

# The Landmark Trust

## PLAS UCHAF History Album



FIG. 12. PLAS UCHA, NEAR CORWEN (No. 399).

**Researched & written by Clayre Percy, 1973  
Updated in 2016.**

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## **BASIC DETAILS**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Late 14th century</b>
<b>Built for</b>	<b>The Barons of Cymmer</b>
<b>First floor inserted into hall</b>	<b>Late 16th century</b>
<b>Last occupant</b>	<b>The Owens</b>
<b>Abandoned</b>	<b>1960s</b>
<b>Acquired by The Landmark Trust</b>	<b>September 1971, from Merioneth County Council</b>
<b>Architect</b>	<b>MT Pritchard, Blaenau Ffestiniog</b>
<b>Builders</b>	<b>J Kenneth Hughes Ltd</b>
<b>Timber repairs</b>	<b>Gunolt Greiner</b>
<b>Listed</b>	<b>Grade I</b>

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**Plas Uchaf in the snow, after restoration.**

## Summary

Built in the late 14th century, Plas Uchaf probably began as the seat of the barons of Cymmer, and was known as Plas o Kymmer. It was built as a hall house, open to the roof, with a main truss of elaborate and unusual design, which survives practically unaltered.

The original house was probably timber-framed, with wings flanking the main hall and entrances in the north and south sides leading directly to the screens passage. Peter Smith describes its original form as ' a commoner type of hall where there is only one aisle truss sited as a screen between hall and passage..... The construction is mixed, box-framed aisle truss and cruck-framed central truss, the disparate elements linked by the general use of a king-post to carry the ridge.' It would have been was a very grand house indeed; it was more ornate than most hall houses of the period and the craftsmanship was of the highest standard - very much a house of the aristocracy.

However, the form it presents today shows that a radical reconstruction took place in the 16th century, when the first floor was inserted with heavy moulded beams. The walls are now of stone rubble and the north and south entrances have four-centred arches and jambs typical of the sixteenth century. No trace of the west wing survives and the east part of the house was altered again in the seventeenth century.

In the late 16th century the barons of Cymmer moved to Gwerclas, a house nearby, and took the name of Hughes of Gwerclas; but Plas Uchaf remained in their possession and in 1707 it was listed by Edward Llwyd as being one of the houses of the gentry of Llangar. After that it embarked upon a steady decline that continued until 1972. By 1825, when the Gwerclas estate was sold, it seems to have been the farmhouse attached to the home farm.

It then became part of the Rûg estate belonging to Griffith Howel Vaughan. Between 1826 and 1885 it was first lived in by labourers and then by a tailor and his family. There is a tradition, locally, that at about this time the first floor room above the hall (that has now gone) was used as a religious meeting house. In 1913, it was described as a tenement, and in 1933, it was a gamekeeper's house. The last people to live in Plas Uchaf were the Owens, who were there in 1960 and who now farm a few miles to the south.

In the early 1960's Lord Newborough, the head of the family that had acquired Plas Uchaf in the early nineteenth century, sold the (then unlisted) house to Mr Lloyd Jones of Bala. The new owner sold the sixteenth century beams and panelling to America: in a way this was a pity, but it did also return Plas Uchaf to its original form: that of a medieval hall house, open to the roof. More unfortunately, having been virtually gutted, Plas Uchaf was left derelict for ten years.

Peter Smith, then Secretary of the RCHMW realised that the whole house was in grave danger and in 1964 he and Ffrancon Lloyd published an article in the Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society, recording it fully and hoping that by drawing attention to its importance it might somehow be saved. There was an idea that parts of it might be removed to the Avoncroft Museum, but nothing materialised. Time went by and Plas Uchaf was rapidly turning into a ruin, but eventually Peter Smith acquired a valuable ally in Colonel A K Campbell of the Merioneth Legal Department. In the end Mr Lloyd Jones presented it to Merioneth County Council, who approached Landmark Trust. Landmark took a long lease it from the Council. The roof, which was part corrugated iron, part broken slates, was replaced with slates. The big slates on the floor of the hall passage are original, the others were bought in to match. Much the biggest job was repairing the timber, the oak for the repairs coming from Llangollen and other local sources.

## The people who lived there

In the beginning Plas Uchaf was most probably the seat of the barons of Cymmer and was known as Plas o Kymmer. Dr LAS Butler suggests this in the historical note which he contributed to Peter Smith and Ffrancon Lloyd's article on the house (*Ancient Monuments Society's Transaction*, 1964; a bound copy is on the bookshelf). Butler has very little documentary evidence to prove it, but there is sufficient material evidence in the house itself. When it was built in the late 14th century, Plas Uchaf was a very grand house indeed. It was more ornate than most hall houses of the period and the craftsmanship was of the highest standard. Very much a house of the aristocracy, it could only have been built by one of the leading local families, and as the barons of Cymmer were the local landowners, it would be most surprising if it had not been built by them.

The alterations, which were carried out sometime in the 16th century, when the first floor was inserted, were also of a high quality, as can be seen in a photograph in an article written by L Monroe for the journal *Archaeologia Cambrensis* in 1933 (attached). In the late 16th century the barons of Cymmer moved to Gwerclas, a house nearby, and took the name of Hughes of Gwerclas. Plas Uchaf remained in their possession and in 1707 it was listed by Edward Llwyd as one of the houses of the gentry of Llangar. After that the house endured a steady decline.

By 1825, when the Gwerclas estate was sold, it seems to have been the farmhouse attached to the home farm. It then became part of the Rûg estate belonging to Griffith Howel Vaughan. Between 1826 and 1885 it was lived in by labourers, and then by a tailor and his family. There is a local story which describes how, at about this time, the first floor room above the hall (now gone) was used as a religious meeting house. In 1913, when it was visited by the Ancient Monuments Commission, it was described as a tenement, so presumably two families were living there. When Monroe visited in 1933, it was a gamekeeper's house.

In 1938 and throughout the war it was lived in by a family called Wilson. Their son, Richard, was born there; in 1978 he revisited it and kindly sent some recollections of the house as he knew it as a child:

*'There was an old cast iron range where the big fire is now and there was a brick fireplace in the lounge built by my father using bricks from the Buckley Brick-works. Rats infested the top floor; in fact, my father who was a captain in the Home Guard at that time used to shoot the rats with his pistol - I remember them coming up holes in the hall! We did not fetch our water from a well, but from the stream at the bottom of the hill going down to the Bala road - my father put large drums outside to catch the rain water and led a tap inside. He managed the local limestone quarry and later moved his employment to the milk factory on the Bala road.'*

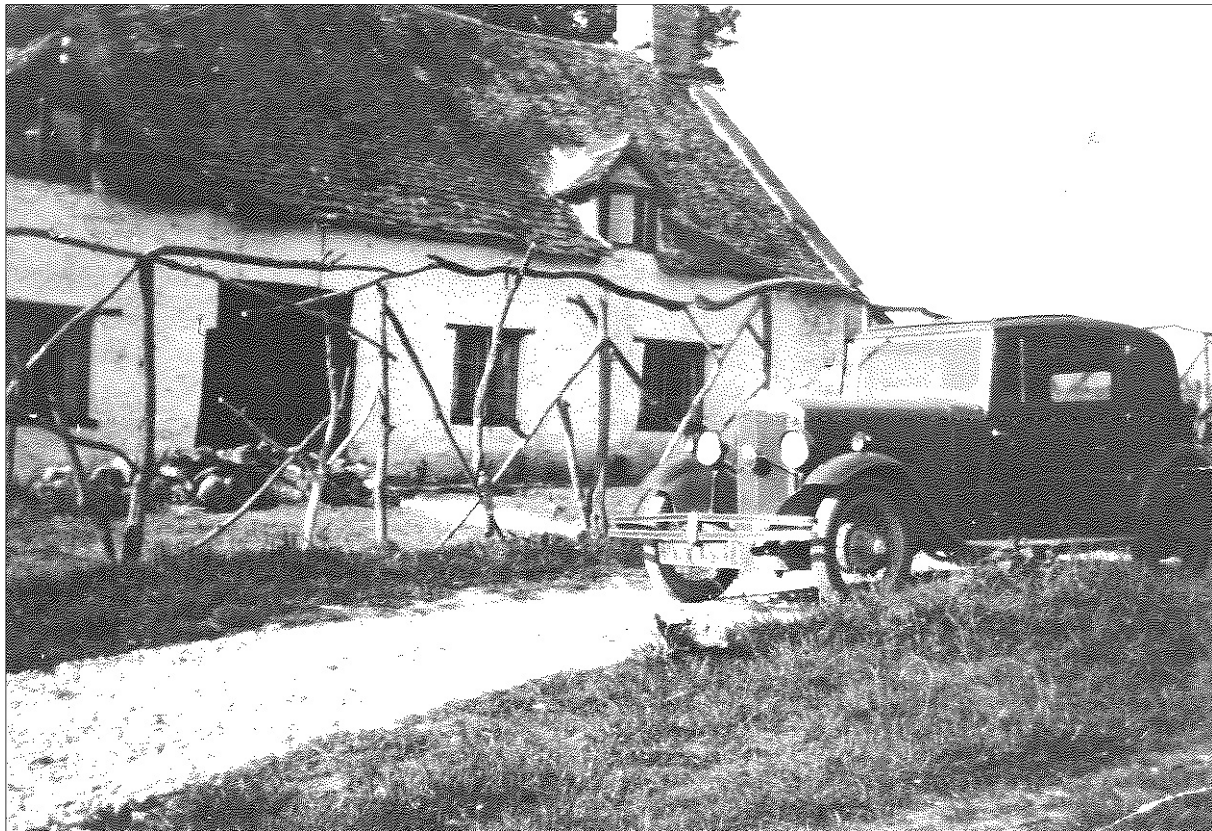
The last people to live in Plas Uchaf were the Owen family, who were there in 1960 and who subsequently moved their farming business a few miles to the south.

