

## RATLING COURT, AYLESHAM

E. W. PARKIN

Ratling Court is an ancient aisled house of considerable interest, situated 9.6 km. (six miles) E.S.E. of Canterbury.<sup>1</sup> It was formerly just within the western boundary of the parish of Nonington but, since revision, it is now part of the new mining township of Aylesham.

### HISTORY

- 1093 The name Ratling suggests a Saxon foundation, though the earliest known documentary reference dates from 1093, when Godfrey de Retlyng held here 'a knight's fee of the Archbishop' (Anselm).<sup>2</sup>
- 1171 Alan de Retlyng held the fee.
- 1210 Thomas de Ratlynge is quoted as being in possession.
- 1213 Early in the thirteenth century the estate appears to have been divided, for under *Pedes Finium*, part vi, CXCI,<sup>3</sup> dated 6th October, 1213, we read: 'Alexander Fitz Ralph and John le Brade for four marks and forty pence quit claim to Master Theobald, and John, Richard and Michael his brothers, all right in two hundred acres in Estriteling'. (East Ratling) '*De ducentis acris terre, cum pertinentis in Estriteling.*'
- 1279 In this year Richard de Dovers acquired half a fee in Ratling; it is interesting to note that afterwards he is referred to as Richard de Ratlinge. On 18th July of the same year, at Lyminge, one Ralph Perot did homage and fealty to Archbishop Peckham for 'half a knight's fee at Ratling'.
- 1286 Archbishop Peckham founded his College of Secular Canons at Wingham, and in the same year, amongst other endowments, he granted the tithes of '... the land that Richard de Ratling and Ralph Perot hold of the Archbishop between the highway which leads from Crudeswood, to the cross at Bonnington, and thence to the estate of the Priory at Adesham.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> N.G.R. T.R. 240537.

<sup>2</sup> F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The Lordship of Kent*, 1966, 141.

<sup>3</sup> *Arch. Cant.*, vi, (1866), 228.

<sup>4</sup> Hasted, *History of Kent*, ix, 253.

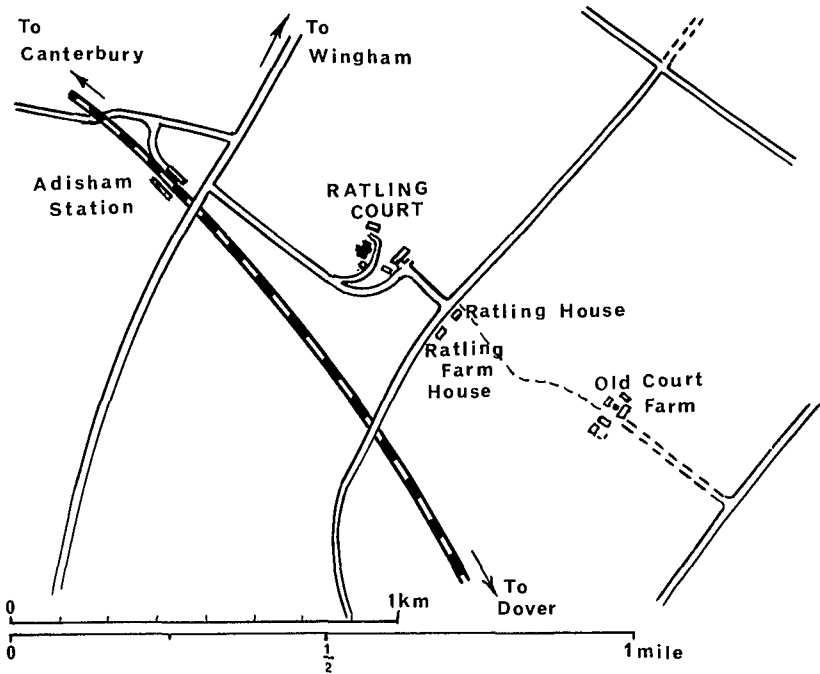


Fig. 1. Location Plan.

