

The Landmark Trust

GURNEY MANOR History Album



W.W. Wheatley c. 1845

Written and researched by Charlotte Haslam

Re-presented in 2015

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417
Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

BASIC DETAILS

Built:	14th century
Main Contractor:	Directly contracted team under Philip Ford
Acquired by the Landmark Trust:	1984
Architect	Peter Bird of Caroe and Partners (Wells)
Quantity Surveyors:	Bare, Leaning and Bare of Bath
Opened as a Landmark:	1992

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Summary

The History of the Manor

Gurney Manor is named after its earliest owners, the Gurneys. This family owned a lot of land in Somerset, including the part of Cannington which came to be called Gurney Street, where a house was built before 1350. Although little of it survives, the presence of that first open hall with chambers at one or both ends can still be felt in the hall range at the front of the building.

To this simple hall house, rebuilt itself around 1400 with a new cross-wing containing a solar at its western end, additions were made over the next few decades. The barn was built at the eastern end and the small building, possibly once a kitchen, was added on the north-west corner. Although the main line of the family died out before 1400, there were still Gurneys living in Cannington in the next century: in about 1430 Jane, the daughter and heiress of Hugh Gurney, married Roger Dodisham. From them, the manor passed to their son William, a lawyer. It was during his lifetime that the courtyard house we see today came into existence.

The Dodishams were a family of rising importance in the area, who had been steadily buying land since the 1380s. William clearly had money to spend: the work he did is all of the highest quality. The hall was given new windows, and a porch. At the south end of the west wing, a new solar block was added. This had a parlour and small chapel on the ground floor, and a solar on the first, with a fine arch-braced roof. At the same time, a new kitchen range was built, enclosing the south side of the courtyard. Across the yard between it and the hall ran a covered way, or pentice, to shelter the servants as they went to and fro. Above the kitchen were chambers, again with an arch-braced roof. These possibly formed a self-contained apartment, with their own garderobe or privy.

Then, in 1480, William Dodisham left his manor of 'Gourneystrete, in which he himself lived' to his niece Agnes, wife of Walter Michel. The Michels were another rising local dynasty, who already owned nine manors. Agnes herself came from another wealthy family, and predictably more was soon done to the house, to bring it up to Tudor standards of comfort. Over the next fifty years, new windows and fireplaces were inserted, and a new floor in the hall, creating an upper storey within it.

Then, for a time, everything stopped, because in 1539 Thomas Michel, grandson of Agnes, murdered his wife and her sister and then killed himself. Disorder followed, at the end of which it emerged that the family of the murdered women had rushed in and stripped the house of its furniture, and the farm of its livestock. Since the Crown also thought it had a claim to these, the case was taken to the Court of Star Chamber, which is why we know about it.

The Michels owned Gurney Manor until 1616. Thomas's grandson, Sir Bartholomew, was the last to live there. He may have floored the solar, extending the stair at the same time, as well as forming a garderobe closet in the north-west wing, and possibly fitting some panelling. Little has been done since, beyond the re-roofings of the hall range, and new windows and floor surfaces here and there. The chapel was at one time used as a china closet, at another as a farm office, at whose window the men collected their wages.

After Bartholomew's death the property went down in the world from manor to farmhouse: his daughter married a Hockmore of Buckland Brewer in Devon, who soon let it to tenants. This pattern continued through changes of owner, first to Gould then to the Earls of Cavan. The last tenants, the Bucknells, played a prominent part in Cannington life, and later owned the property from 1925-34, after which house and land were sold separately. During the last War, the house was acquired by Mr C. Harris, who divided it into flats. His heirs sold it to the Landmark Trust, a charity which specialises in the rescue and care of historic buildings. For many years, the house had been divided into nine flats, most of which had fallen empty. Only those in the barn, forming the east wing, were occupied by tenants.

The intention was to repair the entire building, and to reunite its historic core as a single dwelling. After eight years work, this task was completed in time for Christmas 1992. Gurney Manor is now let for holidays to parties of up to nine people. An income is thus generated for future maintenance, and at the same time this lovely house is enjoyed by as many people as possible.

Gurney Manor has been recognised for many years as a most remarkable survival: a little altered late medieval house of high quality, with almost all its original structure still intact. Although parts of the building date back to before 1400, the main period of building was between 1450 and 1480. Most alterations made afterwards, such as new windows or fireplaces, panelling or decorative plasterwork, date from the Tudor and Elizabethan periods. From 1600 until now no substantial change had occurred, beyond the rebuilding of the hall roof, first around 1690 and then in about 1890 - and again in 1990.

Even the recent division into flats scarcely affected the fabric. Without them, it is possible that the building would have been lost in the 1940s. By 1980, however, this extra lease of life had expired. The house was rundown, and parts of it were near to collapse, with long-concealed structural problems starting to become obvious as walls and chimneys leaned perilously.

The picture is now rather different, as the manor has returned to something approaching its appearance in 1600. In 1984, it took the eye of faith, or of considerable knowledge, to see the interior of a medieval house behind the plaster ceilings and partitions that hid all but a few details from view. Now, fine medieval roofs and fireplaces are fully visible and wonderfully repaired. Windows have been reglazed in traditional patterns, walls have on them lime plaster as

good as that of medieval craftsmen, and ceilings, whether of plaster or moulded oak, are in perfect shape.

In its new life, the original arrangement of the house has been respected, and the layout of the rooms for the most part follows the pattern set before 1500. In some cases, such as the parlour and the hall, and the chapel, they can be used again as they were in medieval times. But the needs of today have also been catered for. The kitchen has moved to a more convenient site for modern life, between the hall and the parlour. Bathrooms have been fitted in where they do not interrupt the medieval layout. Central heating has been installed, to supplement the heat of the open fires.

To oversee the work, the Landmark Trust employed Caroe and Partners of Wells, architects with a wide experience of historic building repair; together with the equally experienced Quantity Surveyors, Bare, Leaning and Bare of Bath. Nearly all the work was carried out by a team of six men, part of the Landmark Trust's own workforce. Under the careful and knowledgeable eye of the foreman, Philip Ford, our masons and joiners worked on nearly every corner of the building, to make it sound and weathertight.

The owners of Gurney Manor in the past made alterations and improvements to suit their own ideas of comfort. We in turn hope that as a result of our work, our visitors will be comfortable, and quickly feel at home.

The Restoration

Building work began at Gurney Manor in the autumn of 1984, with the careful removal of modern accretions and plaster layers to attempt to learn more of the history of the house. It is a remarkable building, and was worth taking time over; and this archaeological exercise which occupied some nine months was indeed very rewarding. It enabled us to assemble a large fund of information about the building before any decisions were made about repair; and it was a most exciting period in that every day seemed to reveal more fascinating detail about the building's past.

