The Landmark Trust

SHELWICK COURT

History Album

Shelwick Court circa 2014

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KEY FACTS

Built	**1400 or earlier, additions made in 1680**
Acquisition by Landmark	**1981**
Restoration	**1982-4**
Architects	**John Schofield of Architecton of Bristol**
Contractors	**Beavan and Hodges of Hereford**
Listed	**Grade II***

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Summary

In 1981 Shelwick Court was in a ruinous condition, on the brink of total collapse. For many years its elderly owner, Mr John Orgee, had lived in a caravan beside it, the house having been declared unfit to live in. After his death in 1977, his heirs thought there was no alternative to demolition.

When the County Conservation Officer visited Shelwick Court, to see whether the building held any architectural interest apart from its charming stone front of about 1680 he found that on the east wall, plaster had fallen off to reveal timber framing of an early type with ornamental braces. Venturing inside the eastern bedrooms, he found all the signs to indicate a medieval roof above - moulded posts and the foot of an arched brace. A dangerous scramble in the attic confirmed that there was indeed a medieval roof, a very fine one from about 1400.

The Conservation Officer spot listed the building and then approached the Landmark Trust. Landmark agreed to take the house on. A sale was agreed with the owner and completed in 1981.

While the restoration was in progress, some very interesting discoveries were made about this building. First of all, only the eastern part is medieval. This range, which runs from north to south, did not contain a great hall, as was first supposed, but always had two storeys, with a great chamber on the first floor and other rooms below. This it seems was the cross-wing of a larger house and lay at the western end of a vanished great hall. The other side of the quatrefoil panels which you can now see in the great chamber would have appeared inside this hall.

We cannot say for certain who lived in this hall house. The manor of Shelwick belonged from the time of the Domesday survey to the Bishops of Hereford. There is no evidence that they had a manor house for their own use here, but there may have been a house for their steward. While you would not expect this to have been large or grand, it would probably have been where the manorial courts were held. The name Shelwick Court could therefore have some significance. Alternatively, the bishop may have granted the manor to someone else, who then built a house for themselves - though again there is no evidence for this.

The most curious thing is that the whole wing has been taken down and rebuilt. We cannot say if it has always stood on its present site, or if it has been moved from somewhere else. This rebuilding seems to have happened about 1680, when a new first floor, attic and central chimney were inserted. Box-framed wings were added on the west side at the same time using much old timber. These formed a double gable (one of which no longer stands) making the house into a square block with a staircase in the middle of the north side. This new house was given a regular south front in stone with cross-mullion windows and a central door around the same time.

Shelwick Court was by this time the house of a prosperous farmer which it continued to be until it entered its slow decline in the post-war years, a decline which nearly ended in disaster.

The restoration was carried out in 1982-4. There were two main aims behind Landmark's restoration of Shelwick Court. The first, and most urgent, was to return the

building to a sound structural condition. The second was to reveal the fine medieval chamber inside, but to maintain its disguise on the outside by preserving the additions made to it in about 1680. This meant removing an attic floor and the upper section of a chimney, and renewing a missing truss at the south end as a gable, breaking intriguingly through the front slope of the roof.

As the ground floor had always been divided the lower stage of the chimney could be kept, with its fireplace on one side and ovens on the other. It also supports a ring-beam of reinforced concrete which the engineers advised forming around the front half of the building. This anchors steel ties running through the wall to plates on the outside, holding the two skins of stone together. The original design of the south front was restored at the same time by removing a porch and some brick buttresses.

Repair of the medieval wing was more complicated, the idea being to keep new timber to a minimum. Only where an element was visually or structurally essential was it renewed - where a section of collar-beam had been cut away for the chimney, for example, or where part of the northern tie beam had rotted. In two cases where joints had failed, steel plates were inserted to hold the truss, rather than go in for wholesale renewal. In this way just about everything visible is medieval workmanship.

In the wall frames, some panels of both original and 17th century wattle and daub survived. These were kept if possible, and new wattle and daub was formed around them. The traditional method of mixing the daub was used, complete with cow dung. Inside, the panels were finished with a coat of lime-hair plaster, leaving the timber frame exposed. Outside, however, tradition was departed from. For reasons both of strength and economy the walls were clad in weather-boarding. This is usually found on barns in Herefordshire, but is occasionally seen on houses, and there was in fact some already at Shelwick Court.

The great chamber did not originally have a fireplace, but it was felt that one would be desirable now, so a new chimney was built against its western wall. The oak floorboards are also new. Surviving 17th century mullion and transom windows were retained at either end. In this way, a harmony between new and old is achieved.

More details on the history of Shelwick Court and its restoration are set out below.

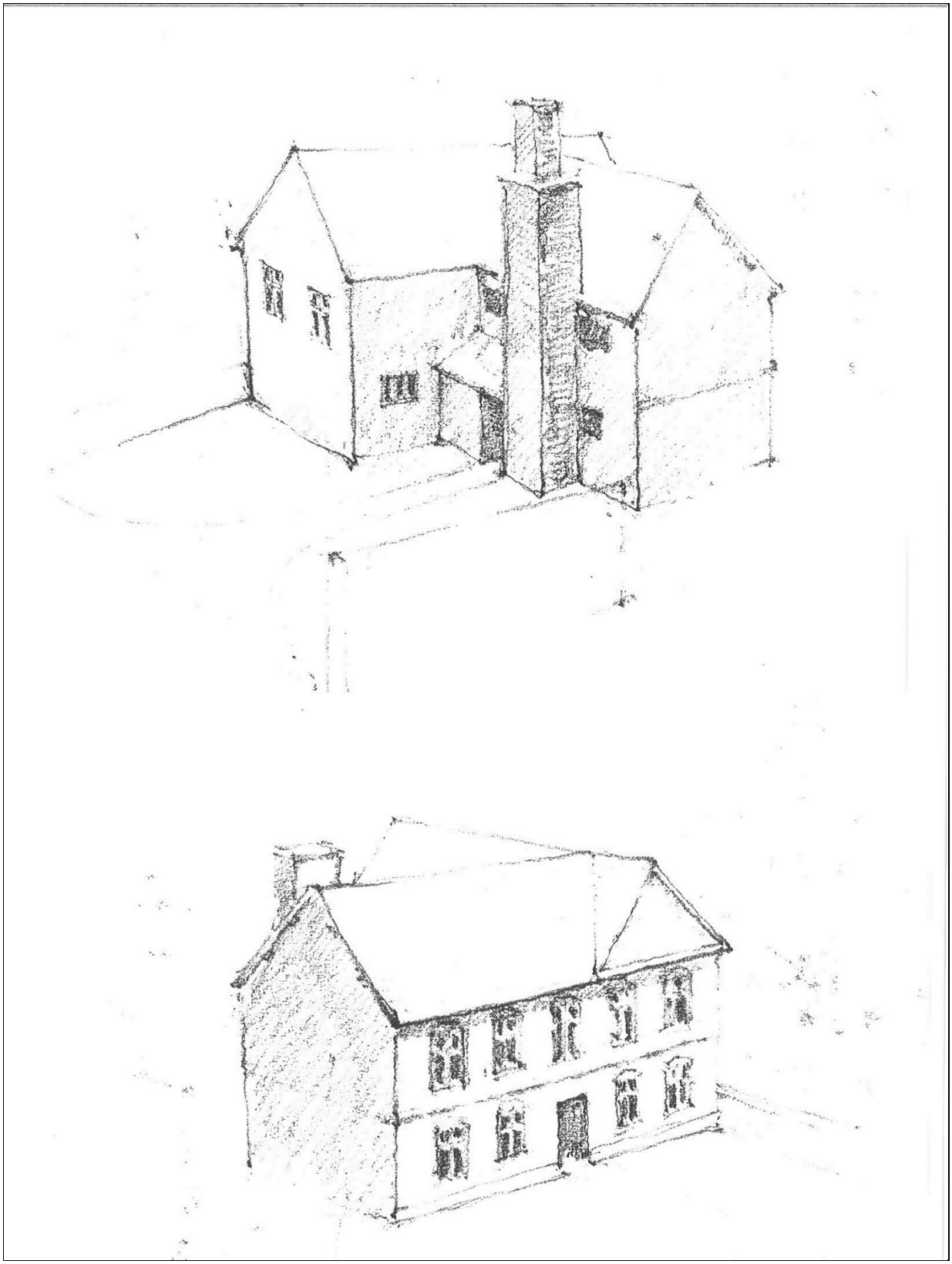
An historical outline

The Landmark Trust acquired Shelwick Court in 1981, after being told about its perilous condition by the County Conservation Officer, Ian Stainburn. As Landmark's founder, Sir John Smith, wrote in the Handbook:

> ' For many years this house had been falling down round the head of an old farmer, Mr Orgee. Eventually its dilapidation forced him to move out, into a caravan in the yard. Then he died, and planning permission was sought to demolish Shelwick and build houses. When we first saw it the doors stood open to every passer-by, and Mr Orgee's minor possessions, rifled and damp, lay strewn all over the house.'

