier buildings on or around the site. The glazing is supported by iron ferramenta. Above this bay is a (restored) crow-stepped gable all of brickwork, with canted tops, typical of the mid-sixteenth century, with a large sundial positioned centrally. Recent cleaning of the sundial revealed an apparently genuine inscribed date of 1556, the same as that recorded on the building stone by a doorway further north-east to this same elevation.

Extending north-east from the Drawing Room but set back 0.6m from it and fronting the Hall, is a wall of larger buff-red bricks laid in header bond and set in a cream lime mortar, all characteristic of the later eighteenth century. Inserted in the centre of this is a ground floor and very wide mullioned six-light window with Bath stone dressings. This would appear to be of mid to late nineteenth-century date, as is its surrounding patching and surmounting arch, all of which are of orange brickwork also laid in header bond. This latter is continued above first-floor window-cill level, over a dentil course of cut brick, and surmounted by ornamental stepped battlements with canted tops, in the style of the crow-stepped gable adjacent. All this is work of the mid to late nineteenth century. At first floor level and centrally above the wide window is a three-light dormer with a hipped tiled roof and metal casements set in a timber frame. Photographs show this was inserted c.1936-8. Beside this dormer window to the north-east is a nineteenth-century chimney stack. The stack diminishes about a third of the way up and is set at 45 degrees, with the comers of the upper part in line with the faces of the lower. The top is capped with three outward stepping bricks courses with a wider continuation of the stack over. The whole is intended to match the stacks to the south-west kitchen garden elevation (see below).

As noted above, the north-east end of the wall containing the bay window returned for some 0.60m. At first-floor level in this return is visible a straight vertical joint with queen closers, either an abutment with an earlier (medieval timber?) wall or the jamb of a blocked square-headed doorway (**Fig. 8**). The tiled pitched roof over this north-east part extends beyond the chimney, and is brought down to a guttered eaves over a set-back dwarf nineteenth-century timber framed wall with large studs. This is jettied at its south-east end. Abutted against this is a pentice roof at a lower level over the continuation of the eighteenth-century wall, containing a four-centred Tudor style opening rebuilt in Bath stone. Next to this is a (presumably reset) date stone of Caen inscribed 1556, which if authentic seems fairly to represent the date of the bay window. The end of the eighteenth-century wall is truncated with nineteenth-century brickwork: the line is continued by a low garden wall, capped in the nineteenth century with two courses of stepped dentils and a canted brickwork top.

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OLD ST ALBAN'S COURT, NONINGTON, KENT
GROUND FLOOR PLAN

mens et del H A Jones January 1998 for the Dover Archaeological Group
on a base survey by Nicholas Blake



Fig. 5 The picturesque collection of medieval style buildings of Old St Alban's Court viewed from the new house (now much obscured by tree growth).



Fig. 6 Old St Alban's Court: south-west (flower garden) elevation; photo 1869.



