

The Landmark Trust

PLAS UCHAF History Album



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

Researched & written by Clayre Percy, 1973

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BASIC DETAILS

Date	1435
Listed	Grade I
Built for	The Barons of Cymmer
First floor inserted into hall	Late 16th century
Last occupant	The Owens
Abandoned	1960s
Acquired by The Landmark Trust	September 1971
Tenure	99-year lease from Merioneth County Council
Architect	MT Pritchard, Blaenau Ffestiniog
Restoration builder	J Kenneth Hughes Ltd
Timber repairs	Gunolt Greiner

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A comprehensive account of Plas Uchaf's history and its residents' genealogy was published online in 2016 by Jenny Lees, as part of the Discovering Welsh Houses project. This can be found at :

[https://discoveringgoldwelshhouses.co.uk/library/Hhistory/den%20023 HH 32 Plas Uchaf.pdf](https://discoveringgoldwelshhouses.co.uk/library/Hhistory/den%20023%20HH%2032%20Plas%20Uchaf.pdf)



Plas Uchaf in the snow, after restoration.

Summary

Built around 1435, Plas Uchaf (or Pla Ucha) is believed to have begun as the seat of the barons of Cymmer, and was also 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. This survives practically unaltered, later insertions having been stripped out in the 1960s before Landmark came on the scene.

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, author of *Houses of the Welsh Countryside*, described 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.' The framing also includes the remains of a spere truss, which is an ornate truss between the hall and the screens passage, from which short screens projected on both sides. A moveable screen could then be moved to block the resulting opening to help prevent draughts. All this indicates that Plas Uchaf would have been a very grand house indeed in 1435; it was more elaborate 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 in status that continued until 1972. By 1825, when the Gwerclas estate was sold, it seems to have been the tenanted 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 is now no more) was used as a religious meeting house. In 1913, it was described as a tenement, and in 1933, it was a gamekeeper's house. Philosopher and writer John Cowper Powys (1872-1963), author of the epic novel *Owen Glendower* (1941), is known to have visited Plas Uchaf in the 1930s, perhaps serving as inspiration for his vision of ancient homesteads in Glendower's time.

The last people to live in Plas Uchaf were the Owens, who were there until n 1960. 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 then left derelict for ten years.

Peter Smith, then Secretary of the RCHMW, realised that the whole house was in grave danger. In 1964 he and Ffrancon Lloyd published an article in the *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, recording Plas Uchaf 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 falling into 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 the house to Merioneth County Council, who approached Landmark Trust. Landmark took a 99-year lease of it from the Council in 1971 and then undertook an extensive restoration.

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. Underfloor heating was installed. In the decades since, there have of course been several significant maintenance campaigns, but Plas Uchaf's future remains secure.

The people who lived at Plas Uchaf

In the beginning Plas Uchaf ('the upper or top house') is thought to have been the seat of the barons of Cymmer and was also known as Plas o Kymmer. Dr L. A. S. Butler suggested 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 copy is appended here). Butler had very little documentary evidence to prove it, but Jenny Lee's comprehensive research as part of the longstanding *Discovering Old Welsh Houses* online project has uncovered a lot more early references in the documents to high status occupants.¹ When it was built in around 1435, 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 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 below). 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)

¹ https://discoveringoldwelshhouses.co.uk/library/Hhistory/den%20023_HH_32_Plas_Uchaf.pdf

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.

