

The Landmark Trust

MARGELLS History Album



Researched and written by Clayre Percy

1976, updated 1998

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BASIC DETAILS

Built: mid-16th century (probably)

Last owner: Mrs C J Andrews

Acquired by the Landmark Trust: July 1976

Repaired and furnished: 1976

Architect: Paul Pearn, Pearn & Procter, Plymouth

Builders: J. Trivett & Co.

Thatcher: D. J. Turbitt

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Summary

Margells was originally a hall house, open to the roof, and probably built in the late 15th century. The frame is a very early construction, the cruck coming at first floor level. There would have been a sleeping gallery at first floor level reached by a ladder type stair probably from the sitting room side, using the rounded door which now goes into the painted bedroom.

About a hundred years later the present first floor was put in, making two big bedrooms. The fine coffered ceilings are typical of this period, and there is a similar, though not such a good one in another Landmark, No. 2 Hawker's Cottages at Coombe. The spiral stair would have been added at this time. It is made of solid blocks of chestnut, except for the top two treads which are oak, as is all the rest of the wood used in the house. At about this time, the two fireplaces were built on, added to the outside of the house.

The quality of such a small cottage has led some people to suggest that Margells was the cross-wing of a larger house. The doorway, which is clearly visible in the wall of the bedroom above the kitchen certainly suggests this. The door from the kitchen into the bathroom was at one time bigger than it is now, and that it was an important door is shown by the decoration in red-ish paint that can still be seen on the beam. The village of Branscombe contains a remarkable number of good houses of 16th and 17th century date, and as the church records show, it housed a number of minor gentry. Margells almost certainly belonged to one of these families.

Since the 16th century Margells has been altered very little. It looks as though at one time the wall onto the road had to be rebuilt. This would explain why the timber frame at that end is different from the rest; it does not come down to the first floor and the wall painting has disappeared from that end of the bedroom. It was probably when this was being done that the big fireplace in the sitting room was made deeper.

There were a few superficial additions and alterations. Outside a small porch was added and a galvanised iron lavatory. Inside, a staircase was put into what is now the kitchen. In the sitting room the big fireplace was partially bricked up, and ceilings were put into the bedrooms. They have now been taken out, but you can see indentations where the rafters were laid on top of the partition between the middle bedroom and the passage. The old floors on the first floor were boarded over in softwood, and the east window in the bedroom above the kitchen was blocked up.

The Restoration

Margells came to the attention of the County Planning Department in 1973, when its rapidly deteriorating condition gave cause for concern. The intrinsic architectural quality of the building, its extremely pleasant rural surroundings, and the building's eminent suitability for holiday accommodation combined to persuade the Landmark Trust to acquire it, which we duly did in July 1975.

As ever, Landmark aimed to keep alterations to the minimum. Our architect, Paul Hearn, quickly arranged for a temporary cover for the roof, before it was rethatched by Mr Turbitt of Sidmouth using imported Austrian reed as there was no local reed available at the time. A major part of the work was concerned with masonry repairs, including stabilisation of the walls by underpinning. The timber screens and the roof trusses were repaired, and as all the old door openings were still in the screens, it was possible to re-make the doors to the old shape. The fireplaces were opened up, and the external porch and lavatory removed. Rising damp was treated by inserting an electro-osmotic damp-proof course. The window in the east elevation was re-instated.

The existing ground floor was of lime-ash construction and in poor condition. Despite extensive research by the architect it was found to be impractical to repair, and so a local stone, Blue Lias, was used as paving slabs, retaining the lime-ash finish as an edging. On the first floor, the floors beneath the new boarding were found to be oak, laid in panels between the beams - typical of good quality 16th century work.

During the restoration, a wall painting was uncovered in the bedroom above the sitting room. It had been painted in a lime and skimmed milk medium with dry colour directly onto the lime and sand plaster of the wall. Over the centuries, this had been covered with a number of layers of lime wash and wallpaper. The painting is typical of the late 16th century, and consists of a foliated pattern in several colours, with a chevron patterned border and frieze. The restoration and stabilisation of the painting was carefully carried out by Mrs. Krystana Barakan.

The contractor for the works was J. Trivett & Co. Ltd of Cownhayne, Cloyton. The work was completed in the autumn of 1976, and Margells opened as a Landmark in November the same year.

