

Abbey Farmhouse, Hoxne, Suffolk



Fig 1: South front of Abbey Farmhouse



Fig 2: South east serpentine brace

Abbey Farmhouse is a gentry house, part 16th century timber framed with a 17th century west brick crossing (Figs 1 & 6a), on the site of a Benedictine priory. In 1538, shortly before the Dissolution, the priory sold the property to Sir Richard Gresham, who a few years later in 1544 sold it to Sir Robert Southwell, who leased it to the Thurstons.

According to Margaret Carey Evans the surviving historic documents show that the priory was a small foundation having a Warden or Prior, and six or seven monks sent out from Norwich Cathedral Priory. Its buildings mentioned in the documents consisted of a chapel, a hall with a painted curtain, a parlour, the chamber of the hall with a parclose (a screen), a dormitory and a chamber over the dormitory. The windows of the hall and parlour were glazed. Plus there were the usual offices of kitchen, bakery, dairy and brewery. Beyond the buildings lay an orchard and a garden, stables, closes (enclosed spaces) for threshing and winnowing corn, a malt-house, a dove-cote, and a cemetery enclosed by a wall. Water was probably piped from the nearby Chickering Beck, as there was a cistern. There were also fish-ponds and St Edmund's well. (Margaret Carey Evans 1987, 'Contribution of Hoxne to the cult of St Edmund King and Martyr in the Middle Ages and later', SIAH Vol XXXV1, part 3, p182-195). None of these buildings survive, apart possibly one farm building to the north¹, unless some are incorporated in the west crossing.

Timber framed range

The timber framed range is a complex building and the interpretation offered here is not universally accepted.¹ Either Sir Robert Southwell or the Thurstons could have built it in about the middle of the 16th century. It is two storey and attic, runs west to east with its timber framing exposed and infilled with brick noggin. The south face is long jettied, with serpentine bracing, and the jetty's bressumer has trailing leaf carvings. The range is very tall, 52ft long and has two rooms on each floor and in the attic. It originally continued inline to the east, shown by mortices in the rafters of the east wall for windbraces extending to the east. Also the north east corner post (post E', Fig 6a) has a mortice for a middle rail extending to the east, with a mortice below for a high frieze window. The studs in this east wall have been replaced, but there are pegs in the south east corner post on the ground floor for a door head, but there is no clear evidence for a door on the first floor. None of the corner posts has grooves for brick noggin, which casts doubt on the originality of the brick noggin. Also the braces in the south front are mainly lap jointed in, and are possibly later insertions, with the eastern brace extending a few inches beyond the east corner post as if continuing across the lost bays to the east (Fig 2). The brick area on the south front between the timber framing and the brick west wing was originally timber framed - as indicted by the pegs for studs visible externally in the wallplate.

The timber framing, apart from the braces in the front wall, has all the studs morticed and tenoned and pegged. The principal posts are jowled, but there is a surprising lack of braces. There are none in the north wall and none of the trusses have braces up to the tie-beams. The roof has a single clasped side purlin with windbraces on each side (Fig 3). This type of roof is usually assumed to date mainly from around the middle of the 16th century in Suffolk, but recently tree-ring dating has discovered one built over a barn in 1464/5 at Park Farm, Liston, Essex which is very close to Long Melford. So it likely that this roof was spreading through Suffolk during the first half of the 16th century, replacing crownpost and queenpost roofs. Another type of side purlin roof, a butt purlin roof, that is



Fig 3: Roof over timber framed range

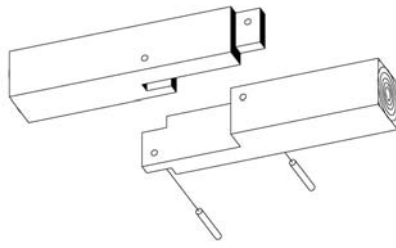


Fig 4: Face halved and bladed scarf joint with blades housed

where the purlins are tenoned to the principal rafters, was used over the gentry house, Otley Hall, in 1512. The scarf joint used in Abbey Farmhouse is a face halved and bladed scarf joint with its blades housed - a joint which appeared in the early 16th century and was used until around the first quarter of the 17th century (Fig 4).

