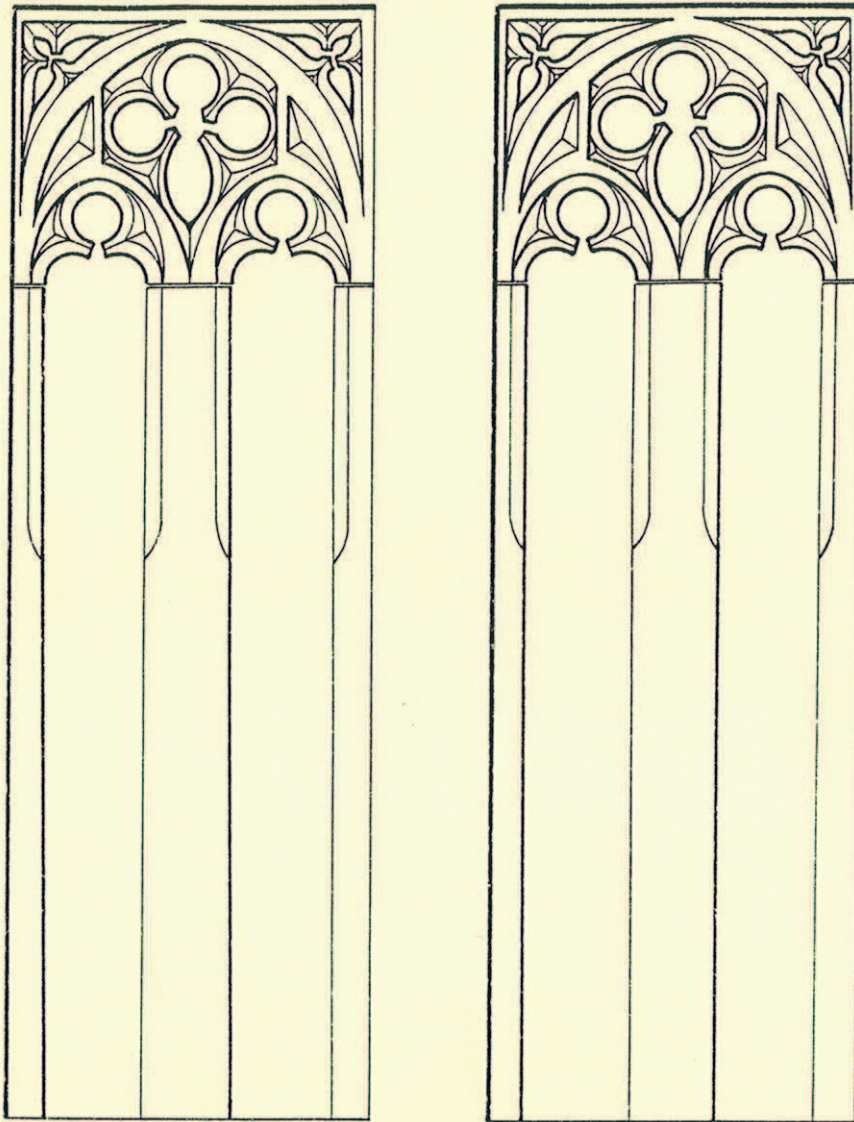


Oxford Preservation Trust

26/26a East St Helens, Abingdon

An Investigation of a Medieval Town House



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Oxford Archaeological Unit
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Summary

The well-known medieval house in East St Helens, recently bequeathed by Miss Baker to the Oxford Preservation Trust, has been re-examined by OAU to evaluate its architectural importance. Suspicion that the central entranceway was the site of an open hall was confirmed by the discovery of a smoke-blackened louvre in the roof, while the timber joists visible on the ground floor suggest that the hall had internal jetties on both sides. The front part consists of a hall and two side wings, and back has one original wing and a gallery linking with another wing. The rear wing has fine stone fireplaces, panelled ceilings on the ground floor, and 16th-century wall-paintings on the first floor; the gallery is lit by a timber window with excellent gothic tracery. This building is certainly one of the most remarkable medieval town-houses in the region, and its date of construction, now determined as c.1430 by dendrochronology, is of interest in dating certain carpentry features.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 An investigation of the historic structure at 26/26a East St Helens Street, Abingdon (Grade II listed, Oxfordshire SMR PRN 11441) was undertaken by OAU for the Oxford Preservation Trust in April 1993, following the bequest of the house from Miss Baker and the subsequent change of tenant in No. 26a.¹ The purpose of the study was to make an appraisal of the historic significance of the building, to draw attention to features of special interest in the building, and to other matters which would be of importance to the Trust. In the course of this investigation certain features were observed providing a new interpretation of the building which added considerably to its historical importance. This is a revised and extended version of the earlier OAU report, incorporating the original investigation and more recent discoveries.
- 1.2 Further to the original appraisal, a detailed survey of the house was undertaken in advance of a major programme of building refurbishment and consolidation work (August 1993 - October 1994). As a condition of listed building consent, a watching brief was maintained on interventions in the building fabric including the stripping of roof tiles and external rendering. This allowed for structural and framing details to be added to the original survey drawings (reproduced below: figures 2-6). The results of the watching brief are included in the main text below.

1 See the Trust's *Annual Report* 1991, 25-6.

- 1.3 A small scale excavation in the area of the carriage entrance was necessary for the laying of new services to the refurbished part of the building. A watching brief was maintained during the course of excavation work and the results are summarised below (section 6).
- 1.4 Given the importance of the building, it was agreed that the Trust would additionally fund a programme of tree-ring dating (dendrochronology) and this was undertaken by Dan Miles and is reported below (section 7).

2 Historical Background

- 2.1 The house was acquired by the noted Abingdon historian Agnes Baker in about 1946, and bequeathed to her sister Mary Baker in 1955. Although when purchased it was 'a condemned slum', it was carefully restored by Tony Lloyd of Curtis Green, and (after 1949) by Walter Godfrey. Planning permission was obtained in December 1946, work began in January 1947 and was completed in June 1948. Further work was undertaken in 1950, after the departure of a protected tenant from one of the cottages. The full interest of the house became apparent in the course of its restoration, with the discovery of medieval windows and tudor wall-paintings.²
- 2.2 A brief description and plan was published by the late P.S. Spokes, where the house was dated to the late 15th century.³ Notes made by Miss Baker record that the house occurs in the 1554 survey of Crown property in Abingdon by Roger Amyce of the Court of Augmentations, as having belonged to Sir James Braybrook.⁴ He died in 1509, and his will dated February of that year shows him to have been a man of substance with a London house and other property in and around Abingdon. He desired to be buried in the Abbey Church, but left £6 for masses to be sung for him at St. Katherine's altar in St Helen's church, and also bequeathed money to almshouses and highways in Abingdon. The house, on the east side of east St Helen's, is not shown on the Christ's Hospital Map as being corporate property in the 19th century, so its history is probably not recorded in Abingdon's extensive archives. It may be surmised that the garden, which is of no great size, may at one time have extended down to the river, and certainly the grandeur of the house suggests that it may have been associated with a merchant who may have had a wharf or warehouses on the extended plot.

2 See papers and accounts concerning building work in Baker papers with Preservation Trust, especially 'Specification of demolitions and alterations' dated September 1946.

3 P.S. Spokes, 'Notes on the Domestic Architecture of Abingdon', *Berkshire Archaeological Journal* (1960), 4-5.

4 Amyce survey in Abingdon Corporation records.

3 Development of the house

- 3.1 By way of introduction, it may be helpful to provide a less technical summary of the development of the building. Reference should be made to the survey drawings of the existing building (Figs. 2-6). The following section (§4) gives a more detailed description of features noted in the investigation, with an interpretation of their significance.
- 3.2 The original house was a timber-framed hall house, built in the first half of the fifteenth century. The central part, where the entrance passage now is, was an open hall roofed parallel to the road, with two side wings roofed at right-angles to the road, the north wing being larger than the south one. On the ground floor the hall was wider than the present entrance passage, and the upper storeys of the side wings were overhanging (jettied) into the hall, making the upper part of the hall narrower. The two roof trusses of the hall were filled with wattle and daub to contain the smoke from the open hearth, and at the north end was a louvre to let the smoke out. The side wings are contemporary with the hall, and have the same roof truss design with a cambered collar and arch bracing below. At the street front the wings were jettied out over the road, decorated with curved bracing, and supported from below by brackets, while the front wall of the hall was recessed. Few original features survive apart from the framing, and one small original window on the return of the south wing against the hall (its matching window in the south wall is modern). Judging from the later development of the house, the original entrance passage was probably on the north side of the hall, though no trace of a screens passage was found when the passage ceiling was removed.
- 3.3 At the rear of the hall were a pair of wings, of which only that on the south survives today, and they were joined by a gallery at first-floor level. The south wing is of high quality, and consisted of one room on each floor, with a fine stone chimney stack having decorated fireplaces on ground and first floor, and a panelled ceiling on the ground floor. The stair giving access to the room may have been on the site of the present stair, though this is not certain. The south wing appears to overhang the entrance passage, but this is only because the ground-floor framing was truncated when the entrance passage was made or widened in the 19th-century, and the sawn-off posts originally continued down to the ground. Evidence was found that the south rear wing originally extended further eastwards, where mortices in the rafters and corner post were clearly intended for an extension. The lack of mortices on the first floor principal floor joist suggests the possibility that this extension might have had another open hall.

The first-floor gallery was necessary to link together the two back wings, and it passed behind the open hall, which had no floor at this level. The gallery existed at first floor level only, being open below and having a panelled

ceiling identical to that in the south wing. The gallery itself is glazed on the east side with one continuous window of many arched and traceried heads (see Plate 2). The north wing has been rebuilt, and little can be determined of its original form.

- 3.4 The tree-ring dates obtained from samples in the front and back parts of the building have produced consistent felling dates for timber ranging from spring 1428 to 1431, and suggest that the entire building was put up within this period. It had been thought that the building might contain spoils from the buildings of Abingdon Abbey (and thus of 16th-century date), but the quality and consistency of construction rather suggests a primary build using new materials. The panelled ceiling on the ground floor could not be closely dated, being prepared Baltic oak boards from which most sapwood had been removed, but there was no evidence that they were later. The raw results of the dendrochronology are presented in Appendix B, and discussed further below (section 7).
- 3.5 In the mid-16th century the first-floor room of the rear south wing was completely decorated with a bold design of red and white vertical stripes on which floral groups were depicted. Now surviving in a large section on the west and south walls, traces of painting can also be made out on all the timber posts on the first floor, and more may still survive on the intervening walls. In the south-east painted plaster was observed during the works near an area of collapsed plaster.
- 3.6 The first post-medieval alterations include the making of an attic space in the south rear wing, and the flooring-in of the open hall, probably in the 16th or 17th century. The front north wing has windows of 17th-century date, and others may have been replaced at the same time. The north rear wing was rebuilt, and the cottages added at the back in the 18th or 19th century. The making of an entrance passage with two brick walls through the ground floor of the hall at an oblique angle to the medieval framing, with the consequent truncation of the south rear wing, is of unknown date, but possibly contemporary with the building of the cottages at the rear. By then, if not before, the house was effectively divided into two parts.
- 3.7 A survey of 1946 shows the house at it was before any alterations were carried out. The north part of the house (No. 26) was then known as 1-2 Ivy Cottages, and extended down the yard. The south part (No. 26a) had its own door to the street and a stair round the chimney stack. Backing onto this was the stair of No 3 Ivy Cottages, which had its own door to the yard. Behind the house on the south was a lean-to wing with washhouses, and a single-storey workshop at the end of the yard, both subsequently demolished. The carriage entrance was already flanked by the parallel walls which, it will be shown, truncated the medieval plan. The plan of proposed alterations, dated September 1946, shows the buildings at the back demolished and turned to gardens, except part of Ivy Cottages converted to a garage, while the back of

No. 26 was rebuilt as a kitchen. No. 26a was to have a kitchen made in the front room, its door to the street replaced by a window, and a single stair to the first floor, where a bathroom was made in the back room. Few changes were to be made to the fenestration, except the side windows uncovered in the front first-floor room of No. 26, and a second window added to the ground-floor back room of No. 26a. Subsequent to this plan, which seems to have been followed in No. 26, the work in No. 26a followed a slightly different scheme. After the discovery of the wall-painting and gallery window the stair was redesigned to follow the broad curve in the wall, the gallery was opened up to reveal the medieval window, and the bathroom was built further west.⁵

- 3.8 The recent works have included removal of the external render, minor timber repairs and support, and re-roofing.

