

HILL FARM, LAXFIELD: A LOBBY-ENTRANCE HOUSE OF THE LATE 17TH CENTURY

by IAN JOHNSON

DURING THE 16TH century, the medieval house with its hall open to the roof fell out of favour in eastern England; to an increasing extent newly built and modernized houses were storeyed throughout. This development was made possible by the erection of a chimney stack to draw off the smoke from the hall fire, thus allowing a ceiling to be inserted over the hall. The lobby-entrance plan was only one of a number of possible arrangements for a storeyed house, although it was to be widely adopted. Typically, it assumed the following form. The main room on the ground floor, serving as a hall-kitchen, was heated from a brick stack at one end, the stack also providing a hearth for the room on the far side, which might be either a parlour or a service room. In front of the stack, connecting these rooms to each other and the world outside, was the lobby entrance. If the ground floor included a third room, it was usually an unheated service room in line with the others.

The lobby entrance had no place in the earliest storeyed houses. Paycocke's in Coggeshall, Essex, for example, is a two-storeyed house dating from about 1500, with a continuous jetty to the street. The entry is at one end and the hearths are set along the rear wall. The earliest known lobby-entrance house has in fact been identified by Eric Mercer at Kneeshall in Nottinghamshire. Built of brick for a royal official probably before 1536, it was a hunting lodge or similar retreat rather than a farmhouse.¹ There are few if any reliably dated lobby-entrance farmhouses before the 1570s, when scattered examples begin to appear over a wide area of eastern and south-eastern England. Mercer suggests that one reason for the adoption of the lobby entrance in a farmhouse was that it kept the owner's apartment, the parlour, separate from the hall, at a time when servants were becoming socially segregated from their employers.²

The Ipswich Branch of the Suffolk Record Office holds a building contract of 1577 for the erection of a timber-framed lobby-entrance house at Holbrook, as an investment for Toly's (or Tooley's) charitable foundation. It includes a detailed specification and plan.³ The central room of the three on the ground floor was to be a heated parlour, with the 'haule' — a somewhat longer room — on the outer side of the stack. Clearly, it is unsafe to assume a central position for the hall in three-roomed plans of this period. The use of this plan for a speculative building suggests that the lobby entrance was already widely accepted. The very similar house at Bells Lane Farm in Stanningfield may be of about the same date. Here however the central room is the largest, and seems always to have been the hall.⁴

Storeyed houses without lobby entrances continued to appear. The following may be taken as representative. Foundry House in Stanton, a new house of 1576, has a three-roomed plan with a chimney stack between hall and parlour, but retains the medieval feature of a cross-passage at the lower end of the hall. The house at nos. 20–22 The Street, Ixworth, is rather like a small version of Paycocke's, but may not have been built before 1600.

By the early 17th century, the lobby-entrance house was not uncommon in Suffolk. After the Civil War, houses of this type are usually smaller, reflecting some decline in status, and may be restricted to one-and-a-half storeys, as at Drift House, Sapiston. But the early 18th-century brick house with classical details next to Kersey Mill shows that a house of some consequence could still be built to a lobby-entrance plan.

Hill Farm (Pl. IIIa) lies just to the east of Laxfield village. Despite its name, it is less than 200ft above sea level, in an area of gently rolling claylands supporting mainly arable and dairy farming. At the time of the tithe award of 1840 the farm comprised 106 acres, of which 80 were arable and the remainder pasture.

