

## A 14th CENTURY AISLED HOUSE: EDGAR'S FARM, STOWMARKET

By J. T. SMITH, M.A., F.S.A.

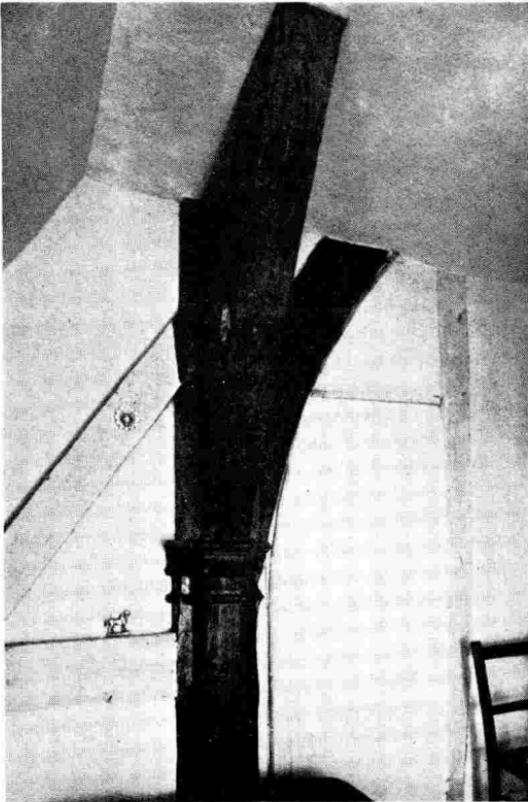
No medieval hall with an aisled ground plan has hitherto been known to exist in Suffolk save for some fragmentary remains of one of the late twelfth century at Stansfield near Clare.<sup>1</sup> During 1957 Mr. S. R. Jones examined the Suffolk photographs in the National Buildings Record and deduced from two of them that Edgar's Farm was a building of this type and was therefore probably of the fourteenth century (Plate XV). When in February 1958 the opportunity occurred of examining the house, thanks to the kindness of Mrs. M. F. M. Mitchell, the owner, his conclusions were confirmed. Had this been all Edgar's Farm would be noteworthy enough, yet it has besides a highly unusual form of structure which provides a key to an early phase of roof development in this class of building. The following account, based on a brief visit, is intended to draw attention to this feature without having any pretensions to being an architectural history of the house; for this reason later alterations to the early structure are largely ignored.<sup>2</sup>

The plan (Fig. 13) of the original house at Edgar's Farm comprised an aisled hall of two bays, probably with a third bay at the west end which has since been destroyed. In the late 16th century a timber-framed wing replaced the third bay to form an L-shaped plan at the same time as a floor was inserted into the hall to divide it into two storeys. The other major alteration was the addition parallel to the medieval hall of an early Victorian two-storeyed range of grey brick that doubled the size of the house.

We will examine first the evidence for an aisled hall. On the ground floor two octagonal posts supporting the former open truss can be seen incorporated in later partitions. The north post and adjacent partition stand on a timber sill, the south post (which has been cut back) and its partition on a later one of brick. What seems to be a corresponding main post at the west end of the hall can be seen at the foot of the staircase. Some plastered timber-framing on the north side may be part of the original aisle wall.

<sup>1</sup> M. E. Wood, 'Norman Domestic Architecture', *Arch. J.*, xcii (1935), 208; also letter in *Country Life*, LIII (1923), 297.

<sup>2</sup> I am greatly indebted to Mr. S. R. Jones for the drawings, based on my measurements, and for his comments on the text. Fig. 15 is also his work.