Armed with this history of the house it was possible to develop a programme for its restoration stage by stage and to agree the work with English Heritage, who provided a generous grant for the work. Repair began in the solar block. The magnificent 15th-century roof here was badly decayed; the chimney stack was falling out, and window tracery was precarious and defaced. The roof was carefully dismantled, repaired and re-assembled. One carved post of the original roof was found to survive, and this was conserved and used as a model for the restoration of the remaining posts. The chimney was tied back to the building with a complicated web of concrete stitches; a print of 1845 enabled us to reproduce the early chimney head in stone. During this work the 13th-century carved-stone head of a King, now set in the wall of the solar, was found in the hearth of the same room.

Once the solar block was weathertight, work passed to the kitchen range. Here again the 15th-century roof was dismantled and repaired. The south wall, leaning outward because of the sideways load of the roof, was restrained again with a concrete ring beam concealed in the head of the wall: the ends of this beam were tied to the structure by drilling through the wall core, in order to avoid loss of medieval render and plaster which survives inside and out. The nuts and bolts securing the beam can be seen inside the flue of the fireplace.

As the work progressed on the outside 'envelopes' of the kitchen and solar it was possible to turn to the interior, and to details such as the repair of the rendering. Where it was missing or loose, this has been replaced in lime mortar exactly to match the original. The stonework of the window tracery and dressings has been repaired by consolidation of the old work and by some replacement of the worst decayed material. Repair of timber floors such as the framed floor over the kitchen, all done with epoxy resin to save as much as possible of the old timber, has also been undertaken. The fine chapel ceiling, with its remains of bright medieval paint, was taken down for conservation, and to allow for the carving of new fretwork, to replace missing sections.

Next came the hall, where the roof has been restored to its 17th-century level, after taking off the late 19th-century roof and building a new structure at the lower level revealed by research. The roofs of the small building on the north-west corner, and the pentice in the courtyard, have also been repaired, and the pentice walls rebuilt.

For the last year, work was concentrated on finishing the interior, and fitting it out for its new occupants. Even so, there were new finds - during the work for the central heating, for example, the original open hearth in the hall was discovered. As work proceeded over the years more and more had been found out about the building: all this was recorded and our knowledge of Gurney Manor and its builders improved steadily as each stone was removed and replaced.

Introduction

The Landmark Trust first heard of Gurney Manor in 1983 and bought it a year later. It was then divided into nine flats, of which only one in the main part of the house was lived in. These flats had been formed in the 1940s, the days of building licences, so the work had been done as cheaply as possible, and maintenance thereafter had been erratic. Serious structural problems had developed unchecked, and dereliction of an advanced order had set in.

It had not always been so. The house began life, sometime before 1400, as a manor, taking its name from the earliest owners, the Gurneys. From them it passed to the Dodeshams, and from about 1450 until 1480 was the home of a wealthy lawyer, William Dodesham. The last landowning family to live in it, from 1480 until 1616, were the Michells, county gentry with estates in Somerset and Dorset. Thereafter it was let to tenants, and until the 1930s was the centre of a prosperous farm, home to a succession of respected local families.

It was immediately clear that this was a house of exceptional quality. Not only were there medieval rarities such as the oratory and the covered way or pentice across the courtyard, but also two fine arch-braced roofs (one hidden by a ceiling), a fragment of Elizabethan plasterwork, a whole series of windows, doors and fireplaces, beautifully worked in stone, not to mention carved gable finials and an ornamental medieval chimney.

The story told by these was of a house of about 1450-75, into which new windows and fireplaces had been fitted in the following century, with only minor alterations thereafter. There was the possibility that the hall was earlier, although much altered since. It was thought that the examination of the building would confirm this relatively simple view.

The house did better than that. Over the next five years, the walls revealed a complex picture. From before 1400, each century has left its mark, including this one. New discoveries were made throughout the entire process of repair, leading to ever more building phases, and the introduction of periods called 0 and even - 0, as early work was found to be added to something even earlier. Several apparently Tudor phases shunted into each other, and then spread out again over a longer timespan. Some things clearly did not belong here at all, and had come ready made from somewhere else, evidence of early recycling. Fitting this weight of structural evidence to the cobweb of knowledge gained from scanty documents has been true detective work - even more so once the house was found to have its own murder. The story as we know it unfolds in the following pages.

Summary of the Manor's History and Development

By 1400

What you can see: the barn or east wing; the walls of the present hall, and the rooms at its east or low end; the north-west wing.

Gurneys are mentioned in Cannington in the 13th century, and in the early 14th century they certainly owned a property there, to which they gave their name. Eventually this became a sub-manor of its own, a division of the main manor which belonged to Cannington Priory. These Gurneys were perhaps a junior branch of the great family of that name, owners of large estates in the West Country, which died out in the direct line in 1406.

Of the first house there is no trace, except a floor under the present hall. The range on the east of the courtyard, which was a barn, with ventilation slits in the gables, appears to be the earliest standing structure, built towards the end of the 14th century. It stood at right-angles to a possibly timber-framed house of unknown date on the site of the present hall range.

Soon after this, the house itself was built in stone, with a single storey porch. From marks left in the walls by the original jointed cruck trusses, it has been established that this house was two and a half roof-bays long. Its west wall was roughly at the back of the present hall chimney. An open hall with a central hearth occupied most of the space. At the eastern end was a service room, with a chamber above: the partition, or closed truss, dividing them from the open hall can still be seen, but its floor was at a lower level than now. There was an outside door in the north-east corner, and at the same time a door was made into the barn, just beside it.

The next addition, made in about 1400, was the little building north-west of the hall. It had to begin with only one storey, and there was a gap of some feet

between it and the hall. A likely use for it, given the fear of fire and the likelihood that the house was then thatched, was as a detached kitchen.

1400-25

What you can see: rooms west of hall; floor and upper walls of north-west wing.

Around 1420, Jane, heiress of Hugh Gurney, married Roger (possibly William) Dodesham, who came from an increasingly wealthy local family. At about the same time, a storeyed cross-wing was built on the west end of the hall, its front wall projecting slightly forward of it. Almost certainly, this had a solar chamber for the family on the first floor, and storage space below. However, the evidence for this wing lay partly in its floor, which was at the same height as the early floor in the east chamber, and was only recently raised to its present position; and partly in patches of masonry and mortar, and the way in which later additions were made, so its arrangement is in no way certain. It would have been reached by a stair at the end of the hall.