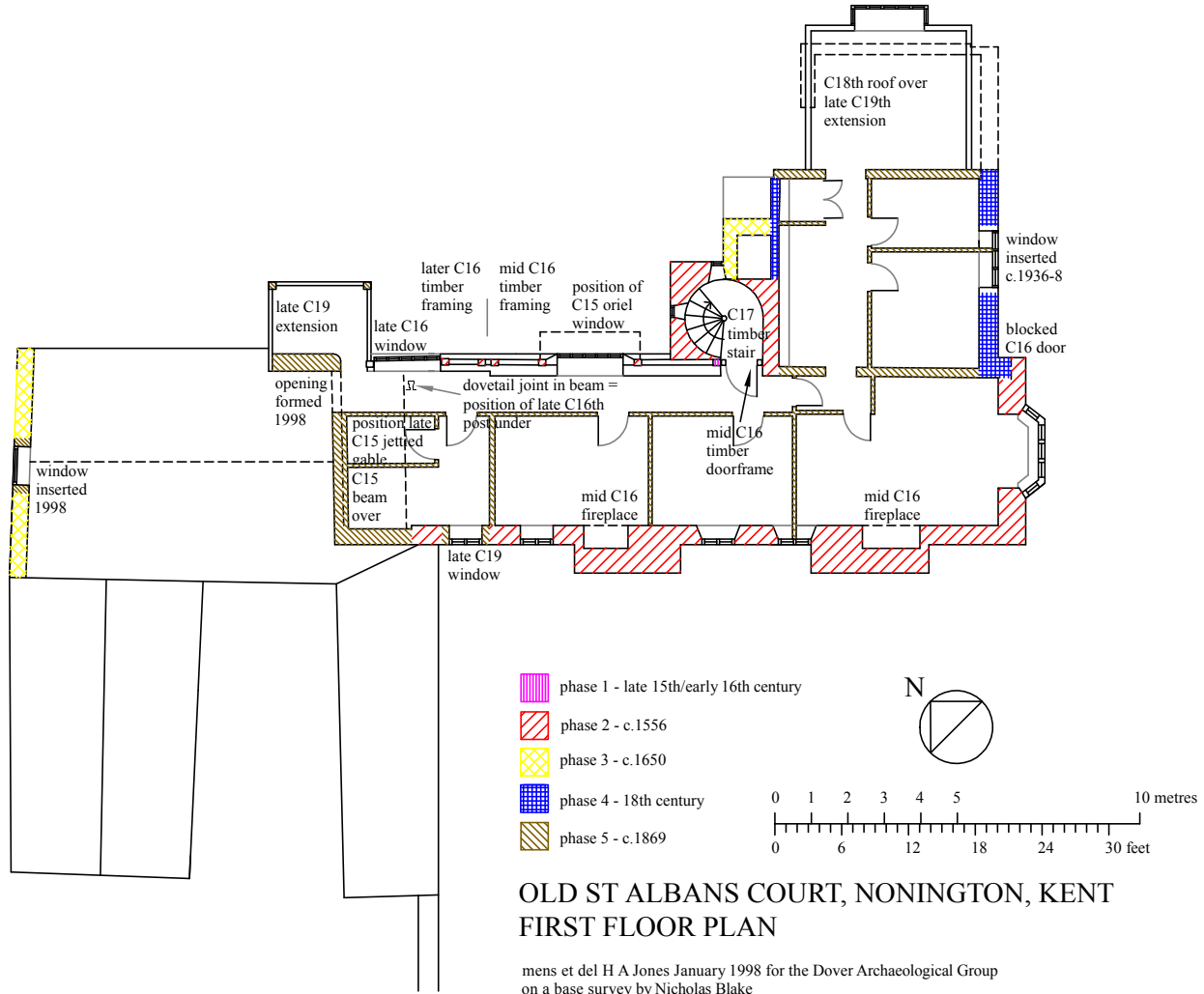
Fig. 7 Old St Alban's Court from the south-east: archaeologists have exposed the Tudor courtyard which fronted the 1556 brick build.

South-west (flower garden) elevation

This fronts the Drawing Room and the Dining Room, part of the kitchen block on the ground floor, and four bedrooms above. Essentially this is of similar build to the south-east (end) wall, and must therefore be of mid-sixteenth century date: small orange-pink bricks in a hard lime mortar and a brickwork plinth which is however two courses higher than the plinth on the south-east elevation. For fifteen or so courses above the plinth, an arrangement of pairs of header and stretcher bricks is staggered to give a diaper pattern. Above this is the walling in a fairly regular English bond. The wall is capped by projecting ornamental crenellations with chamfered faces and roll tops, alternately rising and falling, set off a dentil course, also of cut brick. To the north-west these stop short on the line of the north-west kitchen garden wall, the roof continuing further.

Set in the wall are several square-headed windows of four lights, slightly taller than wide, with jambs, cill, hood and single transom and mullion all in Bath stone, with the glazing again supported by iron ferramenta. Although evidently of the mid to later nineteenth century, these are fairly certainly replacements of earlier similar windows. To the north-west end at ground level is a small doorway, cut through the plinth, though appearing contemporary with it. It has a flat arch over, roughly formed in brickwork. At the other (south-east) end of this elevation is a door of perhaps the eighteenth century, with a segmental brick arch over, quite possibly formed by enlarging an earlier original window.

There are two projecting chimney breasts to this elevation, that to the south-east



**OLD ST ALBANS COURT, NONINGTON, KENT
FIRST FLOOR PLAN**

mens et del H A Jones January 1998 for the Dover Archaeological Group
on a base survey by Nicholas Blake

being wider than the other. Both have a canted brick topping, and at either end of each with a wide gap between is a tall chimney set at 45 degrees, with the comers of the upper part in line with the faces of the breasts. The chimneys are each capped with three outward stepping bricks courses with a wider continuation of the stack over, terminating in a pot. The wide gap between them implies it had perhaps been intended to accommodate further chimneys – probably to serve the third floor suggested by other evidence but which was never built.