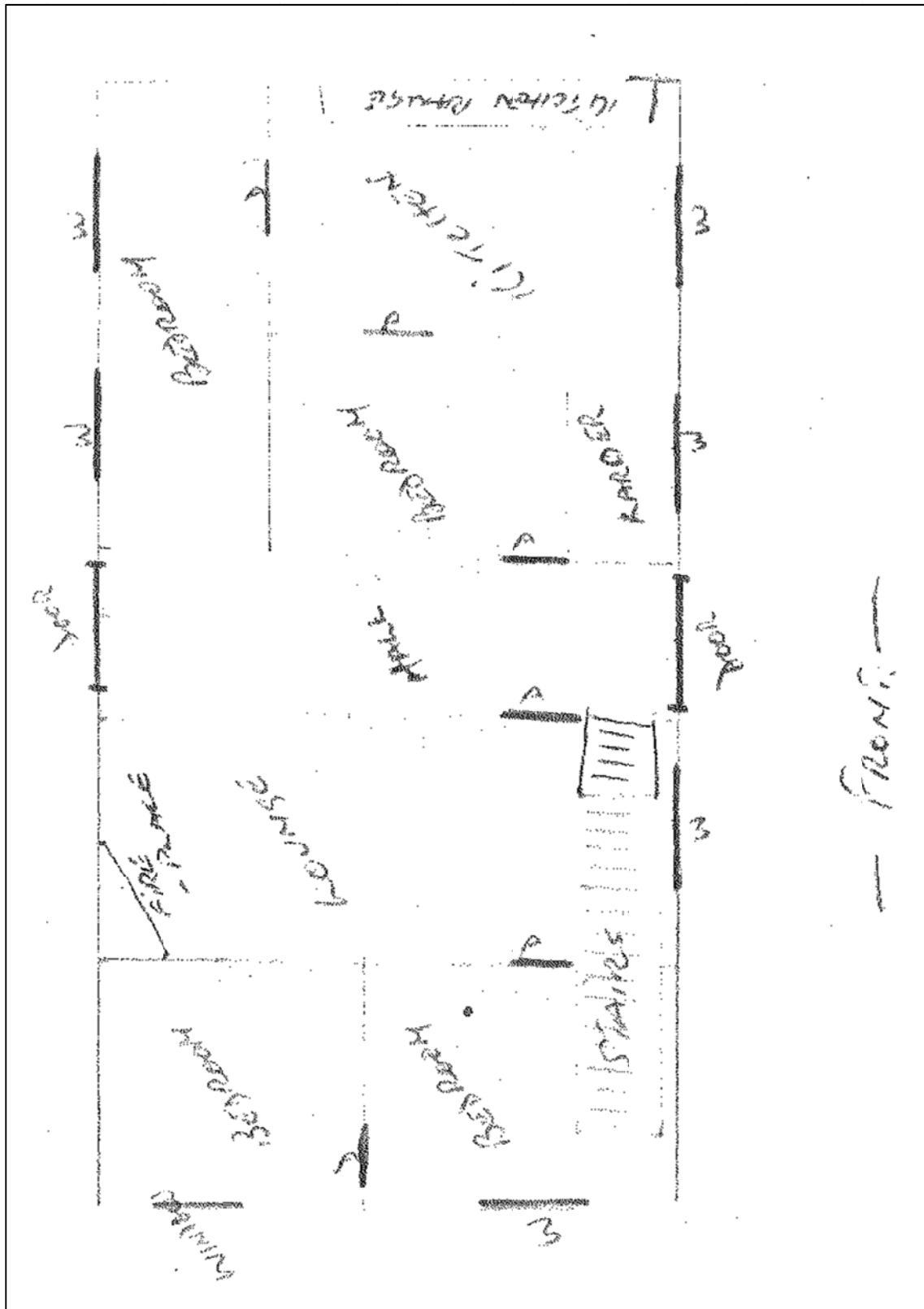
In the early 1960s Lord Newborough, descendent of the family that had acquired Plas Uchaf in the early 19th century, sold the (then unlisted) house to Mr Lloyd Jones of Bala. The new owner sold the 16th century beams and panelling to America. In a way this was a pity, but it did also return Plas Uchaf to its original form – that of a medieval hall house, open to the roof. More unfortunately, having been virtually gutted, Plas Uchaf was left derelict for ten years until it was acquired by the Landmark Trust in 1971.



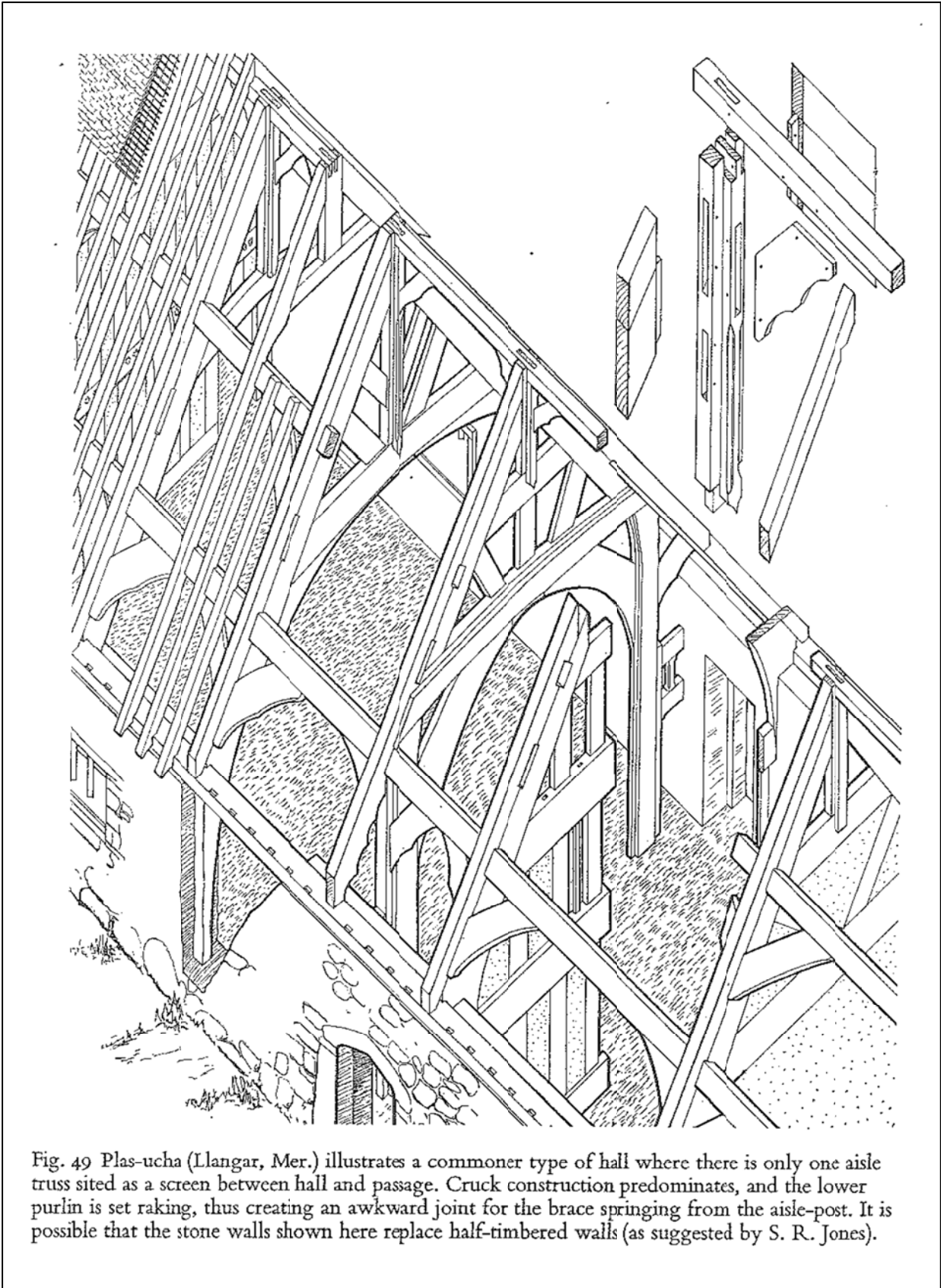


**Plas Uchaf when Richard Wilson lived there in the 1940s.**





Richard Wilson's plan of Plas Uchaf.