At the same time, the north-west wing was enlarged. It now had an upper floor, entered by outside steps on the west. A wall enclosing a small forecourt ran from its corner to the corner of the barn, with a door at the barn end. The house was probably by now roofed in stone slates.

There may have been other buildings south of the hall range: in 1992, between the kitchen range and the mill race, the footings of a building were found which ran north-south, disappearing under the old kitchen, and therefore predated it.

1450-80

What you can see: chamber block with chapel, parlour and solar; old kitchen range; doors of porch and screens passage; top rail of hall screen; pentice.

In his will of 1480, William Dodesham, a prosperous lawyer, left the manor house of Gournestrete, in which he himself lived, to his niece, Agnes Michell. William

was the son of Roger Dodesham and Jane Gurney, and he may have inherited their property before 1450. The major improvements to the house, which belong to mid-15th century, were carried out during his ownership therefore, on the proceeds of his own practice, and with the income from the now quite extensive Dodesham estates. The result was the transformation of a relatively minor house into a fine one.

The new additions consisted firstly of a kitchen range running parallel to the hall range, to its south. This had two rooms, one large for cooking (with two fireplaces, one on the south seemingly never used); and an inner storage room with a framed ceiling, which may have come from somewhere else, since it does not quite fit. The storeroom window was unglazed, but fitted with shutters. Linking kitchen and hall was a covered way, or pentice.

Between the earlier solar wing and the kitchen range a new chamber block was added, enclosing the west side of the yard. This had, on its ground floor, a heated parlour and a chapel or oratory, both with glazed windows. Above, reached by a curved stone stair, was a solar with an open arch-braced roof typical of about 1450. It did not, apparently, have a fireplace, but its windows, which have since been replaced, were probably glazed.

From the south-east corner of the new solar a door led over a little bridge to chambers over the kitchen. These were divided in the reverse fashion to those below, with the smaller chamber at the east end, equipped with a garderobe or privy. The larger, outer, room was heated, its chimney being the one with a crested top. The pattern of the floorboards at the western end results from their being set into the framed ceiling below, which, as already mentioned may be reused from elsewhere. This appears to have been a self-contained set of rooms, slightly removed from the more public areas of the house, and therefore, perhaps, for the owner. The roof over these rooms is the same as those of solar and

pentice, and all are built of the same stone and mortar mix. The carved work is in local Beer stone, and the workmanship is excellent.

Besides the new additions, the older work was modernised. The main entrance to the hall was smartened up, with new doorways in porch and screens passage. There may have been a new screen in the hall, too, and it was given a new south window, higher in the wall than the old one and glazed. In the south-west corner, a new door led to the rooms on the west side of the yard. From lobbies in the angle between the two ranges, new doors were also made into the old solar wing. From the lower lobby another door led into the yard, and from the upper lobby, a squint looked into the hall. From there, it was also possible to ring a bell in a bell-cote which was built in the north wall of the chamber block where, inexplicably, it could scarcely be seen from anywhere.

The old solar or west chamber was given a new arch-braced roof - the mark left by the end-truss shows in the south wall. The door from the new lobby had a draw bar on its inside. The straight stair from the hall is later, and may replace a more secure, possibly spiral, stair and door, making this chamber into a strong room, perhaps for the lawyer's precious documents and money.

West of the house was a walled garden, with orchards beyond and to the north. The farmyard or barton was on the east, as it was until recently, with the mill to the east again, all in active and productive use.

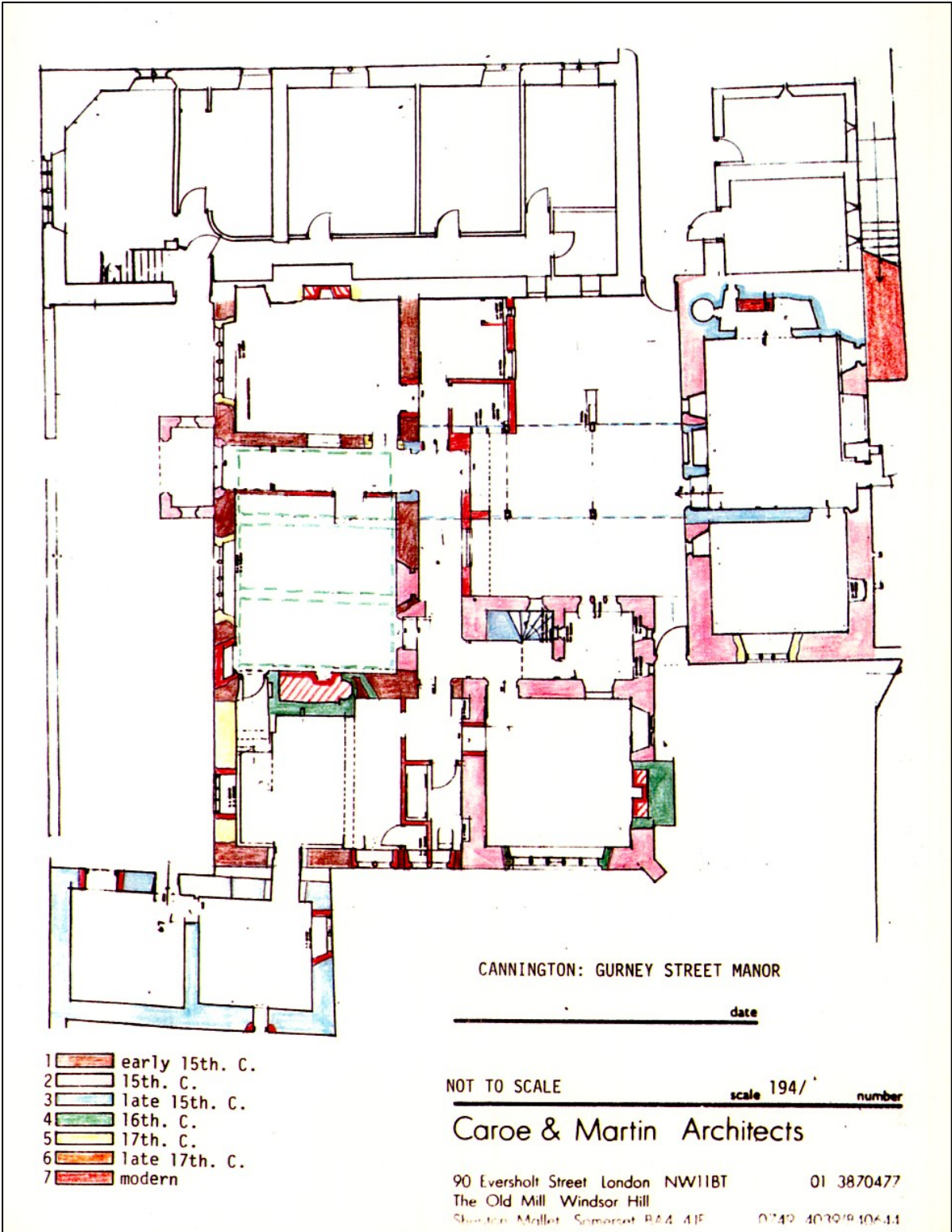
1503-39

What you can see: new west window and fireplace surround in parlour; new windows and fireplace in solar; fireplaces in west chamber and east parlour; ceilings in hall and east parlour; partitions of chambers over hall.