It was only when Mr Orgee died in 1977 that anyone looked behind the seventeenth century front. The Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England, in their Inventory of 1932, had not guessed that there was anything earlier there. But when Ian Stainburn ventured into the eastern bedrooms in 1977 he found tell-tale traces of a medieval roof above, while outside, on the east wall, render had fallen off to reveal cusped braces. A climb into the attics confirmed beyond doubt that this part of the house, at least, dated back to around 1400 or earlier.

When the threat of demolition arose a year or two later, steps were immediately taken to have Shelwick Court listed, and so delay matters until a rescuer could be found. Ruinous though it was, the planners felt it could still be saved. Landmark agreed, and opened negotiations with Mr Orgee's heir, leading in time to the result you see today.



Sketches by the architect for an alternative scheme

The restoration was carried out between 1982-4. The architect was John Schofield of Architecton in Bristol. The main contractor was Beavan and Hodges of Hereford. The intention was to reveal the fine medieval chamber in its entirety on the inside, but to maintain its disguise on the outside by preserving the additions made to it about 1680. Some interesting discoveries were made during the work, giving rise to questions to which we still have no clear answers. The story so far as we know it is told in the following pages.

Owners of Shelwick

Shelwick appears as a manor in the Domesday Survey of 1086. It was divided into two farms and already belonged to the Bishops of Hereford, who remained lords of the manor until this century. A complete run of their Court books survives from the 1660s until 1930, with a few earlier examples too.

The problem of the existence on this site of this particular house is dealt with in a separate section and all arguments concerning it must be treated with caution. It is certain, however, that while Shelwick is referred to from time to time in the episcopal records, there is no mention of a manor house. Indeed, in 1356 the Bishop decided to reduce the number of manors where he maintained a palace for his own use from the twelve of the earlier Middle Ages to five, in addition to those in Hereford itself and in London.

The other manors, where they were not granted to a tenant of some kind, would have been managed by a bailiff or steward. This was probably the case at Shelwick. While a steward did not necessarily have a house of any size, it would be the most likely place for meetings of the manorial court. The name Shelwick Court, in use by the 18th century if not earlier, and attached to a medieval building, is likely to have some meaning therefore.

In the 17th century, according to the Rev C.J. Robinson in *Mansions and Manors of Herefordshire* (1872) the manor was leased to Leonard Bennett, nephew and heir to Bishop Bennett. From his descendants it passed, after two brief transfers, to the Philipps family of Huntington. In the Land Tax returns of the 1780s and later, two proprietors of `the Court' and `part of the Court' are mentioned, Richard Pocock and Thomas Philipps. Each rents the land to a different tenant. It may be that the Philipps originally leased the whole manor, but later sold that part of it containing Shelwick Court to the Pococks; or there may still have been two quite separate properties, as in Domesday.

Tenants came and went, few of them running to a second generation. In 1783 there was a Mr Treherne. By 1797 it had changed to John Green, who in 1816 had given way to Richard Prince. In 1830, and in the Tithe Apportionment of 1844, Shelwick Court was let to William Badham. Whatever its origins, by this time the Court was no more than a prosperous farmhouse among other prosperous farmhouses.

A family called Jones lived here in the late 19th century, then John Griffiths, followed by Arthur Taylor. In 1924 it was sold to Mr A. Orgee, who was succeeded by John Lloyd, known as John Orgee. His heir, Mrs Garland, sold the house to Landmark in 1981.

An account of the building

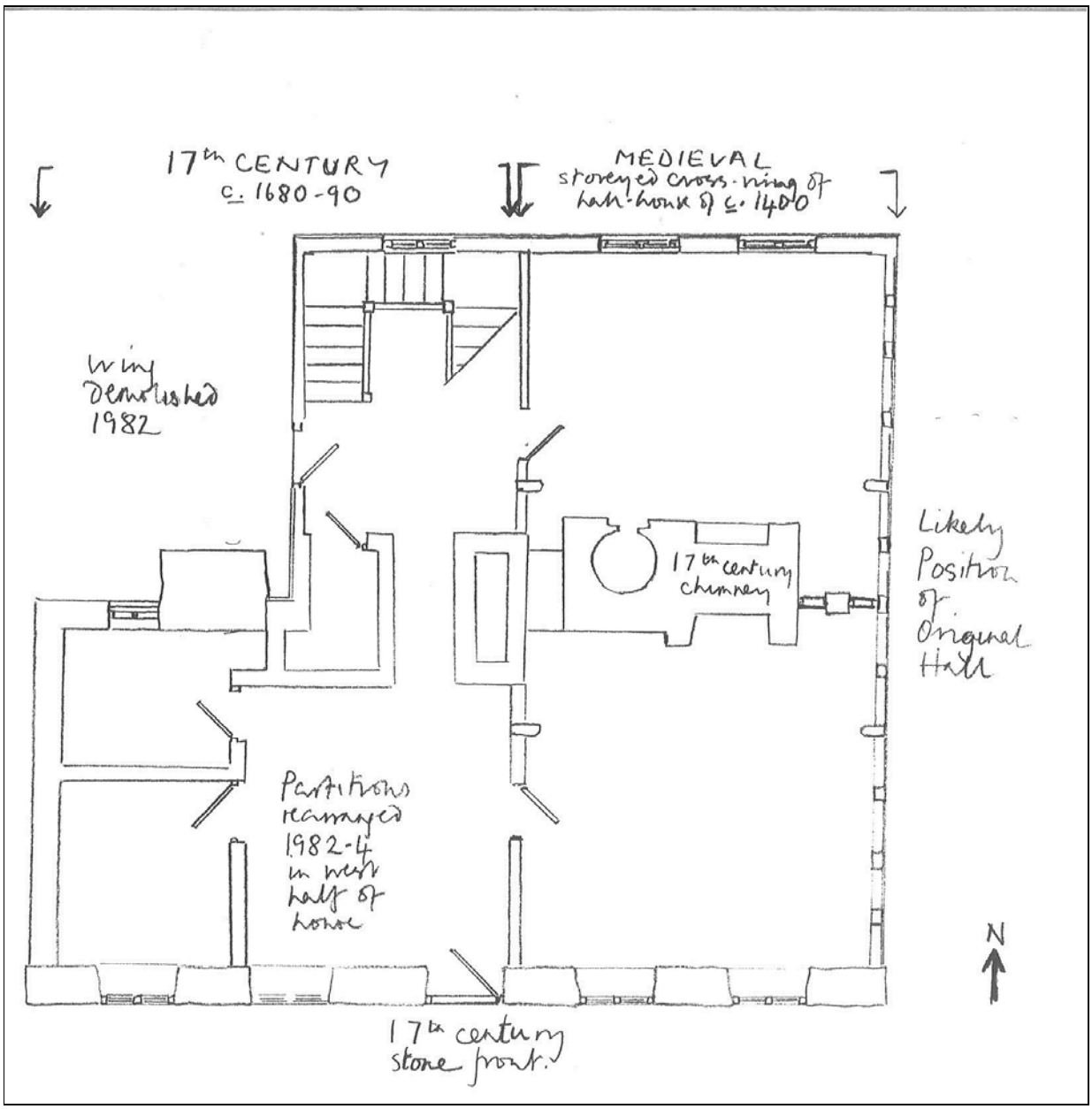
An architectural description of Shelwick Court as it appeared in 1981 sounds straightforward enough, with a logical sequence of building dates. But close inspection during restoration revealed puzzles to which there are as yet no definite answers.

In brief, the building can be described as follows: on the east, running north-south, is a timber-framed range, probably dating from just before or just after 1400. Its fine roof is divided into three main bays by trusses with tie-beams. Each main bay is then subdivided by lesser arch-braced trusses with collar-beams. Above the tie-beams, struts and principal rafters are cusped to form foiled openings, matched by trefoils in the apex of the secondary trusses, and by cusped windbraces on the side slopes. In addition, in the framing of the east wall are four ornamental panels, with cusped braces forming quatrefoils.