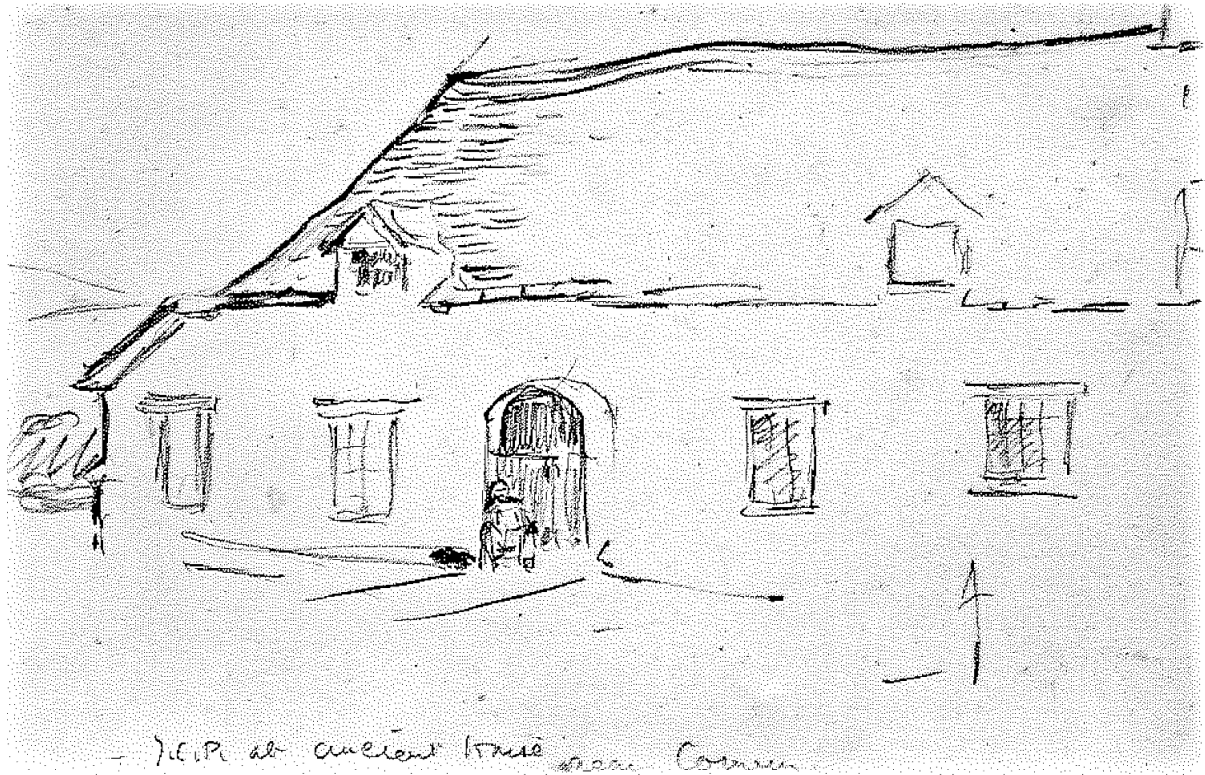
In 1938 and throughout the war it was lived in by a family called Wilson. Their son, Richard, was born there; in 1978 he revisited it and kindly sent some recollections of the house as he knew it as a child:

'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.

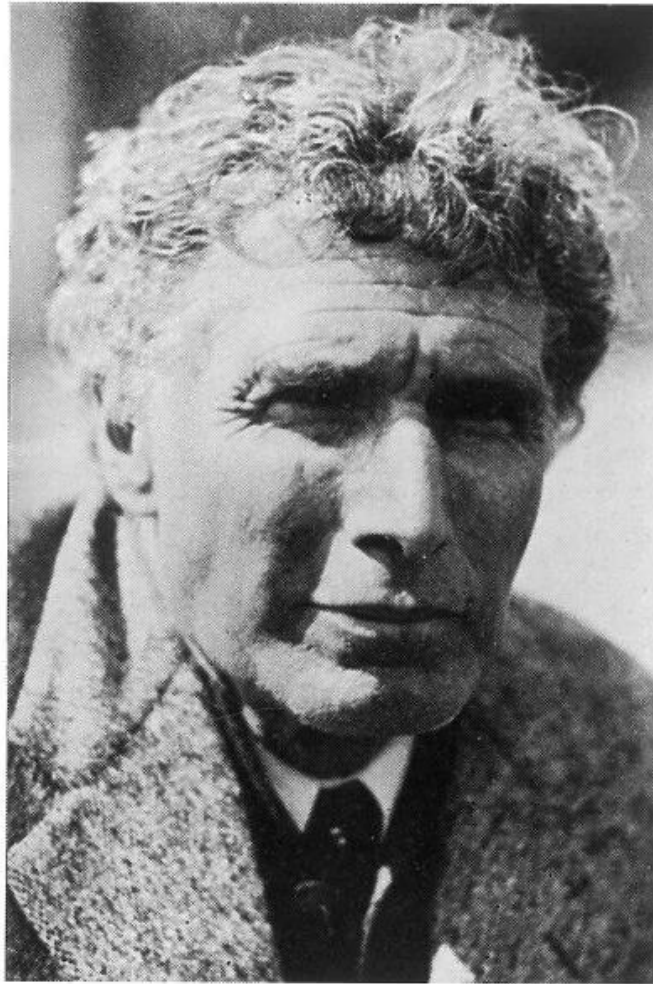
In the early 1960s Lord Newborough, descendent of the family that had acquired Plas Uchaf in the early 19th century, sold the (then unlisted) house to Mr Lloyd Jones of Bala. The new owner sold the 16th century beams and panelling to America. In a way this was a pity, but it did also return Plas Uchaf 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.