5 See framed plan by Walter Godfrey at OPT office.

4 Detailed description

4.1 *The Roof*

- 4.1.1 As with many medieval houses, the plan layout is most clearly displayed in the roof, from which there appears to have been a central open hall with two side wings, and a separate wing at the rear of 26a. The central area at the front has a substantial roof over the *hall*, running parallel with the road. There are two principal trusses placed over the walls of the side wings, each with crown struts and curved braces to the cambered collars; the trusses are joined with a single butt-purlin. The south truss is completely infilled with wattle and daub, but the north truss has lost most of its infill, except at the top, where there is some smoke-blackening and the remains of a louvre to allow smoke out of the roof space (two horizontal trimmers and mortices for two more near the apex). The hall roof formerly ended in valley rafters against the side wings, but the present roof is higher and covers all this.
- 4.1.2 The roofs of the *side wings* are at right-angles to the road, and have crown-struts and curved braces to the cambered collars in the central and end trusses; windbraces support side-purlins, which are clasped by the collars. The roof of the north wing is much larger than the other, and reaches the same height as the hall roof; since the south wing has a lower roof the hall roof ends in a small gablet above it.
- 4.1.3 The *rear wing* of 26a has three trusses with collars clasping the purlins, but the central collar has been cut and replaced with posts to provide easy access to the attic, the east collar is cut for the window, and only the west truss is entire. The attic floor in the rear wing is not original, but was added (perhaps in the 17th-century) when the roof was altered and mortices were cut in the tiebeams to support floor joists. The joists are of long plank-shape profile.
- 4.1.4 The *gallery*, which now has a pitched roof of small irregular rafters, originally seems to have had a flat roof. It is ceiled with five substantial joists and has some old planking lying on top of them, most likely as the base for a lead roof. When the pitched roof was added an elaborate lead drain was inserted in the wall to catch the rainwater trapped between the roof pitches.

4.2 *First floor*

- 4.2.1 The most imposing feature on the first floor is the timber-framed *south rear wing* of 26a. This was a single large room with a medieval fireplace in the south-east corner, the square-headed lintel having an arcaded frieze of eleven trefoiled panels, dated by Margaret Wood to the late 15th century.⁶ The framing is in two bays, and the corner and central wall posts have jowled

6 Margaret Wood, *The English Mediaeval House* (1965), 268.

(expanded) heads to carry the tiebeams. There are traces of *wallpainting* on most of the framing (including the bathroom and back room), and both the south and west walls have extensive areas of painted decoration. These consist of broad vertical stripes of red and white with large floral designs, the overall scheme being similar to work in Christ Church and Trinity College of mid-16th century date.⁷ An account for 'restoring and fixing Wall Painting' was presented by George Nutt of Oxford in 1948.⁸ The partition wall and bathroom are modern, and the staircase is rebuilt, though possibly in its original position, judging from the curved recess in the south wall where it rises.

- 4.2.2 When the render was removed from the side wall of the south rear wing some areas of original lath and plaster were found near the main house (pl.7), but towards the east end of the wing a *blocked window* was uncovered (pl.6). This had been a six-light window with ovolo moulded mullions, which had all been turned when the wall was plastered and were not in their original positions, but it appears there were two large and three small mullions. This was evidently not the original window here, since the framing that contains the window is not pegged into the framing of the house, and mortices could be seen from an earlier and no doubt original window. This was set between two posts of which only the peg-holes and mortices survive and was possibly a bay window, since in the wallplate above the window are three mortices for horizontal members coming out of the wall. This could support a small bay similar to the mid-sixteenth century ones at the Golden Cross Inn, Oxford. There the bays have canted sides, though here the mortices are straight edged and not chased as might be expected if the sides were angled. It is uncertain whether the modern window in the bathroom is on the site of an original one; it has old plaster below and around it.
- 4.2.3 The back wing appears to have had an *eastward continuation* when first built. The evidence for this is to be seen in the principal rafters in the back wall, which have mortices for windbraces both on the inside (for the existing windbraces) and also on the outside, as if the roof had carried on (pl.9). Neither the tiebeam nor the first-floor principal joist have mortices for any continuation of flooring (pl.10), but the corner post does have a mortice for bracing on the outside, as if the wall had been continuous. Since the first floor is tenoned into the rear principal joist and the joist has no mortices on the outside, one possible explanation is that there was another open hall here, built against the stone wall which continues down the side of the garden.

7 J.T. Munby, 'Christ Church Priory House: Discoveries in St Frideswide's Dormitory', *Oxoniensia* liii (1988), 191; B. Ward-Perkins, 'Newly Discovered Wall-Paintings', *Trinity College Oxford, Report 1985-86*, Pls.1-3.

8 Baker Papers, Dec 1948 (£5 18s).

- 4.2.4 From the south rear wing a glazed *gallery* crossed to the other wing behind the hall. The present opening to this was originally filled with stud walling and an arch brace (for which mortices survive), but the small opening next to this on the west may be the original door. The window to the yard is remarkably well-preserved despite restoration, and consists of a row of two-light trefoil openings set in a square panel, each with an upper traceried head containing a quatrefoil in a two-centred arch and trefoils in the spandrels (see pl.2); this is also dated by Margaret Wood to the late 15th century.⁹ Although mostly visible in No. 26a, the fenestration continues in the closet on the landing of No. 26.
- 4.2.5 The framing of the rear wing is built up against the framing of the *south front wing*, which has a curved brace immediately behind a similar brace in the rear frame, and two posts carrying the tie-beam of the front roof. The base of the crown-strut and curved braces in the roof truss can also be seen here. This juxtaposition of the two frames is curious given their near-contemporaneity. Inside the front room there are wall posts carrying a tie-beam at the centre of the room, and wall posts at the front just east of two side windows. That on the north is an original medieval timber window with two trefoiled heads; its pair on the south is a modern copy. The framing of the front wall, revealed when the render was removed, has two tension braces, one on either side of the window (fig.5). The floor joists are substantial medieval timbers, in two lengths and tenoned to the central joist with soffit tenons and diminished haunches. The wallplates on each side of the room have traces of a painted decoration of wavy lines.
- 4.2.6 The central room is the upper part of the *open hall*, though the roof is obscured by the ceiling and the first floor has been inserted. Its floor joists are post-medieval ones of smaller scantling than those of the south wing, and appear to be of elm, as is the principal joist across the centre of the room. As mentioned above, the roof lies parallel to the road, so the wallplates of the side wings double as tie-beams for the hall roof trusses, and the wallplate in the front wall runs between the posts immediately on the east side of the windows in the south wing. Below the wallplate at the front is a row of wall studs which may not be original (the window above is modern). In the north and south walls at the centre of each wallplate/tie-beam stands the crown-strut and curved braces of the hall roof trusses, which reach the collar beam above the ceiling (fig.6). Below them is a post, that on the S having a pair of curved tension braces. The lower ends of the rafters can be seen in all four corners, though all except the one in the south-west corner have been truncated. This one is in two parts, which meet with a straight abutment on the centre-line of the wallplate/tiebeam. The short lower length (of which another example is visible in the south-east corner in the next room) rises from the wall post and is part tenoned, part clasped round the lower half of

9 Wood, *Mediaeval House*, pl.xxix c.

the wallplate/tiebeam on the hall side; the upper part is similarly clasped round the upper half of the wallplate/tiebeam. The other three rafter feet now end half way down the wallplate/tiebeam and appear to have had the same method of construction. The reason for this arrangement was no doubt to allow the roof to be added after the wall framing had been completed. It would have also given the appearance of rafters descending to the wall posts when viewed from inside the hall, while the lower ends would have been invisible in the side wings, or if seen would have appeared to be arch braces.

- 4.2.7 The *front north wing* is wider than that on the south, and jetties out over the carriage entrance. The tie-beams are longer, and are not so markedly cambered as those in the south wing. In the front wall the large central window is flanked by small high windows with ovolo mouldings typical of early 17th-century date, and there are tension braces in the original frame as in the other wing. There are no other original features now visible, and the fireplace is modern.
- 4.2.8 The *back north wing* has been rebuilt in stone, though some timberwork inside may relate to its predecessor. As on the south side, the framing of the front and rear portions stand side by side.

4.3 *Ground floor*

- 4.3.1 The *front south room* in No. 26a has a chamfered ceiling beam running the full depth of the room E/W, but with no trace of any mortices in its soffit for studs of a wall beneath it. However, the joist running N/S across the room has a mortice for a post, just south of the E/W beam, suggesting that there was a dividing wall running E/W at this point, and this is corroborated by the interrupted chamfers on its lower edges. This N/S joist is tenoned into the E/W joist, but its continuation on the north side is not chamfered, and would seem to be of a different date. The simplest explanation of this arrangement is that the central open hall had an internal jetty, thus providing the greatest possible space at ground level, and the minimum space above for the open upper part of the hall, with the upper rooms of the side wings overhanging the ground floor walls of the hall.
- 4.3.2 This pattern would appear to be repeated in the *front north wing*, where the ground floor room was similarly of smaller dimensions than the bedroom above, which extends out over the carriage entrance. The jetty beam is not visible here, though the position of the posts in the side walls of the hall can be seen as mortices in the N/S beam in the front room, and in the N/S beam in the entrance lobby. The hall would thus appear to have had internal jetties on both the north and south sides. The north wall of the front room has exposed framing with braces, based on a plate standing on a low stone wall. There is no obvious explanation of this arrangement, unless it was a wall surviving from an earlier building, or an existing party wall.

4.3.3 The *rear south wing* has been truncated on the ground floor to widen the carriage entrance, and in the yard the sawn-off ends of the wall-posts can be seen in the soffit of the wall-plate (which itself has mortices for the original outer wall); this has now been replaced by a brick wall running the full depth of the house. In the back room there is the remnant of a fine late-medieval stone fireplace, with quatrefoil patterns on the lintel marking the inner face of a row of quatrefoils in squares that have been hacked off. The ceiling of this room is covered with oak panels, a very unusual feature, though they have been scraped clean of any painted decoration they may once have had. There were twelve panels in each half of the room, though these have been truncated by the building of the brick wall and the insertion of the partition wall for the stair. Though the modern ceiling of the entrance hall obscures the original arrangement, the framing of the rear wing and front part can be seen side by side over the entrance to the front room. That for the rear wing has a chamfer on the east side only, as would be expected, but the beam of the front part has an ogee moulding on both sides, so there may have been an earlier back wing here, or else the beam is reused from elsewhere.

4.3.4 In the *carriage entrance* the ceiling cover obscures much of the arrangement of the joists, but removal did not improve understanding, since no clear 'jetty plate' could be seen, which might have held mortices for a screens passage. The arrangement at the back was more clear, where the joist carrying the gallery runs from the rear south wing through to the lost post in the kitchen of No. 26. This joist has no trace of mortices for a wall beneath it and is chamfered on the east side, similar chamfer-stops being visible in the yard and inside the kitchen; this seems to have been an open area beneath the gallery, outside the back of the hall. A small portion of the kitchen ceiling, and the external ceiling of the porch are panelled just like the back room of No. 26a.

4.3.5 The *rear north wing* has largely been rebuilt, but a truncated beam in the kitchen ceiling, with mortices in its soffit, seems to be the remnant of the framing of this wing.

4.4 *Carpentry details*

4.4.1 The framing used throughout is of widely spaced posts and tension braces across the lower corners, with most of the intermediate studs being covered by plaster. The use of clasped-purlin roofs is standard for the period in this region, rather than the crown-post, though the crown-strut appears as a decorative feature.

4.4.2 The bridled scarf joint observed in the top plates is again a usual feature, but the use of the flooring joint with soffit tenons and diminished haunch is of particular interest at this date. What was to become the standard 16th-century floor joint has previously been observed at All Souls College Oxford (1440s), and its use in c.1430 in Abingdon is of note.

- 4.4.3 The carpenters' marks for reassembling the prefabricated frame are of standard late-medieval type, Roman numbers scribed with long strokes up to 15 cm long. They are of similar type on front and back parts, though while the front was assembled according to the numeration the roof of the back was disordered (see Appendix A).

5 Finds during building work

- 5.1 During clearing of the attic, the remains of a coat were found. This is in very poor condition, but is being studied and treated by the Oxfordshire County Council Department of Leisure and Arts Museum Services. An interim report suggests that it may be older than the 19th century.