Margells

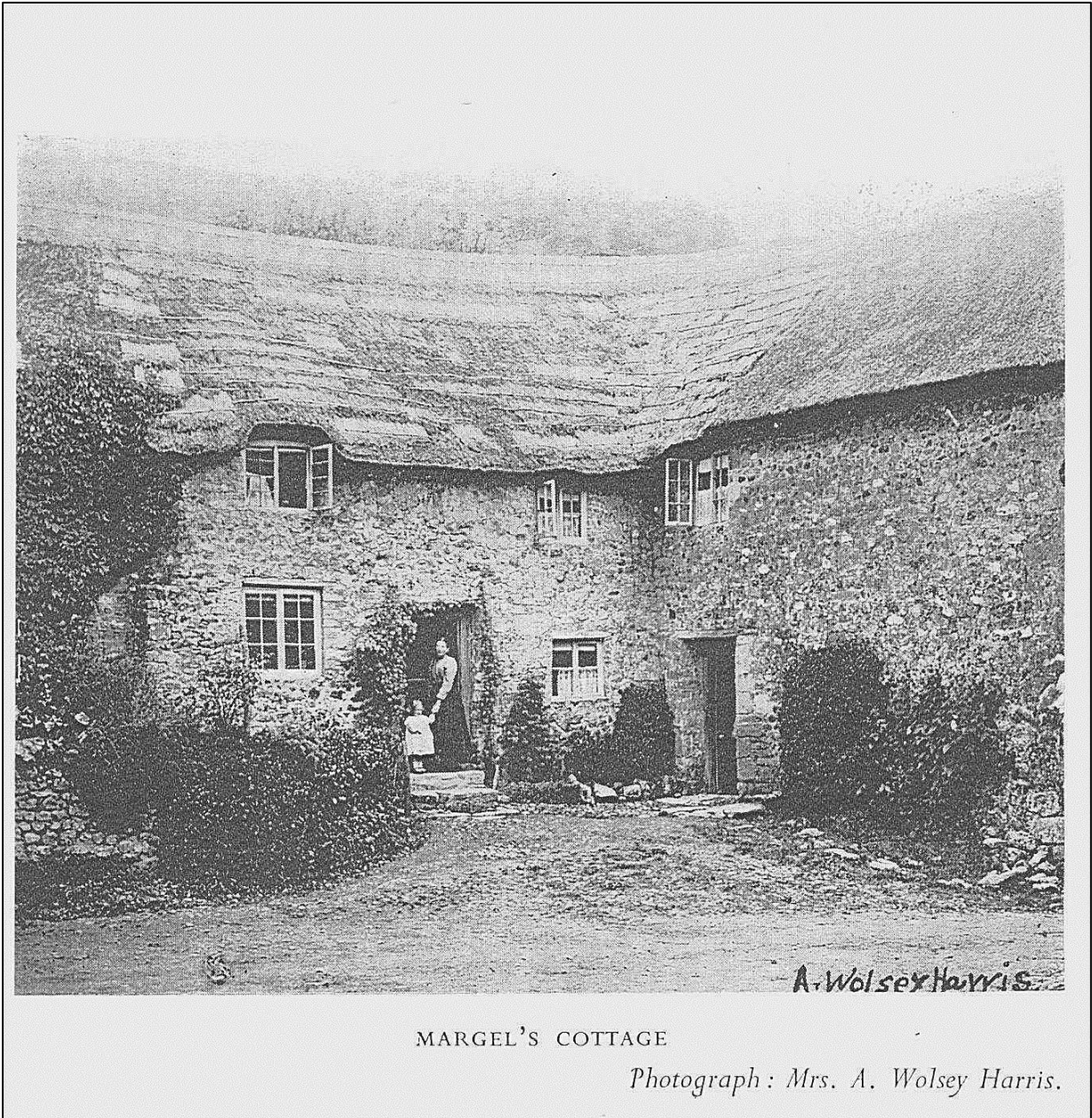
The name

Published information about Margells appears to be almost entirely non-existent. The name 'Margells' would seem to be derived from Margells Hill, in Branscombe. It comes from the name of a family recorded at intervals in the local parish registers from 1600 onwards, sometimes spelt as Markells, Marckells or Marcalls. But this does not seem to have been the name of the house from the beginning. In a survey of the manor dated 1810, and again in 1841 at the time of the commutation of the tithes, the name of Margells was applied to a property below the church, near the blacksmith's forge. The 1810 survey gives the name 'Pound Tenement' to a 23-acre plot to the rear of Margells, which included a farmhouse, and this name also appears in a document of 1657 in the Cathedral Library.

So far it has not been possible to find out when or why the name was transferred to the present Landmark, nor to ascertain the original name unambiguously.

The house

Margells is an exceptionally fine example of a thatched 16th-century house, with magnificent carved floor beams, plank-and-muntin screens, jointed cruck and collars and oak small-framed partitions with wattle and daub filling, described as having 'one of the best late 16th-century interiors in Devon.' The building that you see now was probably the parlour wing of a considerably larger hall house of some distinction: the remains of the wall painting in the west upper room gives an indication of the colour and richness of the original interior (see also the letter



MARGEL'S COTTAGE

Photograph: Mrs. A. Wolsey Harris.

Margells, early in the 20th century (From F.C. Butters, *Branscombe: The Parish and the Church 1949*)

from Mr. Michael Laithwaite included in this album). The doorway that is clearly visible in the wall of the bedroom above the kitchen certainly provides evidence for such a history. The door from the kitchen into the bathroom was at one time bigger than it is now, and that it was an important door is shown by the decoration in reddish paint that can still be seen on the beam. The house probably consisted at that time of an open hall with a screens passage and sleeping platform over.

The house frame is of a very early construction, the cruck coming at first-floor level; below that the walls are of exposed local stone rubble with Beer stone ashlar dressings, as they are above, within the oak frames. The gallery at first-floor level would have been reached by a ladder-type stair probably from the sitting-room side, using the round-headed door that now leads through the screen into the painted bedroom. (This doorway may well have been converted from a Tudor arch like the others in the corridor.) That screen and the two screens below would have been exactly where they are now. The rest of the hall house is thought to have been converted into the adjoining cottage block.

Some time after the construction of the house the present first floor was put in, making the two big bedrooms. The partitions dividing the three bedrooms are in fact two closed roof trusses filled with small-panelled framing nogged with plaster. The coffered ceilings, which are typical of the late 16th century, are of the same date. (There is a similar ceiling, though not quite such a fine one, in another Landmark – No.2 Hawker's Cottages, at Coombe.) The spiral stair would also have been built at that time. It is made of solid blocks of chestnut, except for the top two treads: these are of oak, as is all the rest of the wood used in the house. At about the same time the fireplaces were built on, added to the outside of the house.



From the north west. The corrugated iron porch was removed.



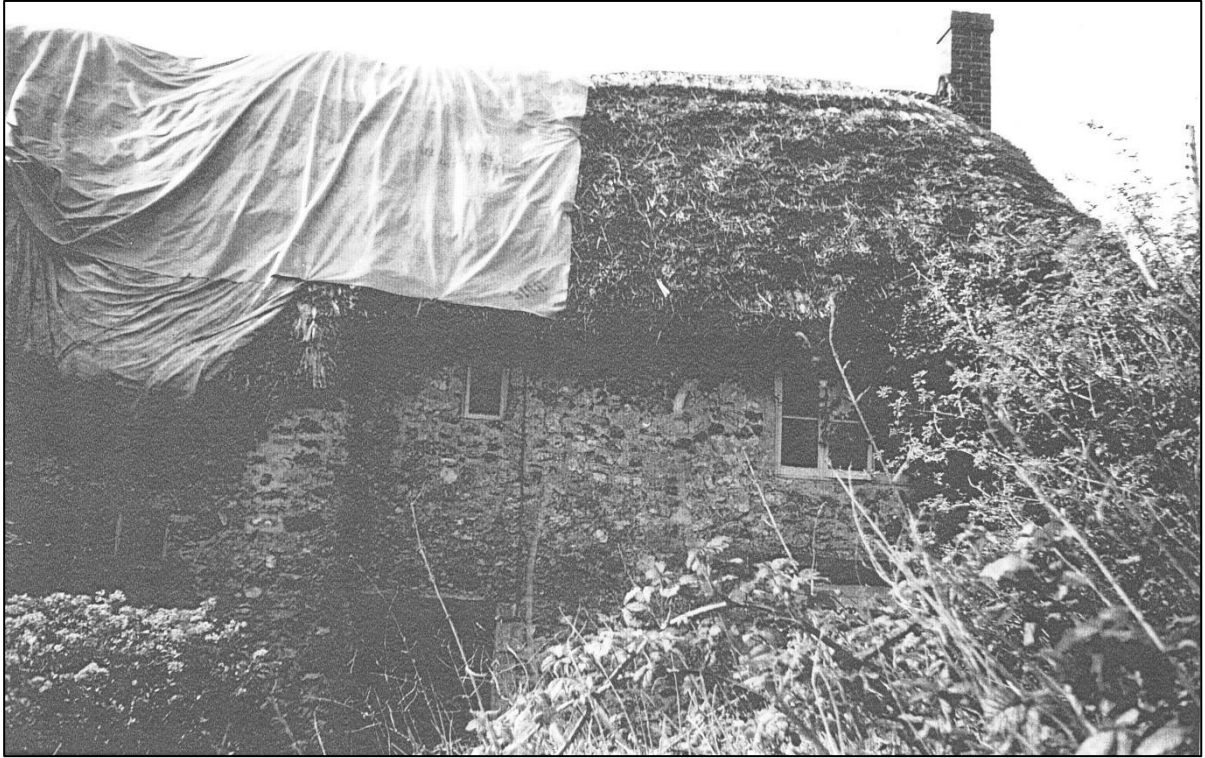
The south elevation

Since the end of the 16th century Margells has been altered very little. But it looks as though, at one time, the wall on to the road had to be rebuilt. This would explain why the timber frame at that end of the house is different from the rest; it does not come down to the first floor, and the wall painting has disappeared from that end of the bedroom. It was probably when this was being done that the big fireplace in the sitting room was made deeper. If you look at the wall below the chimney from the outside, you can see the original roofline quite clearly, about a foot further in than the present wall.