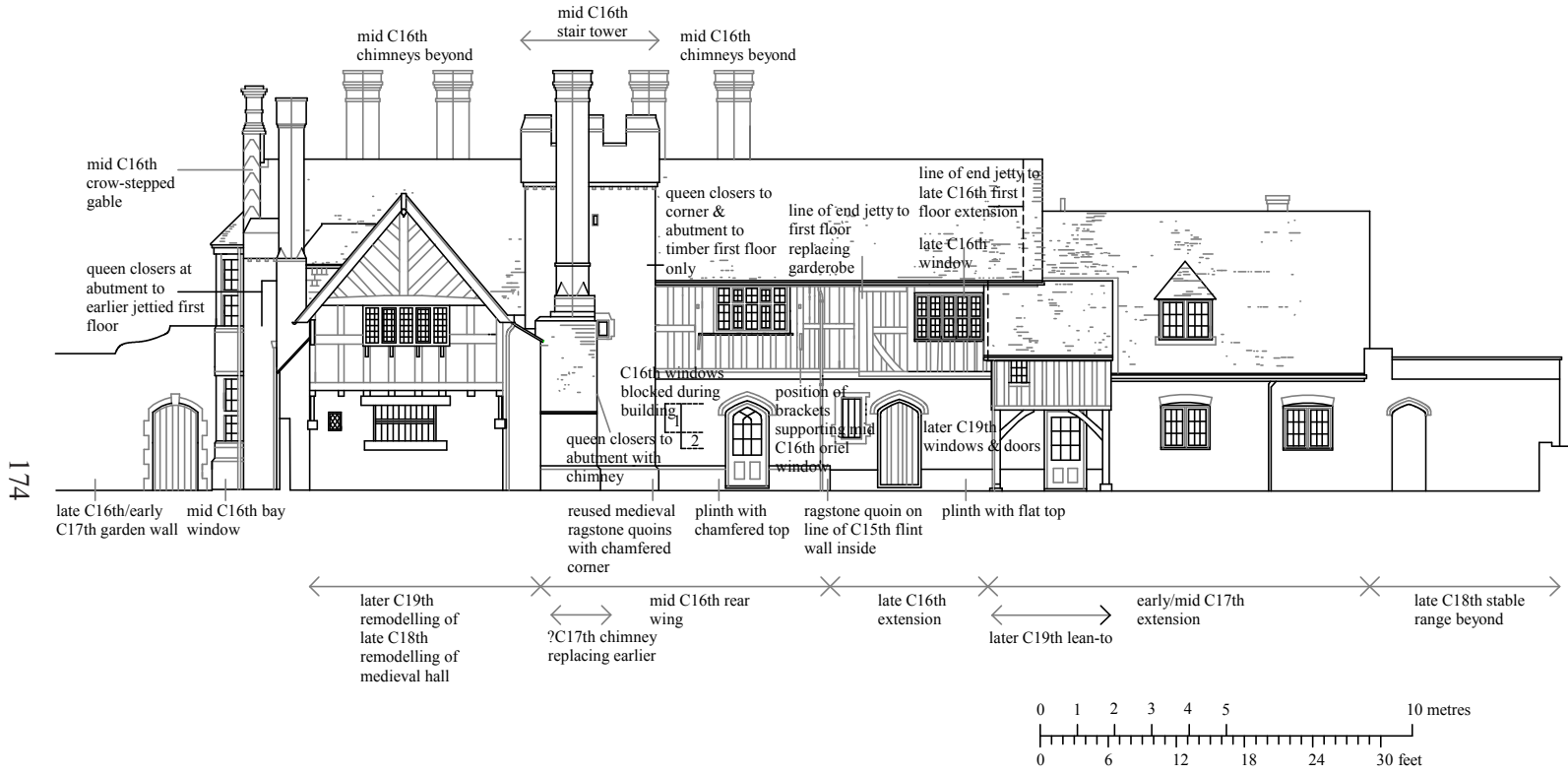
As well as the windows, much of the chimneys and crenellations appear to have been rebuilt in the later nineteenth century, probably *c.*1869 when other building works are known from documentary evidence to have been carried out. There is no reason however to suppose their original form is not retained.