6 Excavations

Summary: Archaeological investigation at the site took the form of a watching brief on below ground disturbance in the carriageway entrance. Although the hall floor was much disturbed by modern services in several places, and firm conclusions cannot be drawn from the limited results of the excavation, the recovery of wall footings and fragmentary tile surfaces in the back wing suggests that the building retains some archaeological potential.

- 6.1 The installation of new services to the refurbished part of the building necessitated the excavation of an E-W aligned service trench 0.40m wide x c.8.00m long with a small extension to the south within the present carriageway entrance (see fig.7). A watching brief was undertaken to monitor the excavation work and record any archaeological deposits exposed. The results are outlined below and summarised in tabulated form as Appendix C. Recording was in accordance with the standard OAU system, though modern service pipes and trenches were not allocated numbers and were recorded in plan/section only.
- 6.2 The present surface of the carriage entrance [100] comprises cobble setts (av. 0.18m x 0.08m x 0.10m) with occasional larger stone slabs (some of which appear to correlate with the presence of below-ground services), which were bedded on 0.10m of compacted sandy mortar [101]. Both deposits overlay the full extent of the excavated trench. Towards the street, in the area of the western c. 3.00m of the trench the modern surfaces overlay ground which had been much disturbed by the laying of recent services. Consequently no archaeological deposits were encountered within this area of the excavated trench.
- 6.3 At a distance of c.3.5m east of the western limit of the trench a small area of a red tiled surface [103] was exposed at a depth of 0.23m below modern

ground level. Tile dimensions were 0.14m x 0.14m x 0.03m and were bedded in 0.04m of clean fine sand [104]. Layer [103] was overlaid by a thin (0.08m) layer of probable demolition debris/make-up material [102]. Only a small area of [103] survived due to its disturbance to both east and west by modern services (fig.7). Further east (in the area of the present doorways to north and south) another small discrete area of tile surface [108] survived at a depth of 0.22 below modern ground level. Only three tiles were partly exposed within the trench, these were black with white spiral decoration and were bedded in a thin layer of light grey gravelly mortar [111]. The orientation of the intact edges of tiles [108] did not correlate with the alignment of the extant building walls or with the tiled surface [103]. Again the isolated and partial survival (disturbed by modern services) of [108] make interpretation problematical.

- 6.4 Beneath [108] and [111], the remains of a fairly substantial wall footings [109] of roughly hewn chalk blocks were exposed surviving to three courses (see fig.7). At the point of exposure, [109] could be seen to be forming a junction which would appear to correspond with the east (rear) wall of 26a front range and the north wall of the rear range (as represented by the line of sawn-off posts at first floor level, see fig. 3). Excavation to the east of [109] revealed a worn stone surface [113] at a depth of 0.60m below modern ground level. It was noted that [113] was present throughout the remaining eastern extent of the excavated trench.
- 6.5 The small N-S extension of the trench (to channel services into the front ground floor of 26a) revealed another stone surface [117] at a depth of 0.62m overlaid two possible compacted mortar floors [116] and [115] and a deep deposit of make-up material [114].
- 6.6 A small assemblage of pottery (totalling 6 sherds only) was recovered from three excavated contexts [107], [112] and [114]. A brief analysis of this assemblage indicated only two sherds of medieval date (one from [107] and one from [114]). Other finds were of 18th-century date. The small size of the assemblage and the disturbed nature of the excavated deposits from which they were recovered makes interpretation unfeasible.

7 Dendrochronological Survey

- 7.1 The opportunity arose during the refurbishment to take a series of cores from the roof timbers and from the ceiling boards at the rear of 26a for dendrochronological dating. This work was undertaken by Mr Dan Miles, and detailed results of the survey are given as Appendix B.
- 7.2 The results of the dendrochronological sampling reveal that the two apparent distinct phases of building are broadly contemporary, although structural observation had at first suggested that there were two disparate phases. Of the

several samples taken from the original framing, most had a felling date of Spring 1429 (six in the front and two in the back parts). However, one sample (a collar beam) from the front was dated Spring 1428, and one (a principal rafter) from the back was dated Spring of 1431. The simplest explanation would be that the building of the front part took place in 1429 using new timber and some older pieces, and that the back was built in a separate phase (as evidenced by the separate framing) with timber also felled in 1429 but requiring one if not more timbers at the time the roof was put on in 1431. The gallery produced no close dating, but is no doubt contemporary with the back frame.

- 7.3 The ceiling boards from the panelled ceiling on the ground floor could not be closely dated. They proved to be of Baltic oak, a common medieval import from the Hanseatic ports where prepared panels were required. Because of their preparation most of the sapwood had been removed, but there was no evidence that they were later. As radially split boards of ½ inch thick, they need not have been seasoned for longer than a year (one year per inch), so the boards were most probably used in 1430.

8 Assessment

- 8.1 This is a remarkably well-preserved example of small medieval town-house dating to 1429-31, is of the highest quality and certainly one of the finest houses in Abingdon. The original plan is reminiscent of the Wealden House type with a unified hall and jettied side wings, known from many examples in the rural south-east, and as an urban type outside the core area of its distribution.¹⁰ But the true Wealden type has hall and side wings under one roof, whereas this has three separate roofs. While internal jetties to halls are not unknown in the south-east, the existence of one on each side of the hall would make more unusual.¹¹ Local examples of houses with internal jetties are to be found at 13 Rotten Row, Dorchester, and Tackley's Inn (106-7 High Street) Oxford.¹² Both these have the jetty over the screens or through passage, and two Hampshire examples, at Winchester (The Blue Boar, c.1380) and West Meon (Garden Cottage, c.1450), have both an internal jetty at the

10 See J. Munby, 'A Fifteenth-century Wealden House in Oxford', *Oxoniensia* xxxix (1974), 73-6.

11 See for example, D. Martin and B. Mastin, *An Architectural History of Robertsbridge*, Hastings Area Archaeological Papers 5 (1974), 14-17 for 'overshot' halls (usually at the service end).

12 J. Ashdown and J. Munby eds., *Vernacular Architecture Group Spring Conference 1987 Oxfordshire, Programme of Visits*, 16 (ex inf Malcolm Airs); W.A. Pantin, 'Tackley's Inn', *Oxoniensia* vii (1942), Fig.22 (probably post-medieval). Another example is at 49 High Street, Amersham (Dan Miles, pers comm.).

'upper' end of the hall and a first-floor room projecting over the screens passage at the other end.¹³ Whether this was the case here was not clarified by opening the ceiling of the carriage entrance. The hall, with its fireplace somewhere in the present carriageway, would have been open to the top of the roof, with the narrower upper stage acting like a large chimney, assisted by the louvre at the north end; it will have had windows facing the street. The jettied side wings projecting into the street give the building an almost symmetrical facade, and no doubt each will have had fine timber windows in addition to the surviving small side windows. The rear wing on the south side is part of the original plan, and indeed may have been longer. This had fine stone fireplaces on each floor (and there is no reason to suppose that these came from the abbey in the 16th century), and well-finished timbers with decorative mouldings and possibly a bay window. The gallery, which must be contemporary with the rear wing, has continuous fenestration of early 15th-century type, and is an excellent example of a medieval timber window, of which all too few specimens survive. Of the carpentry details, the most notable feature is the dated use of the bare-faced soffit-tenon-with-diminished haunch, which is an unusual occurrence in 1430. The splendid wall-paintings are likely to be later additions, of the mid-16th century, when the fashion for interior decoration was beginning to be widespread, and are probably an early example of the genre.¹⁴

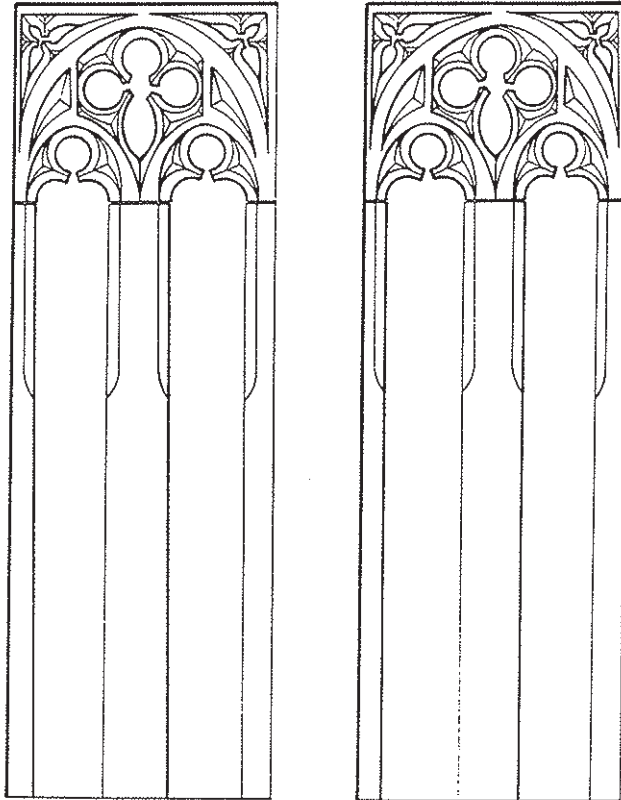
- 8.2 Taken together, these features suggest an uncommonly prosperous owner, or series of owners, and in an area in which medieval town houses are rare (Oxford has but a handful, and Abingdon has lost too many), the surviving structure of 26/26a East St Helens is of the highest importance.

Oxford Archaeological Unit
February 1995

13 E. Lewis, E. Roberts and K. Roberts, *Medieval Hall Houses of the Winchester Area* (1988), nos. 13 and 21.

14 See above, note 7 for similar paintings in Oxford.

Appendices



Appendix A

Register of Carpenter's Marks (Roofs)

(i) *North Cross Wing*

Number of Rafter (see fig.4)	Location of Rafter	Carpenter's Mark
1	North	Nothing Visible
	South	Nothing Visible
2	North	/
	South	∕
3	North	//
	South	∕∕
4	North	///
	South	∕∕∕
5	North	////
	South	∕∕∕∕
6	North	√
	South	∕√
7	North	√∕
	South	∕√
8	North	Nothing Visible
	South	Nothing Visible
9	North	√∕∕
	South	∕√∕∕
10	North	√∕∕∕
	South	∕√∕∕∕
11	North	√∕∕∕∕
	South	∕√∕∕∕∕
12	North	X
	South	X
13	North	X/
	South	X/

(ii) *South Cross Wing*

Number of Rafter (see fig.4)	Location of Rafter	Carpenter's Mark
1	North	?
	South	?
2	North	X//
	South	X//
3	North	X/
	South	X/
4	North	X
	South	X
5	North	V///
	South	V///
6	North	V///
	South	V///
7	North	V//
	South	V//
8	North	V/
	South	V/
9	North	No Mark
	South	No Mark
10	North	V
	South	V
11	North	///
	South	///
12	North	///
	South	///
13	North	//
	South	//

(iii) *Rear South Wing*

Number of Rafter (see fig.4)	Location of Rafter	Carpenter's Mark
1	North	X III
	South	X III
2	North	X II
	South	X II
3	North	X III
	South	X III
4	North	X I
	South	X I
5	North	X I
	South	X I
6	North	X III
	South	X III
7	North	X III
	South	X III
8	North	X III
	South	X III
9	North	X III
	South	X III
10	North	X III
	South	X III
11	North	X
	South	X
12	North	X III
	South	X III
13	North	X III
	South	X III
14	North	X III
	South	X III

(iii) *Rear South Wing (cont.)*

Number of Rafter (see fig.4)	Location of Rafter	Carpenter's Mark
15	North	No Mark Visible
	South	No Mark Visible
16	North	No Mark Visible
	South	No Mark Visible

(iv) *Gallery*

Number of Rafter (see fig.4)	Location of Rafter	Carpenter's Mark
1	East	_____
	West	//
2	East	No Mark
	West	No Mark
3	East	/
	West	_____
4	East	//
	West	_____
5	East	//
	West	_____
6	East	//
	West	_____
7	East	///
	West	_____

(v) *Upper Hall*

Number of Rafter (see fig.4)	Location of Rafter	Carpenter's Mark
1	East	No Mark
	West	No Mark
2	East	//
	West	//
3	East	///
	West	///
4	East	/
	West	/
5 (<i>Louvre</i>)	East	No Mark
	West	No Mark
6 (<i>Louvre</i>)	East	No Mark
	West	No Mark