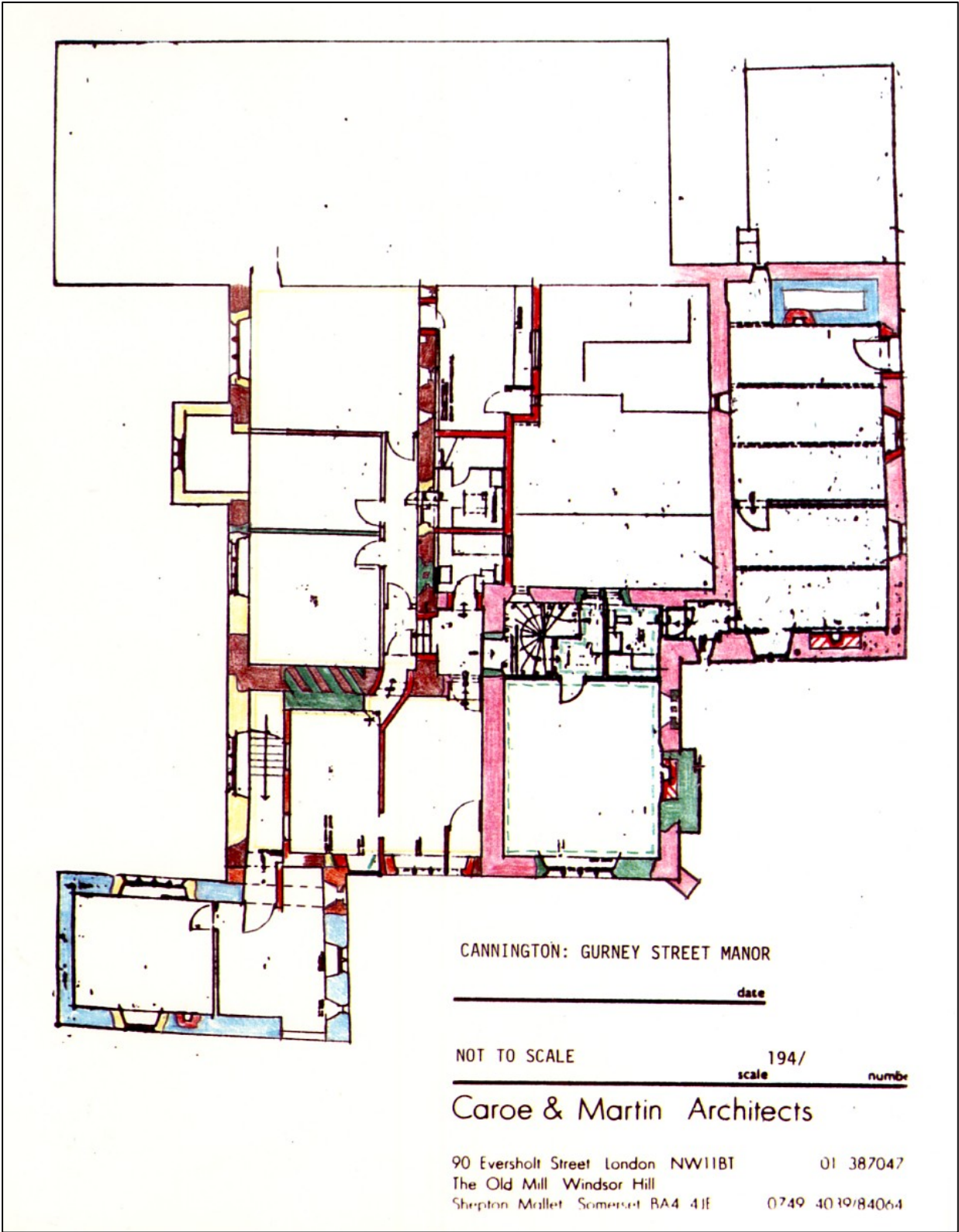
William Dodesham's niece Agnes Michell lived at Gurney until 1503, when she was succeeded by her grandson Thomas. He was estimated to be worth £1,000 in goods and chattels at the time of his death, and made considerable improvements to the house in the fashion of his day. Most of this is characteristic of c.1530, although some of it could be earlier. Typically, larger windows were fitted to let in more light, new fireplaces were added or old ones enlarged. The new fireplace in the solar had buried in its hearth the carved stone head of a king, dating from before 1300, possibly salvaged from a dissolved religious building such as Cannington Priory in the later 1530s.

Yet another example of recycling is in the room east of the hall. This was made into a parlour at this time, with a new fireplace, which was in fact the lintel of another fireplace, turned upside down and reused. Evidence of economy is also seen in the floor inserted into the open hall, to make chambers above. This is made of elm, and not particularly well either, which has caused some to think that the whole floor is much later, and dates from the time when Gurney Manor began to come down in the world in the 17th century. However, the partitions dividing the chambers above, now two bathrooms, are contemporary with this floor and were originally made to fit the medieval roof level. The floor in the east chamber was raised at the same time to run level with that in the hall chambers.

Unfortunately Thomas Michell's life came to a sad and abrupt end. In 1539, he murdered his wife and her sister, and then killed himself. His children were minors, so work at Gurney Manor ceased abruptly. An indication of unfinished work lies in the old solar or west chamber. Here an incomplete fireplace was found in the west wall, designed for a higher floor, level with those in the hall and east chamber. But the floor had been left at its earlier level, and the fireplace covered over, until the whole scheme was completed in 1990.



- 1 early 15th. C.
- 2 15th. C.
- 3 late 15th. C.
- 4 16th. C.
- 5 17th. C.
- 6 late 17th. C.
- 7 modern



1574-1616

What you can see: gallery in solar and stair leading to it; blocked window in west gable of solar; plaster ceiling in solar lobby; windows in west chamber; link between west chamber and north-west wing; garderobe closet, windows and fireplace in north-west chamber.