In the centre Abbey Farmhouse's timber framed range is a cross entry. Both front and rear entrances each had a two storey porch – as shown by the narrow door on the first floor on the front and back which were the entrances to the first floor rooms over the porches (Fig 1). Above these rooms there was an attic room in the roof of the porch, entered from an opening in the roof of the attic of the main range (Fig 3)¹. The porch to the south was also jettied. Today the north porch is single storey and the south one has been removed.

The cross entry is at the east end of the ground floor west room, a room which has no evidence of any fireplace. However there is a short bay beyond the west end of this room, bay B'C' in Figure 6a, which was altered in the 17th century - as shown by the turned balusters on the stairs in this bay which are 17th century. This bay is 8ft 10in wide including the posts and was probably a chimney bay. At this width it must have been for a back-to-back fireplace, implying there was another, now lost, range beyond, probably earlier monastic buildings. Post B' appears to have been part of an open frame against another building, and never had a tiebeam on it, probably because the chimney stack extended across to the earlier monastic buildings on both floors, blocking the use of a tiebeam. Support for the concept of a large chimney is that truss CC', at the west end of the west room, has on the first floor, pegs in the tiebeam for a partition with an 9½ft gap in the middle (Fig 5), consistent with a large brick chimney filling the space. Fig 6b attempts to show what the 16th century ground plan might have been like.

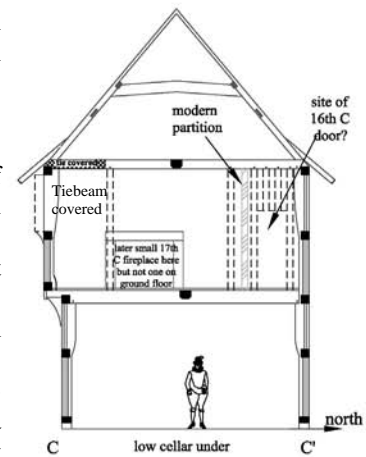


Fig 5: Cross-section of truss CC' of timber framed range (not to scale)