Edgar's Farm, Stowmarket

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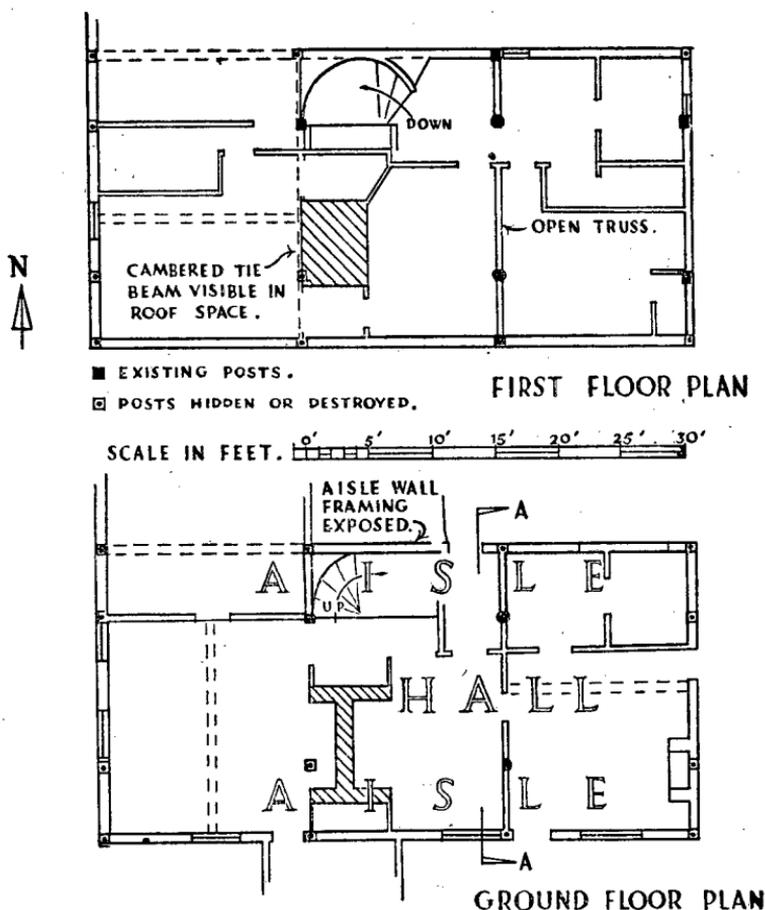
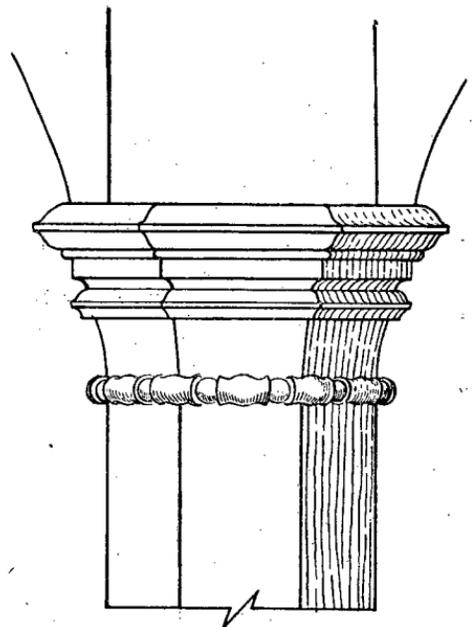


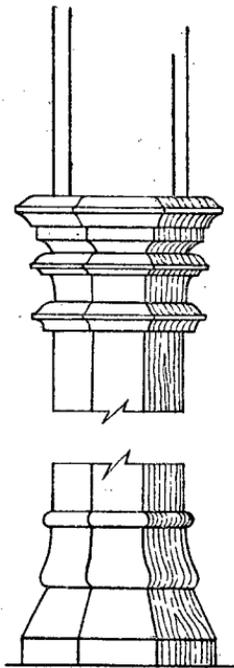
Fig. 13.—Edgar's Farm, Stowmarket.

On the first floor (Fig. 13) the three posts are clearly visible together with the plain posts of rectangular section that formed the eastward terminations of the two arcades. The octagonal portion of each of the freestanding posts (Fig. 14, section) terminates in a moulded capital from which spring curved braces, one rising to the tie-beam and the other to the arcade-plate.<sup>3</sup> A beam spanning the aisle is tenoned into the post below the capital to bind the aisle wall-plate and the framing below it to the arcade structure; it also serves as a tie-beam for the pent roof of the aisle. A ceiling has been inserted below the main tie-beam.