Around 1680-90, this roof was hidden by an inserted attic floor. A new floor was also inserted at first floor level and a chimney stack was built up through the centre of the range, while new windows were added at either end.

The rest of the house appears to have been remodelled at the same time, though much old timber was used. Box-framed wings were added on the west side of the medieval range, forming a double gable, and making the house into a square block, with a staircase in the middle of the northern side. It was thought at one time that these wings were Elizabethan, but it later became clear that they formed part of the same round of alterations as those in the medieval wing. In other words, they too date from about 1680. This new house was given a regular south front, in stone, of five bays, with cross-mullion and transom windows and a central doorway with a hood.

In the 19th century the building was much repaired; wattle and daub infill was renewed or replaced in brick, the rear walls of the building were rendered, and in some places weather-boarded; brick retaining arches were inserted over the windows of the south front and a porch added. Several windows were replaced or altered. Others were renewed in the 20th century, when lean-to sheds were built against the west side as well.



Guide to building dates of Shelwick Court

The first question to answer when examining the structure closely was whether the medieval part of the building had been a self-contained unit, or whether it was only a fragment of something larger. It soon became clear that the latter suggestion was correct. Although the existing floor was late 17th century, it replaced an earlier floor at a slightly lower level. The range was originally two-storeyed therefore, with an open upper room.

The Norman tradition of building first floor halls over undercrofts had continued late in Herefordshire, particularly in buildings belonging to the Bishops of Hereford, such as the palaces at Bosbury and Sugwas. Shelwick was an episcopal manor but the fact that there is no trace of smoke blackening on the roof timbers makes it unlikely that this was the main hall of the building. The alternative is that it was the cross-wing of a considerably larger house, and contained a grand solar or upper chamber. Cross-wings of comparable size and roof structure survive at Amberley Court, Marden, only a few miles away, and in a number of other manor houses in the county.

To begin with it was assumed that the hall had lain to the west, where the 17th century additions are. They contain a lot of re-used medieval timber, and could have stood on the site of a dismantled hall range. But as work continued, evidence was found to contradict this theory. Mortices with sawn off tenons found in one of the main rafters could be explained by a change of design after construction began and the different placing of the struts, but other mortices were found on the outer or east face of the main posts. These same main posts had clearly been shortened, having been sawn off at the foot, presumably where they had become rotten.

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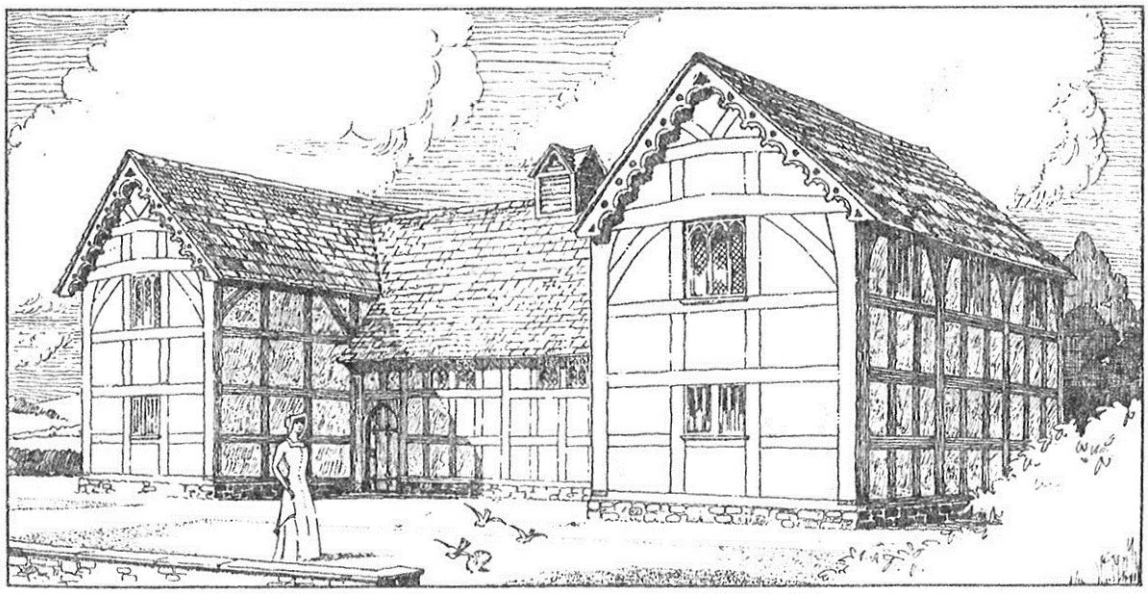


The medieval Shelwick might have looked something like this, with a hall between storeyed cross wings. Amberley Court has the same system of main and secondary trusses in its roof, both in the hall and the wings.
From the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments: Herefordshire vol 3

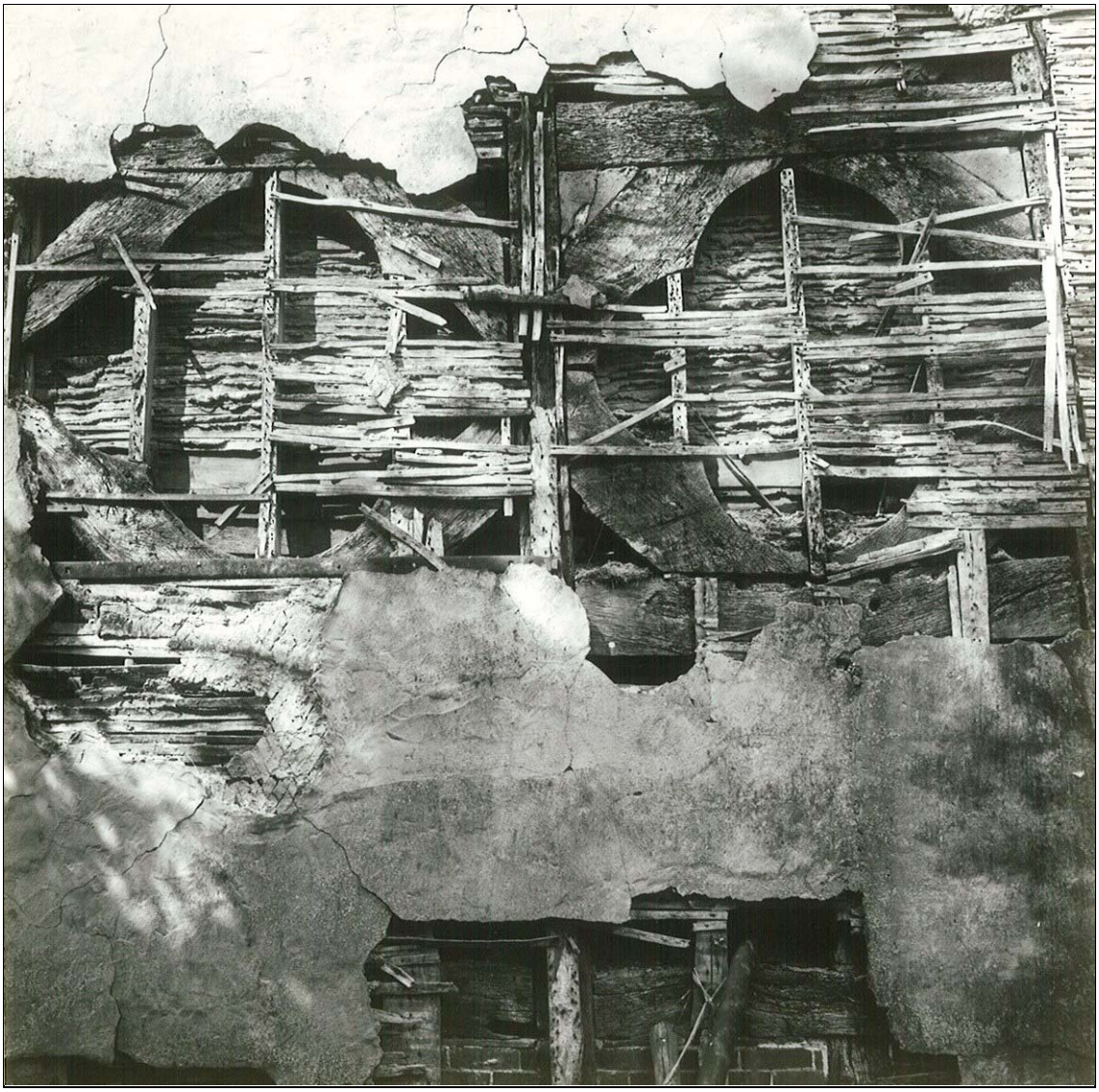
The next discovery was that the 17th century first floor beams were firmly morticed into the main posts at both ends, above the medieval chamfer stops and mortices. This could only have been achieved by taking down at least one wall, something that can scarcely have happened without taking down the rest of the structure as well. There is, in fact, good reason to believe, however improbable such an idea might seem, that the wing has been taken apart and reassembled. A likely reason for such an event is that it was moved from somewhere else.