- 1305 Again in 1305, we hear of the executors of John de Estrateling petitioning the Parliament held that year, and claiming the sum of £132 due to him for the return of horses used by John de Ratling in the service of the King in Gascony.<sup>5</sup>
- 1309 John de Retlynges, on the 25th of November, did homage and fealty to Archbishop Robert Winchelsea for half a fee at Ratling, while the Archbishop was staying at his Manor House at Wingham.

The mention of both Ratling and Estrateling at various times, as well as those concerned there having half a knight's fee, clearly indicates the division of the property into two estates. It is assumed then that Ratling refers to land centred on the present Ratling Court, and Estrateling to property a short distance further east. Here just down the lane is Ratling House, and close to it Ratling Farm House, while across the field behind is a farm complex known as Old Court Farm. Ratling House is a long eighteenth-century building, with

<sup>5</sup> Parliament 1305, in Rolls Series.

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windows of that period, and ornamental dentilation under the eaves, but made into a modern house. Ratling Farm House is of similar date, but even more altered. Old Court Farm is the most interesting of the three, and shows signs, such as old flint ground walls, of occupying a very old site. The present farmhouse dates mainly from about 1700, having windows of that period, and brickwork with blue headers. The south end of the house still has, however, the lower part of a wide fireplace and chimney, about a century earlier, as it has two-inch brickwork, wide jointed. An attractive small barn close to the house is of similar brickwork, and is claimed as being the oldest building in the group. This could well be the site of Estrateling.

- 1325 Laura de Ratling became Abbess of Malling Nunnery, founded by Gundulph, Bishop of Rochester (1087–9).
- 1344 Thomas de Retlynge, who was an official at Christ Church Monastery, had been ordered by the King's representative to collect the wool subsidy. The Prior, thereupon, wrote to the Archbishop, asking him to use his influence to release Thomas from that work, as he was so useful a servant to the Monastery.<sup>6</sup>
- 1347 Assessments were made in Kent and elsewhere for 'Aid to Knight the Black Prince, . . . anno 20, Ed. III'. The 'Aid' in its strict application referred to assessments levied upon those who held knight's (that is, military) service of the Sovereign or other Lord, for special national occasions or purposes.<sup>7</sup> This was in place of the more modern style of taxation with which we are familiar.
- Under this assessment, Thomas de Ratling, jointly with the Abbot of Langdon were to contribute 20s. The heirs of Saire (Sarah ?) de Retling and Margery her sister were to give 40s. '*De heredibus Saire de Retlynge et Margerie sororis sue pro vno feodo quod predicta Sarra et Margeria tenuerunt in Ritlynge, de eoden Archiepiscopo, . . . xl.s.*'
- 1350 Sir Richard de Retling died possessed of it, 23 Ed. III.
- 1356 Thomas de Ratling mentioned 29 Ed. III.
- 1387 Sayer (Sarah ?) de Ratling died in this year, leaving an only daughter Joan, who married a certain John Spicer. Cicely, the daughter of John and Joan Spicer later married
- 1444 John Isaac, of Bridge, who died possessed of it, 22 Hen. VI.
- 1502 James Isaac, deceased, who had held Ratling, but who had enfeoffed one quarter of it to his own use, and three-quarters

<sup>6</sup> Letters Christ Church, vol. ii.

<sup>7</sup> *Arch. Cant.*, x, (1876), 99.

as jointure for his daughter-in-law Benedicta, the daughter of John Guldeford, Knight. The three-quarters was worth £6, and rendered 12*d.* per annum to the Archbishop in his manor at Wingham; the quarter, lately John Hall's, was worth 43*s.* 4*d.*, and also rendered 12*d.* Both parts were held by knight's service.