The construction of Plas Ucha (*Houses of the Welsh Countryside* by Peter Smith).

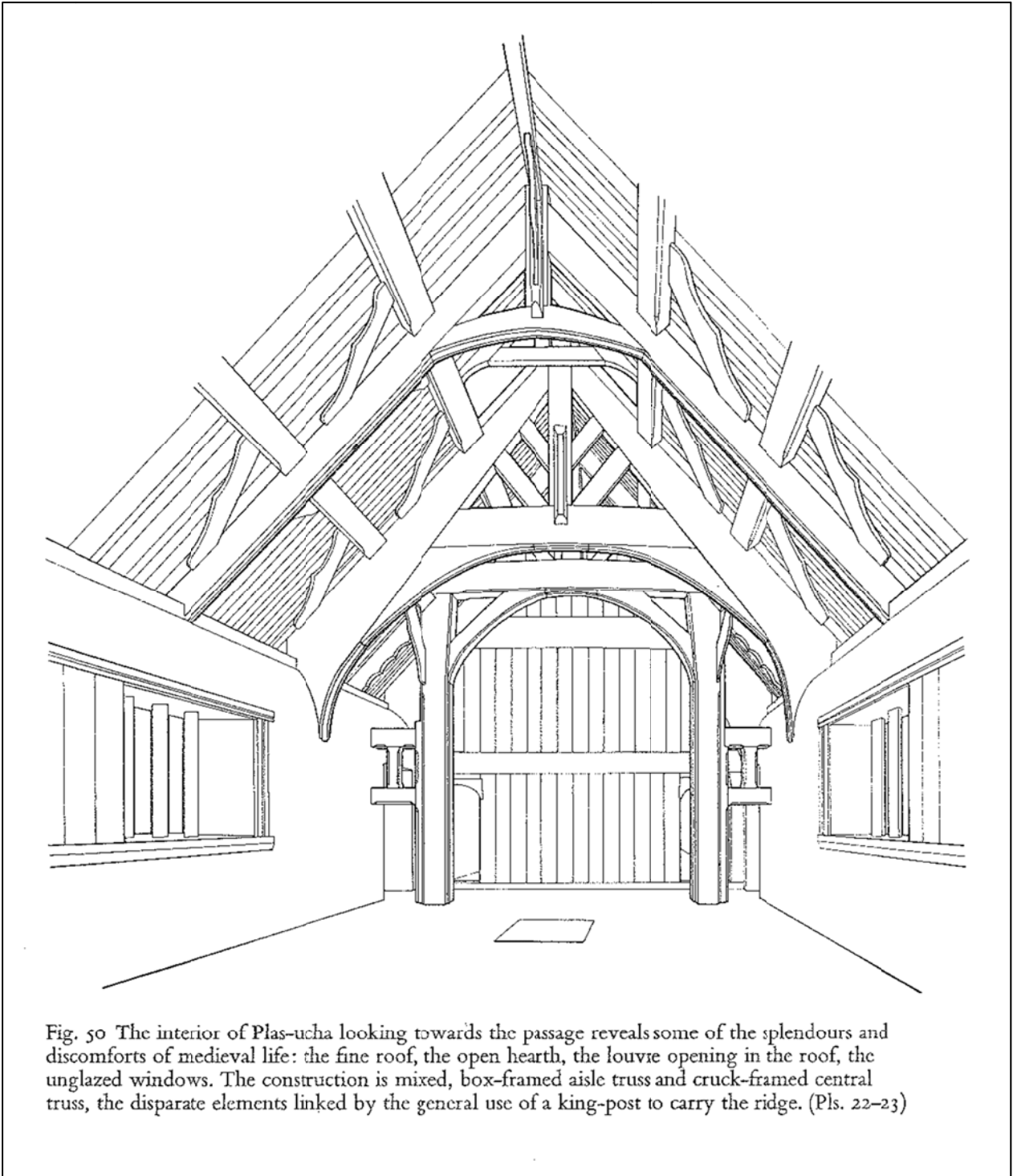


Fig. 50 The interior of Plas-ucha looking towards the passage reveals some of the splendours and discomforts of medieval life: the fine roof, the open hearth, the louvie opening in the roof, the unglazed windows. The construction is mixed, box-framed aisle truss and cruck-framed central truss, the disparate elements linked by the general use of a king-post to carry the ridge. (Pls. 22-23)

**The interior of Plas Ucha (*Houses of the Welsh Countryside* by Peter Smith).**

## How Plas Uchaf was saved

By 1960 Plas Uchaf seemed to have been forgotten, but it was not unknown to those interested in medieval architecture. In 1921 it was listed as Monument No. 399 in *An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in Wales and Monmouthshire, Vol. VI, County of Merioneth* (carried out by The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Contructions in Wales and Monmouthshire). Apart with Monroe's 1933 article, lowerth Peate had also illustrated it in his book, *The Welsh House*, published in 1940.

In the early 1960s Peter Smith, the Secretary of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW), went to see it. He recalled the visit in a letter written in 1976:

*'I first saw the house when taken there by the late Mr Ffrancon Lloyd LIIBA, who had a keen interest in the Vernacular Architecture of North Wales. It was deserted and falling into decay. We were both fascinated by the building and made some preliminary measurements.'*

Soon after that the Elizabethan ceiling and panelling were removed, with nothing to be done to stop it because it was not a listed building. Mr Smith realised that the whole house was in grave danger; in 1964 he and Mr Lloyd published an article titled '*Plas Uchaf, Llangar, Corwen*' in the Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society. It was hoped that by recording the building and drawing attention to its importance, it might somehow be saved. There was also an idea that parts of it might be removed to the Avoncroft Museum, but this did not materialise.

Time went by, with Plas Uchaf rapidly turning into a ruin, but eventually Mr Smith acquired a valuable ally in Colonel A. K. Campbell of the Merioneth Legal Department, and between them they succeeded in arousing the interest of Merioneth County Council, which agreed to buy the building (in the end the owner, Mr Jones, presented it to the County). However, public ownership was

not enough in itself to save the building – to conserve it was going to be a huge undertaking.

It was at this stage that the Landmark Trust intervened, leasing the building from the Council in 1971. In January 1972 the architect, Mr MT Pritchard of Blaenau Ffestiniog, drew up plans to save the building. An examination of the 'before' plans and the annotated elevations show what was done. The roof, which was part corrugated iron, part broken slates, was replaced with slates. The big slates on the floor of the hall passage are original; the others were bought in to match. Much the biggest job was repairing the timber. This was done by an outstanding craftsman, a German called Gunolt Greiner, who also repaired the woodwork in the New Inn, Peasenhall, for the Landmark Trust. The oak for the repairs came from Llangollen and other local sources.

The decorated beam illustrated in Fig. 7 of Monroe's article, and described by him, now leans against the south side of the hall, by the door.

The dresser in the little sitting room was designed and made by J Kenneth Hughes Limited, the builders.

### **Update in 2010**

In late 2010 underfloor heating was installed in the main hall with radiators elsewhere, powered by an air-source heat pump. A new wood burning stove was also installed in the sitting room. The Furnishings team designed and fitted a new kitchen which included a range of base units and a housekeeper's cupboard. The bathroom was reconfigured to include a separate walk-in shower.



Plas Uchaf in 1970, before repair work started.



**The north front in November 1963.**



**The completed north front.**



Passage from a letter to the Landmark Trust from Mr Peter Smith, Secretary of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments in Wales, suggesting that originally Plas Uchaf may have been a half-timbered building. Dated 22nd November 1978

(A footnote to *Plas Uchaf, Llangar, Corwen* by Peter Smith and Ffrancon Lloyd, which is on the bookshelf).

I originally assumed the house had always been of stone because the classic evidence for a half-timbered building, the mortices in the wall plate and main frames for the rails were missing. It also appeared to me unlikely that the inadequately tied truss between the louver and the end wall could have been built into a timber building because of the danger of the whole truss opening and spreading whereas a stone wall would have held it. On the other hand the joint between the spere-truss and the outside walls was not very good, and it seemed strange that the ovolo-mouldings of the central truss should have been buried in stonework. However it only later occurred to me that the wall-plate (clearly designed for a stone wall) might not be the original wall plate and that the bases of the crucks might be without the slots for timber wall connections because the outer vertical face had been cut back in the course of a stone rebuilding. Furthermore I subsequently realised that there were half-timbered houses with weak intermediate trusses (such as the truss next to the end wall at Plas-ucha) where the builder relied on the main trusses to hold the building together. Finally I discovered that Plas-ucha lay just within the area where half-timbered building had been known in late medieval times. At the time of my original report all the local buildings seemed to be of stone, and a half-timbered building unexpected in this location. Favouring my original view that the lateral stone walls are original, or at least certainly earlier than the mid-16th century end wall containing the fireplaces is the fact that the shutters for opening the windows (which clearly go with the stone walls) would not have fully opened because the shutter would come up against the return wall of the end (fireplace) wall. It is a very difficult problem and one we are now facing in another medieval house, Hafoty in Anglesey, now in course of restoration. Here again timber posts without any structural evidence for rail connections have been discovered in obviously early stone walls containing dressed stone pointed doorways etc. Absolute certainty on these points seems unattainable.