John Cowper Powys at Plas Uchaf



This sketch, showing renowned mid-20th-century author and philosopher John Cowper Powys (1872-1963) sitting in the doorway of Plas Uchaf, surfaced on the front cover of The Powys Society Newsletter No 98 in November 2019. The caption reads 'JCP at ancient house near Corwen' and he is accompanied by his dog, known as 'The Old.' One of Powys's most revered novels is the sprawling epic, *Owen Glendower*, published in 1941.

The house was recognised as Plas Uchaf by Peter Foss, who explained in an article in the Newsletter that it came from a sketchbook once owned by Gertrude Powys, an artist and Powys's sister. Peter knew Plas Uchaf from having been for a decade or so the personal assistant, amanuensis and sometime driver of Sonia Rolt, widow of L. T. C. Rolt. For many years, Sonia looked after Landmark's libraries in Wales and the West Midlands, often accompanied Landmarks by Peter. His article postulates that Plas Uchaf helped inspire *Owen Glendower* the novel.



**John Cowper Powys
(1872-1963)**

Powys moved to Corwen in 1935 when he was in his 60s. The sketch of Plas Uchaf can be dated to between 1935 and 1938 since the Wilson family, who lived in the house from 1935 until the 1950s, altered the frontage in 1938. The drawing can be further dated to September 1936, when Powys's diaries tell us that Gertrude visited him and his companion Phyllis, bringing her painting equipment with her.

While Plas Uchaf was known to locals even then as a very ancient house, few in the wider world were aware of it other than experts on early Welsh architecture. One of these was Iorweth Peate, first curator of the folk collection at the National

Museum of Wales (now St Fagan's) and author of *The Welsh House* (1940). Powys began a correspondence with Peate in October 1937. Powys's diaries show that he often used to walk across the Dee and into the waterlogged fields between the confluence of the Dee and the Alwen. Plas Uchaf stands on a ridge above the Alwen and could be seen from the meadows. It occupies a strategic position next to an outcrop of boulders, part of which was formerly used as a quarry. The confluence of the two rivers below Corwen and its associated marsh and meadowland was an important resource in the Middle Ages and gave its name to the demesne, called Kymmer. *Kymmer* or *cymer* means the junction or confluence of rivers and the original name for Plas Uchaf was 'Plas o Kymmer', indicating its significance to the wider barony.

When Powys knew the house in the mid-1930s, it was lived in by a gamekeeper of employed by Col. Vaughan Wynn of the Rûg estate. The house had declined on status over a century or more. Before the Rûg estate, it was part of the Gwerclas estate and it is clear that some of its significance is owing to its putative early ownership. The 1986 Pevsner volume on Gwynedd describes Plas Uchaf as a seat of the 'lords of Endeymion' (p. 581) who could boast their descent from a branch the royal house of Wales.² In the time of Owen Glendower, or Owain Glendŵr to adopt the Welsh spelling, Plas Uchaf was the ancestral seat of Rhys ap Ieuan, lord of Cymmer (*fl.* 1392-1415). Ap Ieuan was a kinsman of Glendŵr, although it is unclear whether he was a supporter of Glendŵr or not; he survived the uprising and his family continued to prosper despite the devastation wreaked on Endeymion in the aftermath of the rebellion - Henry, the English Prince of Wales, reported his army's retaliatory destruction of the 'fine and populous country' of Edeymion.

In 1996, tree ring analysis was undertaken by the eminent architectural historian of Welsh vernacular architecture, Peter Smith. This ascribed a felling date of 1435 to the timber used in Plas Uchaf's mighty trusses. Until this analysis,

² See A. D. Carr, *The Barons of Endeymion 1282-1485*, Parts 1 and 2, 1963-4.