After this discovery, it was difficult to be sure of the original form of the building. The wing seems to have been reassembled fairly exactly as first constructed. This being so, the most likely answer, as evolved by the architect, John Schofield, is that it stood at the western end of a hall range extending from its east wall. The mortices on the outer faces of the main posts show where it was connected to the hall's side walls.

The ornamental panels would thus have been on an inside wall, a decorative feature either at the high end above the dais, or over the screen at the low end. This fits in with other buildings in Herefordshire, where decoration of the exterior was rare before the 16th century. There are in fact two other buildings in the county which have similar panels with quatrefoils on the inside: Swanstone Court, Dilwyn and Wellbrook Manor, Peterchurch.

Where was the wing moved from? We do not as yet know the answer to this. It probably came from not very far away, simply because of the labour involved. There are very faint traces of what could have been a moat overlapping the boundaries of Shelwick Court and the neighbouring farm, which might have been filled to allow for the building of the existing house; but nothing is known of such a site and it does not appear on early maps. No documentary evidence has yet been found for a building in the vicinity of the size and status that this must have been. As already explained, the Bishops

themselves had no residence here and a steward generally occupied a smaller dwelling. The manor could have been leased to a tenant, however, a wealthy merchant from Hereford perhaps, who was able to build a fine house for himself. The alternative is that it came from some other manor altogether.



Medieval ornamental panels showing through decayed 19th century plaster in 1980

Medieval roof

Medieval buildings in Herefordshire

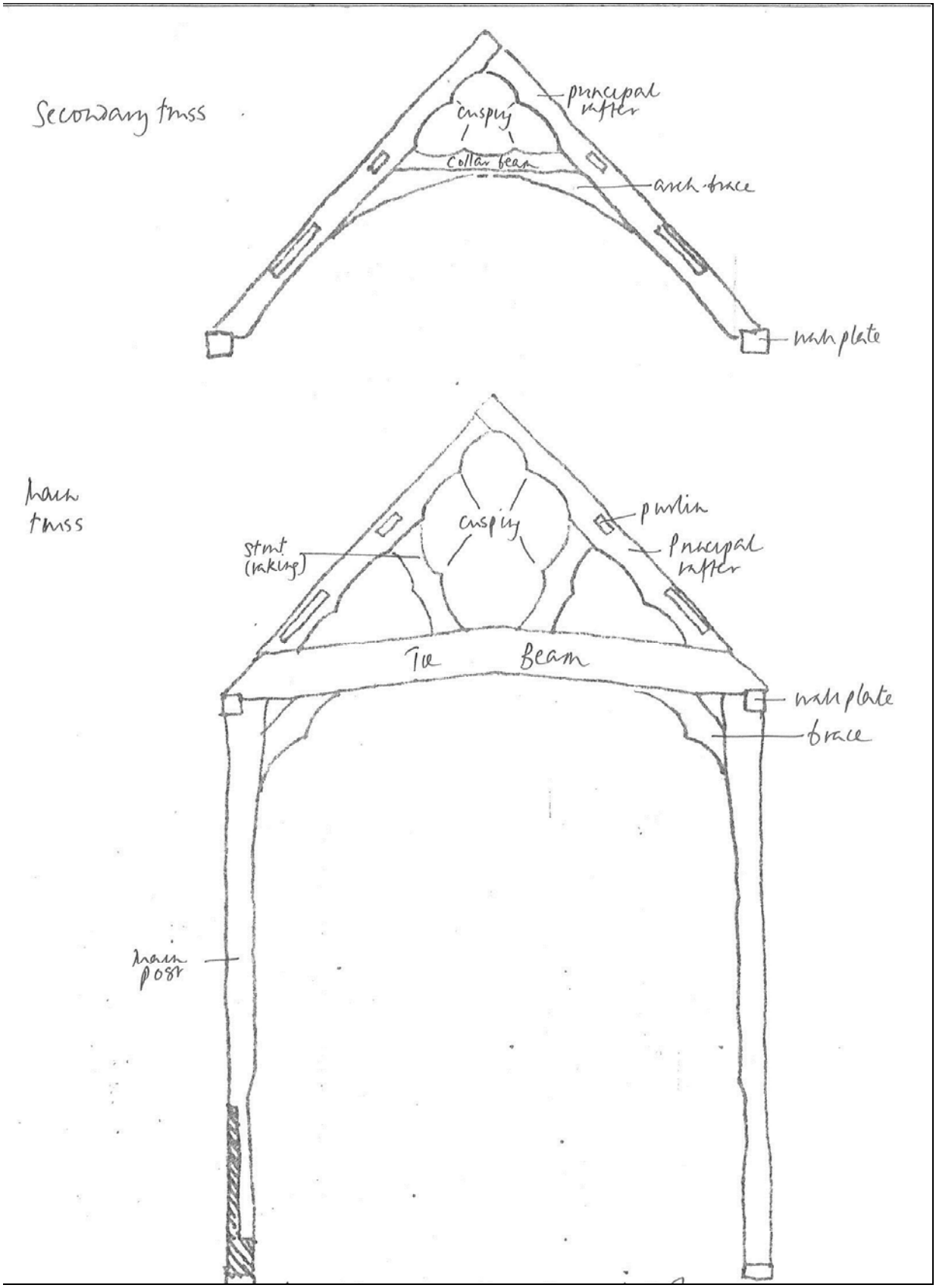
Building materials in Herefordshire divide roughly between stone (old red sandstone) found in the west near the Welsh border, and elsewhere for churches and the very largest houses; and timber, commonly used in the flatter, more wooded, east part of the county and in towns. Brick was not much used before the 17th century. Both stone and clay tiles are found on roofs.

In timber buildings, those in which the framing forms large squares, with heavy timbers, are the earliest, dating from the 14th and early 15th centuries. They should not be confused, as can easily happen, with the more common but lighter square-framing of the late 16th and 17th centuries. Close-studding, with vertical timbers close together, dates mainly from the later 15th and 16th centuries, although found in 17th-century buildings too. The use of braces and struts to make patterns on the outside of the building is also a later feature - earlier buildings rarely have more than carved bargeboards.

The glory of Herefordshire is its timber roofs, found in both stone and timber buildings, in churches and in houses. Many of their features are shared with other parts of western Britain, but it is the concentration, and the unity of ornamentation, which is special to Herefordshire. They are described by Pevsner in the Herefordshire volume of *The Buildings of England*:

> 'Tie beams may or may not be used, arched braces lead up to collar beams, and above them are kingposts or raking struts foiled or later more finely cusped and forming with equally foiled or cusped principals bold trefoils or quatrefoils. The same motif is even more conspicuous in the wind-braces, of which there may be more than one tier..... Foiled or cusped windbraces and the foiling or cusping above tie-beam or collar-beam is the signature tune of the county.'

The common plan-type for the larger houses was of a single storey hall between two-storey projecting cross-wings, one with solar and parlour, the other with kitchen, buttery and other service rooms. The hall was heated by an open fire - chimneys only appear at the very end of the period - and instead of a solid screen often had a moveable one placed between two `speres', posts just inside the side walls which supported a cross-beam or spere-truss. Sometimes one wing would be extended to contain more rooms, sometimes both would continue, to join an opposite range and enclose a courtyard.



Main elements of the medieval roof of Shelwick Court

The Landmark's restoration of Shelwick Court

It is hard now to imagine the state of Shelwick Court as it was in 1981. The gable on the north west corner was standing (just), but the roof behind it had collapsed. The south front was bulging ominously, plaster was falling off the walls inside and out, and structural timbers were sagging where their ends had rotted. Neither floors nor stairs were safe to walk on. Collapsing brick walls and lean-to sheds disguised parts of the house, and a caravan stood against the north-east corner, into which Mr Orgee had moved when a Closing Order was enforced on his home in 1960. The finest part of the building, the medieval roof, could only be seen after a perilous scramble through the attics.

