

# MEDIEVAL TIMBER FRAMED HOUSES IN EAST SUFFOLK

## AN ESSAY IN CLASSIFICATION

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The study of vernacular buildings in East Suffolk perhaps needs some explanation. It is a limited field in that by vernacular we mean dwelling houses below the level of the great mansion. The numerous farm houses in East Suffolk dating from before 1600 are perhaps typical of vernacular buildings, but we would also include the humble cottage at one extreme, and the lesser 'hall' at the other. The lines of enquiry are broad and should include documentary evidence where available. In this article, however, we have confined ourselves to the study of architectural and archaeological features. We would emphasize that this is a provisional classification, for although it is backed by some four years' research, the vastness of the material to be studied leaves much still to be done. However, although we have only covered a small part of the field, we feel that some indication of our conclusions will provide a useful frame work for future research.

We will divide this study into two sections: in the first we will classify our findings to date; in the second we will indicate some structural details which throw light on the chronological development of the medieval house.

The earliest type of surviving timbered building in East Anglia is the aisled hall, of which three have been found so far in Suffolk. The only known example in East Suffolk is Edgar's Farm,<sup>1</sup> Stowmarket where, behind a Victorian façade of grey brick, and beyond its 17th century interior, is embedded one truss of the original aisled house. The truss consists of arcade posts with moulded capitals, and an ornate crown post rising from the tie beam to collar, and collar purlin. Fig. 42 shows the probable layout of this type of house which may have had two or three bays, each with some social usage, as hall, parlour, and service end. The blackened rafters of Edgar's Farm confirm the evidence of the crown and arcade posts that this was a hall open to the roof, and that the chimney was added later. Mr. J. T. Smith ascribes this house to

<sup>1</sup> J. T. Smith, 'Edgar's Farm, Stowmarket', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, vol. xxvii (1958), p. 54.

the early 14th century, and one may reasonably postulate a date in the 14th century or earlier for this type of house.<sup>2</sup>

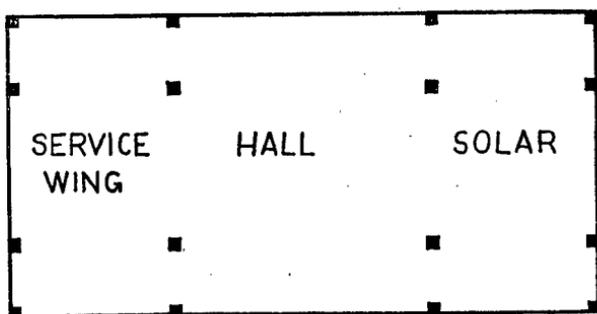


FIG. 42.—Probable plan of aisled hall.

Roughly contemporary with, and developing from, the aisled hall, there appear to be two transitional types. In the first, the arcade posts of Fig. 42 have been cleared away, with the exception of one pair screening the hall from the cross passage and service quarters by speres, or barriers. This type,<sup>3</sup> known as the 'spere truss hall' has so far only been found at Framsdan Hall in East Suffolk; it is of relatively late construction and incorporates several unusual features, in particular a king post roof more usually associ-

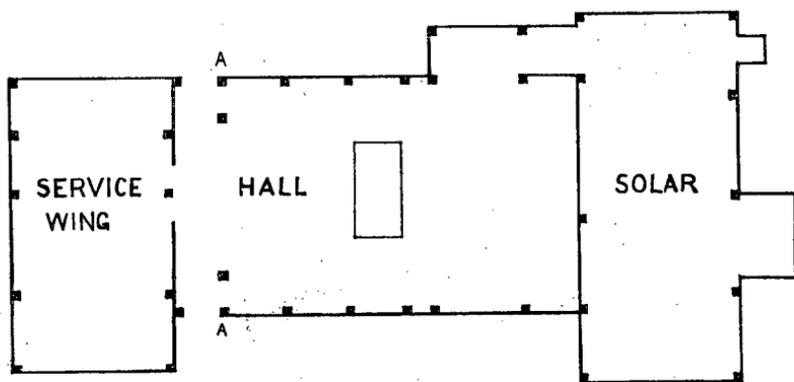


FIG. 43.—Plan of spere truss hall.

<sup>2</sup> See also G. and S. Colman, 'A 13th century aisled house . . .', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, vol. xxx (1966), pp. 149-165.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Wood, *The English Medieval House* (1965).

ated with north west England.<sup>4</sup> The ground plan (Fig. 43) shows how one pair of arcade posts is retained (A-A) and that this type of house can fairly be regarded as a derivative of the aisled house. We hope subsequently to write in detail about Framdsen Hall.