Appendix B

Results of Dendrochronological Survey

26-26a East St Helen Street, Abingdon, Oxon

Sample number	timber & position	dates AD spanning	H/S bdry	sap-wood	no of rings	mean width mm	std devn mm	mean sens	felling seasons & dates/date ranges
Front Range									
No 26-26a									
* sth1	c Rafter	1390-1428	1409	19½C	39	1.64	0.99	0.272	Spring 1429
sth2a	c Collar	1346-1396			51	2.13	0.73	0.177	
sth2b	c Collar	1372-1427	1411	16½C	56	3.24	0.71	0.136	Spring 1428
* sth2	Mean of sth2a and sth2b	1346-1427			82	2.64	0.83	0.163	
* sth3	c Principal rafter - hall	1351-1428	1406	22½C	78	2.56	1.25	0.310	Spring 1429
* sth4	c Rafter	1374-1428	1407	21½C	55	2.10	0.76	0.210	Spring 1429
* sth5	c Purlin	1373-1428	1413	15½C	56	2.34	0.87	0.220	Spring 1429
* sth6	c Rafter	1372-1428	1408	20½C	57	1.93	0.79	0.267	Spring 1429
* sth7	c Collar	1333-1428	1396	32½C	96	1.49	0.87	0.163	Spring 1429
Gallery behind Hall									
* sth11	c Gallery windowhead	1303-1388			86	1.25	0.45	0.172	
Rear wing No 26a									
* sth12	c Tiebeam	1347-1429	1412	16½C	83	2.09	0.80	0.184	Autumn 1429
* sth13	c Principal rafter	1390-1430	1408	22½C	41	2.37	0.90	0.176	Spring 1431
* sth14	c Rafter	1355-1429	1398	31½C	75	1.75	0.59	0.195	Autumn 1429
* sth15	c First floor joist	1297-1395			99	1.52	0.48	0.209	
*=STHELEN1	Site Master	1297-1430			134	1.85	0.51	0.169	

Baltic Oak ceiling boards from rear wing No 26a

sth20	s Moulded rib, board 5	-			2	52	0.99	0.12	0.105
† sth21	s Ceiling board 1	1-139				139	1.82	0.51	0.245
sth22	s Ceiling board 2	1222-1408	1406		2	187	1.18	0.47	0.152 1413-1442
sth23	s Ceiling board 3	1216-1408	1405		3	193	1.15	0.44	0.162 1412-1441
§ sth223	Mean of sth22+23	1216-1408				193	1.17	0.45	0.151
† sth24	s Ceiling board 4	7-140				134	1.83	0.51	0.139
‡ sth25	s Ceiling board 5	1198-1397				200	1.15	0.22	0.147
§ sth26	s Ceiling board 6	1291-1415	1414		1	125	1.74	0.55	0.176 1421-1450
‡ sth27	s Ceiling board 7	1188-1392				205	1.12	0.23	0.161
§ sth28	s Ceiling board 8	1329-1416				88	2.50	0.55	0.195
† sth29	s Ceiling board 9	29-144				116	2.01	1.08	0.190
†=sth2149	Undated mean of sth21+24+29	-				144	1.90	0.57	0.165
§=STHELEN2	Mean of sth223+26+28	1216-1416				201	1.63	0.35	0.159
‡=STHELEN3	Mean of sth25+27	1188-1397				210	1.14	0.22	0.148

Key: *, †, §, ‡ = sample included in site means;
 c, s = core, slice;
 H/S bdry = heartwood/sapwood boundary - last heartwood ring date;
 std devn = standard deviation;
 mean sens = mean sensitivity

¼, ½ C = spring or summer felling (i.e. bark edge present with partial or complete ring)

Appendix C

Table of Contexts (Carriageway Excavation)

Context Number	Context Type	Depth	Comments
100	Surface	0.10m	Cobbled Surface
101	Layer	0.10m	Make-up layer for [100]
102	Layer	0.08m	?Make-up/demolition deposit
103	?Surface	0.03m	Partial remains of ?tile surface - disturbed by modern surfaces to N and S.
104	Layer	0.04m	Probable bedding layer for surface [103] - difficult to interpret due to limited survival/exposure.
105	Layer	0.11m	?Make-up/demolition deposit
106	Layer	0.08m	Similar to [104]
107	Layer	>0.20m	Buried Garden soil/made ground?
108	Surface	0.03m	Tile surface
109	Wall	n/a	
110	Layer	0.06m	Demolition/dumping
111	Layer	0.02m	Mortar bedding for [108]
112	Layer	0.40m	Make-up deposit
113	Surface	n/k	worn cobbled surface
114	Layer	0.34m	Dumping
115	Layer	0.04m	?Surface
116	Layer	0.04m	Poss. mortar floor
117	Surface	n/k	Stone surface

Appendix D

Copy of DoE List Entry

1.
752

EAST ST HELEN STREET
(South East Side)

SU 4996 1/190

19.1.51

Nos 26 and 26A
(Formerly listed
as No.26)

II

GV

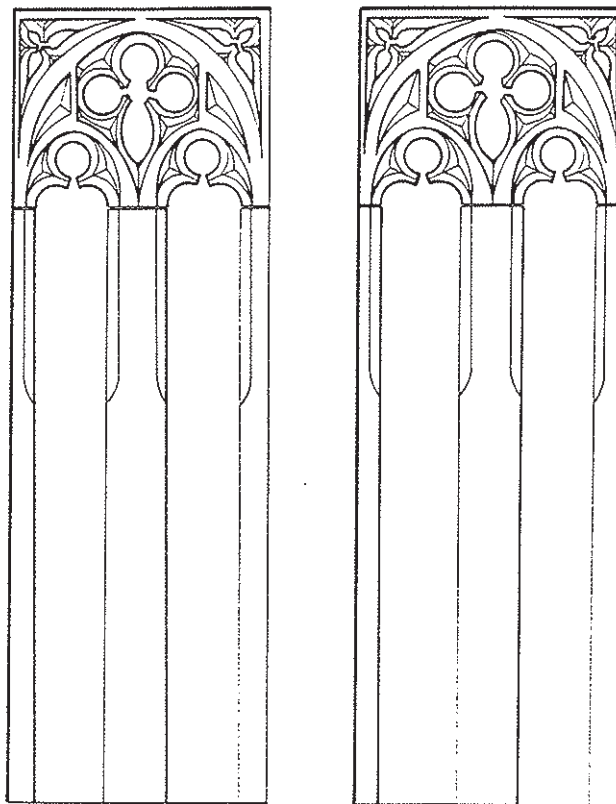
2.

One building. Late C15, timber framed with two gables. Tile roof. Central gabled dormer, leaded casement in wood frame, flanked by two gables each of which has one three-light mullion window with modern leaded casements, flush framed. Two small modern windows inserted in left hand gable.

The first floor overhangs above a wood bressumer. One ground floor, two windows, glazing bars and modern wooden shutters. One small modern window to right. Central carriage arch with double doors. Contemporary stone fireplaces and mural paintings.

Nos. 2 to 60 (even) form a group.