Sir Bartholomew Michell, Thomas's grandson, lived at Gurney until his death in 1616, during the year that he was Sheriff of Somerset. Around 1590, a floor was inserted into the solar to make an extra chamber and closet. This involved altering the medieval stone stair slightly, and extending it to reach the upper floor, with solid oak treads. The floor was of good quality, and double tenoned, which dates it to before 1600 (it now in an outbuilding). A partition was put up to make a lobby outside the solar, with a plaster ceiling. Possibly the new reduced solar had a similar ceiling, but all trace of it has been lost.

The window in the west gable, made to light the upper chamber, has a Hamstone surround, as opposed to the Beer stone used for all earlier work. Hamstone, too, are the straight-headed windows in the west and north walls of the west chamber, and in the north-west chamber, where there is also a Hamstone fireplace. These last alterations are likely to date from after 1600. The gap between the north-west wing and the main building was filled in, and a garderobe fitted at the same time. The north-west chamber itself was fitted out comfortably.

1650-1700

What you can see: hall chimney; oak stair from hall to west chamber.

From Bartholomew Michell, the property passed to his daughter Mary, who married a Hockmore of Buckland Baron in Devon. There are no records for its use during the 17th century, but it seems likely that it was left empty for a while and then, after neglect had led to decay, was repaired and improved for tenants. The

work was done inexpensively in a way that would fit with it having been carried out by a landlord not for his own use.

A good example of this is the way in which the hall roof was raised to a higher level (to which it has now returned) to allow more headroom in the hall chambers. The main structure of the medieval roof was retained, and the new roof was ingeniously propped above it. It is possible that the upper chamber in the porch is part of this round of work: the floor in it is another piece of recycling, dating from about 1600. The ornamental finial was reset in the gable, as it was again in the recent repairs.

Work of a more radical kind was done at the west end of the hall and in the west chamber. The front wall of the former cross wing was rebuilt in plane with the front wall of the hall (and its upper window reset), and its roof made into a half hip. Possibly there had been some sort of disaster, either of fire or collapse. This is born out by the rebuilding of at least the upper levels of the hall chimney, much of the hall's west wall, and possibly its fireplace as well. The present surround is a very debased one, surprising in a house where everything else is of such high quality. It has even been suggested that there was no fireplace here until this date, and similarly that the hall ceiling was also inserted now. However there are equally strong arguments for an earlier chimney and fireplace having existed from at least 1530, and the masonry of the back and sides of the fireplace are consistent with that.

So for some unknown reason, a major rebuilding was necessary in this part of the house. This included the straight stair from hall to west chamber, with its solid oak treads. The door leading to it is another example of recycling. It is in fact a richly moulded window surround of before 1400.



Mr and Mrs Bucknell, the tenants, in about 1900.

The 18th century

What you can see: north window in new kitchen; doors to north-west chamber; alterations to hall and kitchen chimneys.

Various tenants are recorded in the 18th century. The property passed before 1730 from the Hockmores to the Goulds, of Sharpham Park near Glastonbury. Minor alterations were made to suit its new use as a farmhouse. The screens passage was plastered, the east parlour became a dairy, with a brick floor, the hall fireplace was provided with a spit, driven by a dogwheel. A small lean-to was added to the front, reached by a door in the north wall of the hall. The hall window, at least, was fitted with sashes. The present kitchen, which had apparently until then been an unlit - or minimally lit - storeroom, was given a window in the north wall, though it still had no window on the west. A bread-oven was built into the great medieval kitchen fireplace and a door was knocked through from this kitchen to a yard at the back. At some stage panelling was introduced into the parlour, and into the west chamber upstairs. Eighteenth century doors were fitted, of which two survive. Farm buildings came and went.

19th century

What you can see: windows in hall, east parlour and porch chamber; mullions of parlour and solar windows.

From the Goulds, Gurney Manor passed to the Earls of Cavan. Tenant farmers continued to come and go. Towards the end of the century a family called Bucknell took on the farm, now about 250 acres. In the 1890s, work was carried out on the house: the hall was completely re-roofed in tiles at a much higher level, to give yet more headroom upstairs, new windows were inserted in the hall range. The wall enclosing the forecourt had probably been taken down long since, but now a tennis court was made in the paddock in front of the house.

1940s

What you can see: number plate for flats in porch; flats in barn; west windows in new kitchen

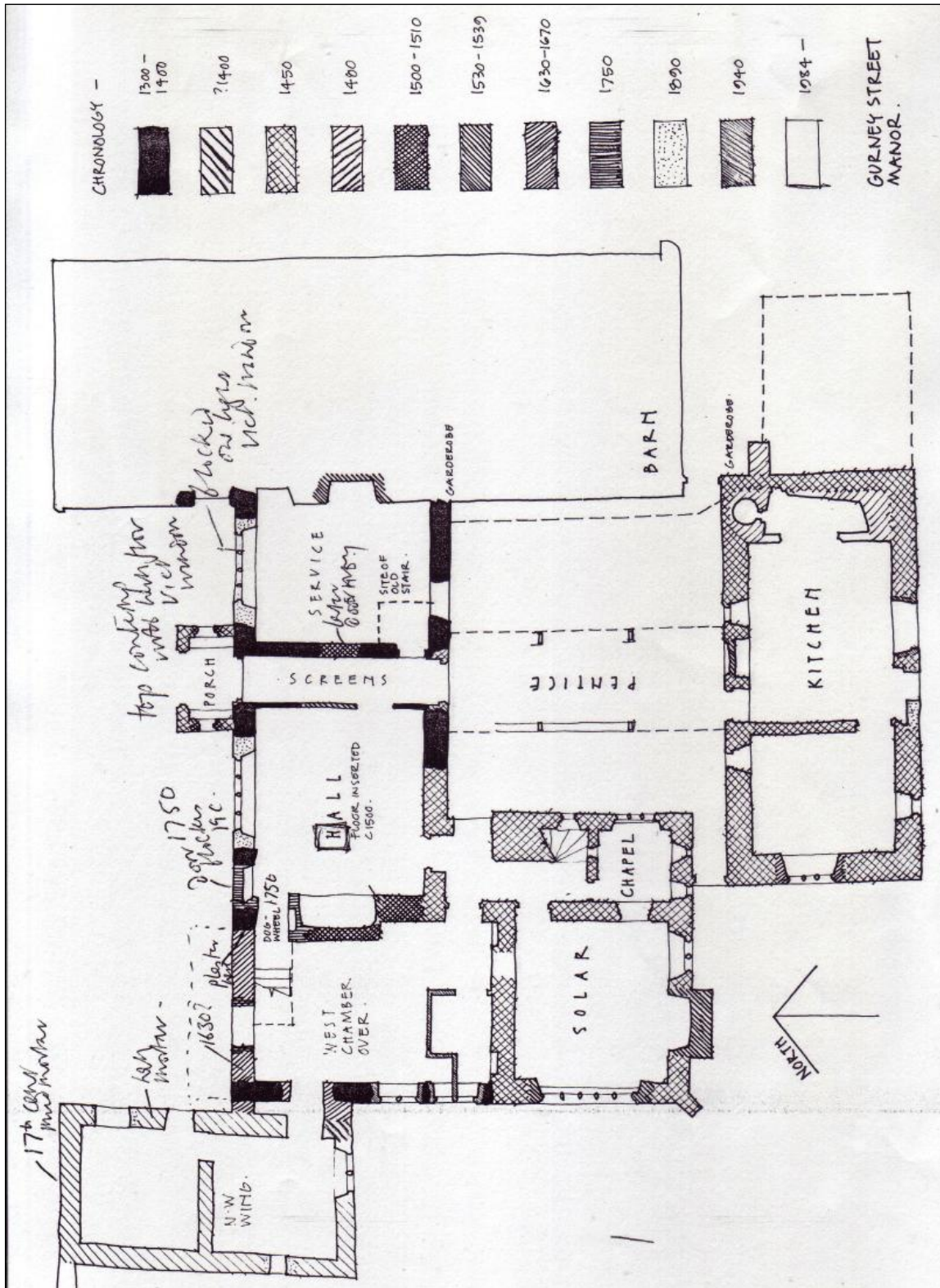
The Earl of Cavan sold Gurney Manor Farm to the tenant, Benjamin Bucknell, in 1925, who sold it in turn in 1934. In 1938 it was bought by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, who then leased it to Mr Clarence Harris. In 1944, Mr Harris bought the freehold and carried out the conversion into flats. Most of this work was purely on the surface: new partitions and ceilings, or linings to walls, did little damage to what lay behind. The only alteration was the insertion of two windows into the room west of the hall, now the kitchen, where previously there were none.