In the second transitional type, so far found in East Suffolk at Fressingfield and Campsea Ash, the arcades are raised clear of the floor by placing them on a tie beam at first floor level. One such truss has survived in a barn at Church Farm, Fressingfield, and Plate XLI shows the unusual double crown post standing upon the braced and moulded tie beam. A house at Campsea Ash exhibits similar features on a grander scale. Here the arcade posts support a single crown post, and there is also a significant stop splayed scarf joint in the arcade plate which suggests an early date.<sup>5</sup>

These two types, we suggest, form the link between the aisled house and the far more common halled house with the usual medieval layout of open hall, parlour-solar at one end, and service quarters at the other, separated from the hall by a cross passage. This form with variations, spans the period from roughly 1400 to the middle years of Elizabeth's reign, when it became the fashion to modernise existing houses by the insertion of a brick chimney (previously smoke had found its way out through louvres in the roof) at the parlour end of the hall, and a ceiling, thus providing a more comfortable and convenient source of heat, and a bedroom above the hall with its own fireplace.

The existence of the open hall can often be proved by detailed examination of the structure; in East Suffolk a common feature appears to have been an arch braced and moulded tie beam supporting a crown post (usually octagonal), rising to a collar and collar purlin. The post is normally moulded at cap and base (Plate XLII, *a*) and braced to collar and collar purlin, and the whole truss forms a centre piece above the hall.

There is some evidence that in the late 15th and early 16th centuries crown posts were rather longer than in the earlier period,<sup>6</sup> but the arguments are inconclusive. Accurate dating by means of the shape of the tie beam, length and section of the crown post braces, and mouldings on the crown post, may become possible as a result of further comparative studies, but is at present untrustworthy.

A further feature of the halled house is the existence in the cross

<sup>4</sup> J. T. Smith, 'Medieval Roofs: a classification', *Arch. Journ.*, cxv (1960), pp. 3-149.

<sup>5</sup> C. Hewett, 'Structural carpentry in medieval Essex', *Med. Arch.*, vols. vi-viii (1962-63), pp. 253-258, Fig. 82.

<sup>6</sup> G. Bailey and Barbara Hutton, 'Crown Post roofs in Hertfordshire', *Publications of the Hertfordshire Local History Council* (1966).

passage of twin doors providing entry to the buttery and pantry. These were usually centrally placed as at the Old Wool Hall, Peasenhall and Ubbeston Hall, Stonham Aspall (Plate XLII, *b*). Where the doorways no longer exist, their original location can often be established if the common door post with its distinctive array of peg holes is still visible. Further evidence is often furnished by the spacing of the mortice holes in the under side of the ceiling beam, indicating the original position of the service doors, where modernisation has required the removal of the cross passage, and by the existence of moulding on the hall side of the ceiling beam only. This would clearly indicate the limit of the hall at the service end. It should perhaps be added that the cross passage, although a medieval feature, survived in many houses (e.g. Bacton Hall) well into the 17th century.

There is normally no reliable method of distinguishing a medieval from a later house from its exterior, especially when, as at Ubbeston Hall, Stonham Aspall, a later cross wing has been added to the service end, or, as at Morgan's Farm, Stonham Aspall, where a later bay was added beyond the service quarters. However, one particular type is distinguishable by its external appearance, the wealden house, most commonly found in Kent and south east England, but also less frequently in East Anglia. In East Suffolk, wealden houses appear to date from the late 15th century, and are recognisable from their two jettied and gabled ends joined by an inset open hall under a continuous roof line. There is usually a crown post truss centrally over the open hall as at Stone-wall Farm, Hemingstone.

There are two obvious types of medieval house which we have not yet discussed, and both have a long history, probably stretching from the 14th to the 17th centuries. They are, first, the open hall without the arch braced tie beam and crown post roof, where removal of roof timbers makes detection often impossible, and, second, the continuous jettied house, which by its structure involving ceiling joists above the hall to carry the jettied upper storey cannot have an open hall, and is therefore much more difficult to date accurately. While there are examples of the first kind, they mostly exist in gables of other buildings and the only clue is the existence of smoke blackened rafters and evidence of structural details. The second type is perhaps best illustrated by the rear room of the Guildhall, Hadleigh for the 15th century date of which there is some evidence in documents held by Hadleigh Borough Council.

In the second part of this article we will attempt to describe the structural development of timbered buildings, which we feel affects the chronological sequence and provides some assistance in dating houses.

The first point for consideration must be the reason for the erection of aisled halls. This particular form has a long history in Western Europe and seems to have been in favour in England at least from A.D. 800, as Rahtz has shown in his excavations of Alfred's palace at Cheddar. There seem to have been two basic reasons for this type of erection. The first is social and involves consideration of data outside the scope of this article. The second is structural. Salzman has suggested that by the early 14th century large timbers were hard to come by, and that therefore after this date new forms of carpentry began to be evolved which allowed the use of lighter scantling to achieve the acquired span.