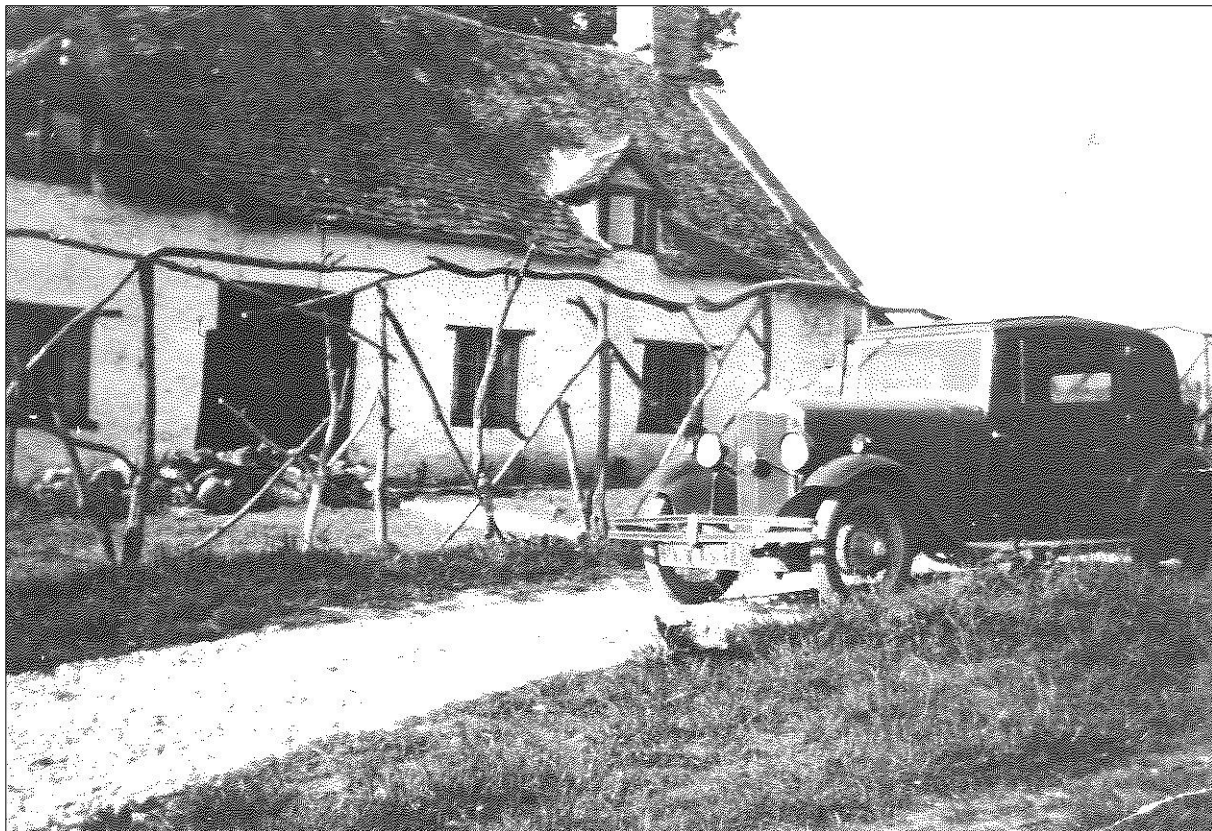
Powys, Peate and indeed Landmark had thought it to be hall of the late- 14th to early 15th century, in other words predating the Glendŵr Rebellion. It is not known whether it replaced an earlier timber-framed house on the site, destroyed during the uprising but a date postdating the widespread destruction seems more likely. Even so, Plas Uchaf's felling date of 1435 makes it the earliest surviving domestic house in Kymmer, and beaten in Landmark's Welsh portfolio only by Llwyn Celyn (1420).