Hill Farm, Laxfield, Suffolk

National Grid ref:- TM 302723

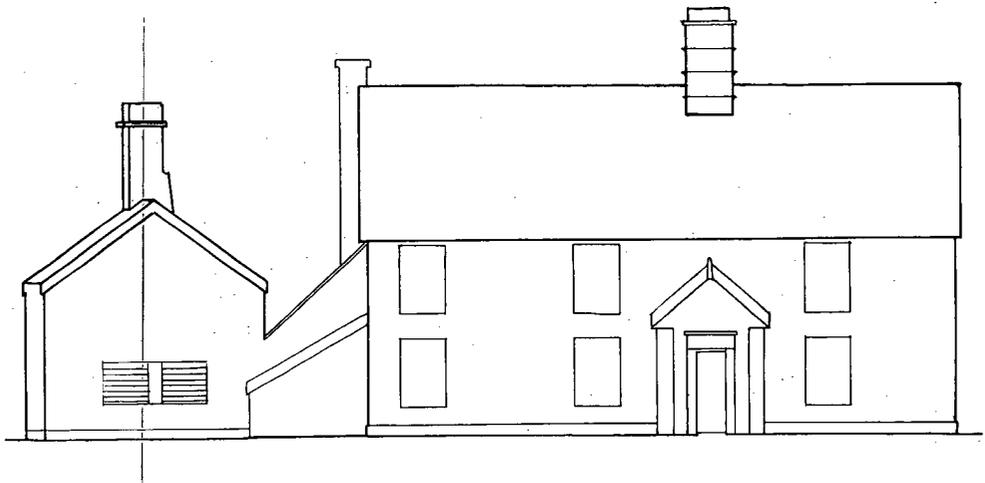