North-east (courtyard) elevation (Figs 9 and 10)

In the south comer of the courtyard is a stair turret. The construction exactly matches that of the south-west kitchen garden elevation, including the change in brick bond from diaper to English. The windows are small, both arched and flat head, with reused Caen stone dressings. Adjacent the stair turret, within the courtyard on the return *north-west* elevation, is the projecting chimney-breast and stack to an inglenook fireplace within the Hall. Part of the flank wall to its base is a later nineteenth-century rebuilding, but overall the chimney is similar in form to the others. Although the brick tumbling to its sloping sides might suggest a seventeenth- rather than sixteenth-century date, they are not unknown at the earlier date, and the queen closers to the end to the stair turret indicated the latter is clearly a later abutment.

The *north-east* (courtyard) elevation proper comprises a brickwork ground storey and a timber-framed upper level. The latter is in two distinct parts, evidently of two periods but close in date. The brickwork fronting the Drawing room and part of the Kitchen contained a great deal of Victorian rebuilding and indeed, where the building reduces in height at the north-west, the wall has been completely refaced. Much was repointed sometime in the mid twentieth century. This, the addition of a nineteenth-century timber framed jettied extension, plus the insertion of doors and windows, albeit probably replacing earlier openings, makes interpretation difficult. The brickwork in the south-east half is similar to that of the stair turret, and is fully bonded with it, but without the diaper work. It is noted that south-east end of the north-west wall of the tower has queen closers at its abutment with the first-floor timber-framed wall; these are absent from its return with the ground floor brick wall, and demonstrate the stair tower is earlier than or, more probably, contemporary with, the timber wall. A couple of vertical joints in the ground floor brick wall represented the positions of successive superimposed square windows, one small closely adjacent the stair tower, one larger. Both appear to have been blocked up before or shortly after their completion. The wall is quite thick (*c.*70cm).

Halfway along the elevation at the base of the wall, and approximately in line with the junction between the sections of the upper storey timber wall, is a quoin of Kent ragstone (Fig. 3), similar to one used in the corner of the tower. Archaeological examination revealed that the wall had originally returned across the building at this point, incorporating a substantial section of an earlier flint wall



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OLD ST ALBAN'S COURT, NONINGTON, KENT
NE ELEVATION (as in 1998)

mens del H A Jones January 1998 for the Dover Archaeological Group
on a base survey by Nicholas Blake

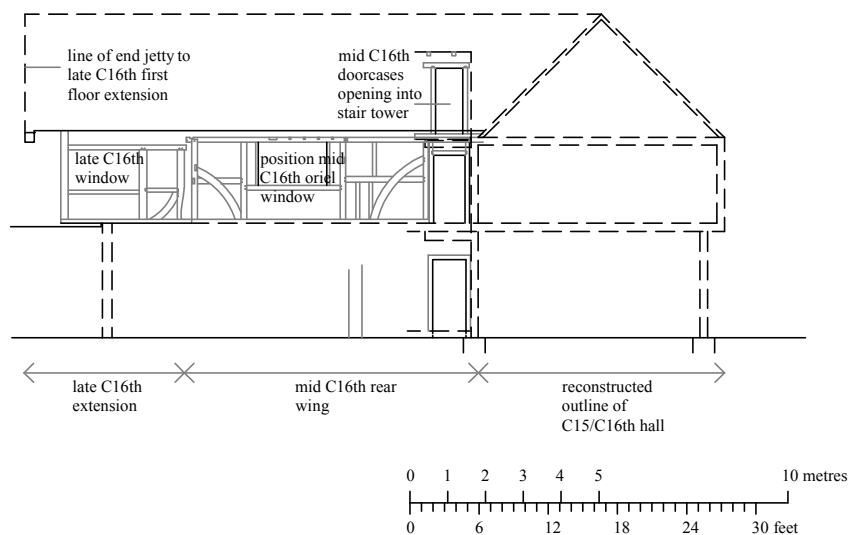
Fig. 9 Old St Alban's Court, north-east elevation (1998).