Over the years, a few superficial additions and alterations were made. Outside, a small porch was added, and also a galvanised iron W.C. Inside, a staircase was put into what is now the kitchen. The big fireplace in the sitting room was partially bricked up. Ceilings were put into the bedrooms: they have now been removed to leave the bedrooms open to the roof, but you can see indentations where the rafters were laid on top of the partition between the middle bedroom and the passage. The old floors on the first floor were boarded over in softwood, and the east window in the bedroom above the kitchen was blocked up.



The blocked up east window



The south elevation



The east elevation

Margells in 1973

The following memo by Professor W. G. Hoskins is dated 18 November 1973:

Report on Margels Cottage [sic], Branscombe

'At the request of Mr. Hunt of the Planning Department I visited the above cottage – not strictly a cottage at all – with Mr. Hunt and Mr. Childs on 13 November. It is already a listed building (Grade II) and my opinion was sought whether it ought not to be raised to Grade II*.'

Branscombe is a long straggling village along the bottom of the combe for the most part, and contains a remarkable number of 'good' houses, many apparently of 16th-century and 17th-century date. It was historically also a village which housed a number of minor gentry, as the church records show, and Margells was almost certainly a house belonging to one of these families. They were not esquires (i.e. not owning a manor) nor even among the larger gentry, but I would say in this case were a younger branch of an armigerous family. The house is too far from the parish church to be associated with it, e.g. as the original vicarage.

The Department already contains a good description of the house, which remains remarkably unchanged since c. 1550. The two ground-floor rooms each have fine, coffered ceilings, probably the Hall and Parlour of the original house. Plank-and-muntin or post-and-panel partitions abound in the house. Only the front windows have been Victorianised and a poor little wooden porch stuck on at the same period. This could be removed easily. Apart from this the house remains as a very nice example indeed of the house of a gentleman of mid-sixteenth century date. It is now being conservatively restored, but the architect might be discreetly watched by the Department as further discoveries may well be made when the poor wallpaper is stripped off in various rooms.

In view of the almost untouched nature of the structure both externally and internally, and the wealth of the original timberwork, I would unhesitatingly express the view that the house be upgraded to II*.'

Margells was subsequently upgraded to Grade II*.

Speculations on Margells' history

The following letter, dated 9th October 1975, was written to our architect, Paul Pearn, by Michael Laithwaite from Exeter:

I should be very glad to help you over Margells, though my views on it are strictly theories rather than an archaeologically provable thesis. I visited the house briefly with Miss E.M. Gosray of Seaton on September 27th and was struck by a whole series of oddities in its plan and construction. It could perfectly well be argued that all of them were original features. All I can say is that, viewed against quite a wide experience of vernacular building in Devon, I suspect the house contains alterations of several periods.

If what we have now is a complete house, then it is remarkable in having two ground floor rooms with splendid ceilings of intersecting beams. Did they really cook in one of those rooms? I think it more likely that this is in fact the cross-wing of a much larger house on the site (roughly) of the cottages which now adjoin it. I could see no marks of such a building on the existing structure, but of course the two parts need not have been on the same build in the first place. Margells might have been an addition to an earlier house, perhaps even of cob (Raleigh's birthplace at East Budleigh – a house with two cross-wings – is of cob). Even if one dismisses the cooking argument, the quality of the ceilings is too [fine] for the size of the house.

Inside Margells it is clear that the ceilings do not fit the stud-and-panel screen, and actually block the upper rails of the latter. Secondly the fireplaces are very ordinary in comparison with both the screens and the ceiling beams – the stair adjoining the front-room stack has clearly been cut through at a later date. The curve of the original stair (apparently) is visible in the wall over the cross-passage. [*During the subsequent restoration it became clear that this was a nineteenth-century addition and it has now been removed.*] Then I thought there was something very odd about the relationship of the screens on the first floor to those on the ground floor. It was difficult to see all the detail properly, but in at least one case it was clear that the ground floor screen had not been continued straight up to the first floor (as one would expect) but another one had been built slightly out of line with it. The roof, too, was odd in having a truss a few inches from each gable wall, usually there is a normal width bay with the stone carrying one end of the purlins.

I daresay some of these points could be cleared up by more detailed investigation, but could I offer a theory for consideration?

Could it be that this was a single-storeyed cross-wing with partitions only 6–7 feet high? Such a partition still stands at the stair-head. Either the two rooms were unheated, or they had open hearths. The cleanness of the roof-timbers might be explained by a re-roofing – possibly the odd end-trusses are associated with this. Secondly, the upper floors were inserted and a newel stair put in at the

end of the passage – passages giving access to rooms at either side but leading nowhere are not unknown. Thirdly, fireplaces were added. The poor quality of these might suggest that the building had come down in the social scale, and possibly had been sub-divided, the present Margells forming one house.

Doubtless you will consider these the fantasies of a mad antiquary – I don't believe all of them myself. Nevertheless, there are many things which do not fit the usual Devon pattern. I look forward to your comments.