- c. 1525 Edward Isaac sold his property at Ratling to Sir John Fineux, Esq., Chief Justice of the King's Bench, whose son William Fineux alienated it to Thomas Engeham, Gent., of  
 1558 Goodnestone, who by his will of 1558 gave it to his second son Edward. Edward's son William Engeham sold it to William Cowper, Esq., who afterwards resided there.<sup>8</sup>

- William, the first of the Cowpers to live at Ratling left some interesting letters and papers,<sup>9</sup> amongst which is his plan,  
 1628 dated 1628, to convert the house to two storeys, and to build an extension to it. He added, however, that the building was in a very sad state, and hardly worth the doing of it. He did eventually renovate the house, and rebuild the south wing,  
 1637 which has the date 1637 on it, though to only about half the size he had originally planned. He was created a baronet of  
 1642 Nova Scotia, and then in 1642 made a baronet of Great Britain.<sup>10</sup> He was a staunch supporter of the King, and during the Civil War was taken prisoner by Cromwell, but restored to  
 1664 his honours and estates by Charles II. He died in 1664. His grandson, Sir William Cowper, Bart., was by Queen Anne made Lord Cowper, Keeper of the Great Seal, then Lord  
 1718 Chancellor, and finally Earl Cowper, 4 Geo. I. Hasted<sup>11</sup> adds, '... and in his descendants, Earls Cowper, this manor has  
 1800 descended down to the Rt. Hon. Peter-Francis, Earl Cowper, the present owner.

It may be added here that the Cowpers of Ratling Court were related to William Cowper, the poet (1731–1800).

- From the Cowpers, Ratling Court finally passed by marriage to William Henry Grenfell, first Lord Desborough,  
 1917 which family owned it until 1917, when the tenant farmer was a certain Mr. Steed.<sup>12</sup>

- Lord Desborough sold the property in 1917 to Albert Leslie Wright, of Derby, who settled it on his daughter Marion at the time of her marriage to Viscount Hawarden, and he sold it in  
 1971 1971 to the present owner, Patrick Loftus, Esq.

<sup>8</sup> Hasted, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Now in Maidstone Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Hasted, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Igglesden, *Saunters through Kent*, x, (1913), 75.

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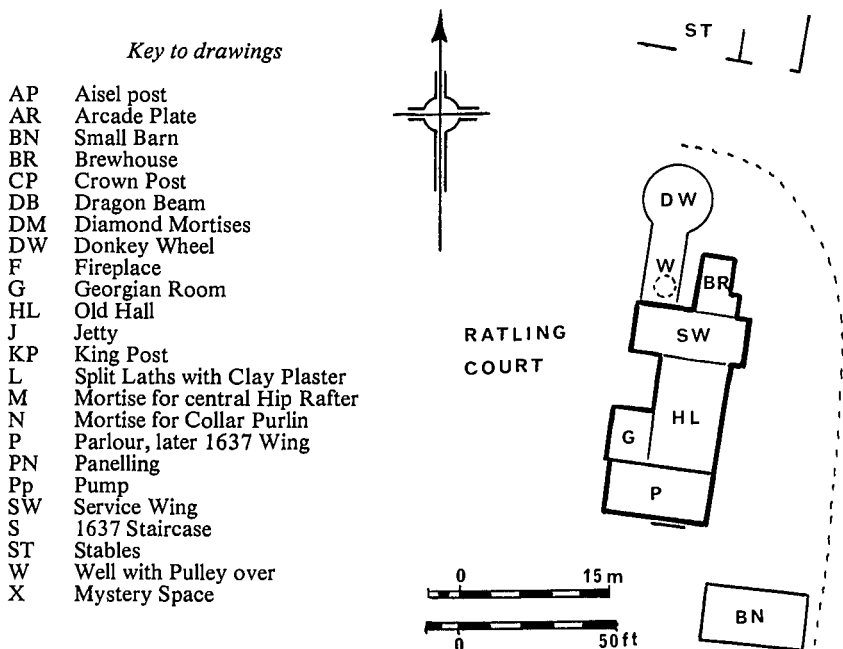


Fig. 2. Site Plan.

### RATLING COURT, THE PRESENT HOUSE

The house, as it stands today, is of several periods. The oldest part, in the centre, was once the open hall of an aisled house dating from the early fourteenth century, and certainly not later than 1320. (Mr. S. E. Rigold suggests a late-thirteenth-century date.) The north wing was rebuilt with an upper floor about the middle of the fifteenth century, while the south wing is dated 1637, and was rebuilt as already mentioned, by William Cowper. He also inserted the great fireplace and the upper floor in the old hall. A century later, the attractive little Georgian room was added at the rear of the house, and the brewhouse at the north end. Close to the brewhouse is the Donkey Wheel, attractively thatched.