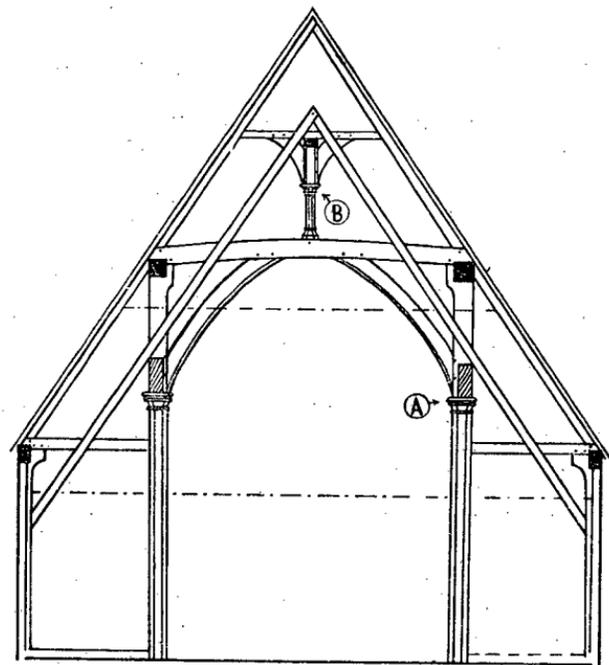
<sup>3</sup> A term used to describe a beam which, in a stone structure such as Oakham Castle hall, would be a wall-plate and which, by its placing, is unlike a normal side-purlin.



CAPITAL AT (A)  
OF ARCADE POST.



BASE & CAPITAL  
OF CROWN POST  
AT (B).



OPEN TRUSS. Section A-A

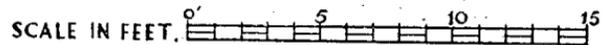


Fig. 14. Edgar's Farm, Stowmarket.

The roof-space is fortunately accessible to complete the account of the structure. Above the cambered tie-beam of the open truss is a crown-post<sup>4</sup> of octagonal section with moulded capital and base and the usual four curved struts or braces. Such construction and ornament are common enough in houses of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Additionally the main truss is reinforced by a highly remarkable system of bracing running parallel to the common rafters. Starting from the aisle wall at the point now hidden by the inserted first floor a pair of straight braces placed side by side rises parallel with the slope of the roof; they are halved across the aisle tie-beam, one on each side of it, halved in the same way across the main post just above the springing of the arcade, then halved successively across the tie-beam, a side member of the four-way struts, and the collar; just above the collar they are halved and pegged to the corresponding braces from the other side of the hall—or were, for the actual joint has been partly destroyed.<sup>5</sup>

All the original roof timbers are heavily blackened with smoke from the open hearth. The first pair of rafters immediately west of the open truss have been removed; a further five pairs remain unaltered, and the last three pairs have modern collars halved on to them. The lack of any clear sign of a louvre is probably caused by the partial removal of rafters which destroyed the evidence. Nor are there signs of gable louvres, such as exist at Fyfield Hall in Essex.<sup>6</sup> East of the open truss are six pairs of common rafters, each with a collar, the rest being modern. It is just possible to see something of the tie-beam at this end of the hall, enough to see traces of a former crown-post. The fact that the tie-beam at the present west end of the hall is cambered may suggest that the structure once continued beyond it for at least one bay, since otherwise the tie-beam would presumably have been flat.<sup>7</sup> Although a probability is thus established the argument is not conclusive, lacking direct evidence for the third bay.

<sup>4</sup> I have adopted this term coined by Professor R. A. Cordingley of the University of Manchester to denote a king-post which does not rise up to a ridge-piece, one, that is to say, that carried a central or collar-purlin. It is very desirable to distinguish this sort of post from the true king-post which supports a ridge-piece, since they perform quite different functions. If generally adopted the term would save much confusion. The term itself is not new, only its restricted definition; cf. J. H. Parker, *Glossary of Architecture*, s.v. 'king-post'.

<sup>5</sup> A large lump of plaster helps to conceal the damaged joint further. Part of the plaster seems to show smoke incrustation, though this is no doubt due to contact with the beams rather than a sign of its presence while the hall was still open to the roof.

<sup>6</sup> V. C. H. Essex, iv, 47-49: *Arch. J.*, cxii (1956), 77-79, 91.

<sup>7</sup> This appears not to be invariably so, hence the conclusion to be drawn from this evidence alone is uncertain.