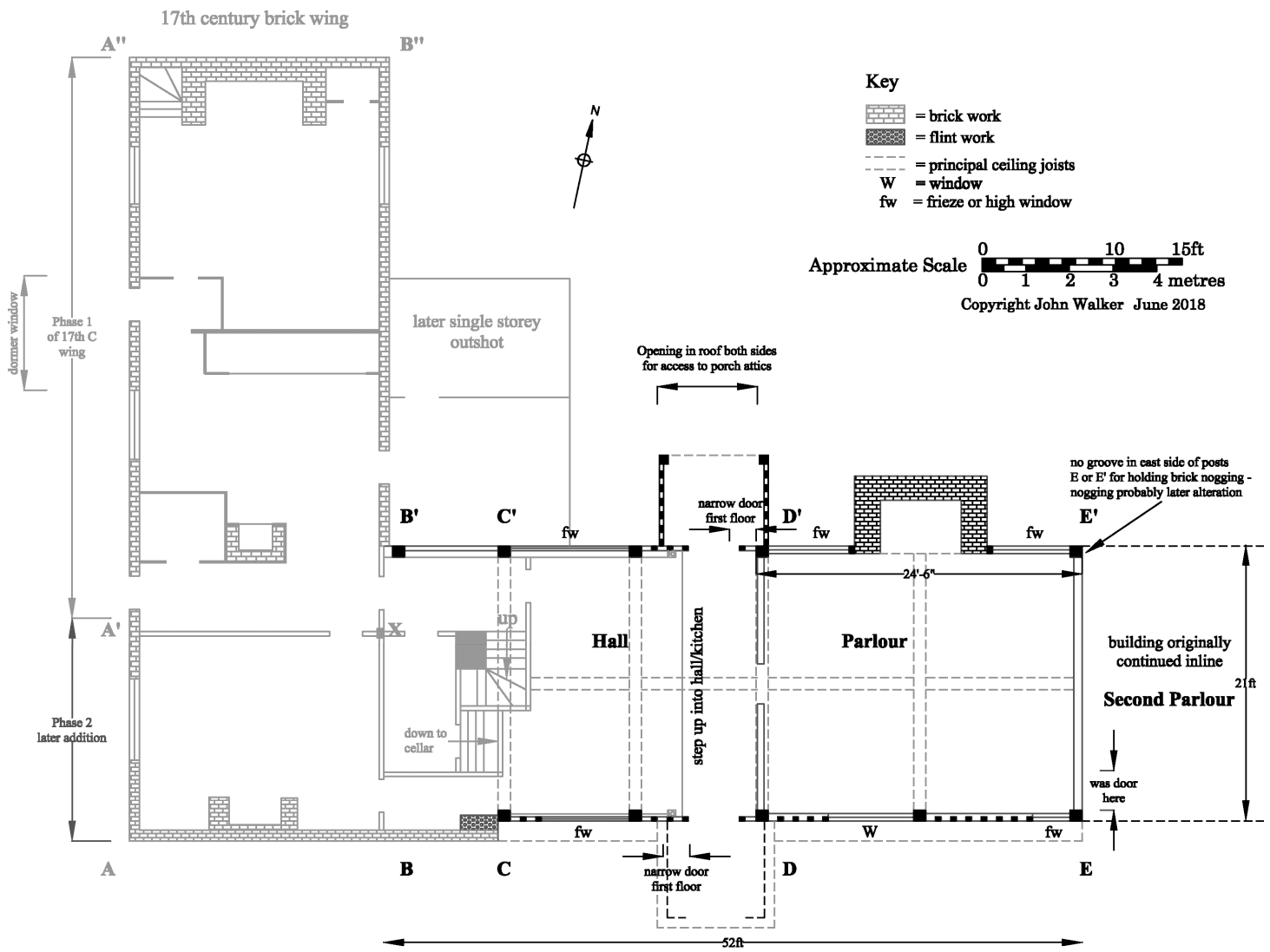
All of this raises the question: what were the room functions? The west room, with the cross entry at its east end, was probably the hall, as it seems unlikely that the stairs to the first floor would have been at the far end of a service room. The present stairs in bay B'C' are 17th century, but must have replaced earlier stairs as there is no other obvious place for them. The kitchen is most likely to have been in the monastic west range. The east room was probably a parlour. It is heated by a large chimney stack on the north wall but the fireplace is parlour size rather the size usually found in halls. It is usually assumed that this room was the hall as it is entered directly from the cross entry, with the parlour in the lost room to its east. However other 16th century buildings have parlours entered directly from the crosspassage, rather than being at the high end of the hall, as the old medieval plan layout started to change in the 16th century. Also, this is a gentry house and would have had many more rooms, usually called parlours in documents, than the three ground floor rooms of services, hall and parlour found in smaller vernacular 16th century houses.

The east ground floor room has much early 17th C oak panelling along with part of a Jacobean overmantel. This panelling was there in 1888 when the Rev. Manning visited and reported "It has a large panelled room to the left of the porch entrance, over which is another panelled-room, with the arch for a fire-place, and round the upper part of the walls of this chamber were paintings of the arms of the Thurston family and their alliances, which.... have been papered over, some 12 or 15 years ago" (Rev R C Manning 1891, SIAH Vol V11, p3). Most of this panelling does not survive on the first floor. The west first floor room has complete 16-17th century panelling.