1984-1992

Visible work: new roof over hall range, repairs to roofs of north-west wing, chamber block, old kitchen range and pentice; repairs and new masonry on solar chimney and new gable finial; new glass in windows throughout; new hall screen, and ceiling joists; new oak doors; new stone floors; repaired ceiling in new kitchen; new window in kitchen. Completed or repaired fireplaces in west and north-west chambers; new ceilings west and north-west chambers; solar returned to full height, gallery formed; kitchen chambers returned to full height, new floor, and partition covered with panelling from parlour. Walls inside and out lime plastered and lime washed. Landscaping and tree-planting.

The Landmark Trust bought Gurney Manor in 1984. The intention was to reunite the main part of the house as a single dwelling, although not every part of it would be fully used. After an initial few months spent unpicking the 1940s work and exploring the walls for evidence of the building's history, work began on its repair under the supervision of architect Peter Bird, of Caroe and Martin of Wells. The foreman in charge was Philip Ford, who with his small workforce of carpenters and masons, was employed by Landmark for the job. In addition to

heavy and complicated structural works in most parts of the building, careful repair has been carried out to joinery and masonry everywhere. With the new plaster finishes, the replacement of missing features such as doors, and the resolving of later changes in floor level, the high quality and careful design of the manor house has reappeared.



History of Gurney Manor

There are surprisingly few documents to tell us the history of Gurney Manor and of the families that have lived there. Although it passed by descent or marriage for most of its history, the families concerned have all died out, and there is no collection of estate papers, with leases and accounts, to provide details of repairs or new tenants; nor family papers to fill out the bare names of pedigrees. There are no collections of portraits, nor sketches in watercolour by daughters of the house: just one view by W.W. Wheatley of about 1845, and one or two photographs taken earlier in this century. All other information has had to come from public sources of one kind or another, usually concerned with taxation or judicial matters.

These are of course most plentiful for the 19th century, with its Tithe Maps and Census Returns and Directories, but there is a surprising amount for the earlier periods as well, from a deed of administration of William Dodesham's will of 1482, to the hearing resulting from Thomas Michell's triple murder in 1539. By the greatest good fortune, the officers of the Victoria County History for Somerset, Dr Robert Dunning and Mary Siraut, were working on Cannington at the same time, and have given invaluable help in tracing obscure but vital pieces of the jigsaw. William Dodesham's career as a lawyer has in particular been the discovery of Robert Dunning.

Fortunately, too, a member of the Michell family had traced his family and written up his research in *The Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological Society_ Vol 73* (1927). For the more recent past, relatives of the last farming tenants, the Bucknells, have given a lively picture of the house in the last days of its prosperity; as have those who worked on the farm before the Second World War, and others who lived in the many flats after it. The most active participant of all has perhaps been the house itself, which speaks so clearly of its makers and inhabitants, and their ways of doing things. From all of this, something like a coherent story begins to emerge.

The Gurneys

The main contribution of the Gurneys has been their name: a neighbourhood called Gournestrete, a tenement called Gurneysplace and a mill called Gurneyspill, are all mentioned in 1482, evidence of a long association between family and place. As early as 1243 a Richard de Gurney laid claim to a mill called Bosecroft in Cannington which had belonged as part of his demesne to 'William, son of Philip, kinsman of the aforesaid Richard' whose heir he was. Further links between the Gurneys and Cannington occur in the next century. The connection must have been that small estate which with the breakdown of the manorial system eventually became a manor of its own within Cannington (of 300 acres according to the 18th historian Richard Locke), called Gurney Street.

There can be little doubt, too, that the house that went with this estate was the same small hall whose outline survives in the front range of the present house. During the recent restoration, a floor surface was found in the hall which continued under the existing low end partition, itself known to belong to the earliest known building phase of before 1400. It was at right angles to this earlier house that the barn was built - and it is interesting therefore that in his report on the house in 1981, the Somerset vernacular buildings specialist Commander Williams noted that the only other example in the area of such a juxtaposition was Englishcombe Rectory Farm, now in Avon. Englishcombe was for a long time a Gurney manor and site of a Gurney castle.

The Gurneys were Anglo-Norman barons who came to England with William the Conqueror. They were given large estates in East Anglia and elsewhere, and a branch of the family was established in the West Country before 1200.