Figures



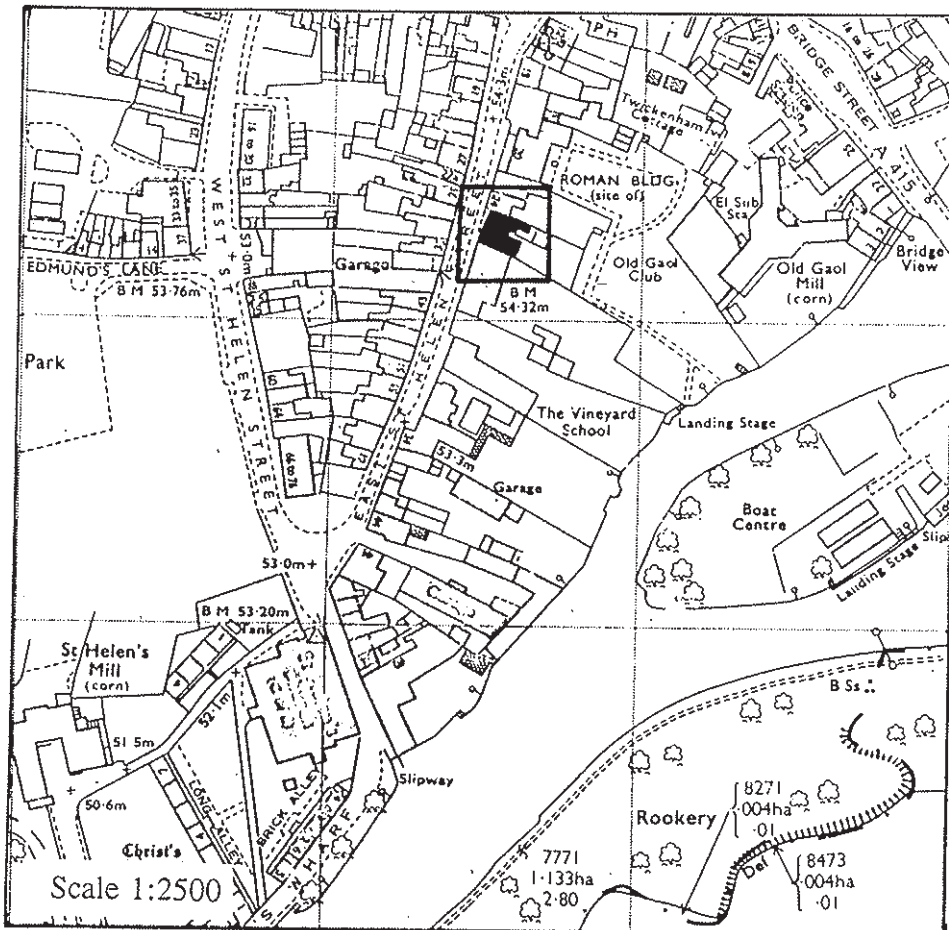
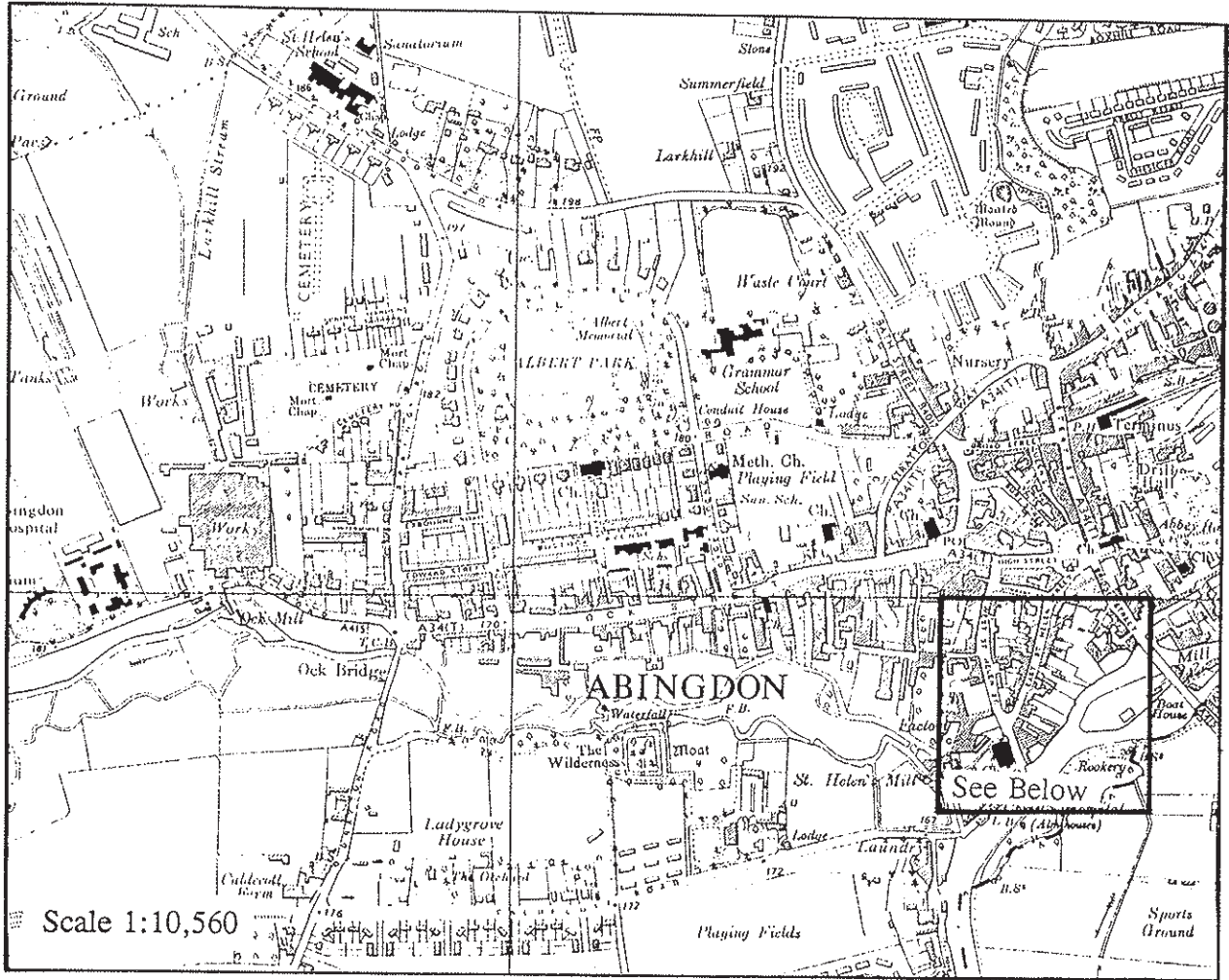
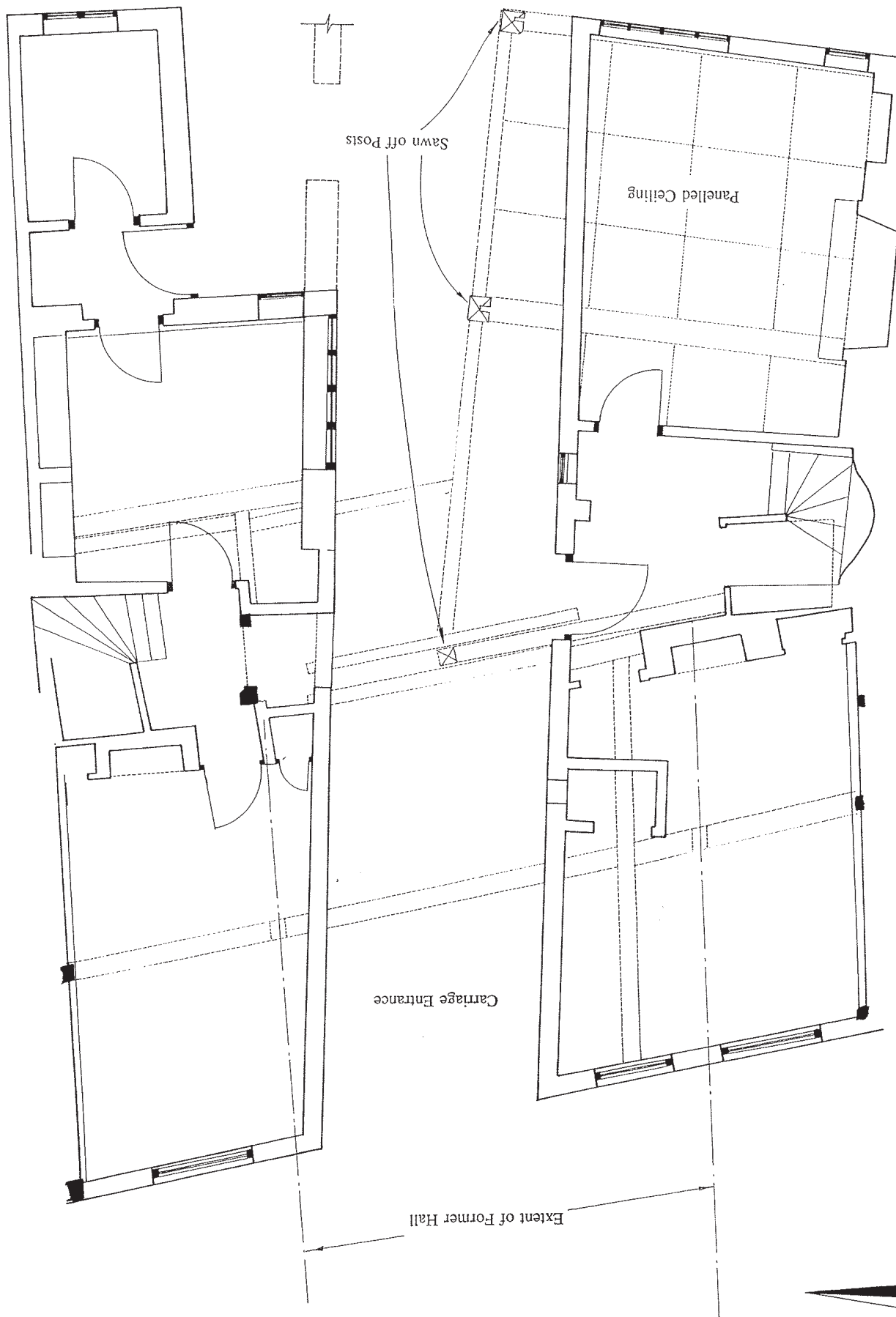
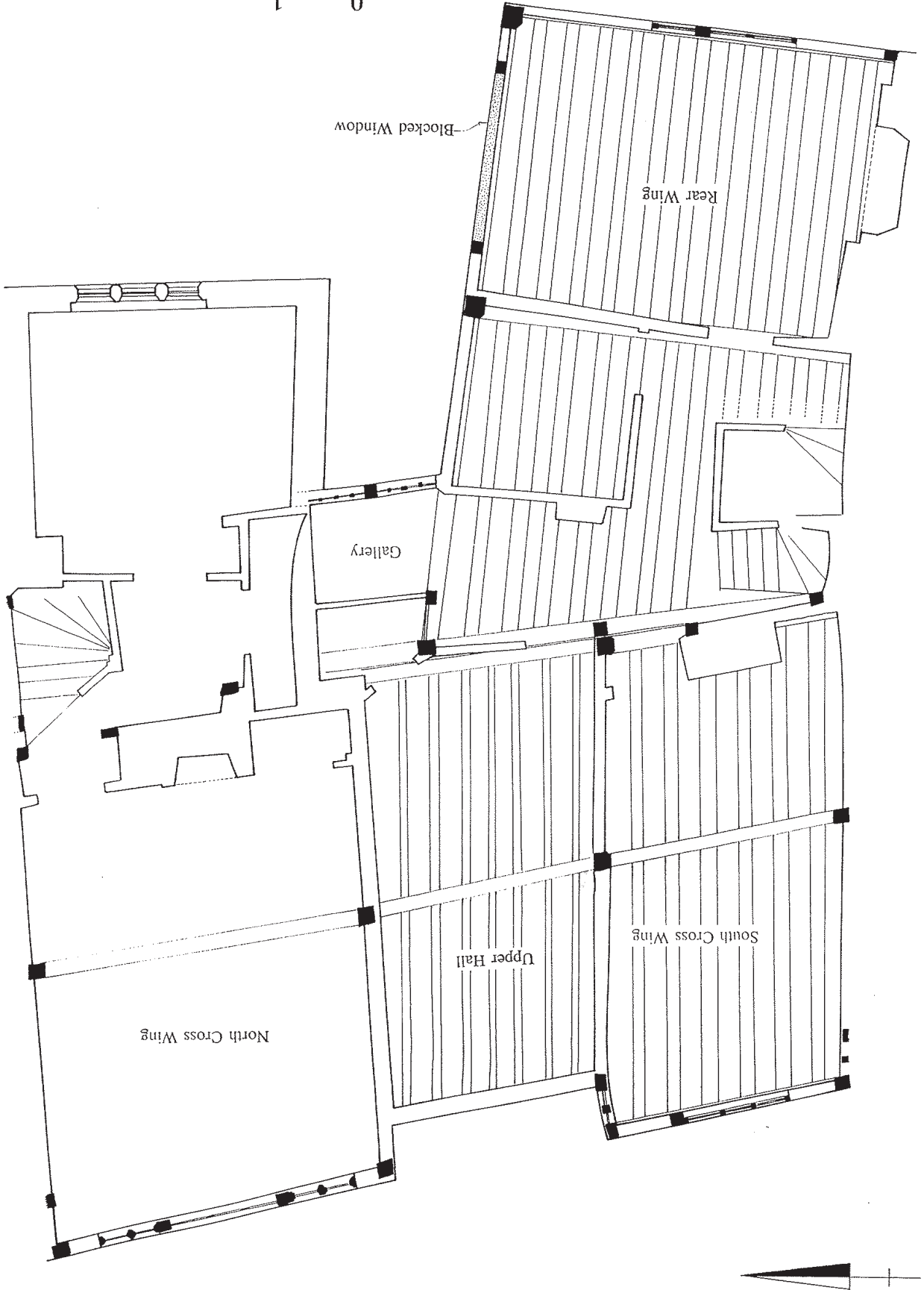


Figure 1: Location Plan

Ground Floor Plan



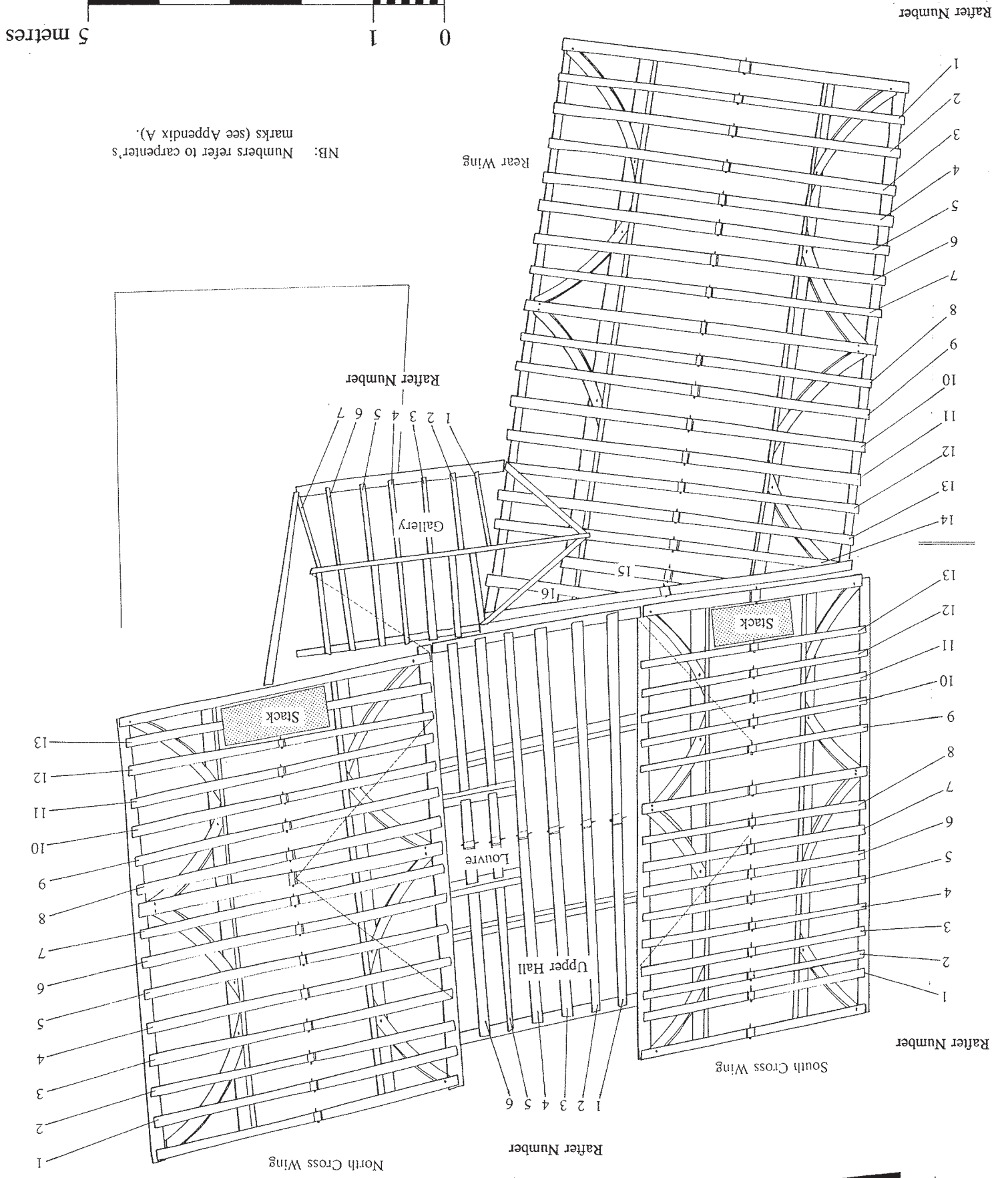
First Floor Plan



Plan of Roof Timbers



NB: Numbers refer to carpenter's marks (see Appendix A).