Interior in 1970, showing the extent of disrepair (RCAHMW).



**Interior in 1970, showing the spere truss and the beam linking the two aisle posts (RCAHMW).**



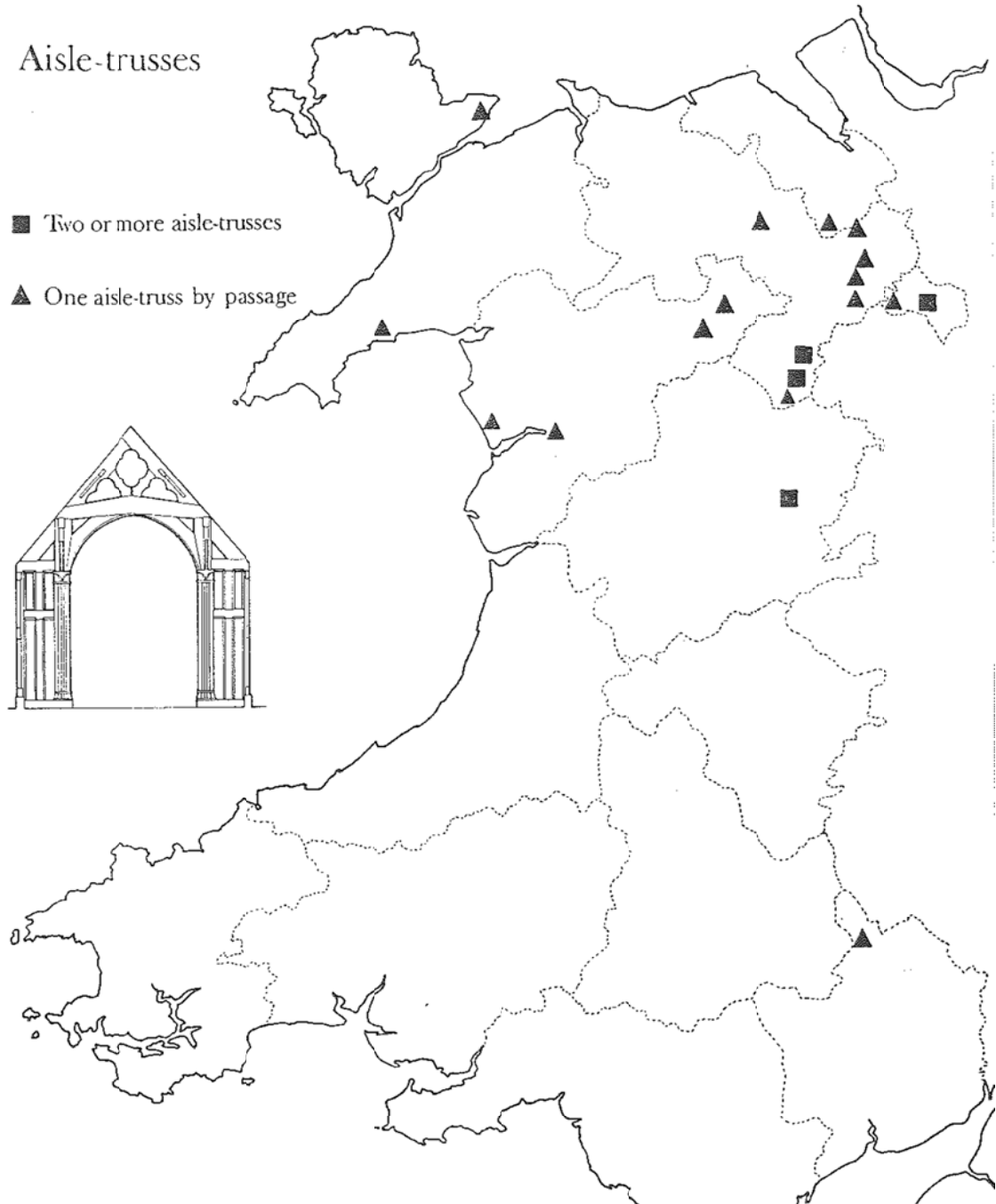
**Interior after restoration.**

## Roads

Drovers' roads roughly followed the lines of the A5 and A494, joined at Corwen and went on together to Langollen. From there they carried on to Shrewsbury.

## Slate

Ordovician slate was quarried on either side of the Dee, east of Corwen, in the Berwyn range to the south, and in the Llantysilio Mountain to the north, near Llangollen. Quarrying in the Berwyn had a long history: it was already going on in the time of the Tudors, and could well have been used in the building of Plas Uchaf. There was quarrying between Corwen and Bala before 1815. When Borrow visited the quarries at Llangollen and Gly Ceiriog in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, they were flourishing and employed 600 men. By 1932 the work force had shrunk to 126. Now the nearest slate quarries are at Blaenau Ffestiniog.



**Aisle-trusses**

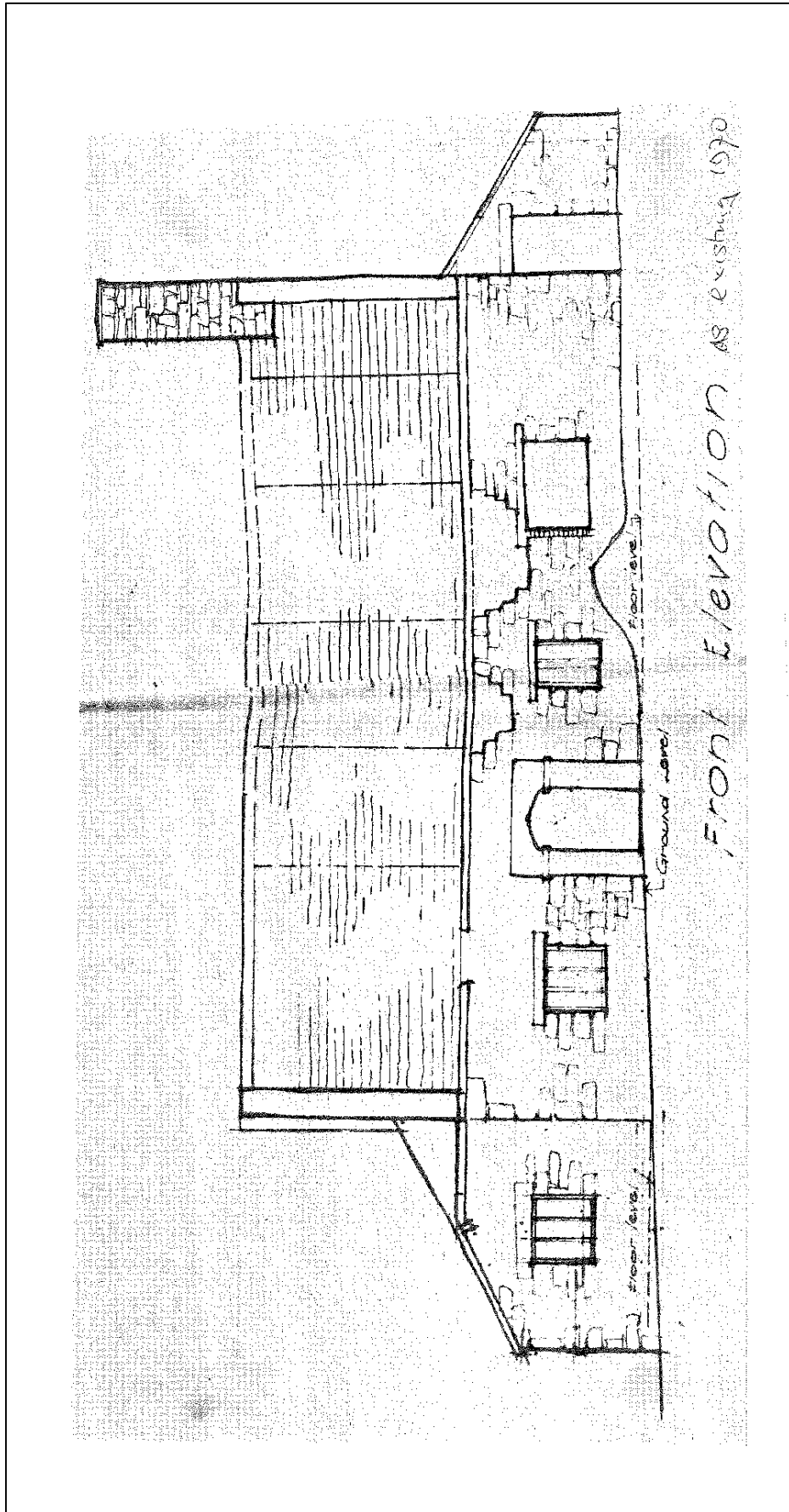
*(Houses of the Welsh Countryside by Peter Smith).*

*Aisle-trusses*

An important type of both roof and frame was the aisle-truss. Aisle-trusses appear to have been used in three ways. In the first each truss was aisled; in the second each truss apart from the central truss was aisled, in the third there was only one aisle-truss in the form of an open partition by the cross-passage. Only one house in Wales appears to have belonged to the first type; three belong to the second, and the remainder to the third. The distribution map showing the four houses having more than one aisle-truss along the eastern border, and the single aisle-trusses houses spreading to the west would suggest that aisled building is an importation from the east. It is significant that the multiple aisle-truss houses have the lower purlin set square as an arcade plate in a south-eastern aisled building.