Yours sincerely,

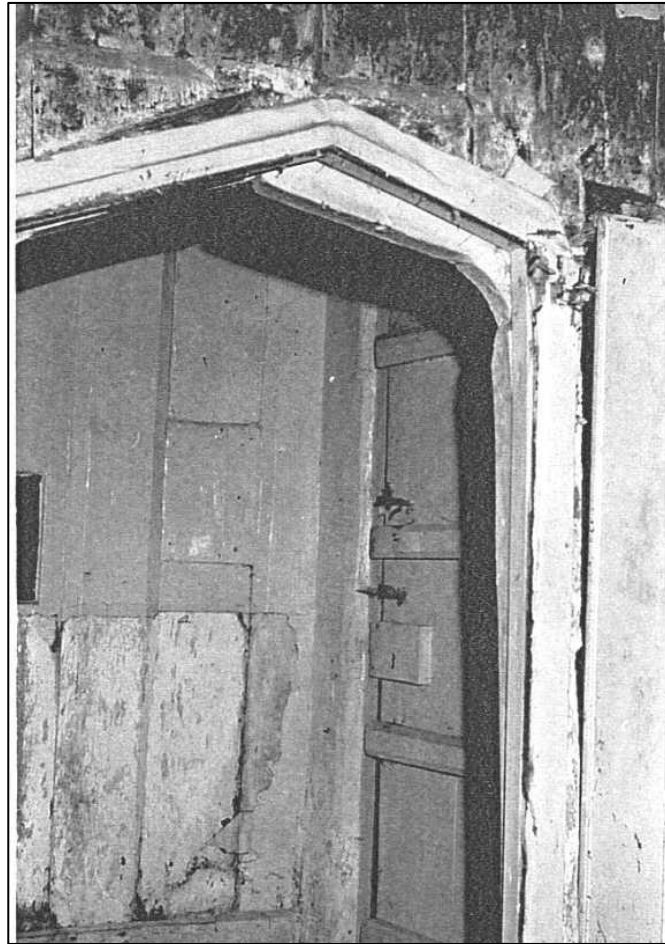
Michael Laithwaite



The blocked up east window from inside



This lean-to hut (the WC) was removed



Looking towards the front door.



The old range in the kitchen fireplace.



The sitting room ceiling



The bottom of the plank and muntin screen had rotted.



Work starting in 1975.



The renovation

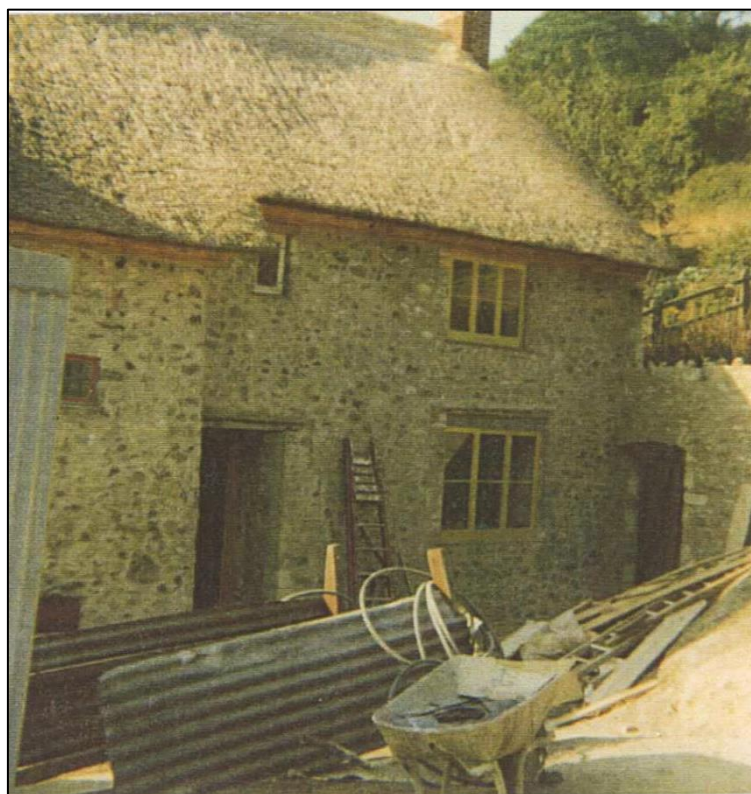
Margells came to the attention of the County Planning Department in 1973. Its rapidly deteriorating condition was giving cause for concern, and there was no prospect of the then owner undertaking the necessary repairs. But the intrinsic architectural quality of the building, its very pleasant rural surroundings and its eminent suitability for use as holiday accommodation combined to persuade the Landmark Trust to acquire it, and we appointed Pearn & Procter of Plymouth as architects for the renovation. Mr. Paul Pearn had previously restored several other buildings in Devon and Cornwall for the Trust.

By April 1975 the purchase from Mrs. C. J. Andrews had been decided upon (it was completed in the following July), and the architects quickly arranged for a temporary cover to the disintegrating roof. During the month of May Mr. Pearn drew up plans of the house as it then stood, copies of which are included in this album: by comparing these with the plans in the Landmark Handbook, you can see how little has been changed. Our aim was to keep alterations to a minimum, which involved the installation of bathroom and kitchen fittings and the removal of the 'poor little wooden porch' and the galvanised iron lean-to. Complete re-thatching was essential; Austrian reed was used, since no local reed was available at the time.

But most of the work was concerned with masonry repairs, including stabilisation of the wall by underpinning, repair of the timber screens and roof trusses, opening up of the fireplaces, treatment of timber infestation and inserting an electro-osmotic damp-proof course. The small window in the east bedroom wall was reinstated. The existing ground floor, of lime-ash construction, was in poor condition and in spite of the architects' extensive researches it was not found practicable to repair and reinstate in to match the existing. Instead, second-hand paving slabs of Blue Lias (a local stone) was brought from a farm nearby and laid on a new base, retaining the lime-ash finish as an edging. The link between Margells and the adjoining cottage was found to be open in the roof space, and

an obvious hazard was eliminated by installing a fire curtain. The wall painting (see the separate report) was carefully restored and stabilised.

The work at Margells was completed by the end of September 1976.



Margells with its new Austrian reed thatched roof.



The underside of the thatched roof.



Opening up the kitchen fireplace.



The bricked up fireplace in the sitting room.



The sitting room after restoration (Richard Hayman).

The wall painting

The painting was described as follows by M. E. Keevil, Chief Restorer to the Department of the Environment, in a report dated 29th July 1974:

The painting in a first-floor room is painted in a lime and skimmed milk medium with dry colour directly on to the lime and sand support of the wall, covering an area of approximate 7 feet square. It has been covered by a number of layers of colour wash and finally by layers of wall paper. The painting, which is typical of the late sixteenth century, consists of a foliated pattern in several colours including red, black, green and white, with a chevron patterned border and frieze. There are some badly damaged areas at the bottom near the floor level and several cracks which need attention, also one or two places where the facing layer of plaster has become detached from the main support of the wall.

The painting is in reasonably good condition and the removal of the layers of colour wash etc. would reveal a large proportion of the painting in good condition. It is possible that the whole room was decorated in this way, but the remaining areas of wall surface appear to have been re-plastered at some later date.

I feel that this area of most interesting painting of the period should be restored and made a feature of the room.