### THE OLD AISLED HOUSE

This was of one floor only, having a hall in the centre open to the roof, the owner's parlour at the south end, and a room at the north end, probably a store. The hall measured 10.36 by 6.70 m. (34 by 22 ft.), the roof being supported by aisle posts, giving narrow aisles, barely a metre

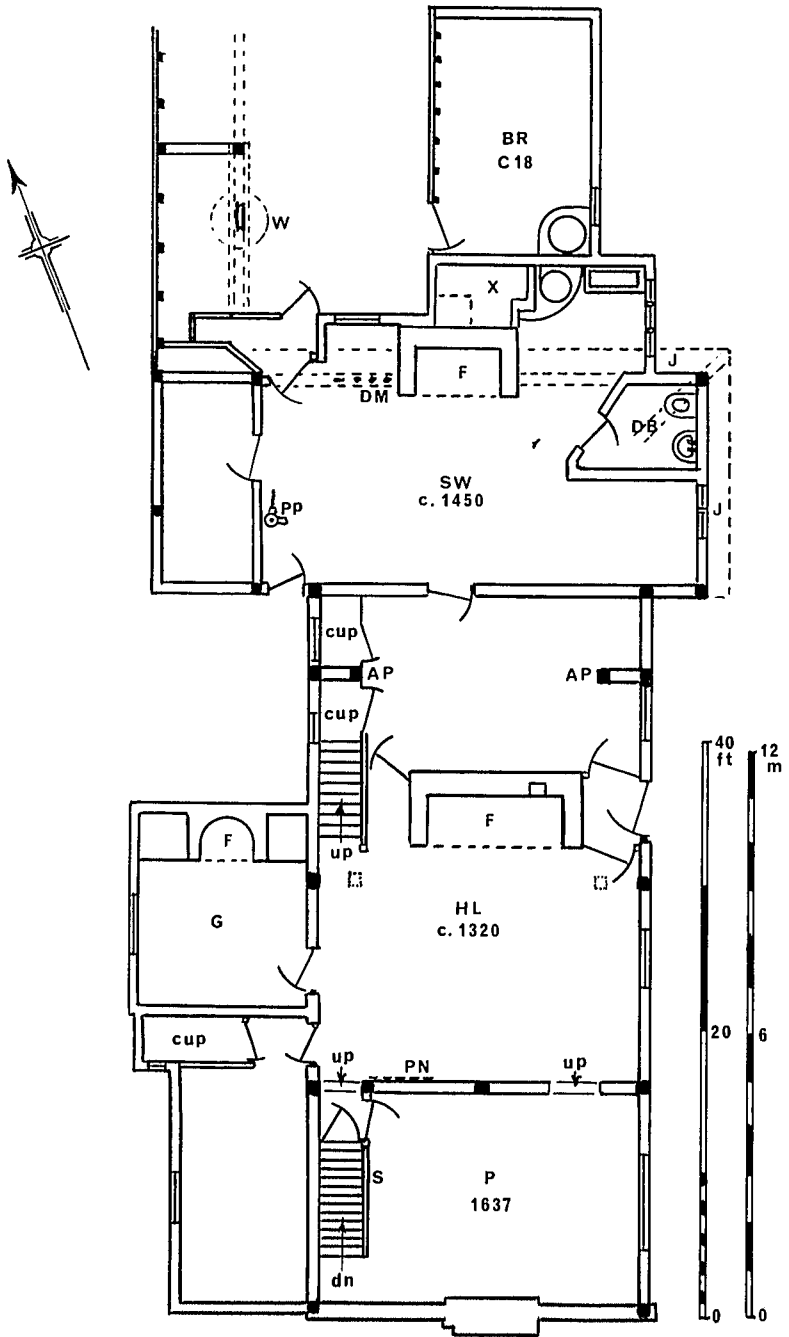


Fig. 3. Plan of present House.