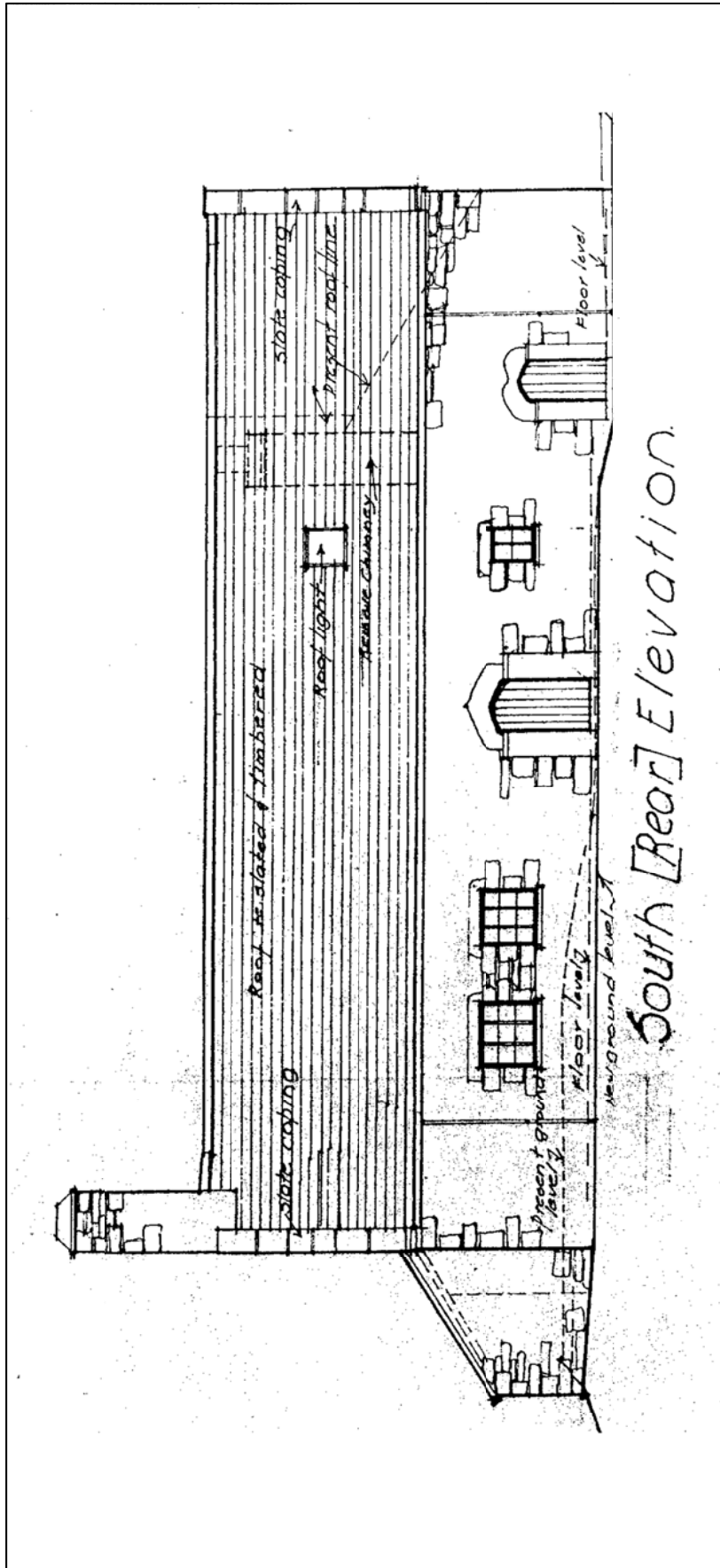
The distribution of aisle-trusses in Wales is predominantly northern. The aisle-truss roof was eventually superseded by the hammer-beam roof.

* more than one aisle-truss in building		<b>Flintshire</b>	
		Althrey Hall	SJ 3791 4408
<b>Anglesey</b>		Bryniorcyn	SJ 3005 5694
Henblas	SH 6045 7615	* Horseman's Green	SJ 4474 4145
<b>Caernarvonshire</b>		<b>Merioneth</b>	
Penarth-fawr	SH 4192 3768	Branas-ucha	SJ 0155 3735
		Cwrt-plas-y-dre	SH 728 177
<b>Denbighshire</b>		Egryn	SH 5950 2034
Castle Hotel	SJ 1237 5832	Plas-ucha	SJ 0529 4277
* Hafod	SJ 2050 3216	<b>Monmouthshire</b>	
Henblas	SJ 1701 2378	Llwynceilyn	SO 3095 2180
Llai Hall	SJ 3260 5570	<b>Montgomeryshire</b>	
Lower Berse	SJ 3122 5007	* Tŷ-mawr	SJ 1729 0434
* Pen-y-bryn	SJ 2014 2706		
Plas Cadwgan	SJ 2987 4872		
Plasnewydd	SJ 2990 4389		

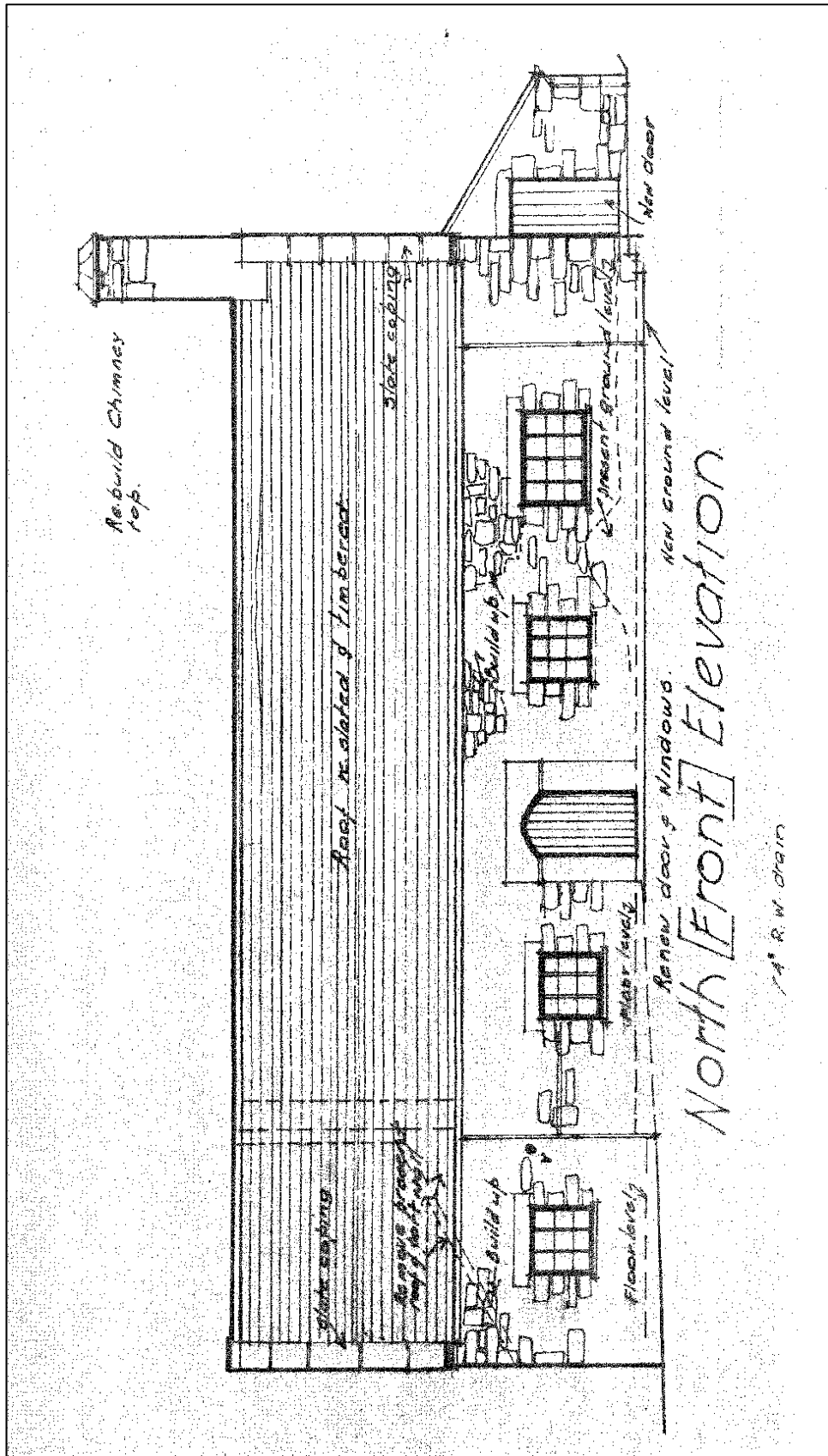


North elevation - before.