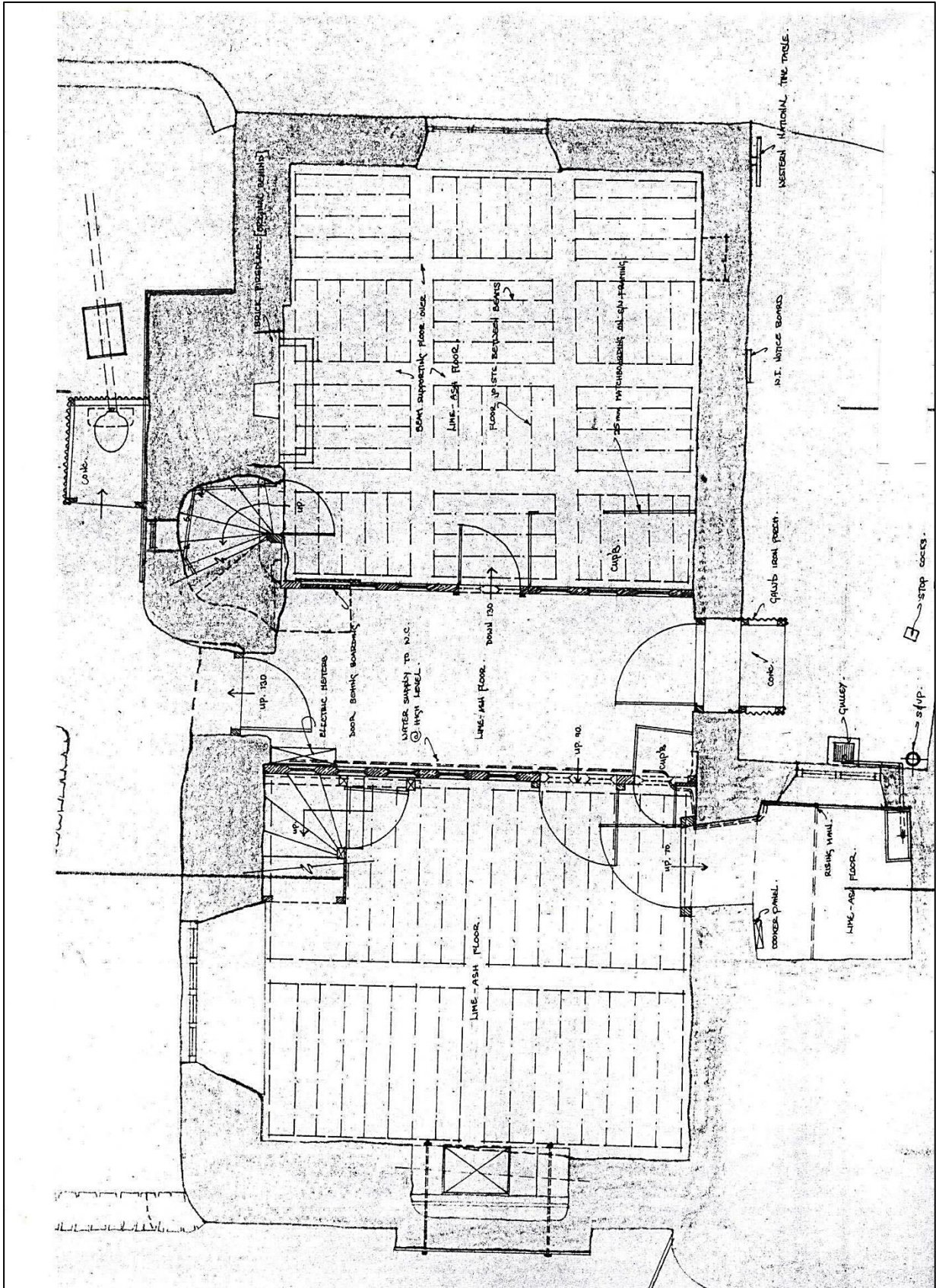
The wall painting was restored in 1976 for the Landmark Trust by Mrs. Krystyna Barakan, in such a way as to ensure that the new infill pieces can be clearly distinguished from the original.



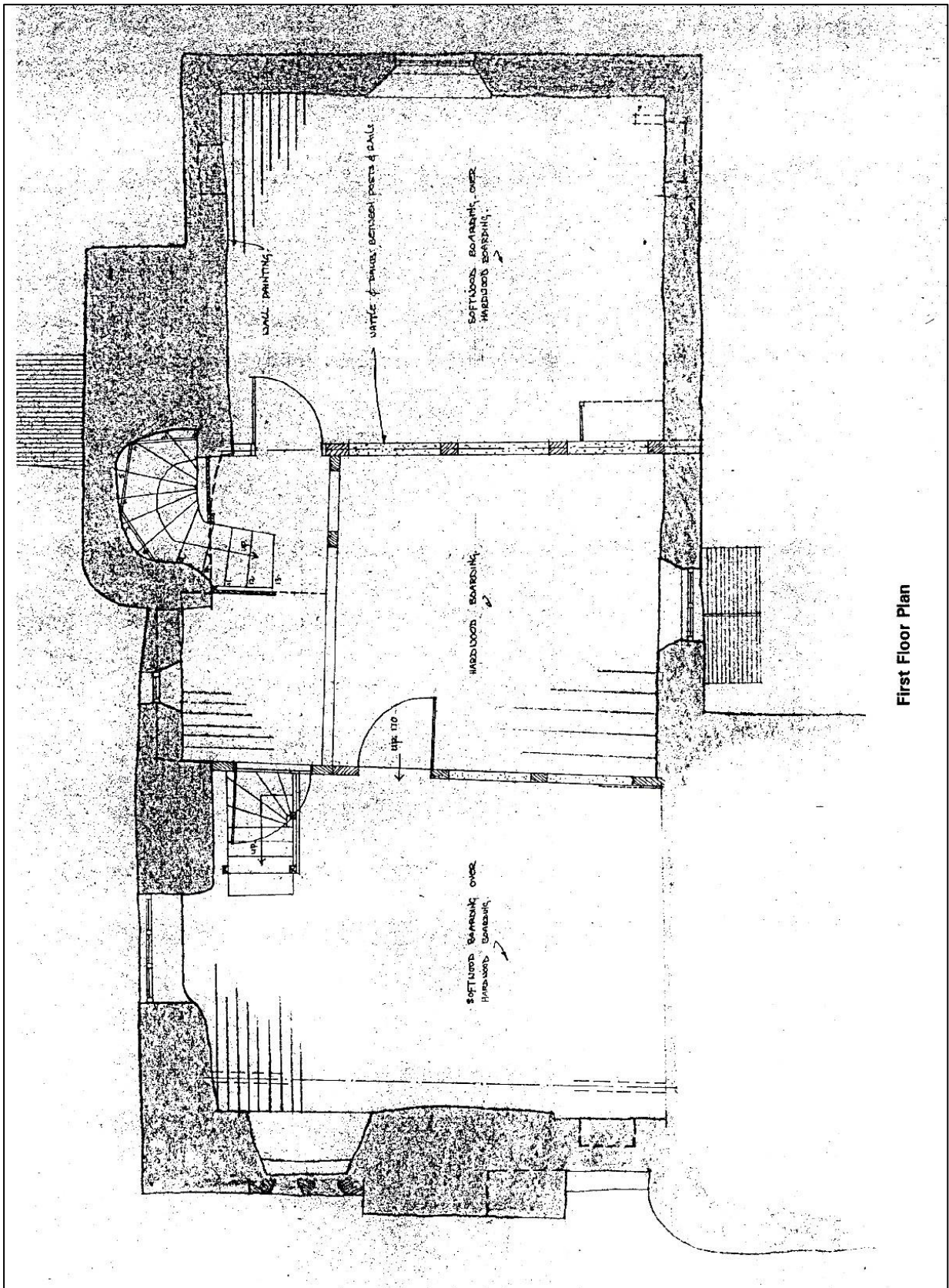
Traces of the wall painting in the south bedroom before restoration. The ceiling is visible at the top. (C L Hines).