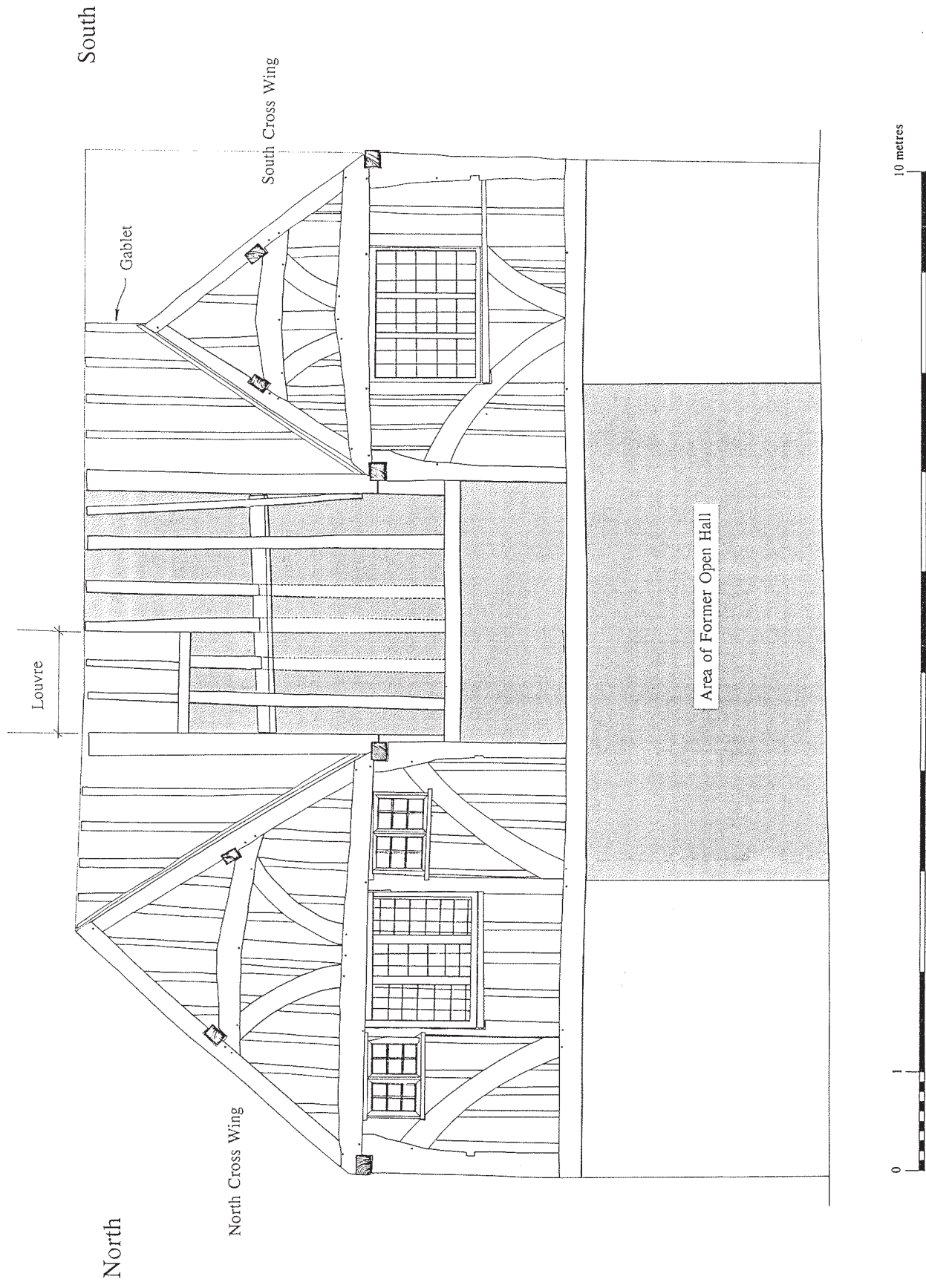
Rafter Number

Rafter Number

Rafter Number

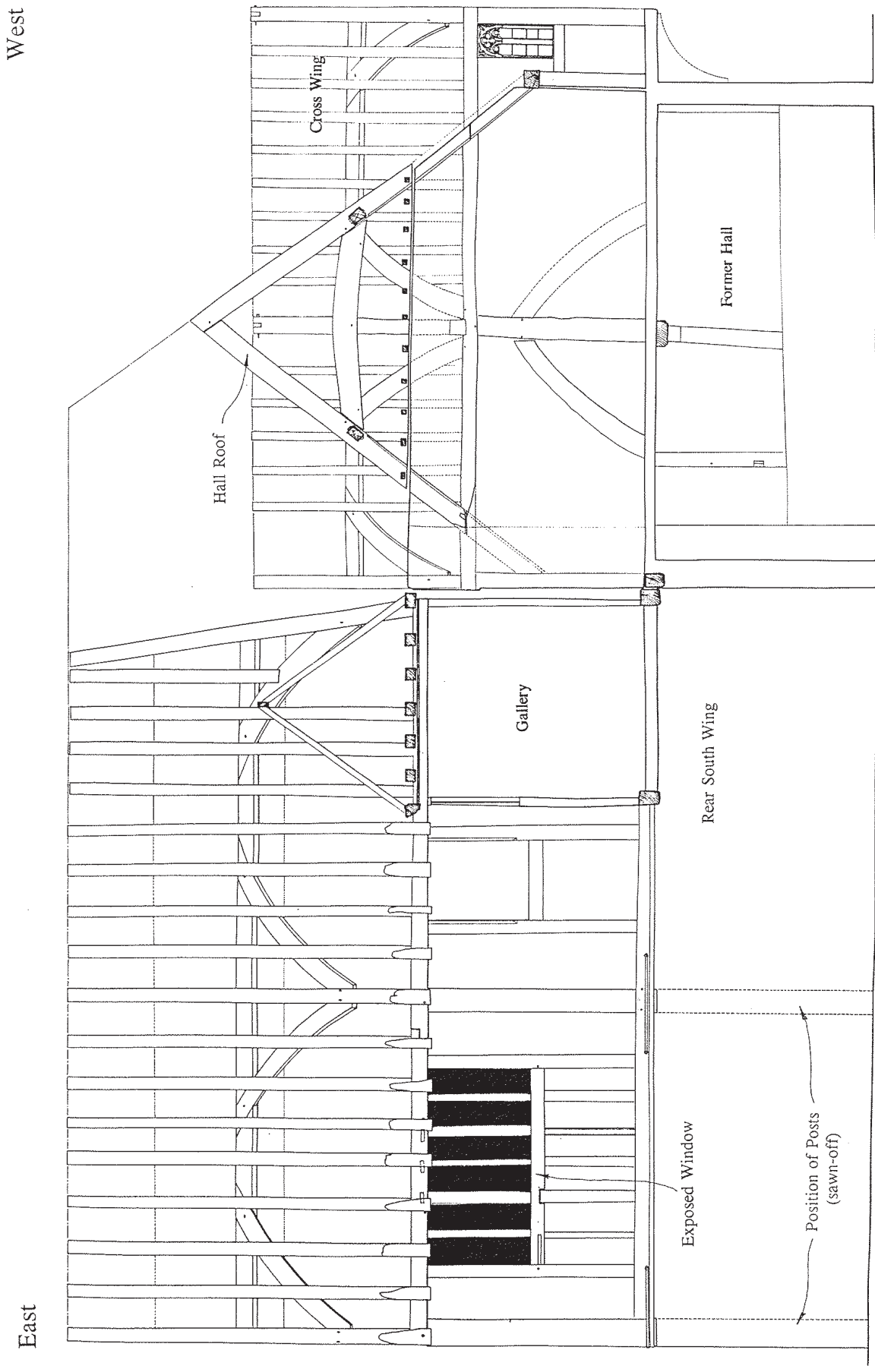
26/26A EAST ST. HELENS, ABINGDON, OXON.

Street Elevation (including details of exposed timber framing)



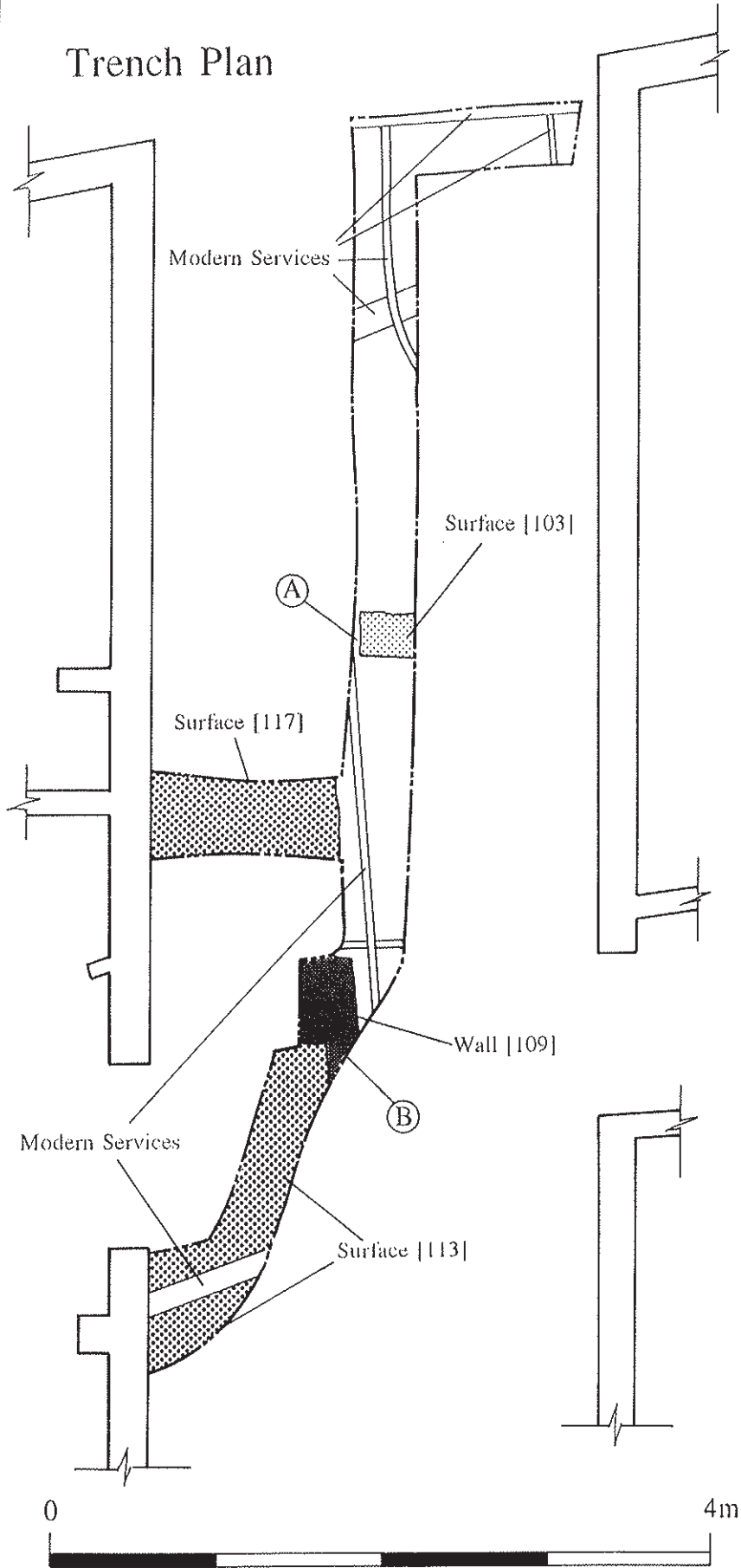
26/26A EAST ST. HELENS, ABINGDON, OXON.