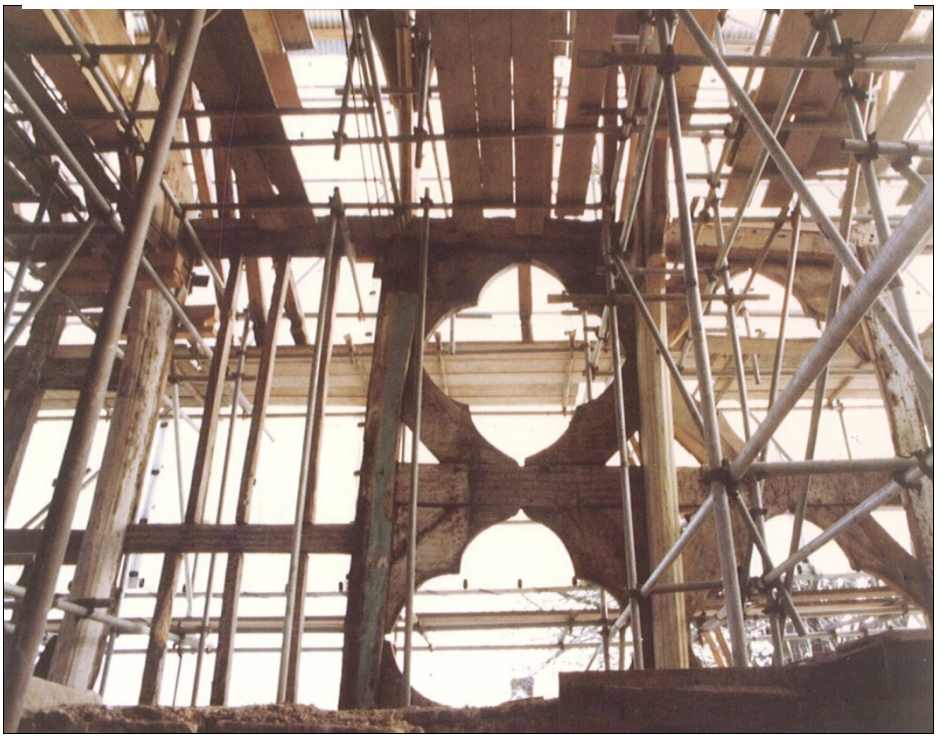
Shelwick Court circa 1981

The first decision that had to be made was what to do about the medieval roof. At that time it was hidden by the 17th century attic floor and chimney. It could be argued that these should be preserved, as an important part of the history of the building. At the same time, the 17th century work was extremely plain - the fireplace openings without even a chamfer - and Landmark felt that it simply did not compare with high quality of the roof. Everything seemed to indicate that this roof should be exposed and a room created in which it could be seen in its original form.

A second decision concerned how much of the rest of the building to keep, considering the ruinous state of most of it, and the fact that if rebuilt completely, it would end up too large for use as a Landmark. If only the medieval wing was kept, the point of the attractive south front would be lost. A wing for kitchen and bathroom would be needed in any case. In the end a decision was made to keep all but the most ruinous, north-west, corner, where little of the original 17th century work survived.

Such policy decisions over, the most imperative need was to get on and prop up the building before any more of it fell down. Scaffolding was constructed, bracing the medieval roof, and the whole of the south front was shored up with timber buttresses. Then the unpicking could begin - always requiring great caution in a timber building, since it is possible to find yourself with almost no building left at all.

The medieval wing was protected by a temporary roof while work was carried out



The discovery that the medieval wing had originally contained a first floor chamber or solar, and had not been open from the ground, meant that the chimney need only be taken down to that level. The ground floor stage, with its fireplace on one side and ovens on the other, could be kept. It would also support a ring-beam of reinforced concrete which the engineers advised forming around the front half of the building, to provide stability. On the front this would anchor the steel ties which were to run through the wall to the plates on the outside, holding the two skins of stone together.

Shelwick Court with temporary shoring in 1982

In addition to strengthening the south front, its original design was reinstated. A porch was removed, and some brick buttresses - the danger of it collapsing had been seen even in the 19th century. The central window on the first floor had, for unknown reasons, been made into a door, and this was built up as a window again. Two of the original oak mullion and transom windows survived; these were repaired, and new ones made to the same pattern. New lintols were inserted above them, and some of the stonework rebuilt. The whole front was then repointed, using a lime mortar.

Repair of the medieval wing was a lot more complicated. When 19th century brick infill had been removed it was possible to assess the condition of the actual frame. Once the roof was supported on scaffolding, work could begin. The walls consisted of a mixture of medieval framing, 17th century framing, and areas where the frame was missing altogether. In the latter areas, an external frame was made in softwood, with an internal surface of lath and plaster. Elsewhere a very careful system of repair prevailed, keeping new timber to a minimum, and with no conjectural reconstruction of missing timbers. For 17th century sections, salvaged timber of the same date from elsewhere in the building could be used. Otherwise new, dry, oak was used for piecing-in where renewal was structurally or visually necessary: the footings of the main posts, the surface of the braces in the ornamental panels, and for one or two entire post and rails.

In the roof, repairs were also kept to a minimum. Where a section of collar-beam in the central secondary truss had been cut away for the 17th century chimney, and where part of the northern tie beam had rotted, new oak was let in. Rotted ends of purlins and wall-plates were renewed too, but missing wind-braces were not replaced. In two cases where joints had failed, steel plates were inserted to hold the truss, rather than opt for wholesale renewal. In this way, just about everything you see is medieval workmanship, and there is no need to question what is new and what is old.

In the wall-frames, some panels of both original and 17th century wattle and daub survived. These were kept if possible, and new wattle and daub was formed around them, mainly on the east and north walls. The traditional method of mixing the daub was used, complete with cow dung. Inside, the panels were finished with a coat of lime-hair plaster, leaving the timber frame exposed.

On the outside however tradition was departed from. For reasons both of strength and economy, the east wing was clad in weather-boarding above a rebuilt stone plinth. This is commonly used for barns and farm buildings in Herefordshire, but it is occasionally found on houses too. There was indeed some both on the east wall and on the two western gables of Shelwick Court.

Another change to the external appearance of the building lies in the new south gable of the medieval wing. When the 17th century front was added, the medieval roof was cut back to make a hipped gable. With the solar reinstated this looked most unsatisfactory, so the end truss was put back in its original position, which resulted in the gable bursting through the southern slope of the roof.

The solar did not originally have a fireplace, but it was felt that one would be desirable now, so a new chimney was built against its western wall, with as plain an opening as possible. The oak floorboards are also new, placed at the medieval level rather than that of the 17th century. Surviving 17th century mullion and transom windows were retained at either end however.

In the rooms below the solar, the medieval framing was exposed. Apart from this they have kept their 17th century appearance. In the southern room a beam with painted decoration was discovered, apparently of late 16th century date. The beam was in poor condition, so the painted surface was cut off and applied to a composite beam made to support the new ceiling. The decoration itself was cleaned and consolidated by John Dives. New windows were fitted in the northern room, and new softwood floors in both.