The wall painting after restoration and with the ceiling removed.



The ground floor before restoration.

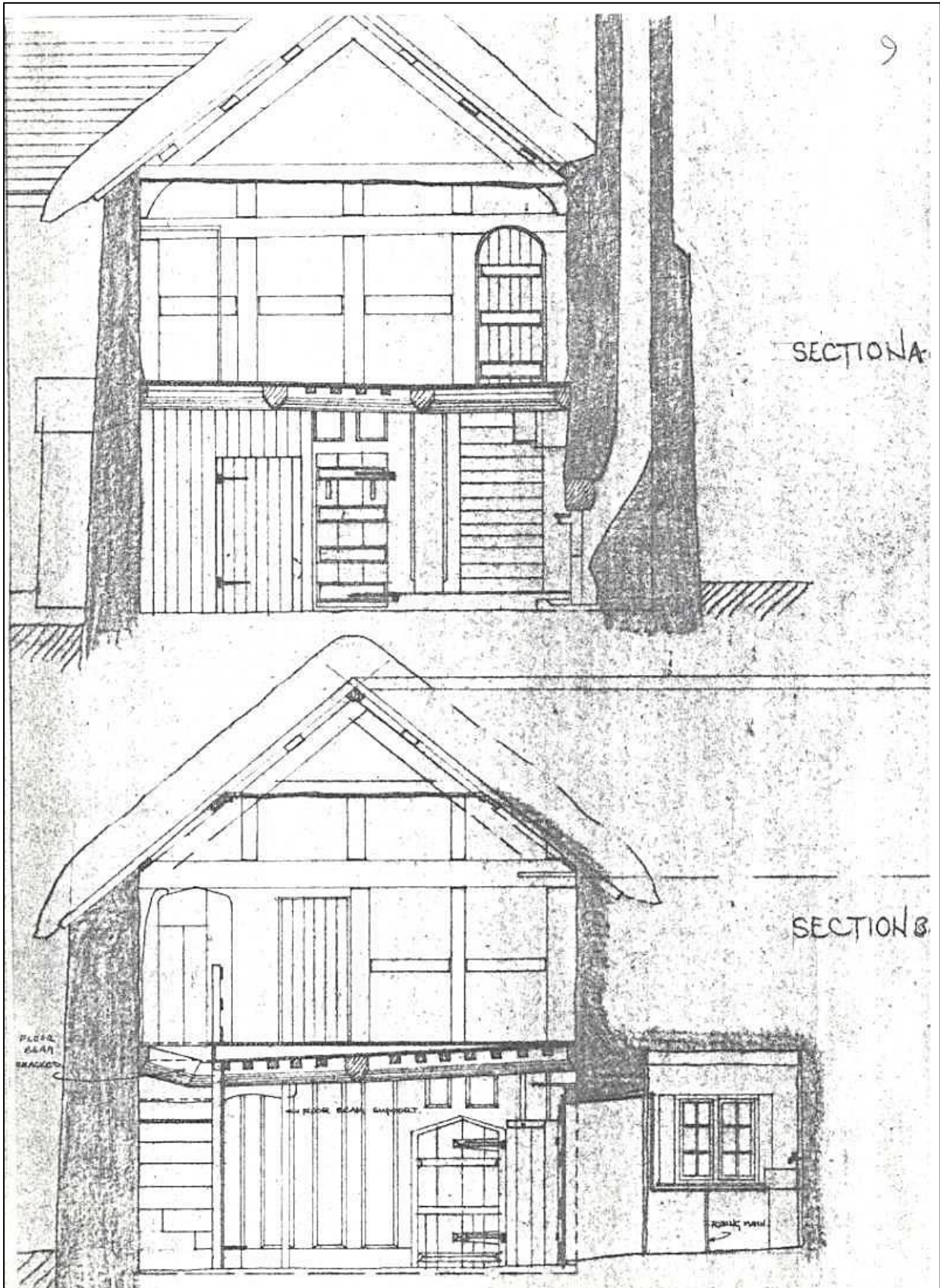


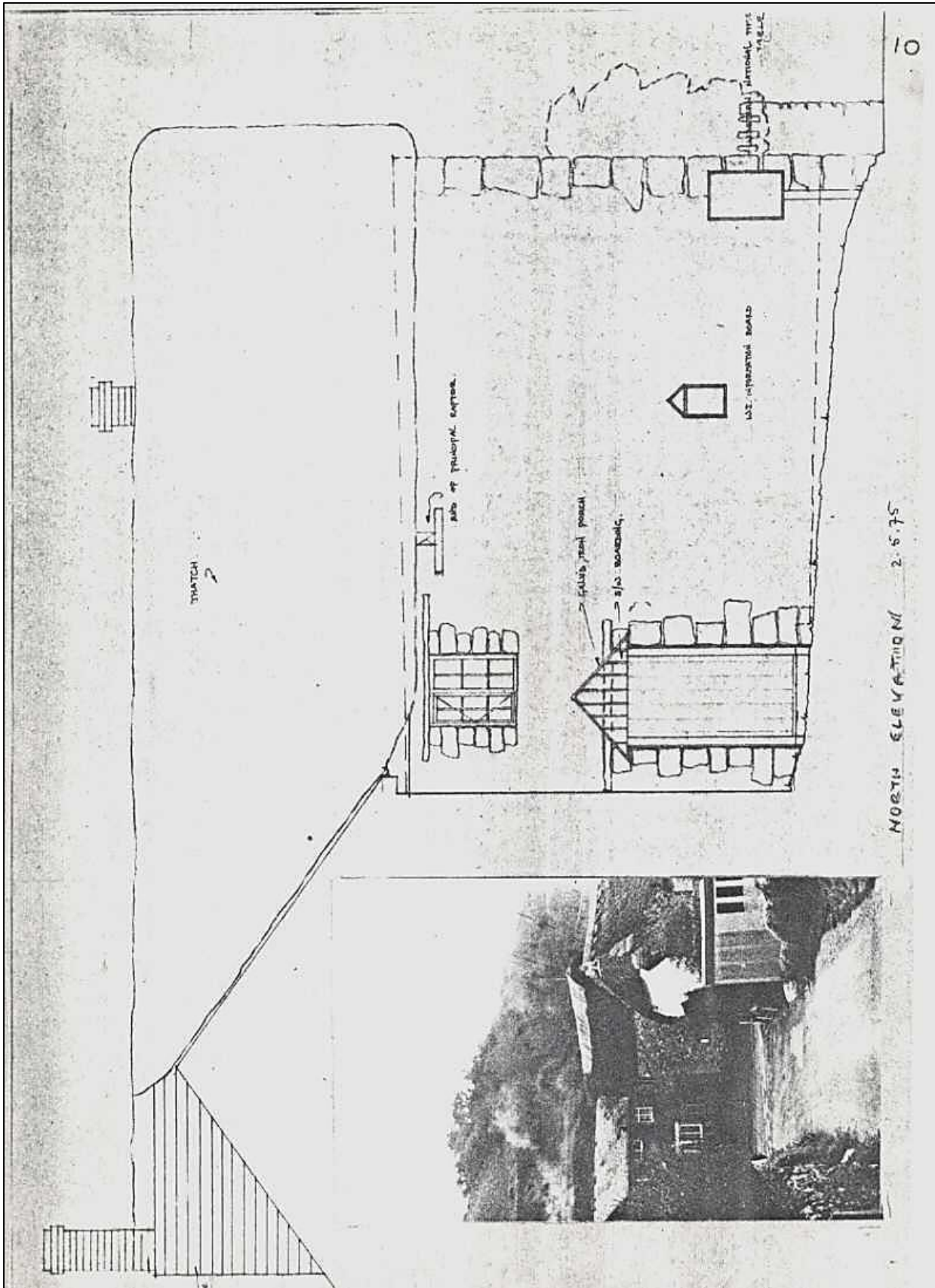
First Floor Plan

The first floor before restoration.