Fig. 10 Old St Alban's Court from the north-east: archaeology in progress on the foundations of the 1665 wing demolished in the late 1870s.

within the house that had originally formed one side of a garderobe shaft (see below). It contained reused yellow medieval bricks of *c.*1300, and it is probable therefore that these and the ragstone had been reused from an earlier building, perhaps from the site of the earlier manor house some distance to the west. It is suggestive that silt from the disused garderobe shaft yielded what appeared to be a fragment from an angled jamb of Kent ragstone, socketed to receive a ferramenta. Beyond this joint, on the face of the wall continuing to the north-west, the plinth has a flat rather than canted top, and when inspected inside the building, the brick bond is shown to be more irregular. It is apparent there are two separate phases of building work.

The junction of the mid sixteenth-century brickwork with the timber-framed upper storey is crudely done, and its projection somewhat from the latter initially suggested it is a later substitution for an earlier timber wall. Despite this, the appearance of the timber framing to the south-east part, close studded with a centre rail and concealed half-lapped curved braces, demonstrate it is in fact coeval with the brickwork. Scars on its timbers indicate the position of a central oriel window (**Fig. 11**). The presence and position of a dovetail joint inside the building (see below) indicates that the first floor of this north-east part was originally jettied, with the timber ground floor being replaced by brick sometime later. An inverted brace at the junction with the timber wall to the south-east suggested a date late in the sixteenth century or early in the seventeenth; the slightly projecting ten-light timber window, mostly original, has mouldings suggesting the former date. The



OLD ST ALBANS COURT, NONINGTON, KENT SECTION THRO' NW WING

mens et del H A Jones January 1998 for the Dover Archaeological Group
on a base survey by Nicholas Blake

Fig. 11 Old St Alban's Court, section through north-west wing (1998).

framing is again close studded vertical timbers with a centre rail, and shows signs of settlement, which are also reflected in the brickwork below.

Further to the north-west the two rooms forming the Kitchen has bricks of similar size, a slightly darker hue, with an irregular bond. This is particularly conspicuous on the north-west end gable wall, and is very similar to the construction of the kitchen garden walls. Given the return of the plinth at the ragstone quoin (see above), the abutment of the kitchen garden walls to the mid sixteenth-century brickwork to the south-east (end) wall, and their lesser thickness (*c.*50cm), this wall can probably be assigned a date to the later sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries – probably the latter as it had replaced a timber ground floor of *c.*1600. The whole formed a single storey annexe with a large attic space to the residential wing.

Interior

The two ground floor living rooms (i.e. Dining room and, further south-east with the bay window, the Drawing room) each has a fireplace on their south west (Kitchen garden) elevation. In the Drawing room this has a lintel and side supports of Kent ragstone or Reigate stone with a brick relieving arch over, concealed by the plaster. The supports are plain, the lintel in two halves, comprising three

carvings of a rose surrounded by a large circle alternating with two lozenges each with a lozenge-shaped centrepiece, and a four-centred arch under with a carved shield and ?chain in the spandrels. The initials there were originally EH (Edmund Hammond, *ob.*1616). The two timber beams to the ceiling were added *c.*1997, and the panelled partition to the hall to the north-east a replacement *c.*2000 of a nineteenth-century wall.

The fireplace in the Dining room is less ornate: the simple wooden lintel was inserted as part of the *c.*1997 building works. Separating these two rooms is a late nineteenth-century partition in yellow brick, plastered. This abuts a sixteenth-century window in the south-west wall, blocked when the partition was added. No evidence for any earlier dividing wall on this line was found when the floor was lifted.

The stair turret contains a finely formed oak spiral stair with an octagonal central pillar, more probably of seventeenth- than sixteenth-century date. Each storey – including the roof-space – has a substantial oak door-frame, comprising a lintel pegged to uprights and forming part of the upper storey framework to the courtyard. These have a double roll moulding set in a cavetto on the staircase side only – the side fronting the room being plain, although the ogee architraves in softwood were evidently a nineteenth-century addition. The timber frame is built into the brick interior of the stair tower, which had been lime-washed rather than plastered. The doorframe at the second storey suggests that perhaps further accommodation was planned at this level. If so, it was never carried out.

Each bedroom upstairs has a stone fireplace, though smaller than that in the Drawing Room. That in the rear (north-west) bedroom is plain. A curious feature of the principal posts to the north-east section of this wing is that they lack jowls to support transverse tie beams. Instead they sit on the wall-plate, indicative that an upper (second) storey had been intended (see note above on door cases to stair).