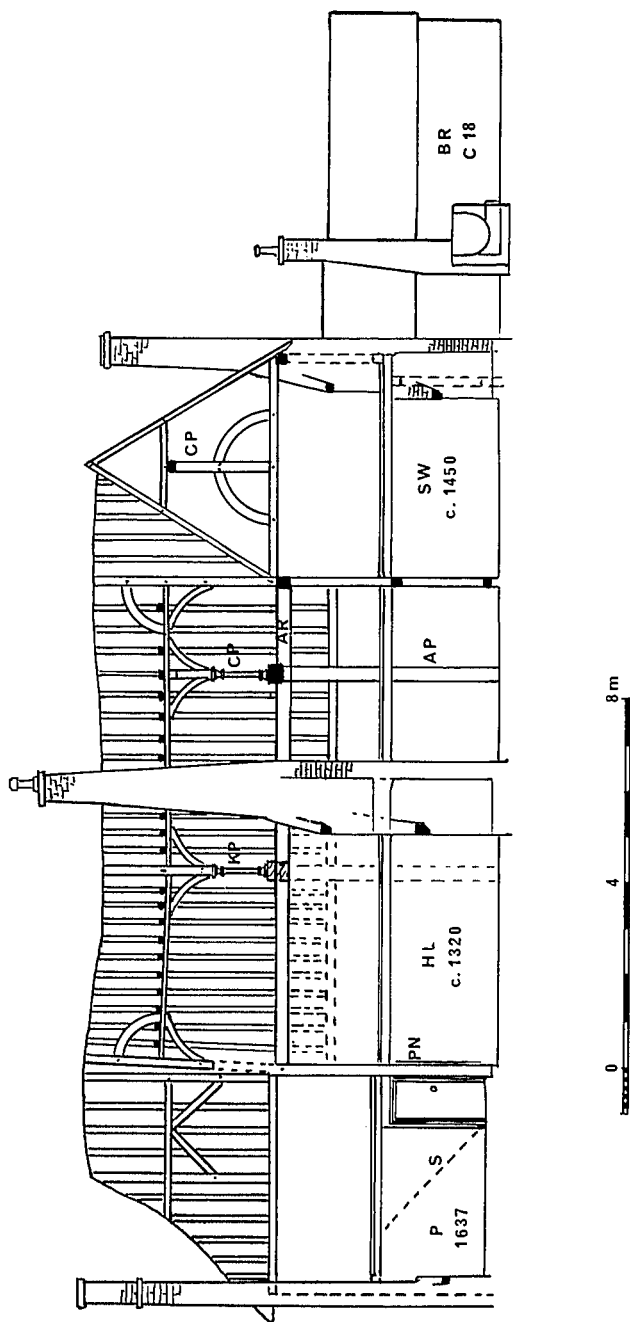


Fig. 4. Longitudinal Section of House.

in width (3 ft.). The outer doors, front and back were at the north end of the hall, forming a cross-passage where the posts in the speers, or screens still survive (Figs. 3 and 4). The arcade plates of the northern half of the hall may still be seen upstairs, together with the one visible aisle post. This is 27 cm. (10½ in.) square, chamfered on the inside edges, and with mortises for large curved braces up to the arcade plate. The main free-standing posts in the hall were taken out during the 1637 alterations, together with the tie-beam above them, causing the roof to sag at this point in a manner which Igglesden found so quaint.<sup>13</sup>

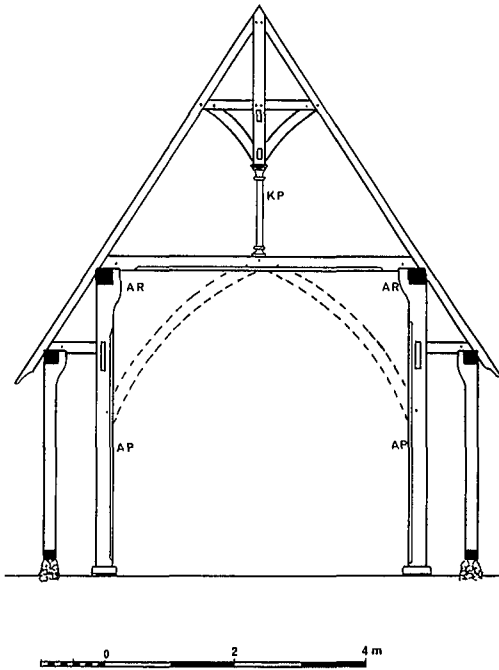


Fig. 5. King-post Truss in old aisled Hall.