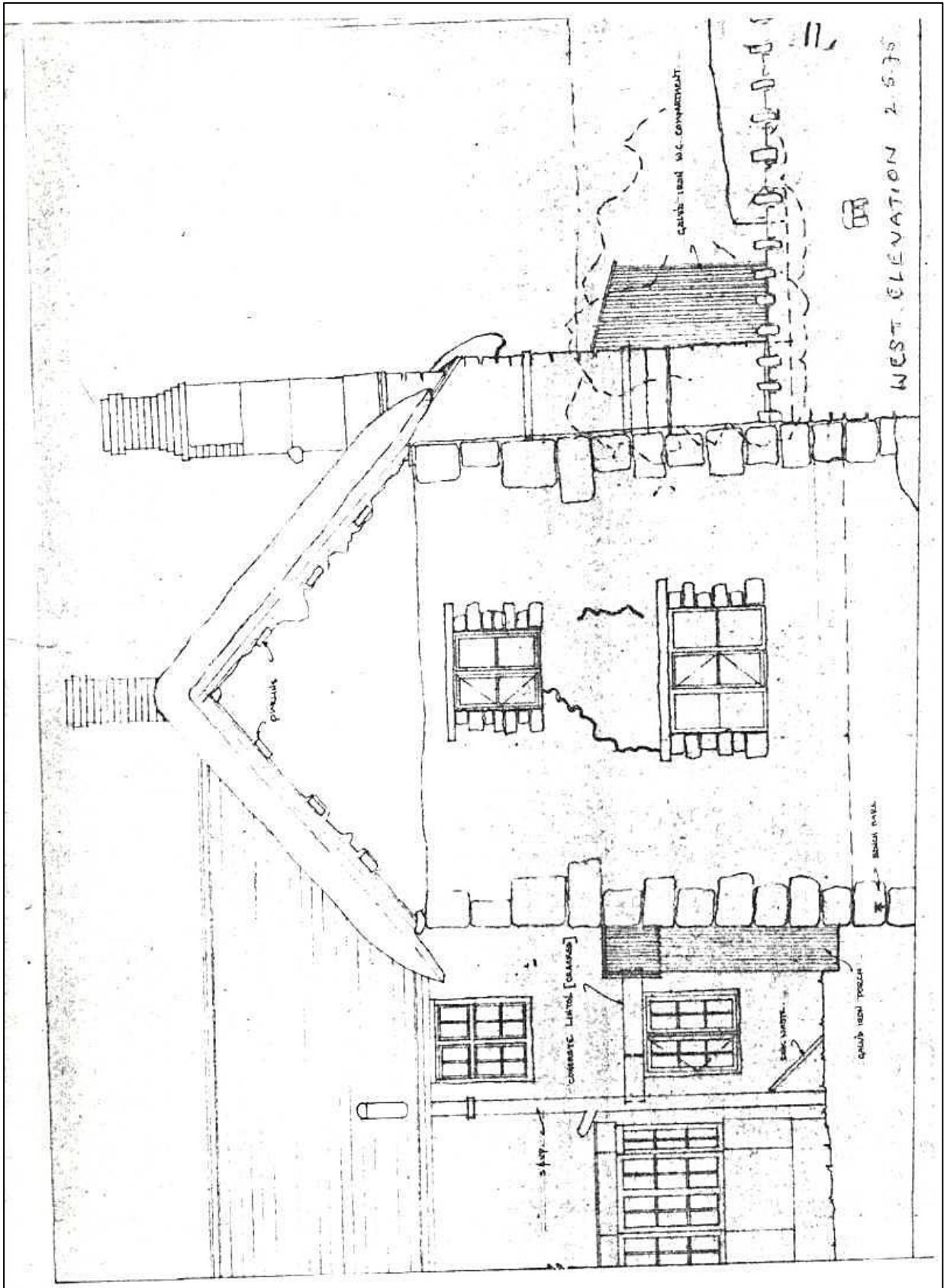




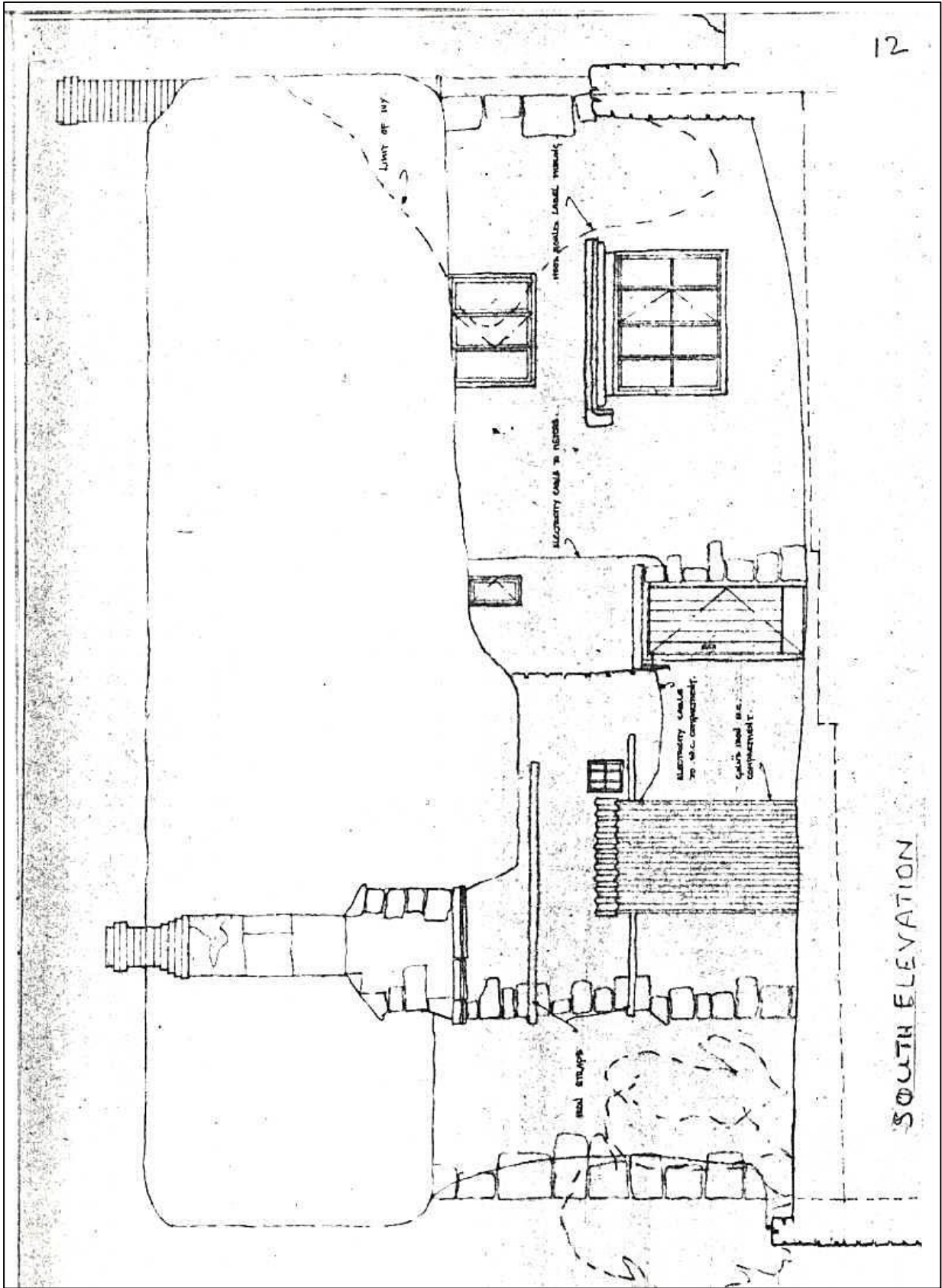




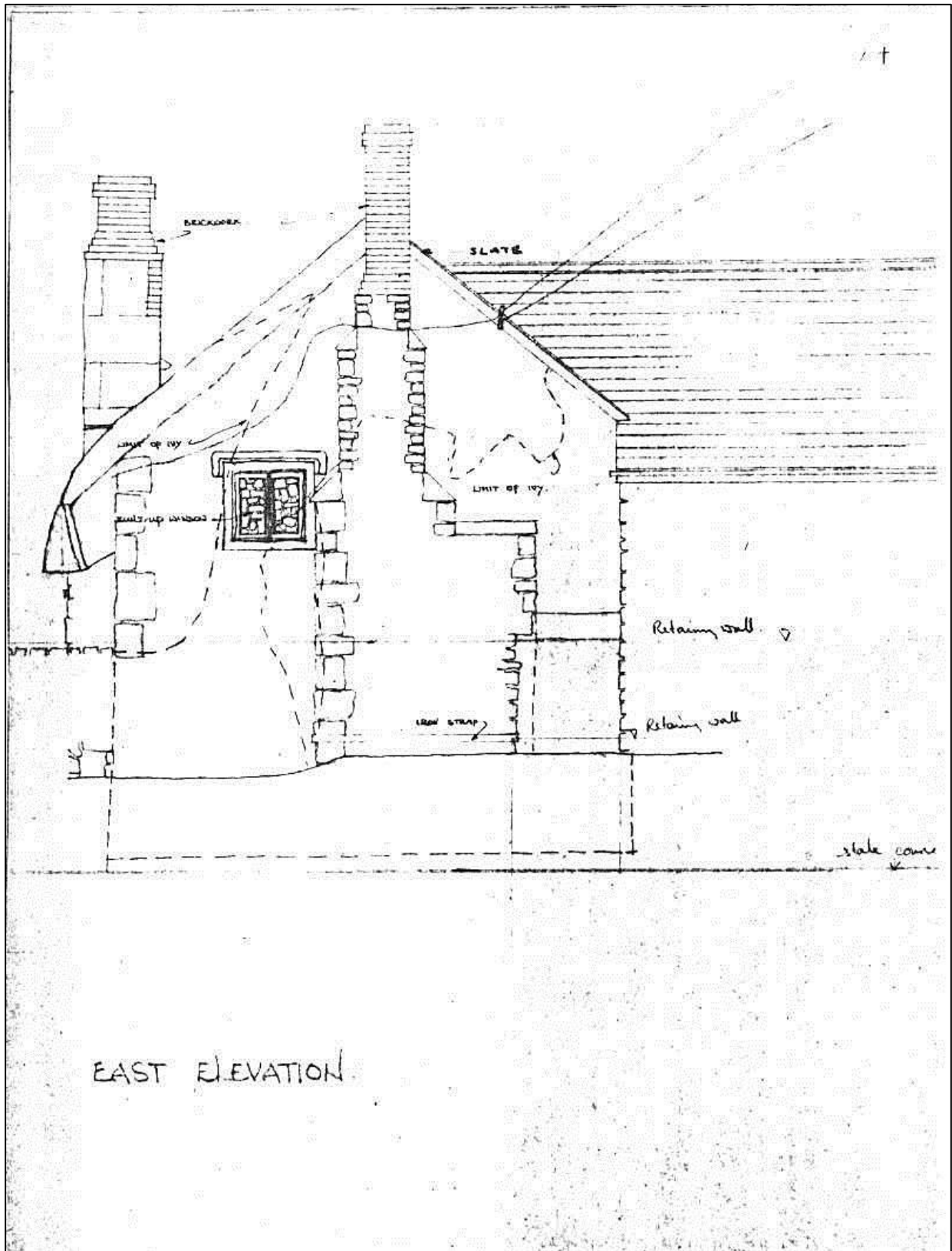
North elevation



West elevation



South elevation



East elevation



This photo was left by a Landmarker in an earlier History Album. We don't know but perhaps it was taken in the garden in the late 19th century.