Exposed 16th C beam

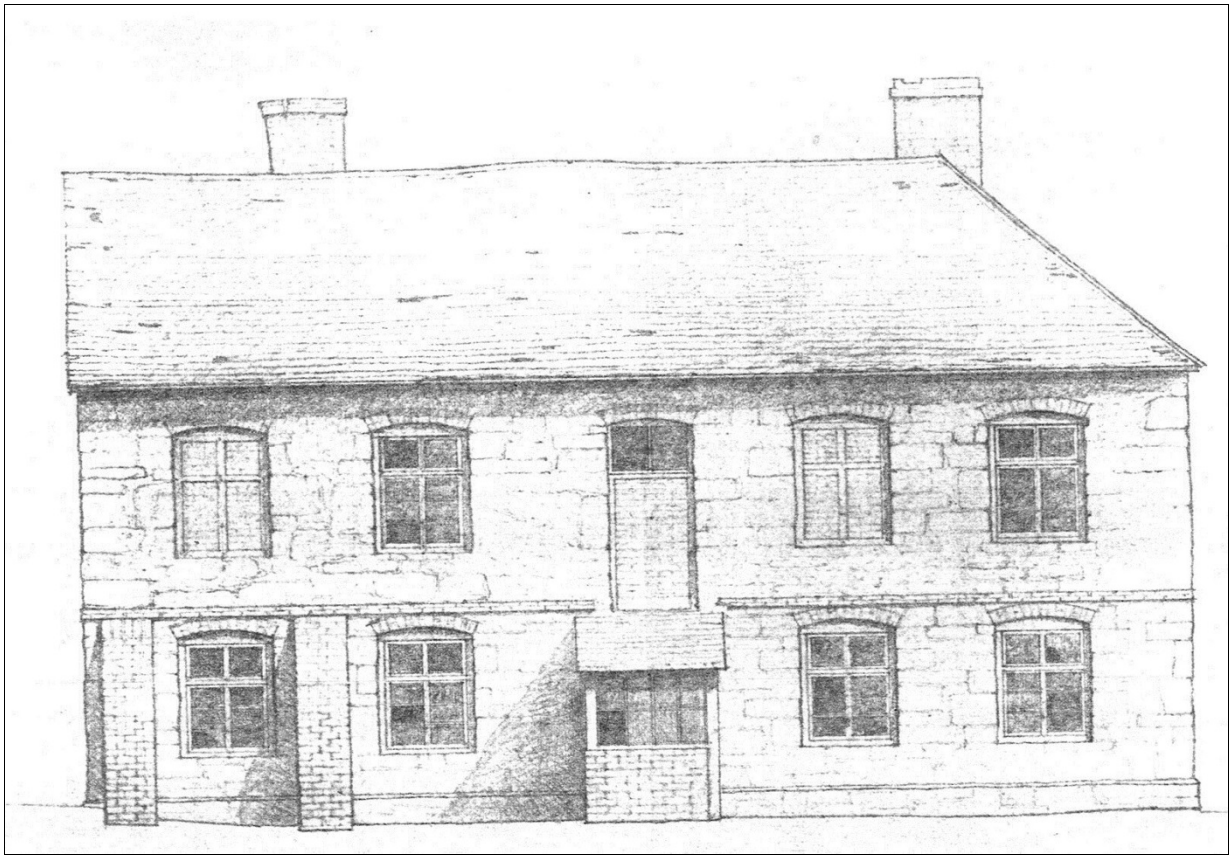
In the south-west and staircase wings the repair was fairly straightforward. Round the staircase the frame was repaired on the same principles as the east wing, and then the weather-boarding carried on round. Two 17th-century windows survived intact, the small top one still with its original glass and lead. The staircase itself had new oak put in where steps or other sections were missing or badly rotted. 19th-century softwood balusters were replaced with new oak ones set diagonally, as they had been originally, but otherwise it was reconstructed as before.

The ground floor walls of the south-west wing as found were brick; this was replaced with stone salvaged from the demolished 17th-century chimney. The chimney on the north face of this wing was repaired and repointed. On the first floor, the frame was repaired, and then covered with weather-boarding. The windows are all new.

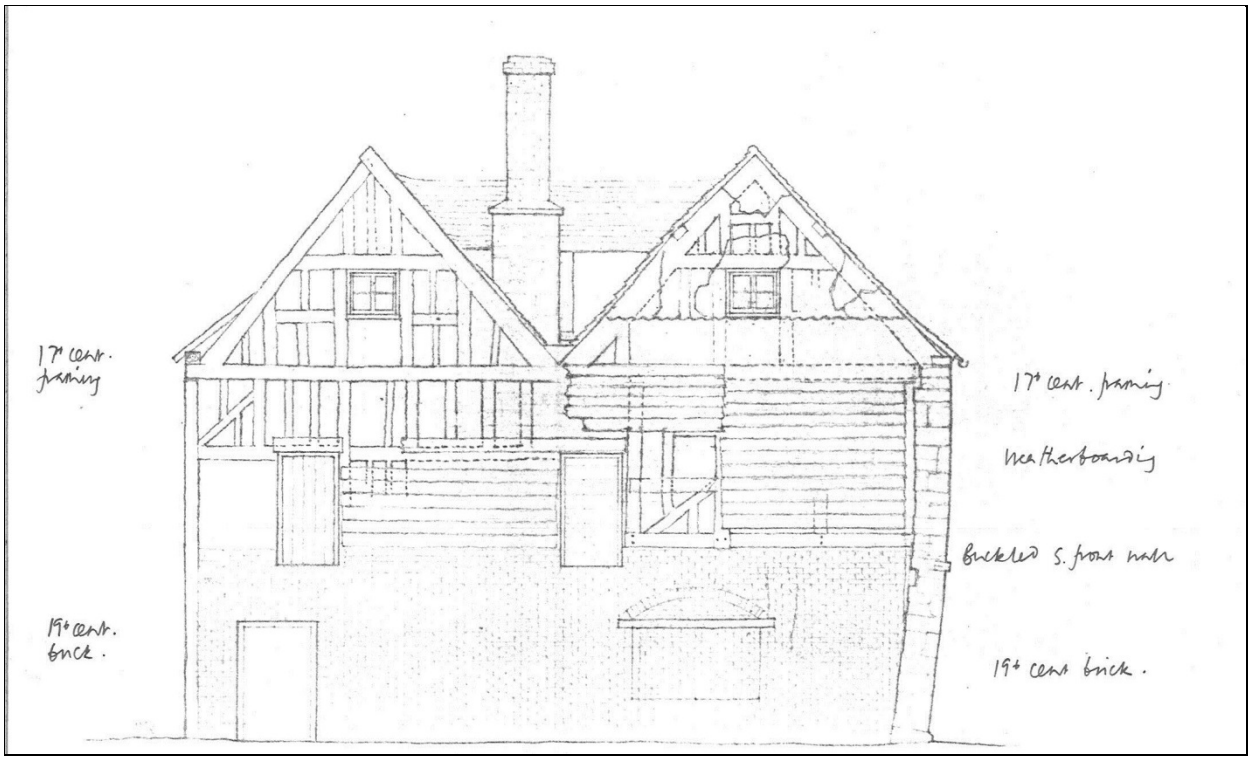
For the roof, salvaged, handmade plain clay tiles were used, resting in the medieval wing on the original structure, on the other parts mostly on new timbers.

Inside the house, the partitions outside the medieval wing are all in new positions, but wherever possible old or traditional materials were used. Wooden floors are new softwood, but the stone flags in the hall were salvaged from the building, as were the quarry tiles in the bathrooms. These came from the north bedroom, which had been a larder. All the walls are finished in lime-hair plaster and limewash. As many old doors as possible were reused - in the southern bedroom, the solar and the bedroom and bathroom on the first floor. The glass for the new windows comes from 19th century greenhouses.

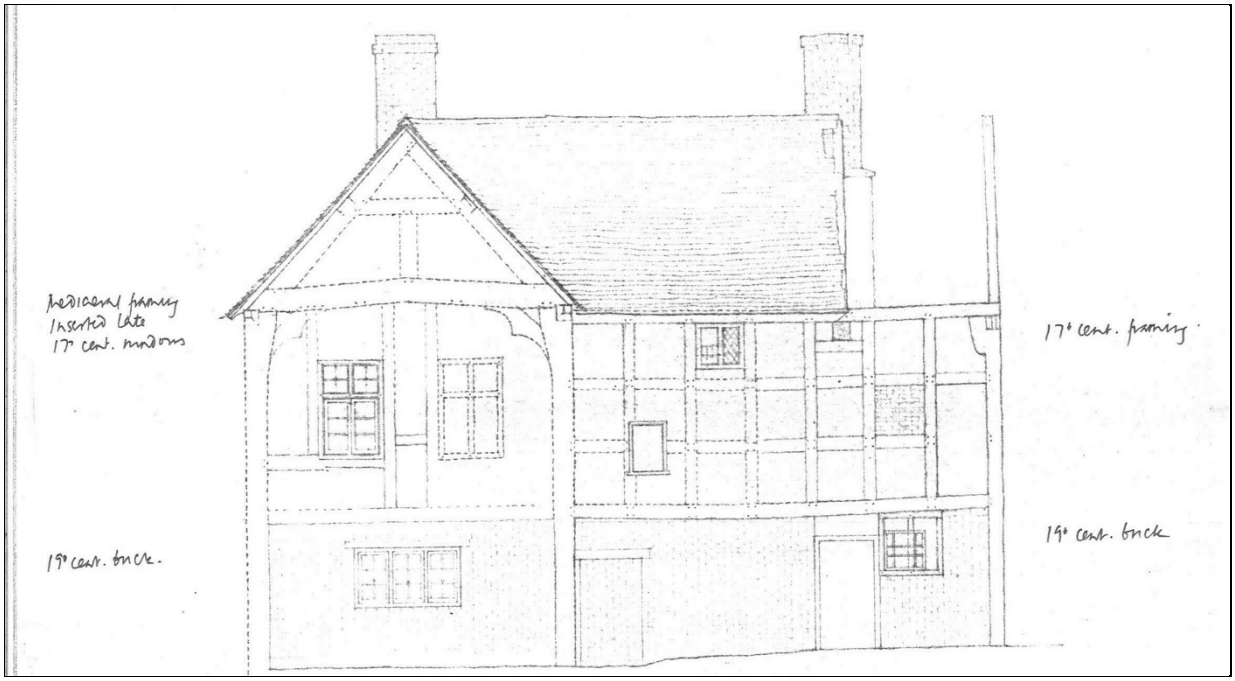
And so it was finished. The exterior of Shelwick Court still gives little away, but it is slightly puzzling, as is right for a complicated building. We hope, too, that it gives a hint at the undoubtedly rich rewards to be found within.