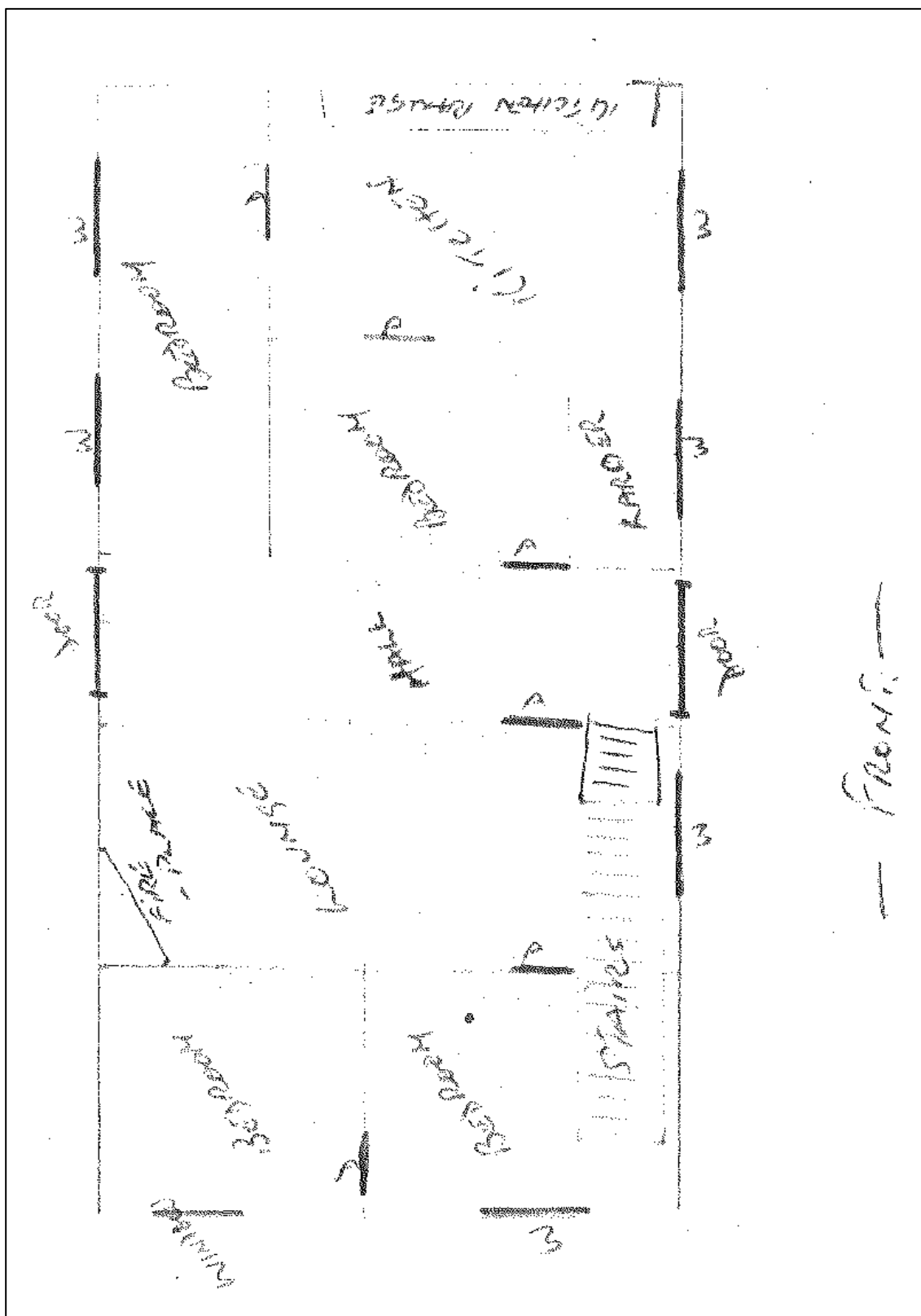
Either way, for Powys Plas Uchaf seemed contemporary with or earlier than the great Welsh prince Glendŵr and, given the proof from the sketch that he visited Plas Uchaf, he no doubt had it in mind as a representative medieval Welsh hall house when he began writing his novel about Glendŵr in 1937. In Chapter XVI ('The Forests of Tywyn') he describes the hall of Rhys Dda with words that conjure something of the character of Plas Uchaf:

'It possessed ... and air of romantic antiquity, carrying the mind back ... beyond the age of castle-building, to that remote epoch when few, even among well-to-do gentlemen, possessed moats or battlements. The outer walls ... were compose of a species of rubble into which plenty of small stones had entered, but it was the time-blackened ancient woodwork, almost entirely of oak, that gave the place it air of immemorial antiquity.'