C. Hewett has suggested that the techniques of structural carpentry developed strongly from about 1300, and that new joints, better able to resist extension were being developed and it is certainly true that in the earlier houses of the Edgar's Farm, Fressingfield and Campsea Ash type the form of scarf joint of the wall plates is of the stop splayed type mentioned by Hewett, rather than the more common halved and pegged joint universally seen in the houses of the later medieval period onwards.

The development of structural carpentry cannot, however, be disassociated from the social side. It seems logical that in order to obtain greater space on the floor of the hall the arcade posts should be cleared away, and it is obvious that one method of doing this, while simultaneously providing sufficient support for the weight of the roof, is to raise the arcades upon a tie beam. However, this produces certain problems, notably in the construction of the tie beam, which at both Fressingfield and Campsea Ash is extremely bulky, and in the construction of the walls, which need to be strongly built to take the thrust imposed by the roof.

With a greater understanding of roof geometry perhaps combined with the introduction of the more sophisticated stopped dove-tail joints rather than mere lap joints, the way was open to raise the hall to a greater height, as at Framsdén where the apex of the roof is 32 feet from the ground, while keeping two of the arcade posts for the functional-ornamental use of forming spères, between the hall and service quarters.

However, Framsdén, a larger house than most, is unique in its design, and perhaps lies slightly outside the more obvious stream of development.

The plain arch-braced tie beam roof with the crown post rising to a collar, is the next stage of development and seems to be associated principally with the more sophisticated types of joint, and in particular, to our knowledge, to have no plain lap joints or splayed scarf joints associated with it. This suggests, perhaps, a later date, and the grace and delicacy of some of the examples, e.g. Morgan's Farm, Stonham Aspall, suggest that by this time the carpenters had

solved the problems involved in the weight of the roof. It is, however, necessary to sound a word of warning here on dating. It is interesting to see also in some post medieval houses of the 16th century a rudimentary form of arch-braced tie beam still exists in the great chamber above the hall, but that the crown post has now vanished in favour of collars and windbraces.

Two other features deserve mention. One is not vernacular but stems directly from the aisled hall. This is the hammer beam roof, which can be seen to be a far grander way of getting rid of the bulky posts at ground level than the crown post roof. It bears comparison with the Fressingfield roof, and is possibly a development of this by merely removing the feet of the arcade posts, but again this is a more refined type of carpenters' work of the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Gifford's Hall,<sup>7</sup> Stoke by Nayland is just such an example, but in general such roofs are later and not normally strictly vernacular.

The second type is the trussed rafter roof, which had no purlins to give lateral stiffening, and which has by and large disappeared because of its tendency to collapse. One example of this, where the timbers have been re-used is at Valley Farm, Flowton. This must have been a medieval roof from its smoke blackened rafters, but just where it comes in the development is impossible to say, except that there are lap joints visible suggesting an early date.

Thus the overall plan and the structural details of the medieval house suggest the evolutionary classification which we have outlined from an early aisled house to late medieval halled house.

Dr. Peter Eden and Mr. A. Paget Baggs have suggested a different form of classification as a result of a careful study of house types in West Cambridgeshire<sup>8</sup> and their scheme dovetails very neatly with our preliminary study in East Suffolk.

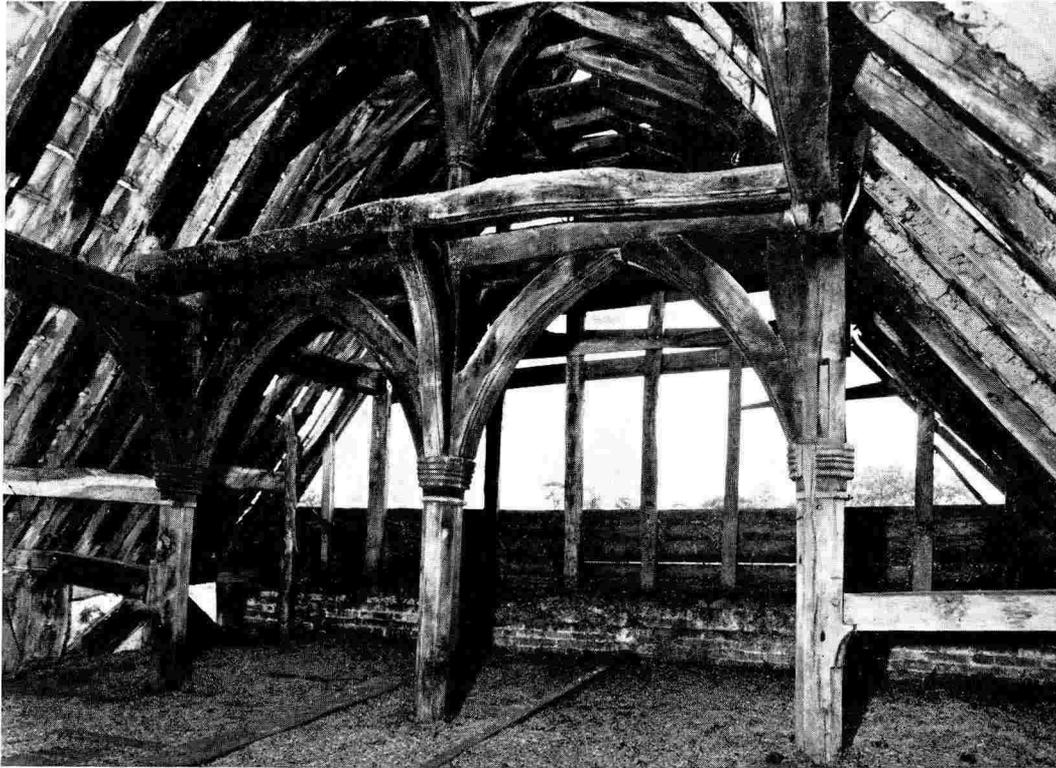
Their conclusions, briefly summarised, describe the existence of four basic floor plans of medieval houses to which they give the letters A, B, C and D. A is the aisled hall (Edgar's Farm) and also covers the spere truss form (Framsden Hall) because of its single pair of arcade posts. B is an open hall with one or two ceiled cross wings, often with a jetty on the cross-wing. C is the wealden house type (Stonewall Farm, Hemingstone) which F. B. Charles has discussed in the second monograph issued by the Society of Medieval Archaeology. D is a three-bay house with a central hall, the end bays being continuous with the hall.