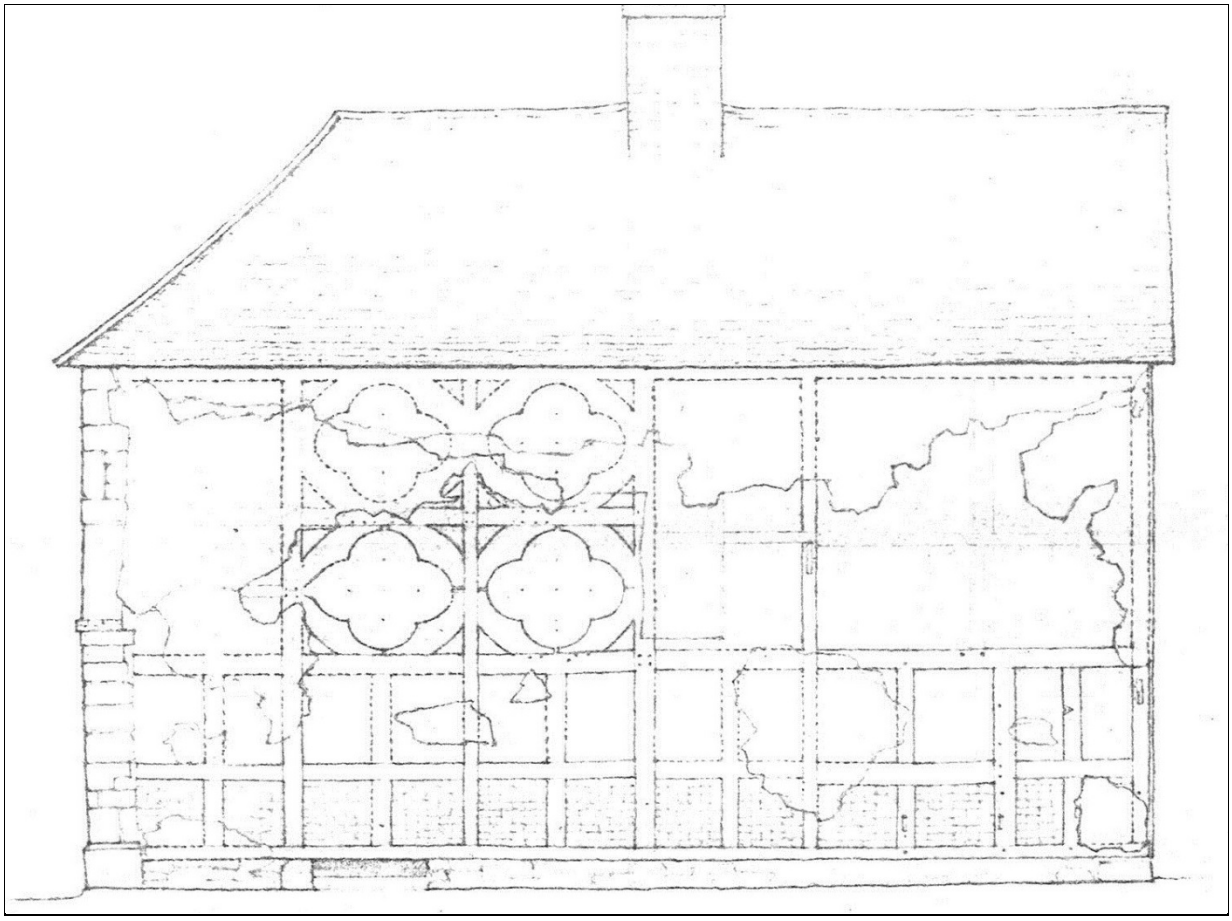
South Elevation 1981: late 17th C stone front with 19th and 20th C alterations