Cross Sectional Elevation (looking South) (including details of exposed timber framing)

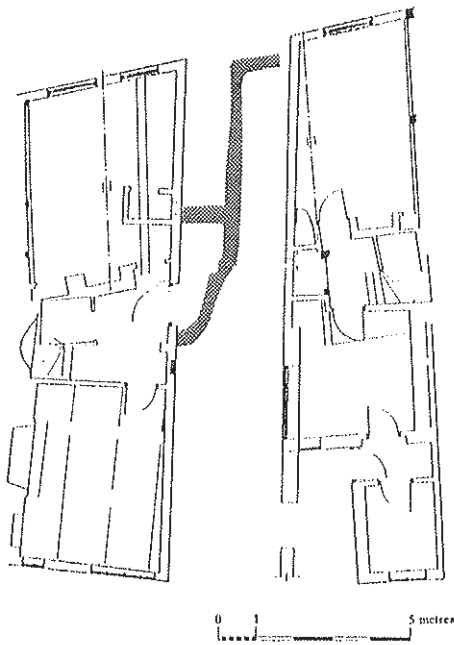




Trench Plan

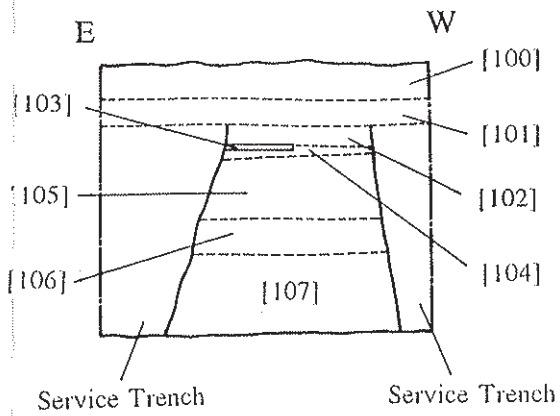


Scale for Plan

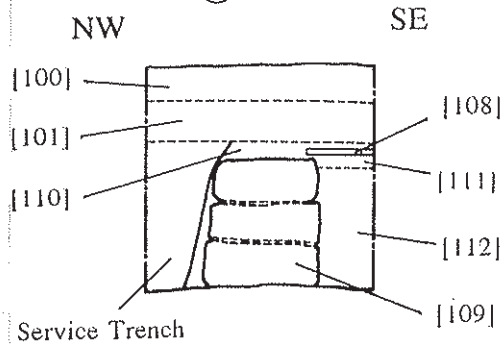


Trench Location

Section at (A)



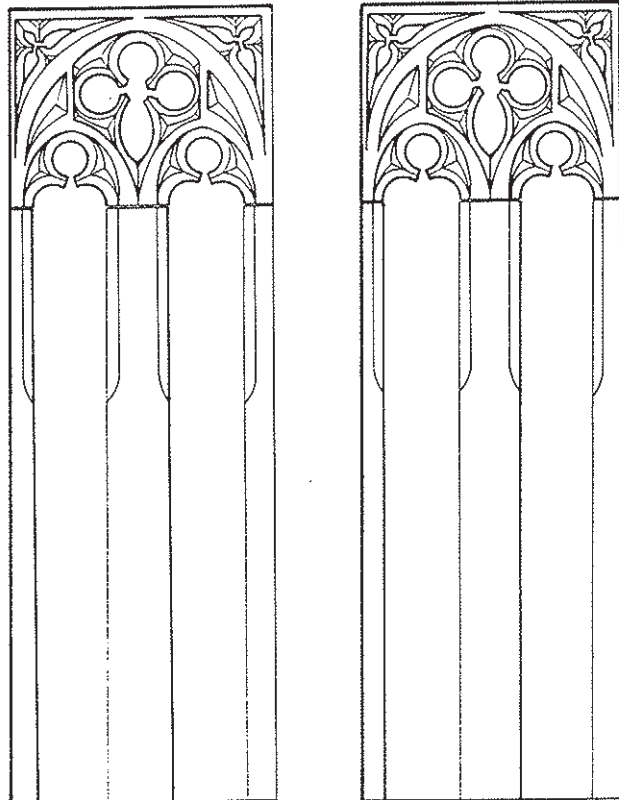
Section at (B)



Scale for Sections

Figure 7: Plan and Sections of Carriageway Excavation

Plates



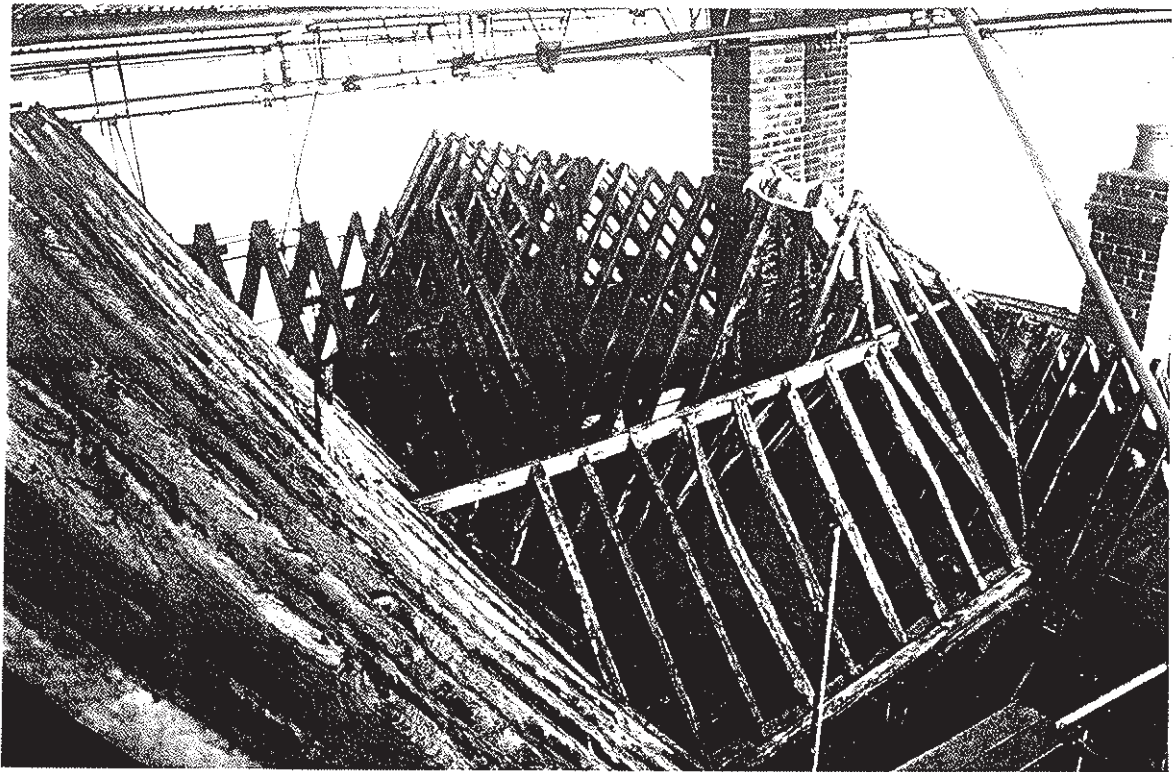


Plate 1: High level view of exposed roof framing.



Plate 2: Detail of gallery window.



Plate 3: Bracing: north cross wing.

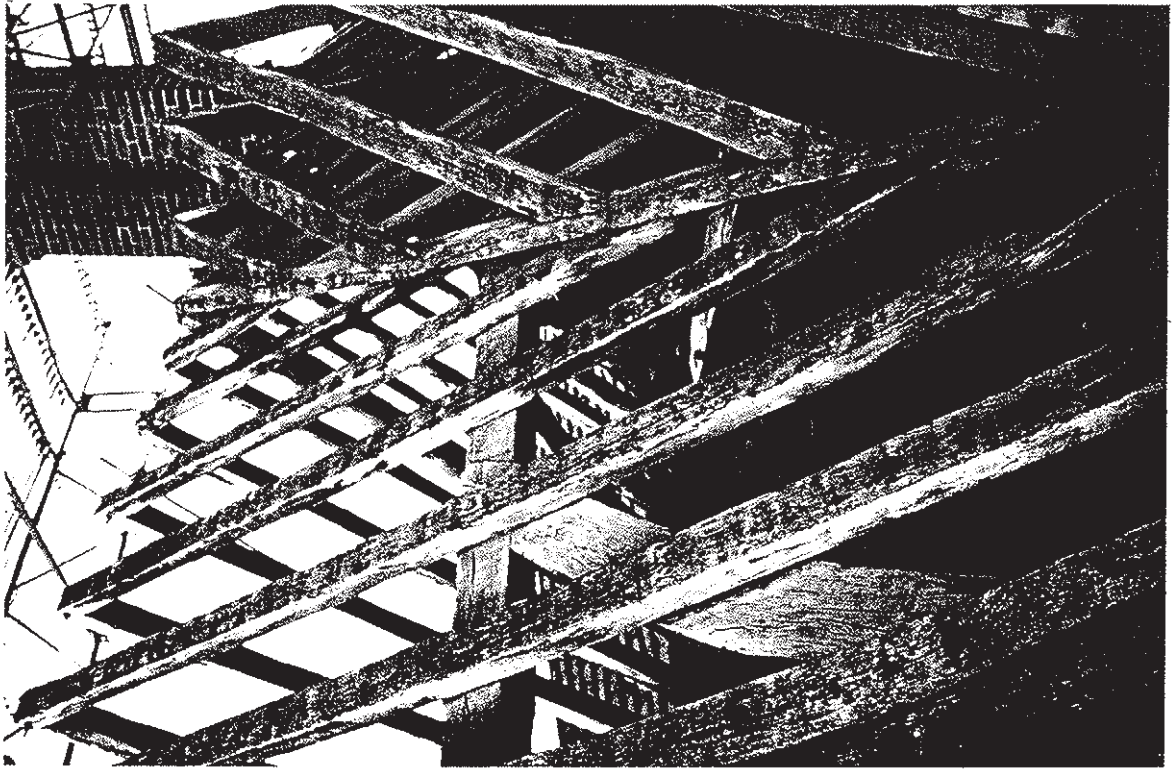


Plate 4: Bracing: north cross wing.

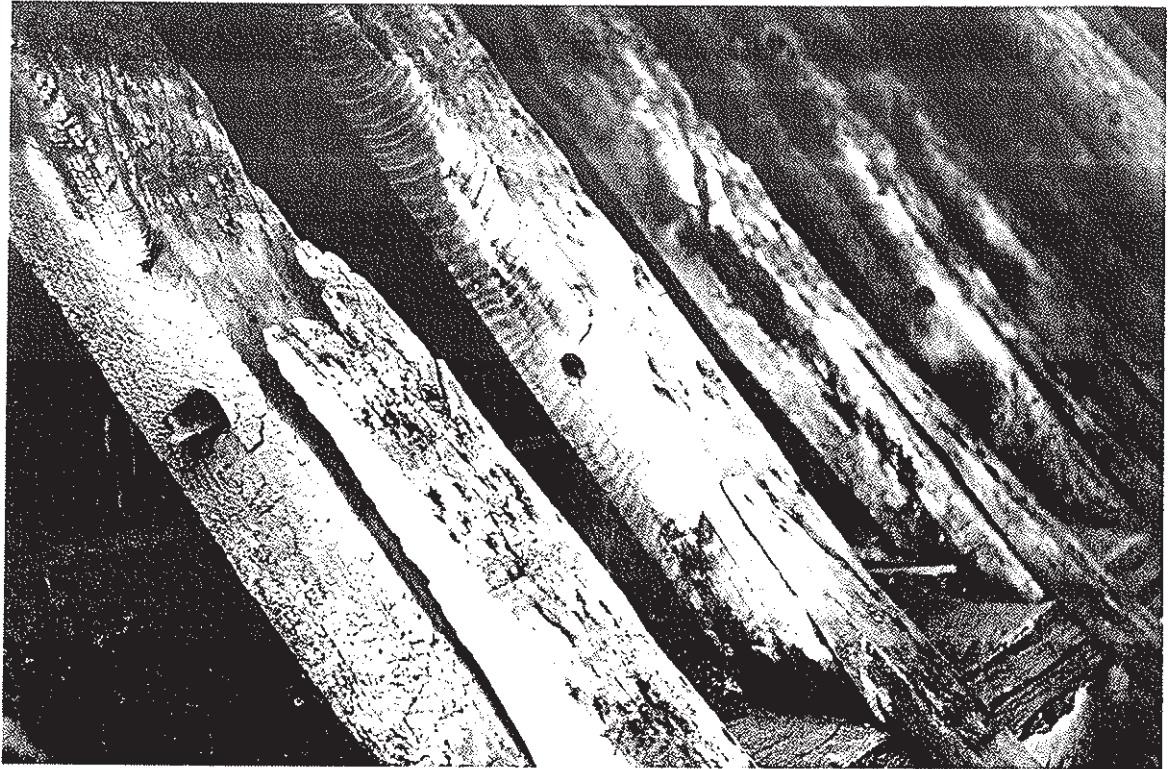


Plate 5: Rafter detail (including rafter holes): rear south wing.