The underside of the second phase (*c.*1600) of the surviving timber first-floor structure to this wing is visible. The principal transverse beam, running north-east by south-west, has a dovetail set into its underside at the north-east end, well back from the present brick wall; this indicates a previous connection into a wall-plate below and very probably, a supporting post under that. This indicated the line of an earlier (timber framed) wall, and proved that the existing second-phase wall above was originally jettied. Tenoned into the principal transverse beam is a lesser central longitudinal beam either side, with transverse floor joists tenoned into them. Their undersides are flush, plain, and intended to be concealed by a lath and plaster ceiling. Remnants of a Victorian one survived. On the south-west side, across a twentieth-century opening into a peculiarly long early eighteenth-century outbuilding, is visible a first floor sole-plate associated with the original timber framed structure of the second phase.

Roof

The roof over the main range is of nineteenth-century date, though as it fits easily behind the crow-stepped gable, it in all probability retains the profile of the original. The position of the surviving sixteenth-century transverse beam under the existing gable at first floor wall-plate level indicates that the north-west

(end) gable of the *c.*1600 part of this wing had been jettied over a first-floor wall which is itself jettied. The roof over the south-west/north-east (front) rooms is eighteenth-century, reusing some sixteenth-century timbers, despite the presence of nineteenth-century walls below.

Outbuildings

On the south-western side of the Kitchen, and behind the kitchen garden wall, running north-east by south-west is a series of outbuildings. Backing onto the kitchen garden wall, and indeed with its south-west wall forming a later insertion on the line of that wall, is a long narrow building (the Long room) with a pentice style slate roof. The brickwork is soft, orange, of English bond laid in white lime mortar, and all reminiscent of the early eighteenth century. The presence of sockets in the wall high up inside, with the remains of horsehair and lime plaster, imply there was formerly a first-floor storey. The use to which such a peculiar structure was originally put remains unclear. Sometime between *c.*1790 and the early Victorian period its floor was lowered, a flue added, and the whole converted into a boiler room to serve adjacent green-houses.

Probably at about this time also small a rectangular sunken room was butted onto the south-western end of the building. This was apparently demolished in the 1960s but its surviving wall tops were exposed in 1999. It is reported by the former College groundsman that this structure was the stoke-hole for another boiler heating the adjacent green-houses. The excavated filling, containing much coal ash, would be consistent with such a use.

In the south-eastern (flower garden) elevation of the Long Room a set of three triangular-headed bee boles were unblocked in 1999 (Fig. 4), with a further three discovered more recently further to the south-west. Each is about 32cm (12in.) high by 25cm (9in.) wide. The exterior of the south-west end wall shows evidence for a small, high level blocked window or niche, with chamfered edging. The whole structure has a marked lean to the south-east, which must explain the presence of two sloping buttresses, probably of eighteenth-century brick, added to the outside of the south-east wall.

Further north-west and parallel to the above structure is a mid to late eighteenth-century building with a hipped tiled roof of which much of the brickwork, in Flemish bond, is a rebuild of the late nineteenth century. Documentary evidence indicates its form had not changed: now a garage, it was probably originally a cart shed, projecting from the south-west wall of the Kitchen. Below it is some sort of water catchment pit of considerable volume, with a substantial brick vaulted drain of *c.*1790 running under its south corner and leading to a large cistern in the far corner of the quarry that is now identified as the Pulham garden (see below).

Further north-west again is a low eighteenth-century boundary wall to the garden, which was raised sometime during the later eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries to support a range of outbuildings set along the far side of a long narrow courtyard beyond the walled garden. These now have slate pentice roofs, but it is reported that they were formerly covered by pantiles and that there were three small dormer windows.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ENDNOTES

¹ P. Hobbs, 2005, 'Old St Albans Court, Nonington', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, CXXV, 273-90; G. Daws and P. Hobbs, 'The variety of brick types and sizes used at Old St Albans Court, Nonington', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, CXXXVI, 281-93; P. Hobbs, 2017, 'A Pulham garden rediscovered at Nonington', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, CXXXVIII, 291-98.

² J. Newman, 2013, *North East and East Kent*, Yale University Press, pp. 471-72.