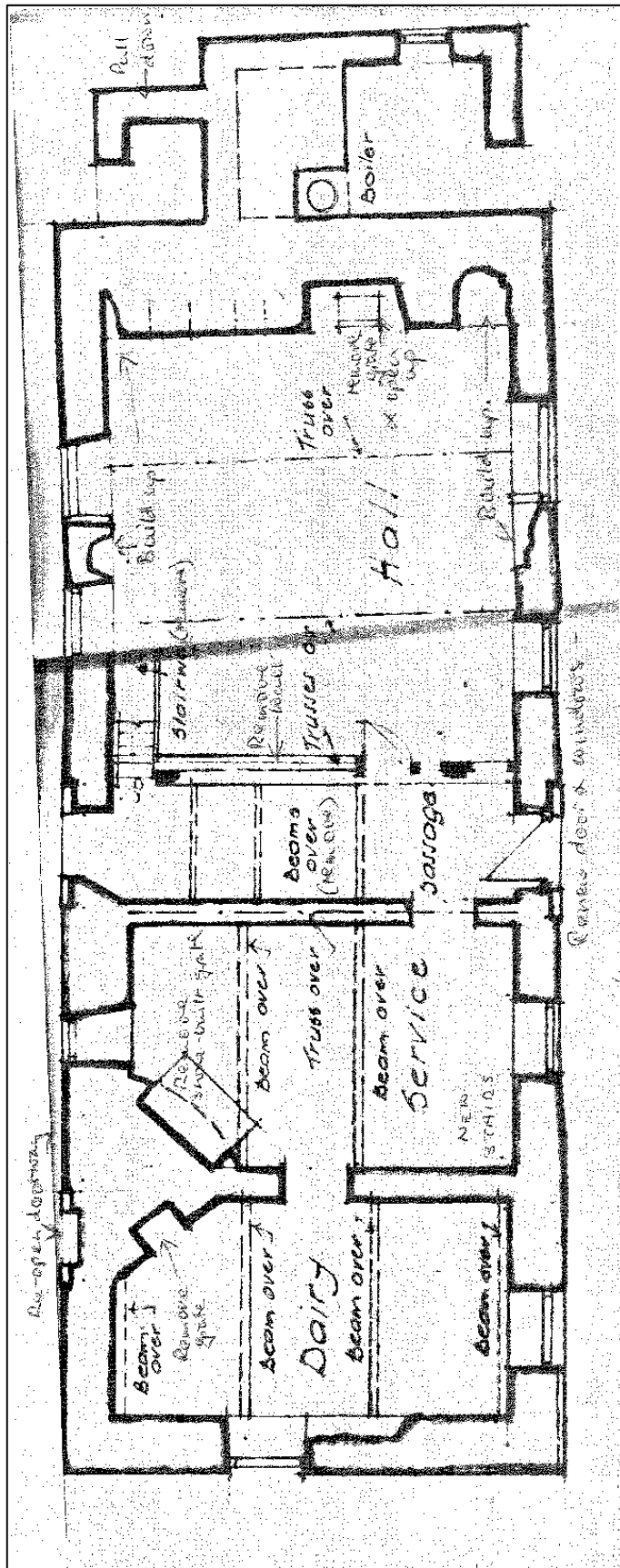




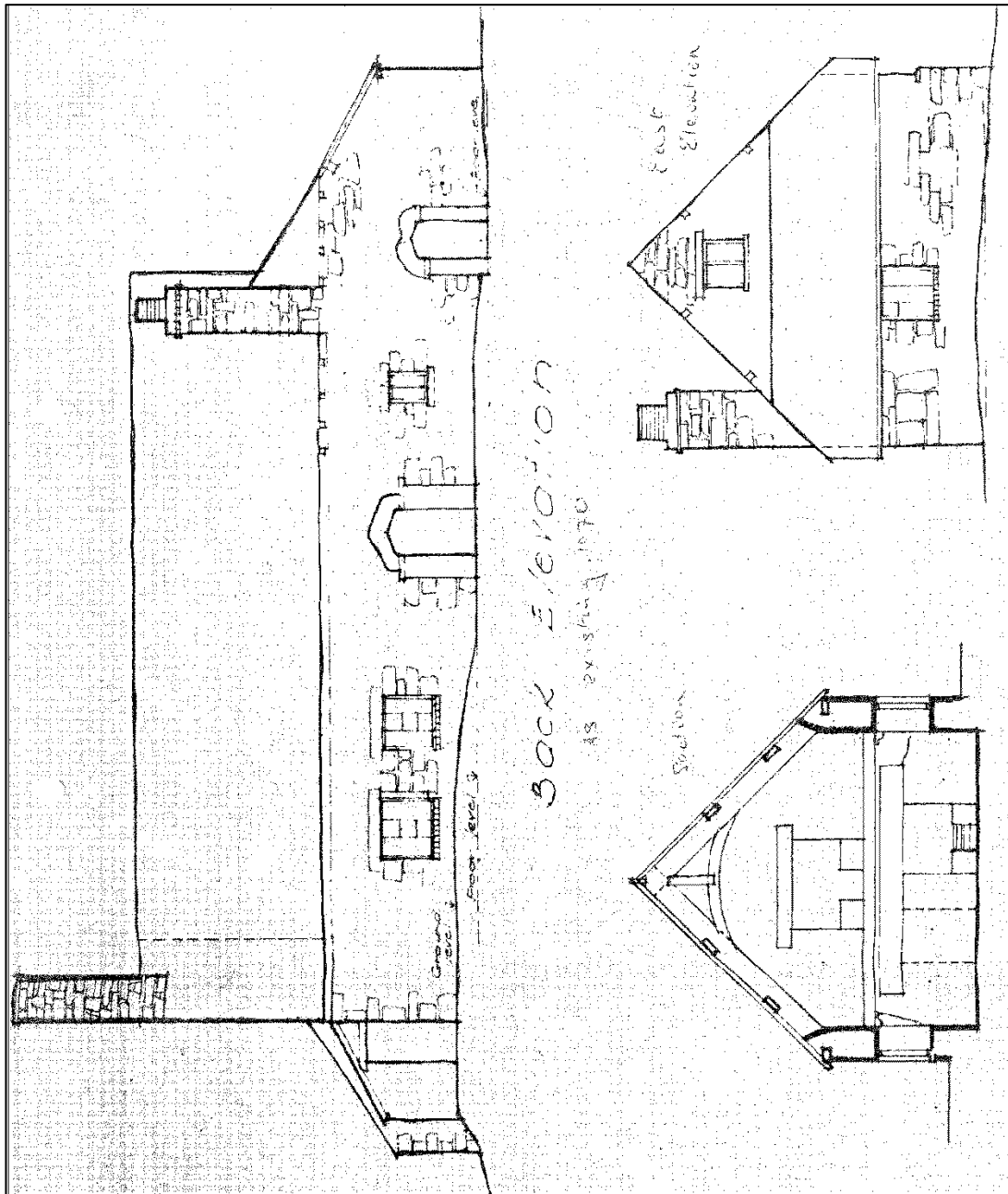
South elevation - after.



North elevation - after.



Ground floor – before work.



Rear elevation - as existing, 1970.

PLAS UCHA, LLANGAR, MERIONETH.

By L. MONROE, A.R.I.B.A.