The owner's parlour led off the south end of the hall, as shown by some of the original panelling which still survives there. In common with Nurstead Court, and other aisled houses of this early period,<sup>14</sup> Ratling Court appears to have been hipped at both ends, and to have been built without any upper floor (Fig. 8). The end partitions of the hall still survive within the roof, and were constructed with a gablet at the apex.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Sole St., Crundale, Kent. Purton Green Farm, Stansfield, Suffolk.



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These were framed with an additional small collar, pegged to the rafters with joints known as barefaced lap-dovetails (Fig. 6). These are apparently the only archaic joints used, all others being of the mortise and tenon type. In these partitions, the central post goes through the gablet, up to the ridge, and has an inclined mortise for the central hip rafter (M on Fig. 6). A smaller mortise below it (N) shows that the collar purlin was continued through to the hip. Some original, blackened infilling remains, with clay plaster on split oak laths.

The roof, though modified in places remains remarkably intact, and

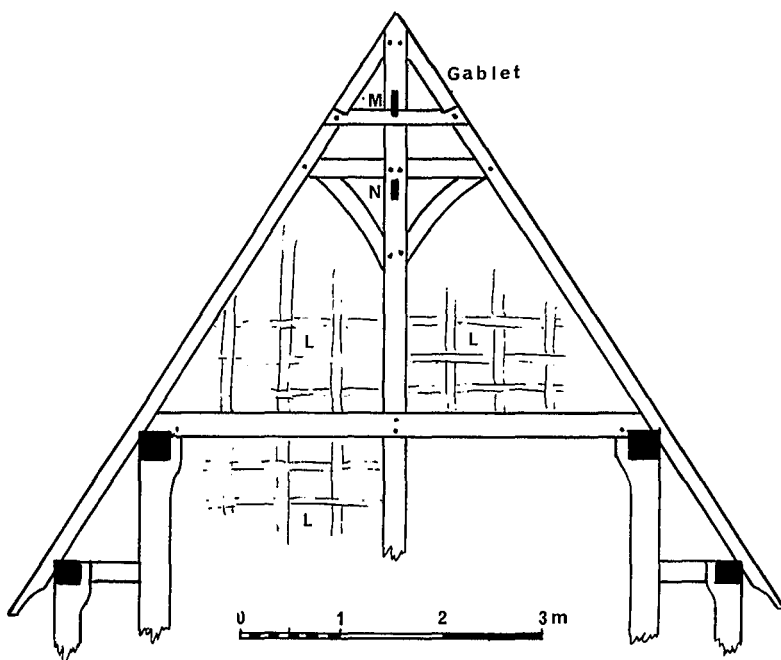


Fig. 6. Partition at south End of Hall.

combines the unusual mixture of king post and crown post. The crown post over the screens finishes under the collar purlin, while the king post in the main truss goes right up to the ridge. The king post measures 18 cm. (7 in.) square in its upper part, but is carved in the lower part into a square shaft measuring only 9 cm. (3½ in.) each way, with a narrow vertical roll mould at each corner (Fig. 7). The collar purlin, and the curved braces are heavy, and almost square in section. There is no evidence for a louvre.