West Brick Crosswing

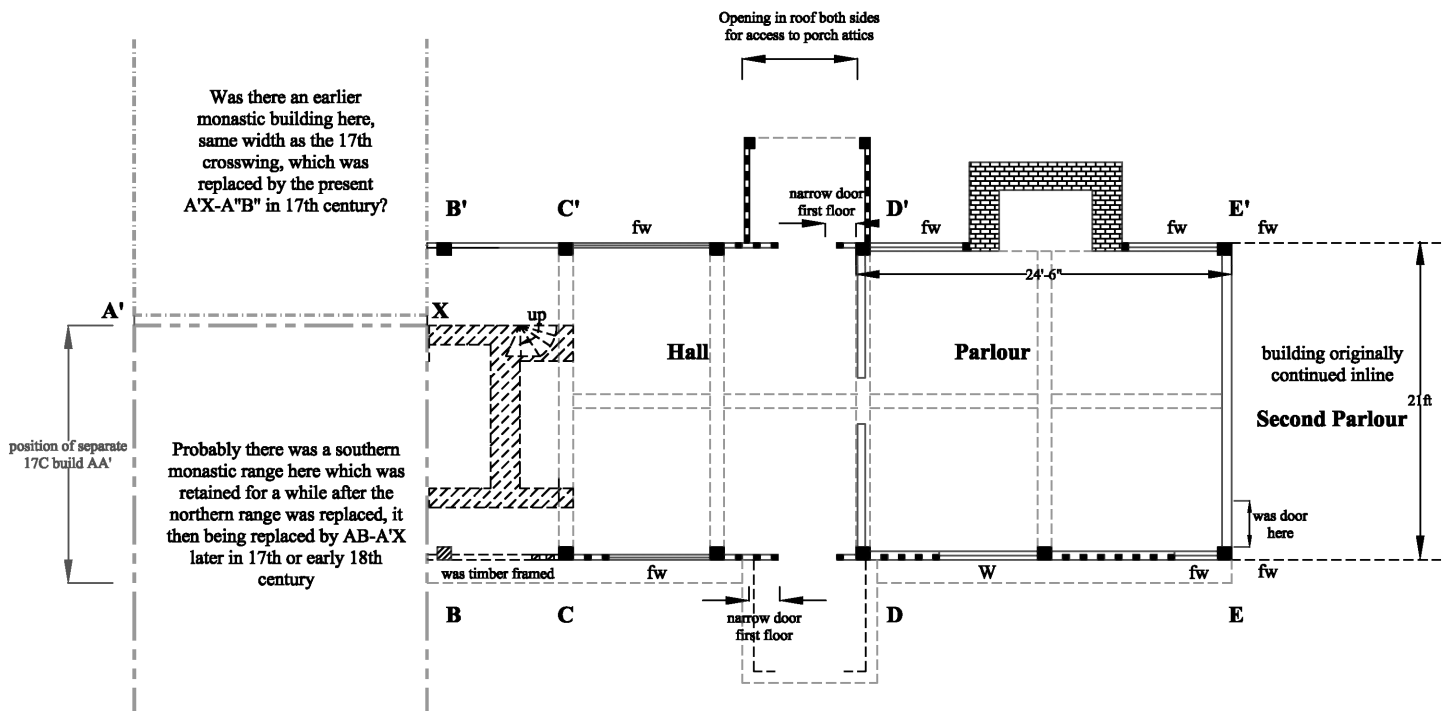
The brick built west crosswing replaced the monastic buildings on the west end of the house and was built in two phases in the 17th or early 18th century. The south attic room of the crosswing has two collars next to each other at the north end of the room, with the roof to the north having a 17th century side purlin roof consisting of two tiers of butt side purlins on each side with wind braces, while that to the south is later. The latter also has two tiers of butt side purlins, but has no windbraces. The northern part of this crosswing was built open framed against an earlier range to the south, which in turn was replaced when the southern bay was added later in the 17th or early 18th century. A difficulty with this interpretation is that there is no evidence of a break between the two parts visible externally in the west brick wall. Similarly the north end of the wing seems to have been extended with the addition of the present north end chimney, but again there is no break visible in the brickwork, which is in Flemish Bond, for this addition. Leigh Alston¹ has suggested that the west wing may be part of the old monastic buildings, and has been re-faced externally with 17th century 'Tudor' bricks at some later date.

¹ Leigh Alston 2018, *Abbey Farm, Hoxne Suffolk: Historic Building Survey*



a: Ground plan today

but did it look like Fig. b below when the timber framed range was built in the mid-16th century?



b: Possible ground plan when timber framed wing built in the mid-16th century

Fig 6: Ground plan and possible development of Abbey Farmhouse, Hoxne, Suffolk