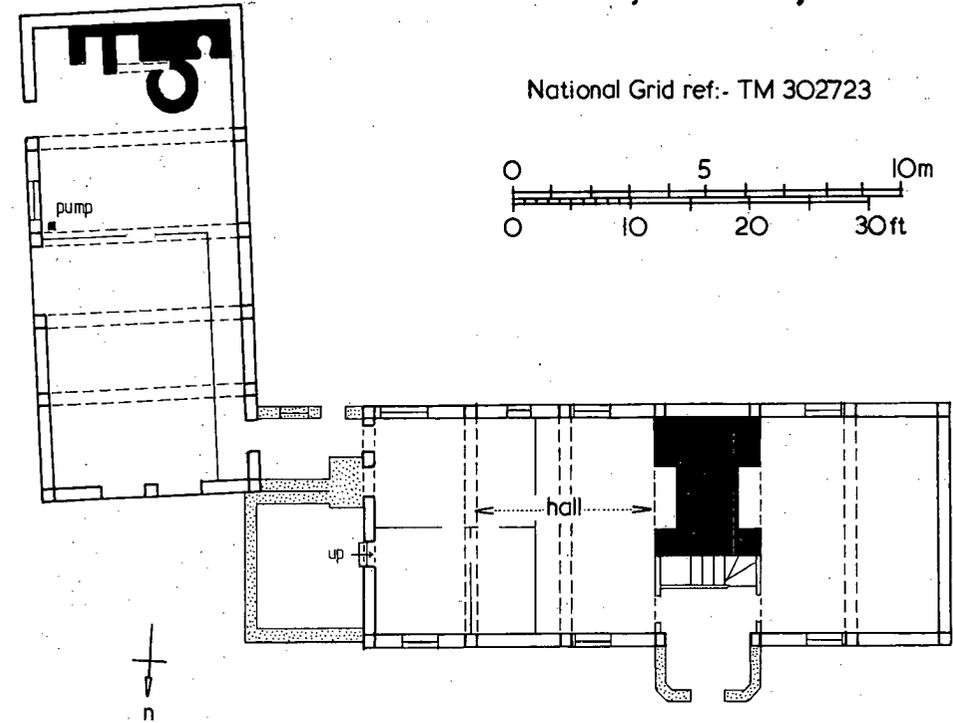
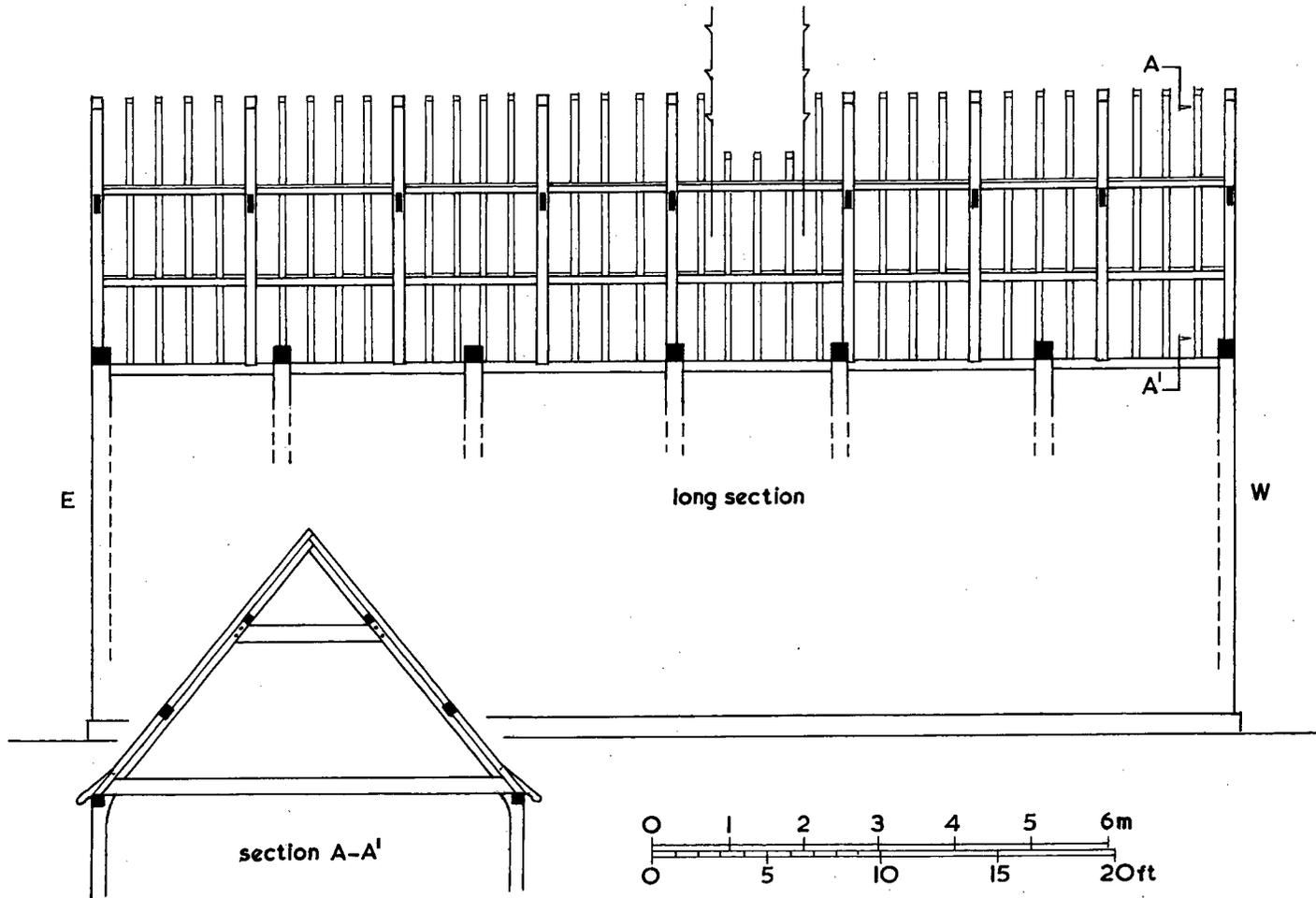