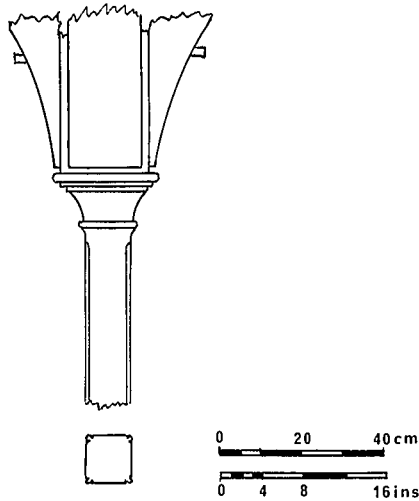


Fig. 7. Capital of Posts over Hall.

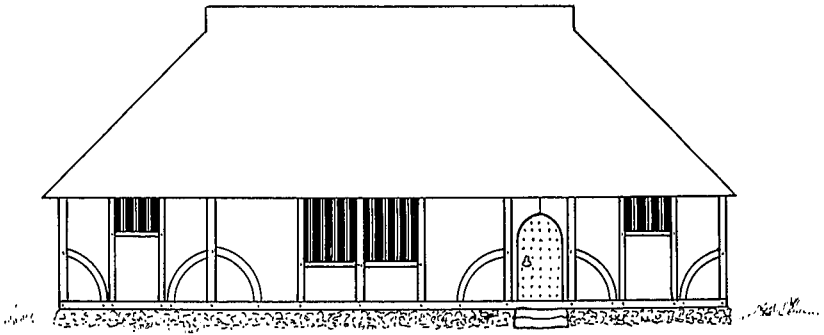


Fig. 8. Reconstruction of original House.

#### THE NORTH WING

This wing was rebuilt with an upper floor, and a more orthodox crown post roof, about the middle of the fifteenth century. The central crown post has an octagonal shaft and flatter braces, while an extension towards the rear of this wing, made later in the same century has a plain square crown post, with curved braces going down to the tie beam, and up to the collar purlin. This wing has a jetty or overhang at the front and on the north side, with some close studding still showing, as well as the usual corner post and dragon beam. Under the bressumer, which passes



Plate IA. The east Front of the House.



Plate IB. Inside the north End of the Roof.



Plate IIA. The Brewhouse and Donkey Wheel.



Plate IIB. The Donkey Wheel.

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through the present kitchen, may be seen the diamond mortises of the former buttery window.

### THE SOUTH WING

This is the wing which was rebuilt by the first William Cowper in 1637. It is also timber-framed, the roof being typical of the period, with side purlins and straight wind braces. The steep oak staircase is still in use at the rear, or west side, with square-headed, moulded doorways.

### THE GEORGIAN ROOM

Behind the south part of the old hall is an attractive small eighteenth-century room, which happily retains its original features and atmosphere. It has a small fireplace on its north side, the back of which is almost semi-circular. Fitted Georgian cupboards fill the space on either side of it, their upper part presenting open shelves, with domed tops. The window on the west side with side shutters is also original, and there is panelling around the lower part of the walls.

### THE BREWHOUSE

This is a low building of eighteenth-century brickwork, extending from the northern end of the house. It still has its old brick floor, and a copper in one corner, which is indeed made of copper. A bricked-in mystery space between the brewhouse and the present kitchen (marked X on Fig. 3) was found upon investigation to have a domed brick top, and may once have been a large oven, since sealed-in. It is unlikely to have been the domestic bread oven, as a blocked opening in one side of the present kitchen fireplace suggests a smaller oven there.

### THE DONKEY WHEEL

This extends from the north-west corner of the house, and is still almost in working order (Plates IIA and IIB). It has a circular walkway, with a frame and harness for a small horse or donkey to turn a vertical spindle and drum, a rope from the drum going out and over a large wooden pulley near the back, kitchen door. The well beneath this is 30 m. deep (114 ft.), but has now been sealed over. The whole is covered by a fine thatched roof on a rough hewn framework, supported by posts, and may have been installed to supply water to the brewhouse.

### BARNS

Several barns and outhouses may still be seen near the house; the most interesting of these is the small barn or granary close to the south side of

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the house. It is substantially framed in oak and, judging by the side purlin roof, contemporary with the 1637 wing. One of the two large barns was pulled down a year ago; it was not thought to be earlier than the eighteenth century. The surviving one may be a little later.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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