PLAS Ucha, in the parish of Llangar, is situated near the south bank of the Afon Alwen, near its junction with the Dec and one and a half miles due west of Corwen. It is now a gamekeeper's dwelling on the

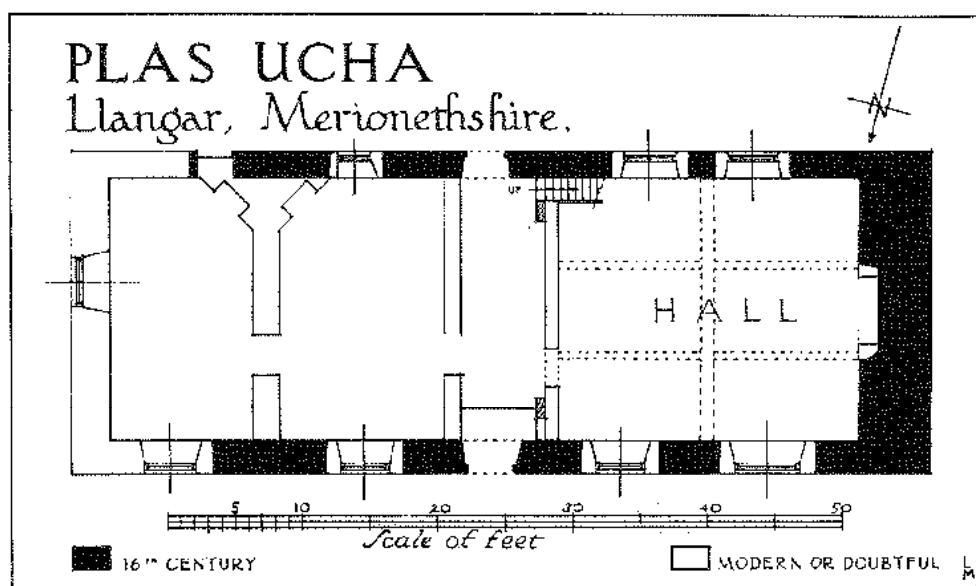


Fig. 2.

estate of Col. Vaughan Wynn, but until recently consisted of two tenements occupied by farm workers, for which purpose it was adapted by dividing the house into two units by the formation of a central through passage. In spite of subsequent alterations, however, sufficient evidence remains to indicate that it was originally a residence of some importance containing a large Hall, with an open roof, and a main truss of elaborate and, for Wales, unusual design as its principal internal feature. This truss, fortunately, remains practically unaltered, and it has been possible to make a detailed scale drawing showing it as it was in its original state (Fig. 1). Before proceeding to a description of the truss, however, a short summary of the development of the house, as far as it can be ascertained from the remaining evidence, will be advisable.

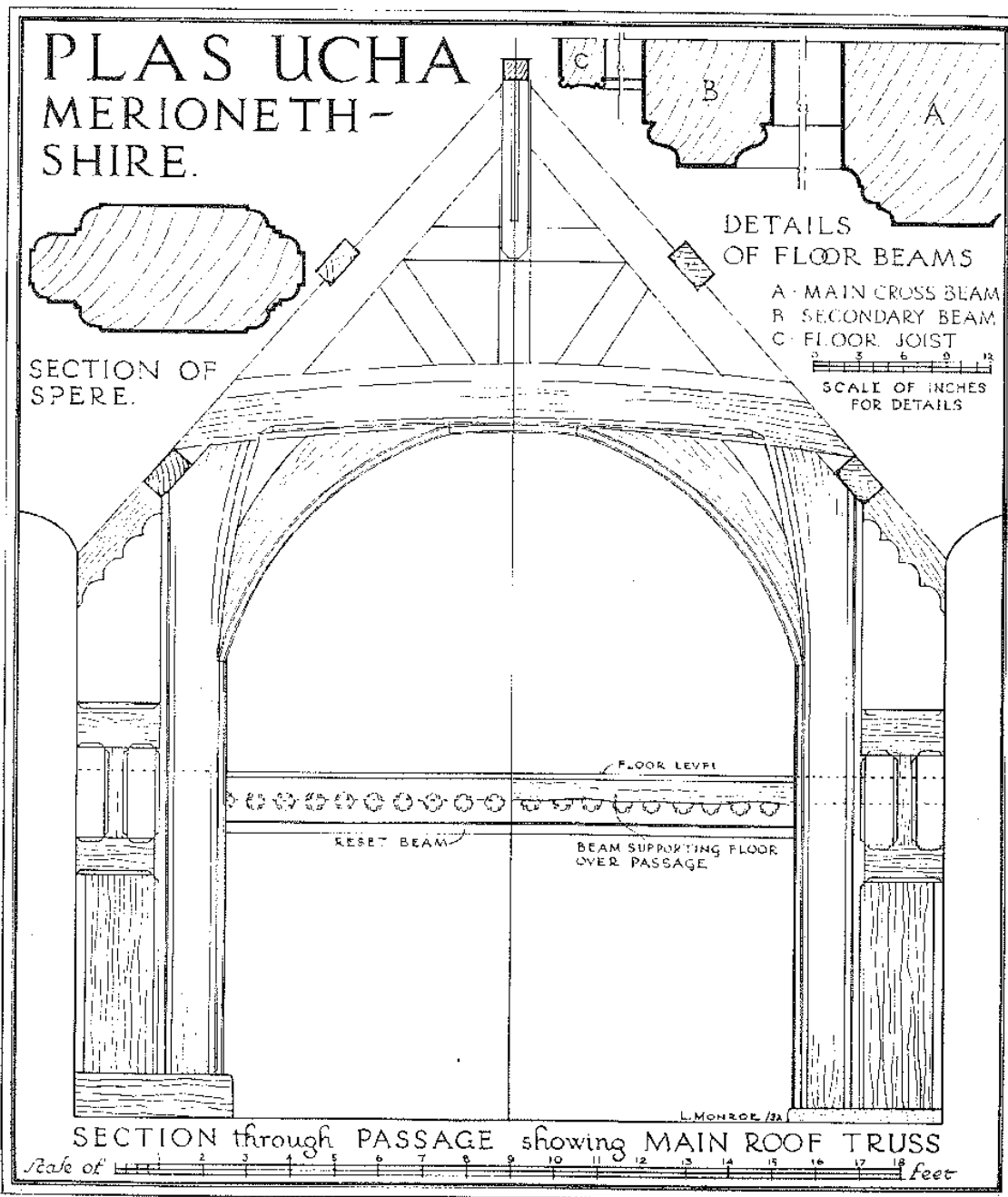


Fig. 1.

The original house was most probably of timber framed construction, and was built in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, consisting probably of a central Hall with flanking wings, with entrances in the north and south sides leading direct to the screens (Fig. 2). Nothing, beyond the main and a secondary roof truss and a reset beam, now remains of this period, the house having been

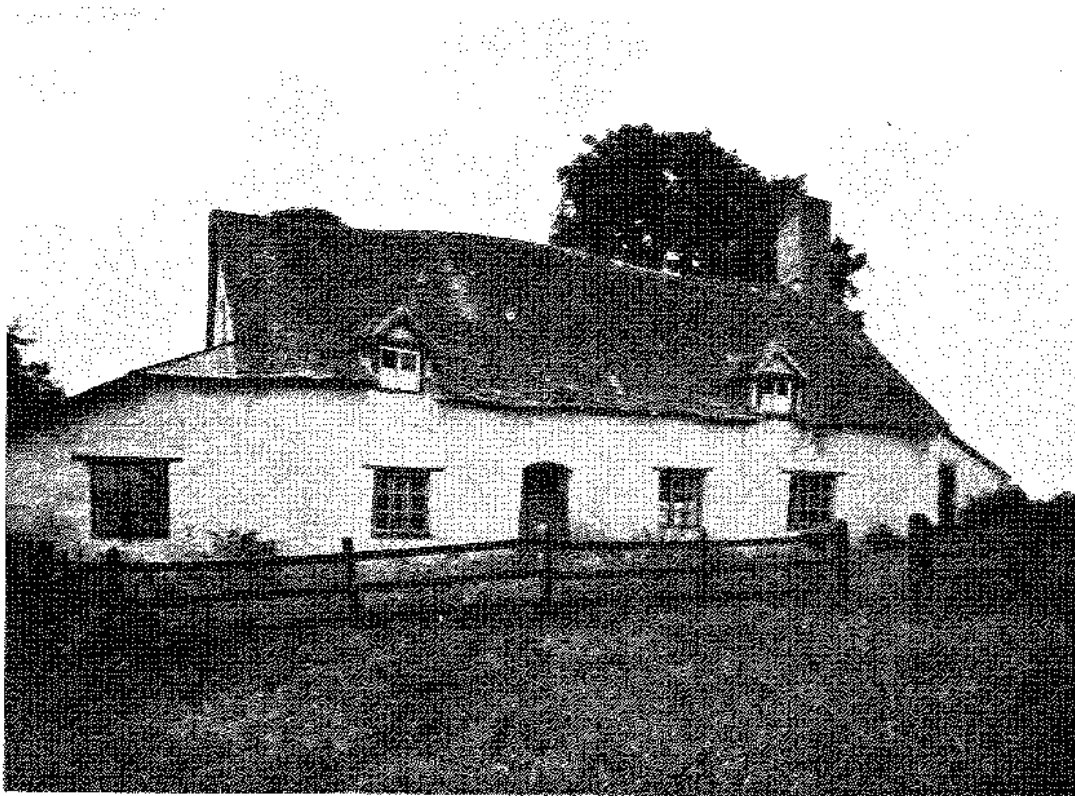


Fig. 3.—Plas Ucha from the North.

almost completely reconstructed in the early sixteenth century in the form in which, with some minor more recent modifications, it survives to-day. The present walls are of stone rubble and the north and south entrances have four-centred heads and chamfered stone jambs of sixteenth century character (Fig. 3). The extent of the original Hall cannot now be definitely determined, as the stone wall forming the west gable is of the reconstruction period, but it is probable that this wall occupies the position of the original partition

forming the west or dais end of the Hall, the western part of the present house thus representing in extent that of the original Hall. No traces of a west wing now remain. The east part of the house was further altered in the seventeenth century (or possibly later), and no evidence remains from which the original plan can be determined, a blocked sixteenth-century doorway in the south wall being the only surviving feature.