According to Daniel Gurney in *The House of Gurney* (1848) 'for many generations [they] were opulent and powerful barons in the western counties.' Robert de Gurney in the 1240s had 22 knights fees in Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire, as well as others in Gloucestershire. Besides the castle at Englishcombe, he owned Richmount Castle near East Harptree in the Mendips, and another at Beverstone

in Gloucestershire. His descendant Sir Thomas de Gurney was guardian and finally murderer of King Edward II, while his son Sir Matthew was one of the Black Prince's knights, whose name occurs in Froissart's chronicles of the French wars. He was the last of the direct line, and died in 1406. A branch of the family was still living in Cannington, however. If the property had originally been part of the larger family estate, it had by 1400 been settled on a junior line. A later pedigree for the Michell family notes that Jane, the daughter and heir of Hugh Gurney, had married Roger Dodesham. Working backwards from later generations, this marriage must have taken place about 1420. It marks the end of the Gurneys' connection with the house.

The Dodeshams

The Michell pedigree states that the husband of Jane Gurney was Roger Dodesham, and that their daughter married Philip Puryman. The Purymans' daughter Agnes married Walter Michell in about 1465. In 1482, the executors of William Dodesham transferred, according to the instructions in his will, property in Gurneystreet to his kinswoman, Agnes, wife of Walter Michel. Other sources confirm that Agnes was William's neice, her mother Joan being his sister. Thus William was son of Roger Dodesham, and thereby heir to Jane Gurney's property.

In Cannington church is a brass to a William Dodesham who died in 1440. Only a gentleman of some substance in the parish would have earned such a memorial. Either there was another landowning Dodesham in Cannington, therefore, or the pedigree is wrong, and Roger was in fact William. Certainly the date of his death would fit in well with his being Jane Gurney's husband and William's father. William was buying land for himself in the 1450s, and so could well have been born before 1430. The pedigree was drawn up in 1623 by the College of Heralds, relying on information given them by Michells of that time: how many of us could be sure of the Christian name of our great great great grandmother's grandfather?

The Dodeshams were a long-established family in the area; Dr Dunning describes them in *Somerset Country Houses* (1992) as 'a family of obvious energy and competence.' A William de Dodesham had a house and burgage plot in Bridgwater between 1250-70, when that next to it was granted by its owner to Muchelney Abbey. The editor of the Muchelney Abbey Cartulary for the Somerset Record Society in 1899, notes that 'the Dodesham family took their name from that place in the parish of Cannington.' Another William Dodesham was buying land in Somerset in 1386-7, and this process continued. William, probably already of Gurneystreet, was buying yet more land in 1455-6.

In addition to increasing his family's estates, William was on one occasion Member of Parliament for Bridgwater, and also practiced as a lawyer: Dr Dunning has found him described as attorney. Sometimes he acted as a trustee, and at others represented the plaintiff in legal disputes. His name appears in the sale by John Kenne to Thomas Tremayll of Blackmoor Farm in 1476. This very interesting house just outside Cannington was enlarged and rebuilt before his death in 1508 by Tremayll, another lawyer who acted in turn as William Dodesham's executor. Although later than the main phase of building work at Gurney Manor, it has many similarities of detail.

Two factors point to the enlargement of Gurney Manor being the work of William Dodesham. First of all such stylistic details as roofs, doors and windows, point to a date not much later than 1450-1475. Secondly, in the deed of transfer of 1482, a chapel of the Blessed Margaret is referred to, which it is thought might refer to the little oratory chapel in the house.

The wording of the deed is not entirely straightforward however. It starts by declaring that Thomas Tremayll and others, according to the last wishes of the late William Dodesham, transfer and confirm to Agnes, wife of Walter Michell and kinswoman of William, the capital messuage formerly belonging to William in Cannington in which he himself dwelled, situated in that district or street called

Gurneystreet with orchards, gardens, curtilages and bartons. It then gives details of various closes of land or meadow, and tenements, south and north of the street, including one directly opposite the capital messuage of six acres, and one of one acre which is part of a tenement called Gurneysplace, held by a couple and their son for their lives. Finally it goes on to say 'and also the chapel of the Blessed Margaret', together with a water mill called Gurneyspille, with other tenements, all of which were held in trust by named trustees for the use of William Dodesham himself.

From this it sounds as though the chapel was a separate building, and not part of the main house. On the other hand it is hard to see why an oratory was included in the house, if there was already a chapel elsewhere; and a chapel of ease would hardly have been reserved for private use. Having a private chapel was obviously something of a requirement among the local gentry, two other houses in the district, Blackmoor and Gothelney, being equipped with them. William Dodesham may have wanted to single out such an adornment for mention for quite world, especially if it contained valuable vessels.



1984





From the south, during repairs





The west side



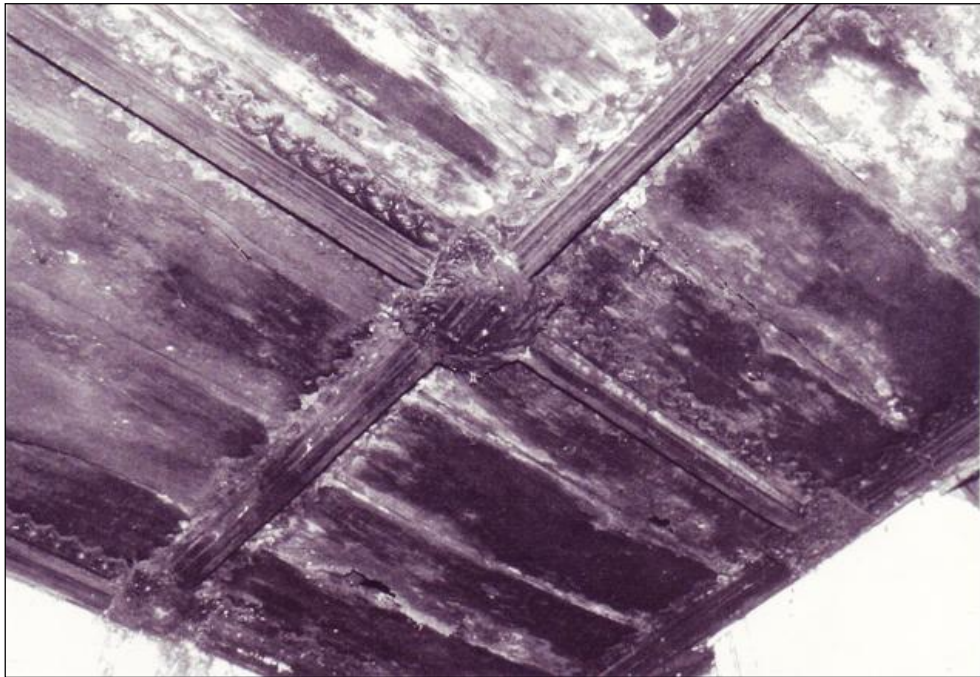


The pentice





The south side of the hall range, with
19th century addition, now removed.