FIG. 18—Ground plan and elevation to north.

FIG. 19—Sections of main roof.



Until recently, the farm had a backhouse, or detached service building, which is described below. The farmhouse is not unlike Bells Lane Farm or the projected house at Holbrook, being another two-storied lobby-entrance house with a three-roomed plan. But it will be seen that Hill Farm is a more recent building, dating probably from the second half of the 17th century. The plan can best be described as modular, as it is based upon six eight-foot bays: two each for the large rooms on either side of the chimney stack, one for the stack, lobby and stairs, and one for the room at the east end. The rooms next to the stack are assumed to have been the hall and parlour. As they were originally the same size (the central room is now smaller than it used to be) it is not easy to tell which was which. Nor do the details help, since the joists of both ceilings bear the same rather simple mouldings, and both hearths seem to be about the same size. The central room, however, was surely the hall. Not only is the adjoining room to the east a service room, but it formerly gave access to the backhouse. In view of the activity which must have been attracted by these arrangements, the hall could hardly have been anywhere but in the centre of the house, with the parlour in relative seclusion beyond the lobby, at the west end.

It is not easy to see what the modular plan achieved for the householder. Eight feet may be generous for a chimney bay, but the same length can hardly have been sufficient for the only service room. It is not surprising that the eastern part of the ground floor was eventually rearranged, and the service area enlarged at the expense of the hall. This may have taken place not long before the brick cellar was added at the north-east corner in the 19th century.

The plan (and perhaps also the regular range of upright windows which, although entirely renewed, may represent the original scheme) may well reflect Renaissance ideas, which were unlikely to find expression, at this social level, until after the Civil War. It is instructive to compare this plan with the earlier plans of the Holbrook and Bells Lane Farm houses, where the room sizes seem to have been chosen almost at random, yet may be expected to have met the practical needs of a household.⁵ Of the wall framing, not much can be seen under the plaster, apart from the upper sections of the posts dividing the wall into bays (which can be detected from inside), and the wall plates. The posts are jowled and each pair is joined by a tie-beam.

The main roof structure consists of nine pairs of principal rafters with collars, and two rows of butt purlins in straight lines. Only at the gables and in the centre of the roof do the principals form a truss with a tie-beam; elsewhere they are merely seated on the wall plate. The roof bay accommodating the stack is as wide as the wall bay below; other roof bays are narrower and do not coincide with the wall bays. The lower purlins bisect the common rafters, accepting the tenons of the rafter sections.

Extensive use of short lengths of timber appears to reflect a time of scarcity. Apart from the tie-beams and principals, nothing longer than 10ft was used. Disregarding sprockets and pegs, there are as many as 182 components, as follows:

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Length of timbers</i>
Tie-beams	7	17ft 6in
Principal rafters	18	14ft 9in
Collars	9	6ft 6in
Purlins (upper)	16	5ft 0in – 7ft 6in
(lower)	16	5ft 0in – 7ft 6in
Common rafters		
(upper sections)	58	10ft 0in
(lower sections)	58	4ft 9in
Total:	182	

Lacking wind braces, and with the rafter tenons left unpegged, the roof might seem scarcely strong enough to withstand lateral wind pressure. The fact that it survives in good order speaks

well for the quality of timber and workmanship. The rare occurrence of roofs of this type suggests, however, that there have been failures elsewhere.

The roof bears out the late 17th-century date for the house suggested by the plan. Crown-post roofs had been usual for open halls, and some occur in storeyed houses, but not many of these are recorded. One Suffolk example noted by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments is at nos. 6–7 The Broadway, Bury — the surviving part of a two-storeyed house with a jetty to the street. Here the crown posts are plain, being square in section without mouldings. This is an early storeyed house, attributed by the Royal Commission to the early or mid 16th century.⁶ It cannot have been much later than this that crown-post roofs were entirely superseded by those of side-purlin construction. No doubt there was more than one reason for such a sweeping change. Perhaps the comparative costs of timber and carpentry swung in favour of the side-purlin roof, but this has not been established. As an embellishment which the ordinary householder could afford, the crown-post roof must have lost its attraction when the display of timbers could no longer be seen from ground level because of the hall ceiling. But the deciding factor may well have been that the side-purlin roof left the roof space comparatively uncluttered with structural timbers, freeing it for use for storage or accommodation. A sequence of such side-purlin roofs can be traced in Suffolk buildings.

The earliest type, consisting of a roof without principals in which the purlins are clasped between collars and rafters, occurs at the 16th-century end of Purton Green Farm, Stansfield. A roof with 'substantial purlinges and principals' is specified in the contract of 1577 for the Holbrook house, but no further details are given. Butt purlins and clasped purlins were used at Green Farm at Little Green in Bedford. Two rows of butt purlins were used in conjunction with wind braces in the demolished wing of Brandon Manor House. In the main range of Tattingstone Hall — also demolished — the lower row of butt purlins bisected the common rafters. The use of bisected rafters and a ridge piece, resulting in roof slopes like tilted floors, occurs at the Unitarian Chapel at Bury, where the date 1711 appears on a waterhead. The roof of Hill Farm most closely resembles that formerly at Tattingstone Hall, and may well be of about the same date.