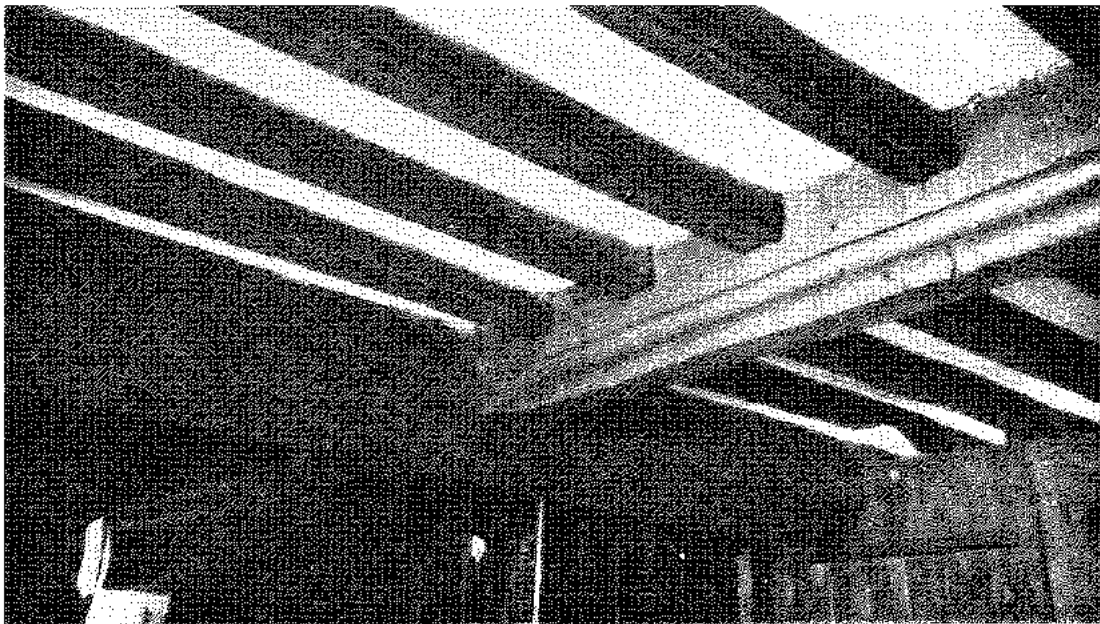


Fig. 4.—Plas Ucha. Beams of Inserted Floor.

Another important feature of the sixteenth-century reconstruction was the insertion of an upper floor in the Hall. This floor is supported on two main moulded cross beams, one placed against the truss, carrying two secondary moulded longitudinal beams, the ceiling thus being divided into six bays (Fig. 4). The ceiling beams, laid on edge, and the wall plates are also moulded. Contemporary with the floor is an upper fireplace, featureless except for a heavy oak lintel.

The main roof truss in its present form consists of an upper and lower unit (Figs. 1 and 5). Probably the latter only is original; it consists of two heavy moulded upright posts or speres, placed about 1 ft. 9 ins. from the walls, supporting a moulded tie beam with curved



braces at the angles. The intervening spaces between the speres and the walls are filled with panelling to a height of 9 ft. 6 ins., the



Fig. 5. Plas Uchaf. The Main Roof Truss.

lower part solid and the upper open. The south spere stands on a heavy oak plinth, that to the north on a lower plinth of stone. The speres, tie-beam, and braces have well cut  $\frac{1}{4}$ -round mouldings, and all the jointings and mitres are particularly well formed. The

upper unit resting on the tie-beam is probably mainly of the sixteenth century, and consists of a form of king-post, with cusped ridge-and



Fig. 6.—Plas Ucha. Secondary Roof Truss.

wind-braces, but the whole roof has been considerably reconstructed, with many older timbers reused, and it is possible that the upper part, though slightly different in character, is contemporary with the spercs and tie-beam.

The other surviving truss of the original house is that nearest the present west wall, and is of a simple coupled type with cusped wind-braces and an arched collar beam supporting a king-post, with cusped braces to the ridge. All the main timbers have  $\frac{1}{4}$ -round moulded soffits (Fig. 6).

Another interesting feature of Plas Ucha is a reset decorated beam inserted between the speres of the truss masking the east of the main

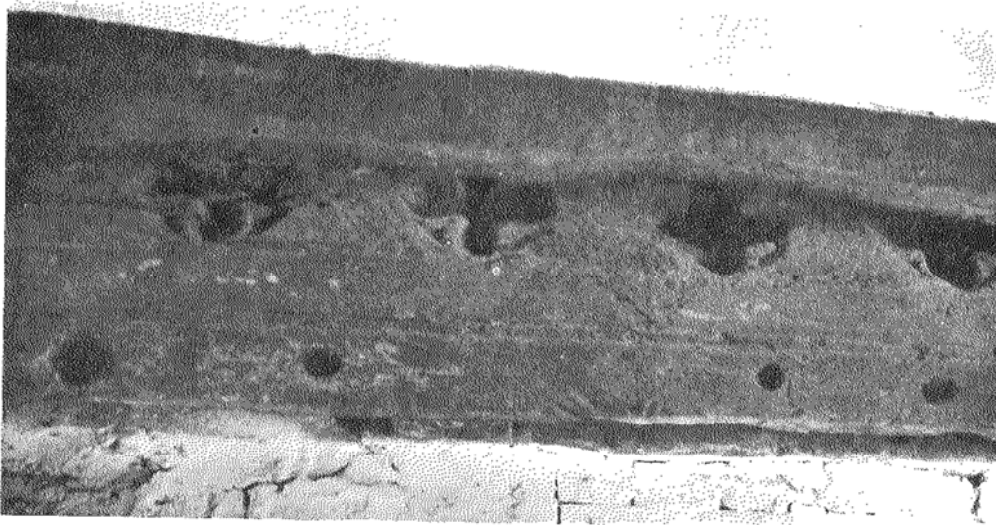


Fig. 7.—Plas Ucha. Decorated Beam Inserted between Speres.

beams carrying the floor (Figs. 1 and 7). In this position it is one of the first things that meet the visitor's eye on entering the house, and he cannot fail to be immediately impressed by the delicacy of design and the quality of the craftsmanship displayed in the series of sunk quatrefoils with which it is enriched. The beam obviously formed, at one time, the top rail of a panelled screen of fairly early date, for the mortises and peg holes, showing the rails to be of equal width with the panels, are still traceable on the soffit. That the beam belonged to the original house, there can be little doubt, its character being consistent with a late fourteenth or early fifteenth century date and thoroughly in keeping with that of the truss, but its purpose there must be a matter of conjecture. It is probable, however, that it formed the top rail of the partition at the dais end of the Hall.

## PLAS UCHA, LLANGAR, MERIONETH

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Plas Ucha is now a humble dwelling retaining but little to indicate that it was ever anything more. That little, however, is sufficient, for a roof truss of such fine proportions and excellent workmanship and the delicate ornamentation of the reset beam could only be found in a house of considerable importance, whose builders, in touch, as they undoubtedly were, with the best contemporary work of the period, could hardly have been recruited from the ranks of the local craftsmen.<sup>1</sup>

Since the examination of Plas Ucha was made, some interesting examples of houses containing a similar type of roof truss have appeared in the volume on East Hereford by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England.<sup>2</sup> In each of these the spere truss marks the position of the screens, which, it is suggested by the authors, were movable, a suggestion which affords a solution to a problem at Plas Ucha, where no traces of a fixed screen are visible on the inner edges of the speres.

It is interesting, also, to find so far west as this part of Merionethshire an example of a type of roof described in the Hereford volume as being typical of the west of England, and the suggestion that Plas Ucha is the work of "imported" craftsmen is thus further strengthened.

My thanks are due to the owner and the tenant for allowing me to examine the house, and to Mr. Stuart Piggott for the series of photographs with which the paper is illustrated.

<sup>1</sup> In an article on the "Old houses in the neighbourhood of Llansilin, Denbighshire" (*Arch. Camb.*, 1898, p. 154), Mr. Harold Hughes gives illustrations of roof-trusses at Henblas and Pen-y-bryn which appear to be comparable with that at Plas Ucha.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Amberley Court, Marden (pp. 137-8), and Court Farm, Preston Wynne (p. 155).