The oratory

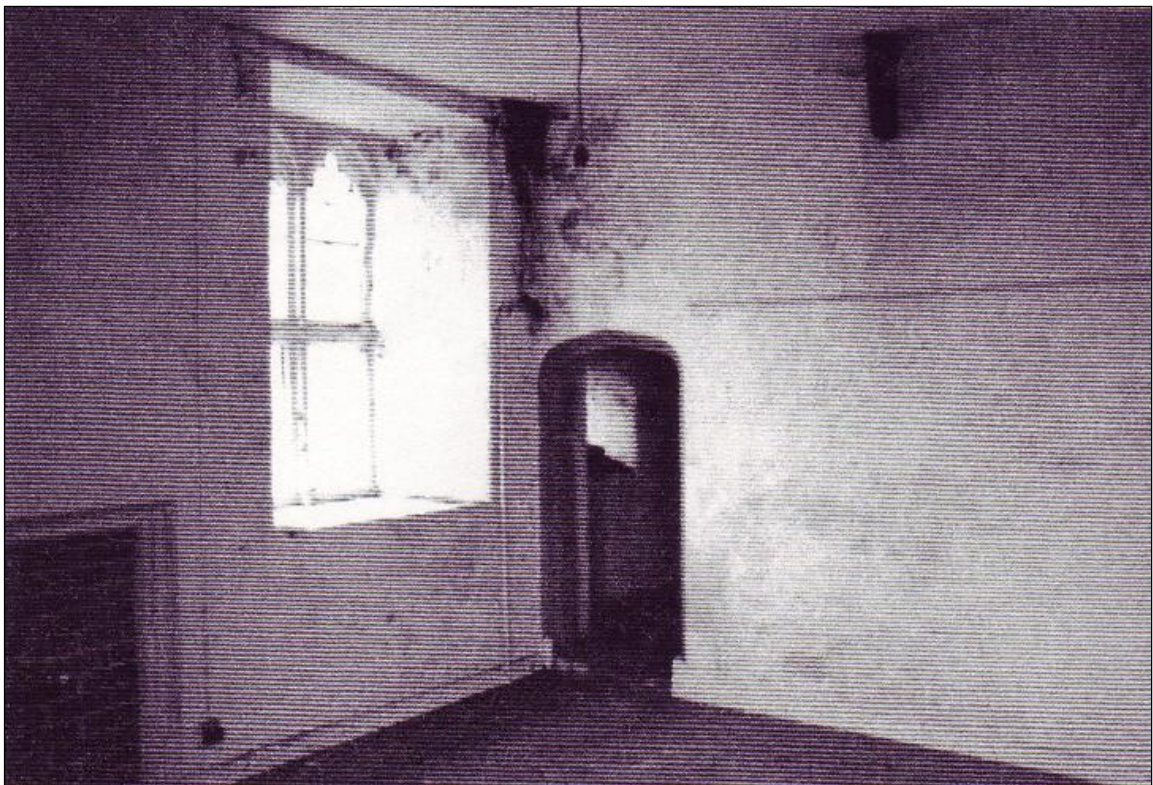


The oratory





The parlour



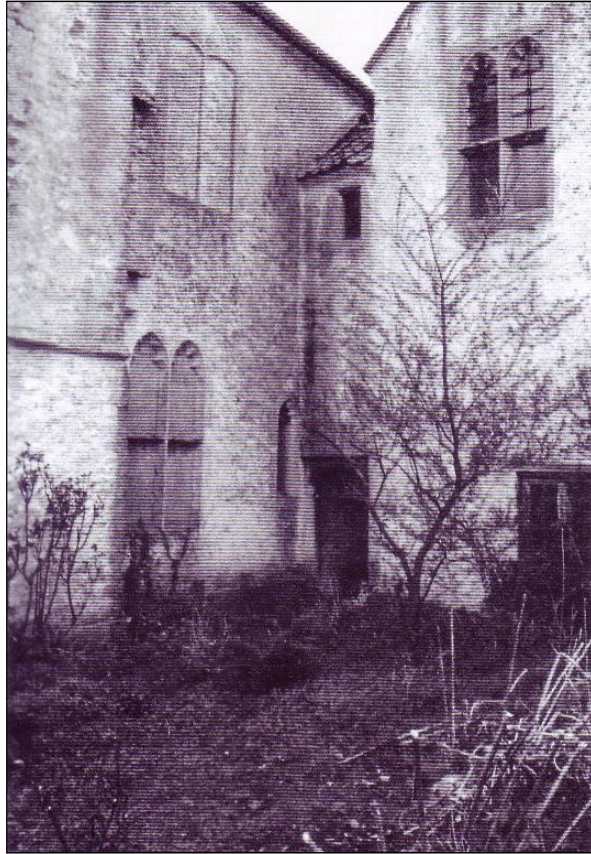
The kitchen chamber



Inserted bedroom in the solar



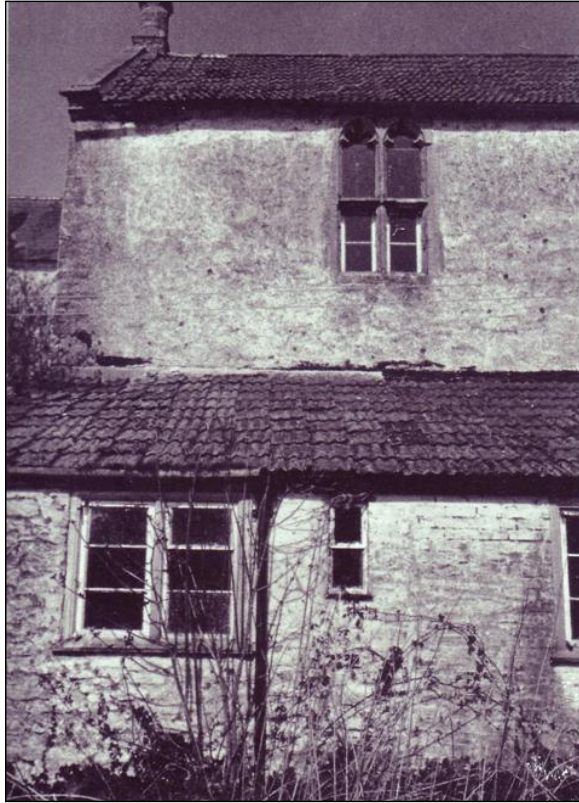
The screens passage



The solar block and kitchen range. From the garden.



The door from the farmyard, to the courtyard.



The south side of the kitchen range in 1984