The dating of the house must be determined firstly by the mouldings on the capitals and the king-post—which by themselves are inconclusive in the present neglected state of the study of timber mouldings—and secondly by the position of the roof structure in a rather uncertain typological sequence. Documentary sources, which may well date the house more accurately than these doubtful criteria, require considerable time to search for and evaluate and for that reason have not been examined. The capitals (Fig. 14) of the main arcade posts have an unusual curved necking bearing some resemblance to astragal (bead-and-reel) ornament, for want of a better term; it is hard to find anything comparable in wood or stone. The bell of these capitals has little of the undercutting which appears on the crown-post. These mouldings probably fall into the first half of the fourteenth century, not later, though this may be refined when some dated wood mouldings are available for comparison.

The familiar elements of the roof structure, the arch-braced cambered tie-beam with a crown-post, appear in the early fourteenth century, e.g. Lampetts in the Essex parish of Fyfield.<sup>8</sup> The generally similar roof in the late thirteenth century solar wing of Charney Bassett manor house (Berks.)<sup>9</sup> lacks the arch-braces either because it is of smaller span or because it is set on a stone building; moreover the fact that the four-way struts are straight places them early in their typological sequence. Although the curved struts of the Stowmarket house are not necessarily much later they are not likely to be before c.1330. This brings us to the remarkable straight braces which are closely akin to those at Fyfield Hall, already cited.<sup>10</sup> At Fyfield the tie-beam of the open truss is flat, without arch braces; the straight braces no longer exist and the evidence is not as clear as at Edgar's Farm. Nevertheless the one accessible post of the open truss—the other is quite disguised by a wall put up when the south aisle was demolished—has an empty slot running diagonally across it, into which a sloping brace must have been halved. The one visible face of the tie-beam has two diagonal slots and two notched joints, all now filled with wood blocks; from this evidence the original appearance of the hall was tentatively reconstructed (Fig. 15). Looking at it again in the light of Edgar's Farm the two braces on each side were probably parallel to the slope of the rafters, a fact which was difficult to establish because of the subsidence of one side of the truss. The former existence at Fyfield of double braces clasping

<sup>8</sup> V. C. H. *Essex*, iv, 50-52; *Arch. J.*, cxii (1956), 88; both supersede R.C.H.M. *Essex*, II, 86.

<sup>9</sup> *Arch. J.*, cv, Suppt. (1950), 9 (drawing) and Pl. iva.

<sup>10</sup> See note 6.

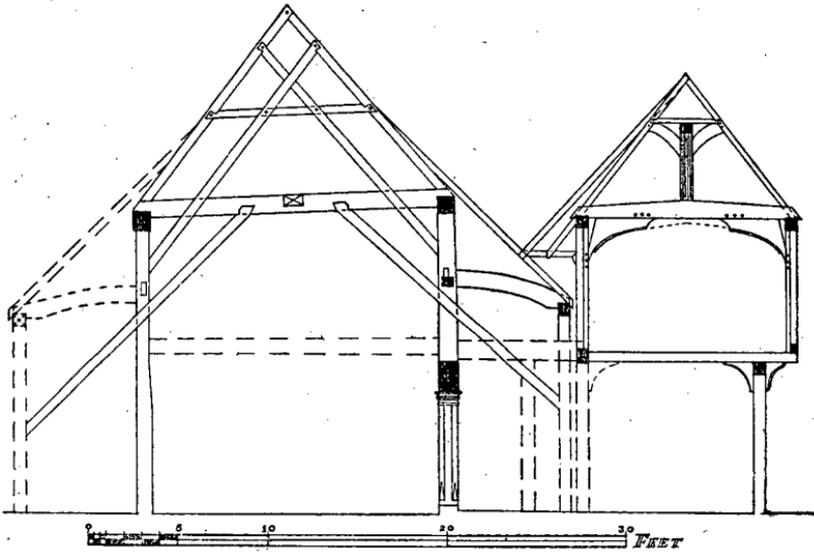


Fig. 15.—Fyfield Hall, Essex.

other members of the roof can be inferred from the two pairs of common rafters which were tenoned into the tie-beam. Two pairs would be pointless unless they were associated with a double bracing system below, an inference which should be checked at the Hall itself as opportunity offers.<sup>10a</sup>