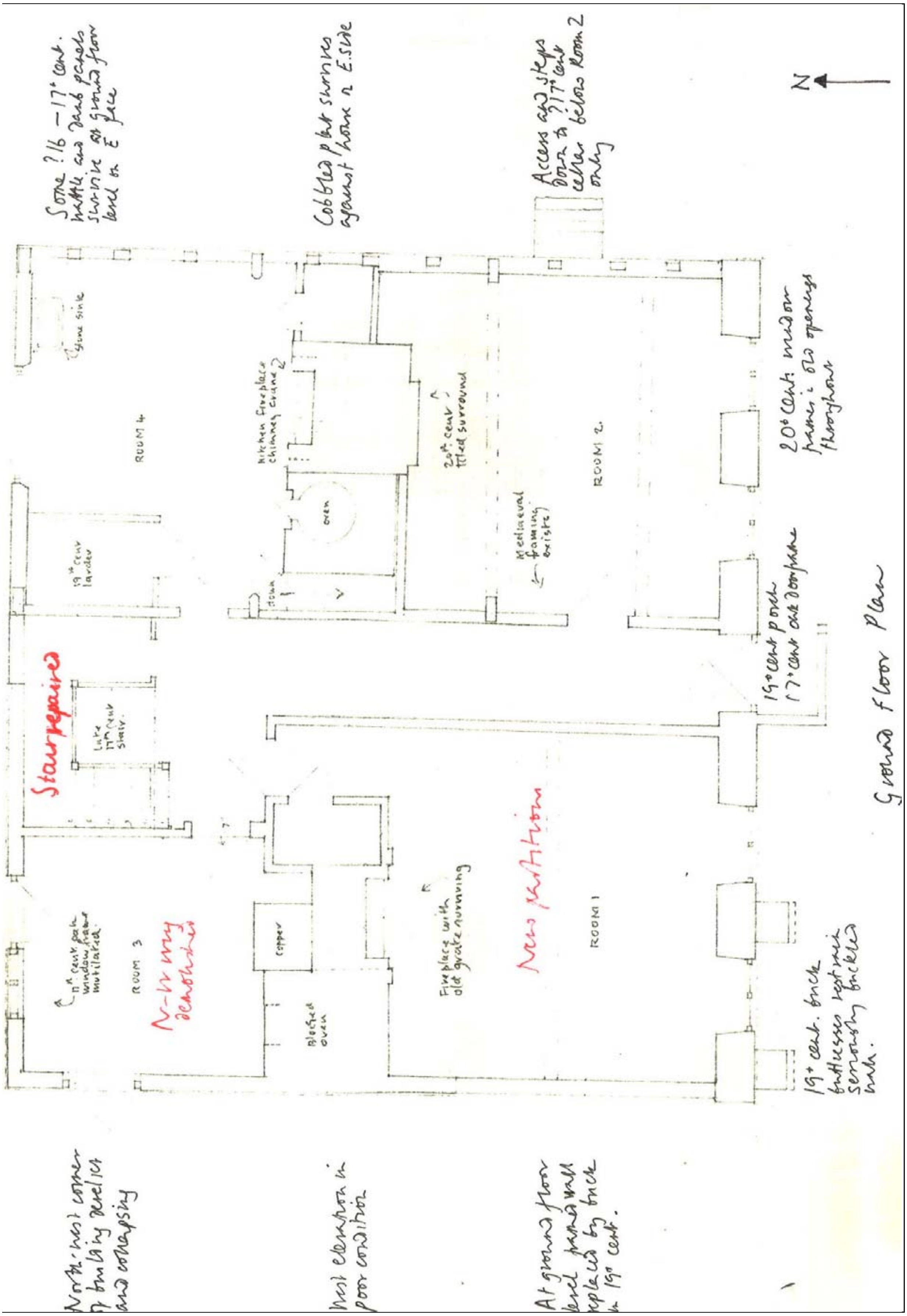
West elevation 1981

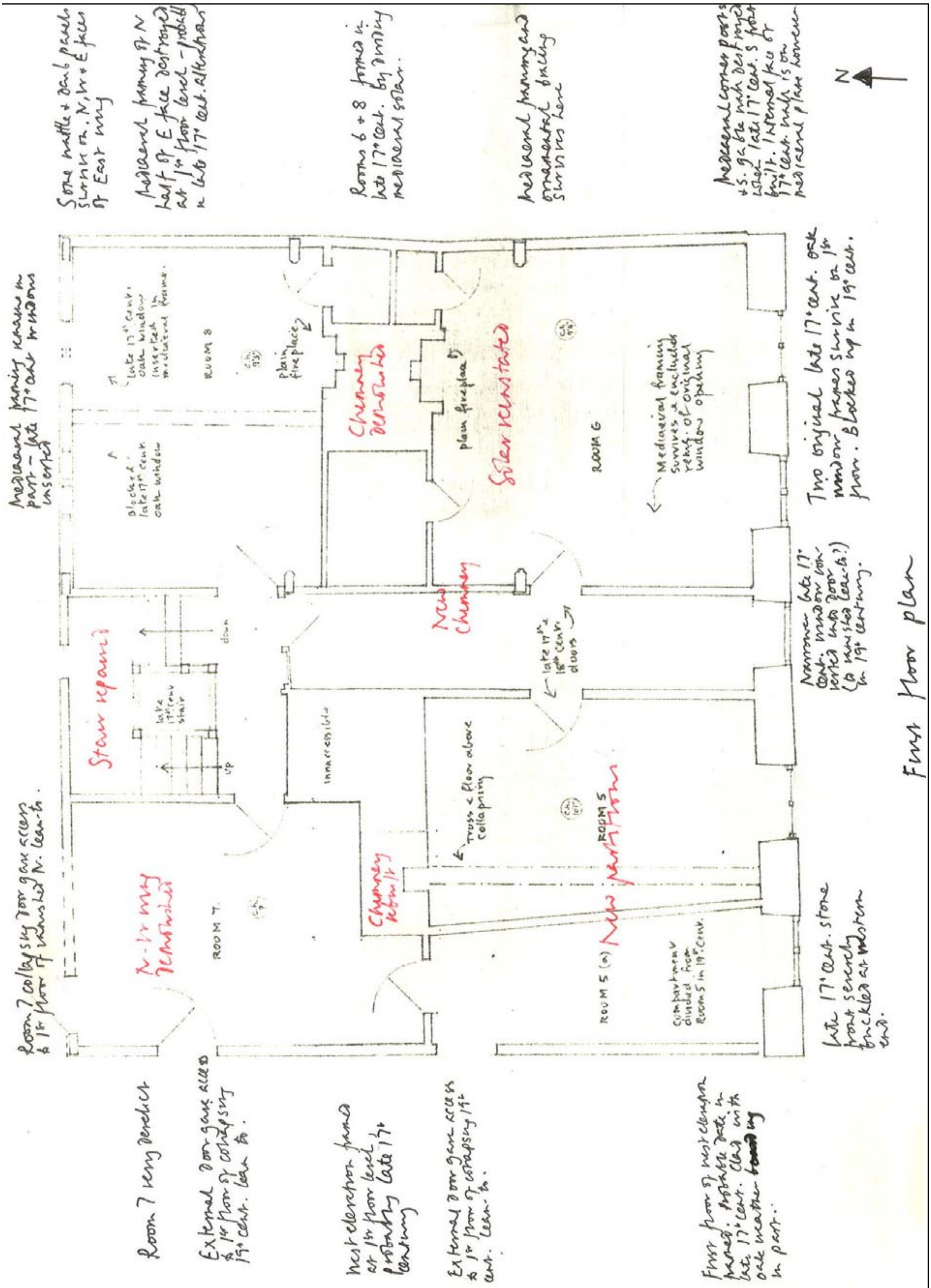


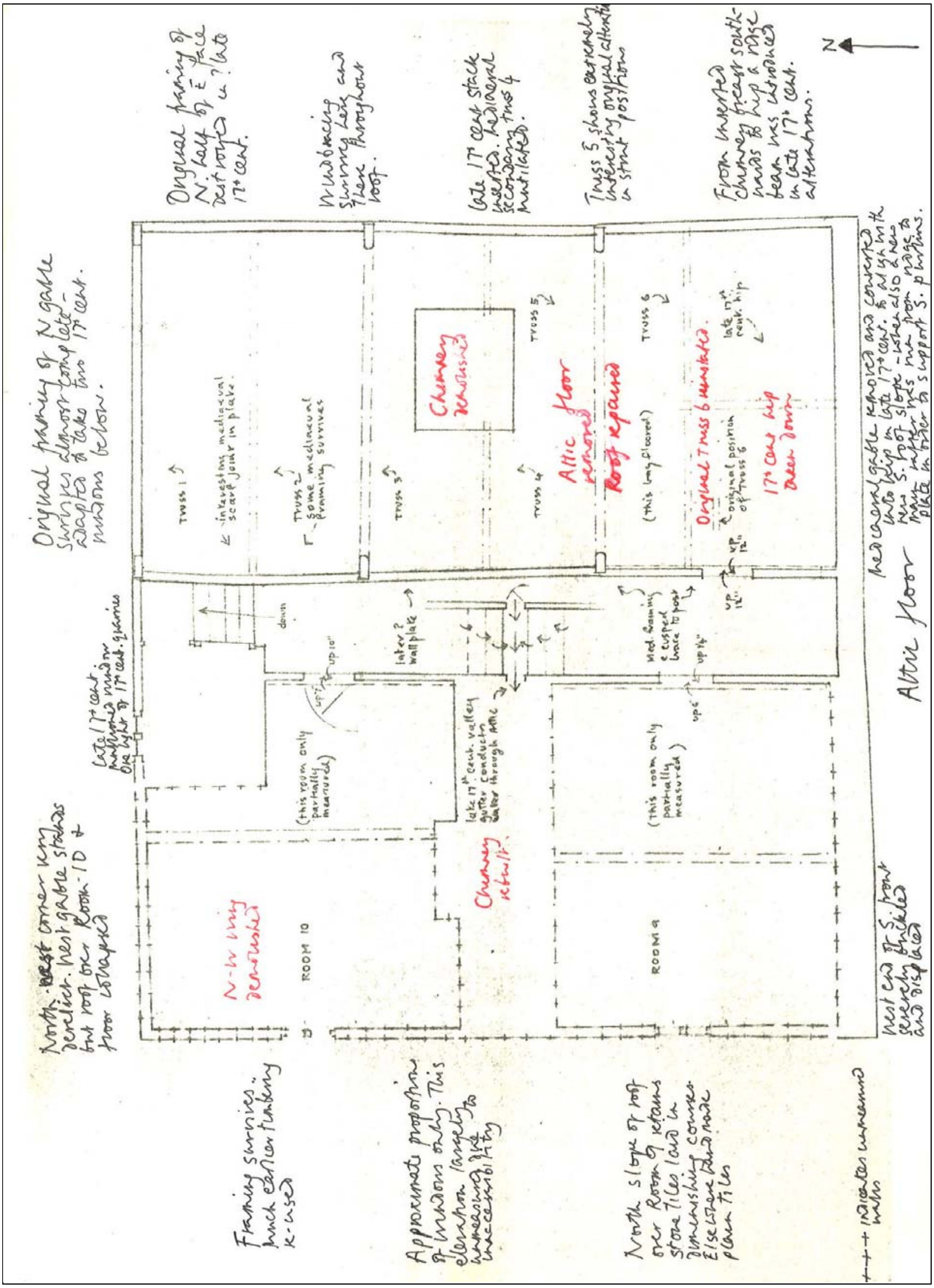
North elevation



East elevation 1981: 17th C chimney and mainly medieval framing with some sections destroyed in late 17th C alterations


Ground Floor Plan
N
ROOM 1
ROOM 2
ROOM 3
ROOM 4
Stair repaired
New partition
19th cent larder
Late 17th cent stair
copper
oven
Blocked oven
Kitchen fireplace chimney stand
Fireplace with old grate surviving
Medieval framing exists
Cobbled plat survives against house on E side
20th cent. window frames; old openings throughout
West elevation in poor condition


First floor plan
ROOM 8
ROOM 6
ROOM 5
ROOM 7
ROOM 5 (a)
Stair repairs
New chimney
Chimney rebuilt
Solar reinstated
inaccessible
late 17th cent. stair
plain fireplace


Attic floor
ROOM 10
ROOM 9
N