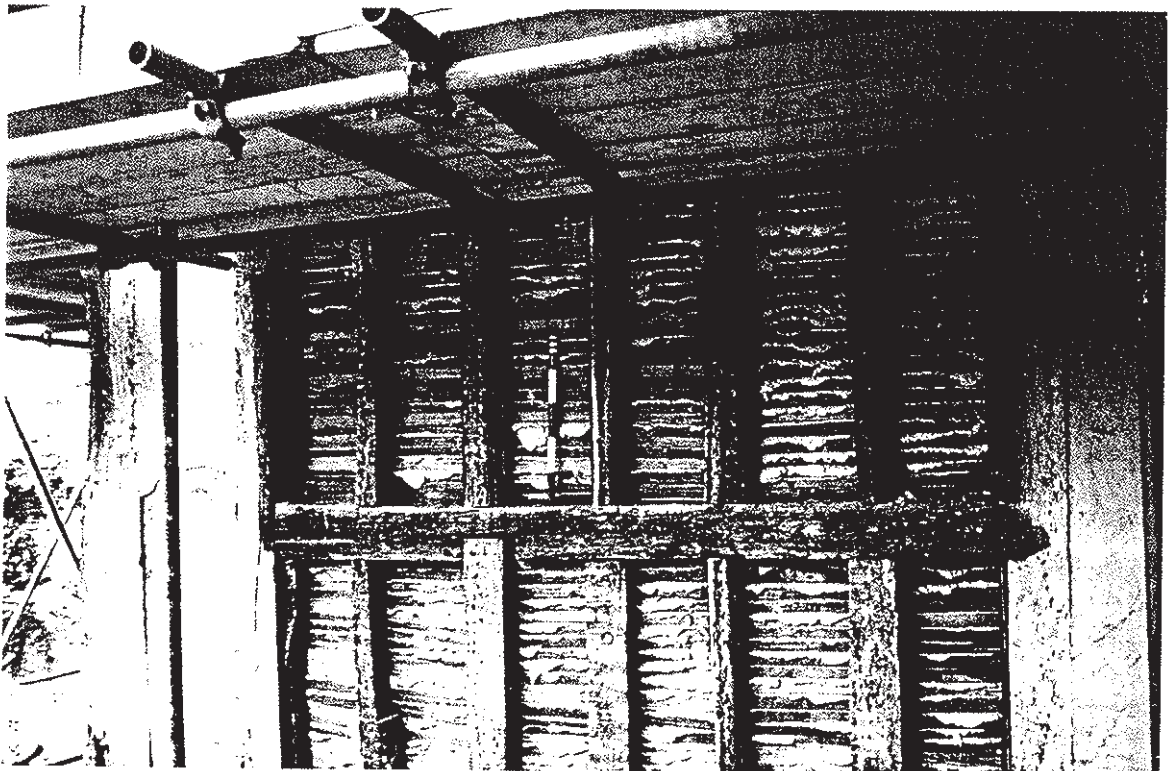


Plate 6: Exposed window framing: rear south wing.



Plate 7: Exposed original lath and plaster: rear south wing.



Plate 8: Work in progress: general view from the east.

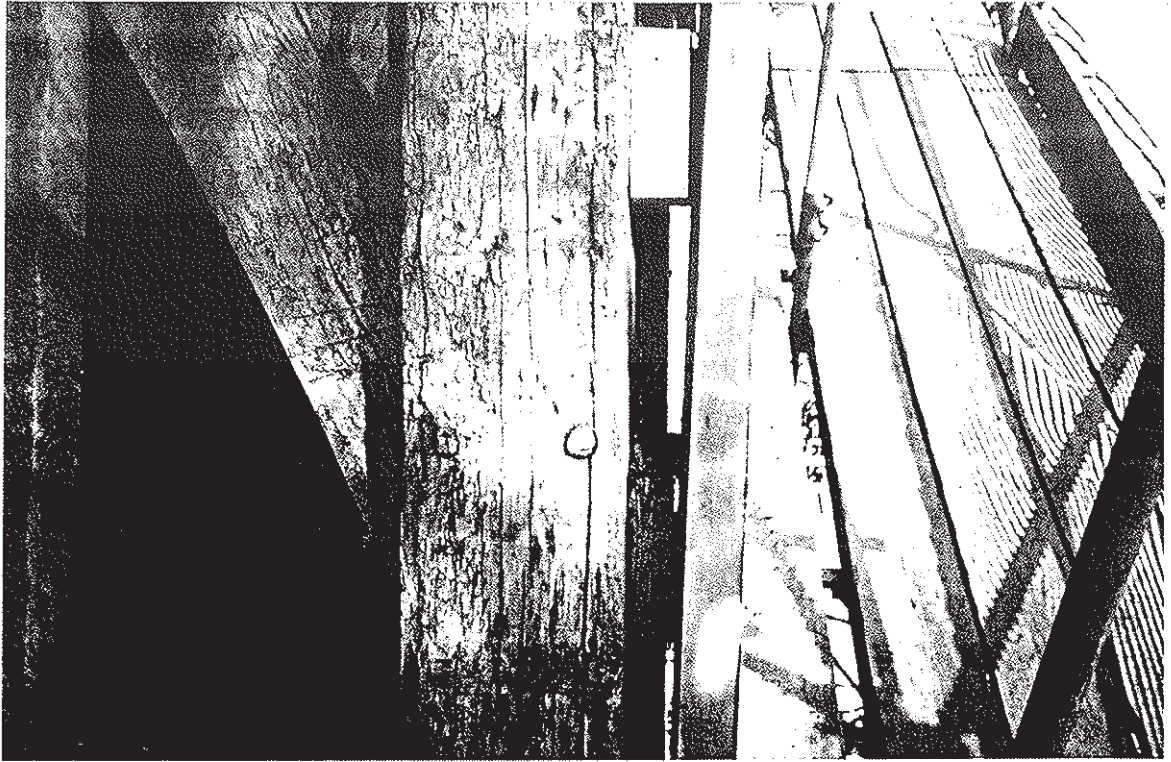


Plate 9: Evidence for continuation of rear south wing.



Plate 10: East wall, south rear wing: note lack of mortices in principal joist.

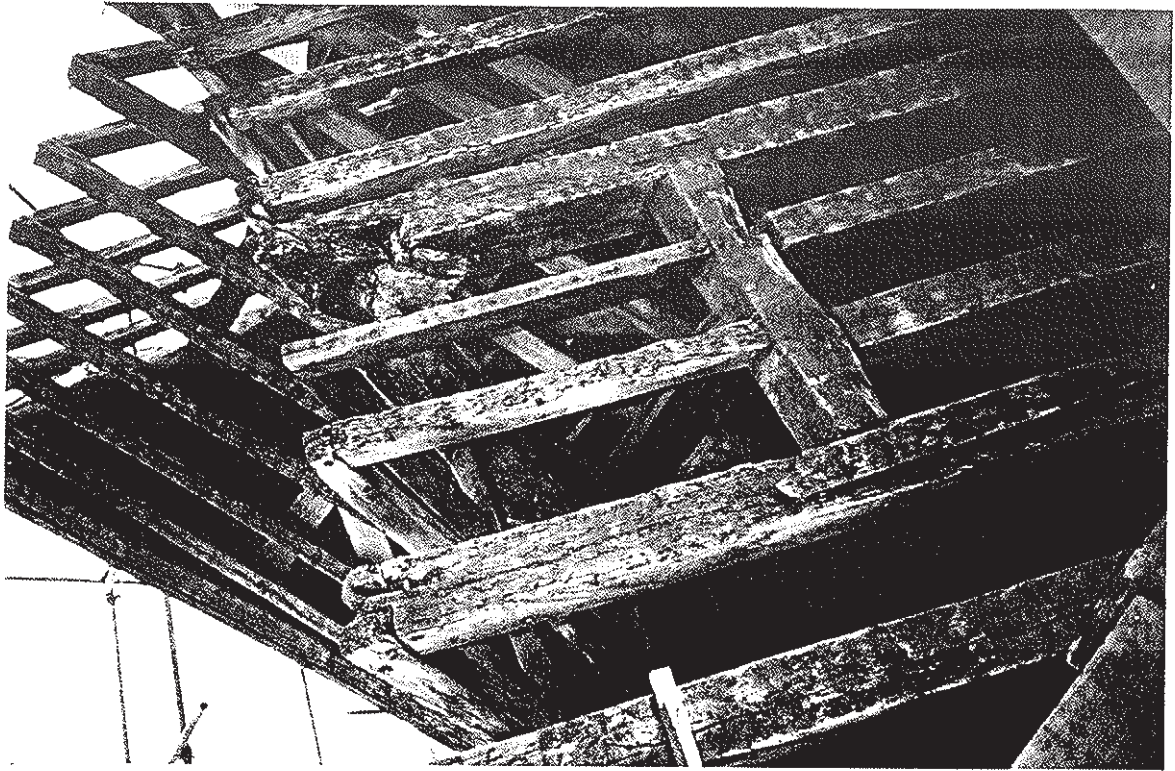


Plate 11: Detail of louvre.

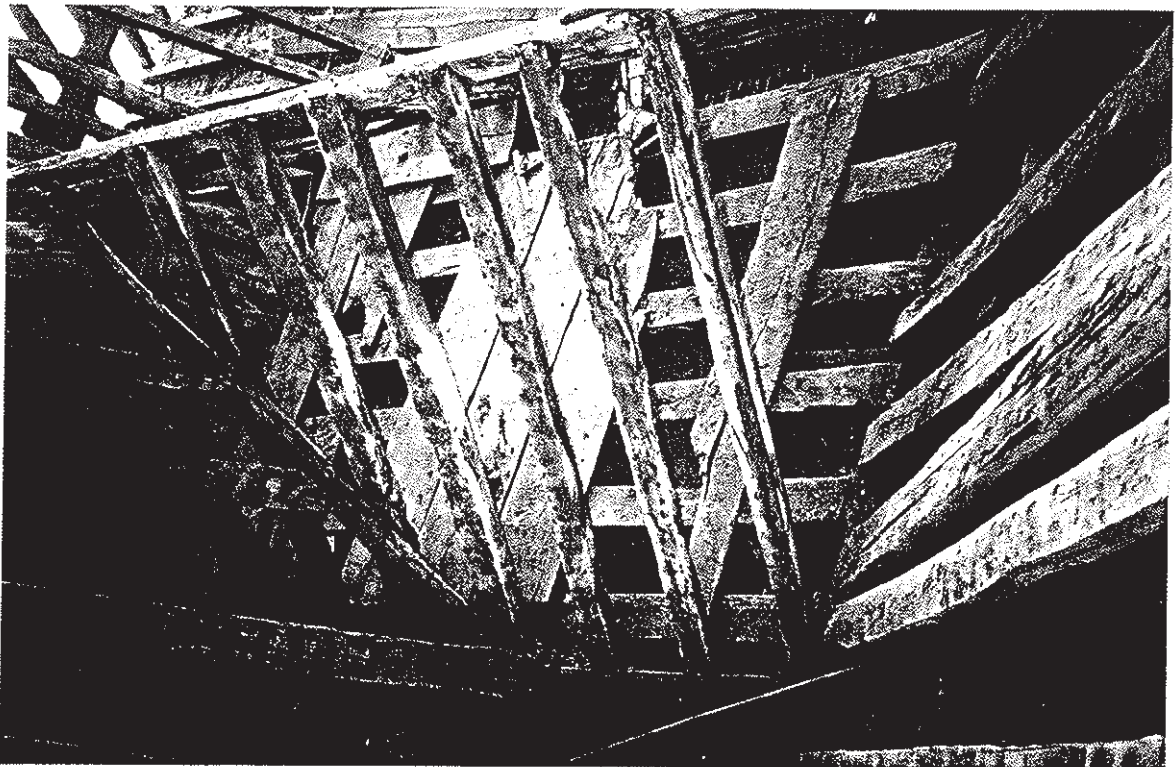


Plate 12: Gallery roof

Oxford Archaeological Unit

46 Hythe Bridge Street
Oxford OX1 2EP



Tel: 0865 243888 Fax: 0865 793496

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