At Fyfield Hall and Edgar's Farm these doubled straight braces are sufficiently alike for us to be sure that they represent the same concept of trussing a roof, Fyfield being typologically the earlier and purer example uninfluenced by the application of arch-bracing to the tie-beam. That such double bracing is indeed the earlier type is suggested by its rarity, whereas the arch-braced tie-beam is universally found from *c.*1330 to the end of the 15th century. Other examples of this structural system will be added once it has been recognised; one such is Manor Farm at Wasperton in Warwickshire, where the long braces were employed solely in an end truss.<sup>11</sup> A house known as 'King John's Lodge' at Wraybury (Bucks.)<sup>12</sup> has a roof resembling the one at Edgar's Farm.

<sup>10a</sup>Since checked at Fyfield and found to be correct.

<sup>11</sup> Manor Farm, Wasperton, is inadequately described in V.C.H. *Warwick*, v, 187-8. Mr. S. R. Jones and the present writer intend to discuss the house more fully in a paper now in preparation for *B'ham. Arch. Soc. Trans.*

<sup>12</sup> *Recs. of Bucks.*, xii (1927-33), 157-164, with drawing.

In Essex the two magnificent barns at Cressing Temple known as the Wheat Barn and the Barley Barn, each showing a different application of the system, badly need full publication with measured drawings, and redating.<sup>13</sup> These new examples so readily found show that we are dealing here with an important strand of the building traditions of lowland England, and if we take into account some late partial applications of the system, and derived forms, the list could be enlarged.

The constructional principle which all these roofs exemplify to greater or less extent is the use of timbers that are of a uniform scantling, or nearly so. Although the arcade structure with its tie-beams employs much heavier timbering in breach of the principle, nevertheless the common rafters, their collars and other bracing components employ scantlings which differ only within a fairly narrow range. Arcade-plates and tie-beams had been of exceptional size as far back as we can trace the aisled timber hall in England; beyond this it is the curved braces used to form the arcades and strengthen the tie-beam that begin the slow process of supplanting the uniform scantling system by one in which scantlings were proportioned to the function of any given member. The doubled straight braces are the most striking survival at Edgar's Farm of an earlier practice necessitated by the logic of the system, the doubling of any component needing extra strength. Examples can be found in several early roofs, notably the late thirteenth century hospital of St. Mary at Chichester<sup>14</sup> and the famous early fourteenth century barn at Great Coxwell (Berks.),<sup>15</sup> where there are four straight braces instead of two arch braces under the tie-beams.

The other remarkable feature of Edgar's Farm is the way the long braces spring from the side walls to span the aisles and continue to a point above the collar-purlin. Fyfield Hall and the other examples cited previously all show this characteristic use of very long struts, demanding the most careful carpentry to ensure a tight fit of the joints. This practice was superseded by the use of large curved arch-braces meeting in the soffit of a steeply cambered tie-beam, their size being progressively reduced throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries until they finish as brackets of two-centred outline. The very long 'lattice' struts, seen in a late stage of development at Edgar's Farm, lose nearly all structural function in their final application—relegated to the end-truss of the hall—at Manor Farm, Wasperton. Fyfield Hall may represent

<sup>13</sup> R.C.H.M. *Essex*, III, 79; N. Pevsner, *Essex (Buildings of England)*, illustrates the Barley Barn (Pl. 47).

<sup>14</sup> F. T. Dollman and J. R. Jobbins, *Analysis of Ancient Domestic Architecture*, II, pl. 27.

<sup>15</sup> *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, xvii (1958), 11.

the peak of their importance, when straight braces provided the primary strutting of the open truss. The typological sequence thus outlined cannot at present refine the dating provided by the mouldings but is perfectly consistent with it.

Finally, although the proper dating of the building is important, it matters more to define at Edgar's Farm a hitherto unrecognised class of structure, which may well find a place in the general history of North European as well as English roofs.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The house stands in Combs Lane, Stowmarket and up to 1934 was included in the civil parish of Combs; it is still in the ecclesiastical parish of Combs. The name suggests that it once belonged to the family of Edgar of Ipswich, a branch of which owned property in Combs.—*Editor*.