The backhouse was pulled down not long after it was seen in 1975. It was a five-bay building of one and a half storeys with a coupled rafter roof. Many of the timbers had been re-used, including three main beams with ogee mouldings of 16th-century form. The south end was built in 17th-century brick, and had been in full use as a kitchen since the installation of a range and copper in the 19th century. The rest of the ground floor was a dairy. There was a harness room upstairs. It appears from references in probate inventories that a backhouse might serve as a dairy, bakehouse, brewhouse, or wash-house, but rarely if ever as a kitchen. The backhouse may have been built at the same time as the farmhouse, as timbers with mouldings similar to those mentioned above have been cut lengthwise and used as upper rafter sections in the main roof. Perhaps they all came from an earlier house on the site.

At Hill Farm, Renaissance ideas of design were applied to a type of house that had survived without much change for about 100 years. The plan therefore has a new regularity, although in practical terms it could hardly be considered an advance on what had gone before. The elevation, too, seems to have been made more regular, so far as one can tell in the absence of the original windows.

What can be seen of the structural details is almost confined to the roof, although that is revealing enough. Traditional timber building in Suffolk, as elsewhere, depended upon a plentiful supply of oak. But the unusual roof of Hill Farm, making ingenious use of short lengths of timber, is a clear indication that the days of abundance were over. Timber building did not, of course, immediately come to an end, but carried on into the 18th century, especially at humbler levels. After 1700, however, the preferred materials for house-building came to be brick for walls,

and imported pine and fir for the woodwork. Hill Farm marks, in fact, the stage at which the vernacular tradition goes into decline.

APPENDIX

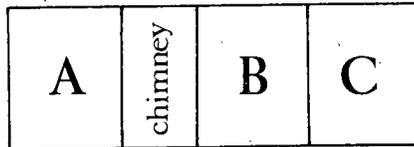
Comparative table of three Suffolk lobby-entrance plans

FIG. 20—Block plan.

	<i>Projected house at Holbrook</i>	<i>Bells Lane Farm Stanningfield</i>	<i>Hill Farm Laxfield</i>
Date	1577 (contract)	Late 16th cent.	Late 17th cent.
Total length	50ft 0in	46ft 0in	49ft 9in
Width	18ft 0in	18ft 0in	19ft 0in
Room A			
Use	Hall	Parlour?	Parlour
Length	16ft 0in	12ft 6in	15ft 9in
Chimney bay			
Length	7ft 0in	5ft 0in	8ft 0in
Position of stairs	Behind stack	Behind stack?	Next to lobby
Room B			
Use	Parlour	Hall	Hall
Length	14ft 0in	14ft 0in	15ft 9in
Room C			
Use	Buttery	Service?	Service
Length	11ft 0in	11ft 6in	8ft 0in
Backhouse	None	None reported	Of five bays (demolished)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the owner of Hill Farm for allowing access. Much of the information on Suffolk houses was provided by Sylvia Colman, whose help I gratefully acknowledge. She and her son Adrian assisted with the survey.

NOTES

¹ Mercer 1975, 60.

² Mercer 1975, 61.

³ S.R.O. (I.), C6/1/7, pp. 269–70. This most informative document was brought to the writer's attention when David Penrose circulated a copy with a transcription at the Winter 1979 meeting of the Vernacular Architecture Group. Detailed contemporary descriptions of vernacular buildings are rare.

⁴ See the plan and elevation in Eden 1968, 83.

⁵ Details of all three plans are given in the table in the Appendix.

⁶ The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) kindly allowed me to see their record card describing this house.

REFERENCES

Printed works

Eden, P. M. G., 1968. 'Smaller Post-Medieval Houses in Eastern England', in Munby, L. M. (ed.), *East Anglian Studies*. Cambridge.

Mercer, E., 1975. *English Vernacular Houses*. H.M.S.O., London.

Unpublished MSS: Abbreviations

S.R.O.(I.) Suffolk Record Office (Ipswich).