This classification, although provided originally for West Cambridgeshire, has certainly some relevance to Suffolk and other

<sup>7</sup> *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, vol. xxx, part 2 (1965), pp. 186-7, Plate XXVII, a.

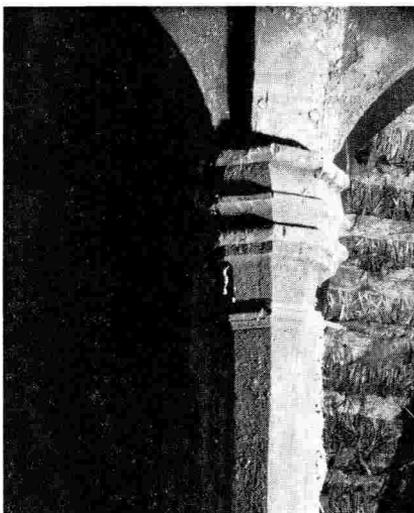
<sup>8</sup> R.C.H.M., *Report on West Cambridgeshire*, (forthcoming).

PLATE XLI

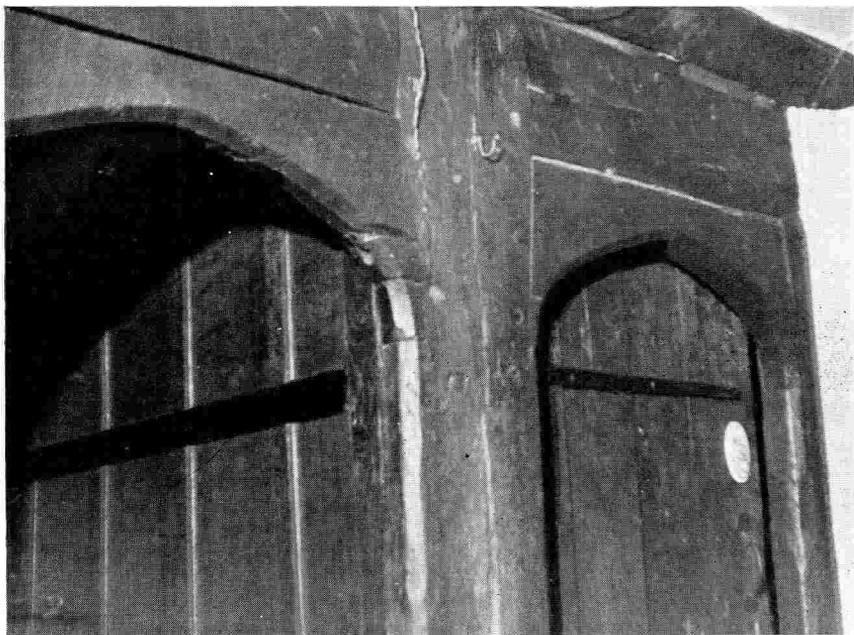


Church Farm, Fressingfield, unusual double crown post standing on tie beam.

PLATE XLII



*a*, Ubbeston Hall, Stonham Aspall, crown post.



*b*, Ubbeston Hall, Stonham Aspall, cross passage of twin doors.

East Anglian counties, but it must be borne in mind that it does not include any chronological development. This in any case must vary from region to region and any detailed chronological survey must depend upon considerable numbers of documented houses.