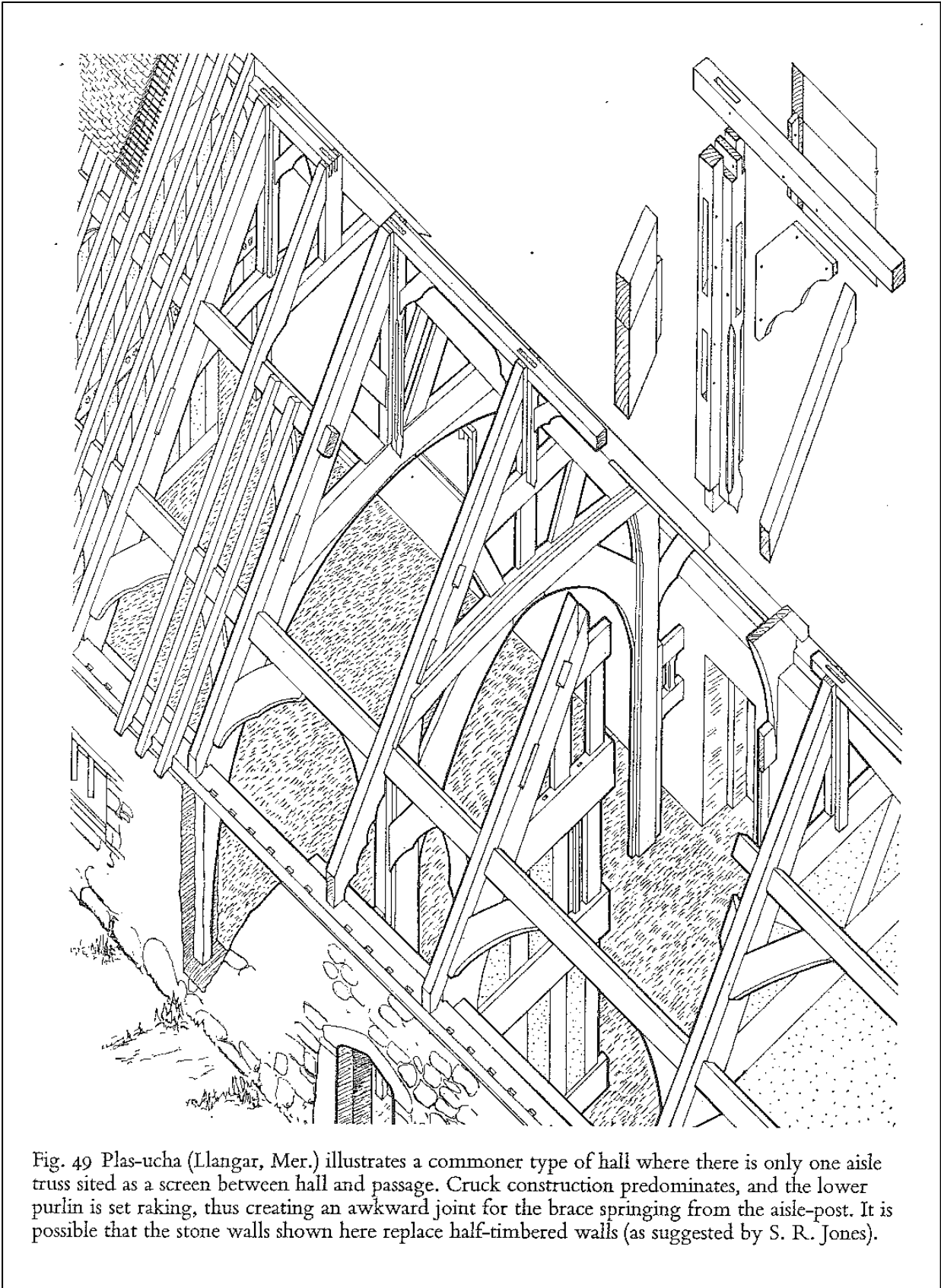


Plas Uchaf when Richard Wilson lived there in the 1940s.





Richard Wilson's plan of Plas Uchaf as used in the 1960s.



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

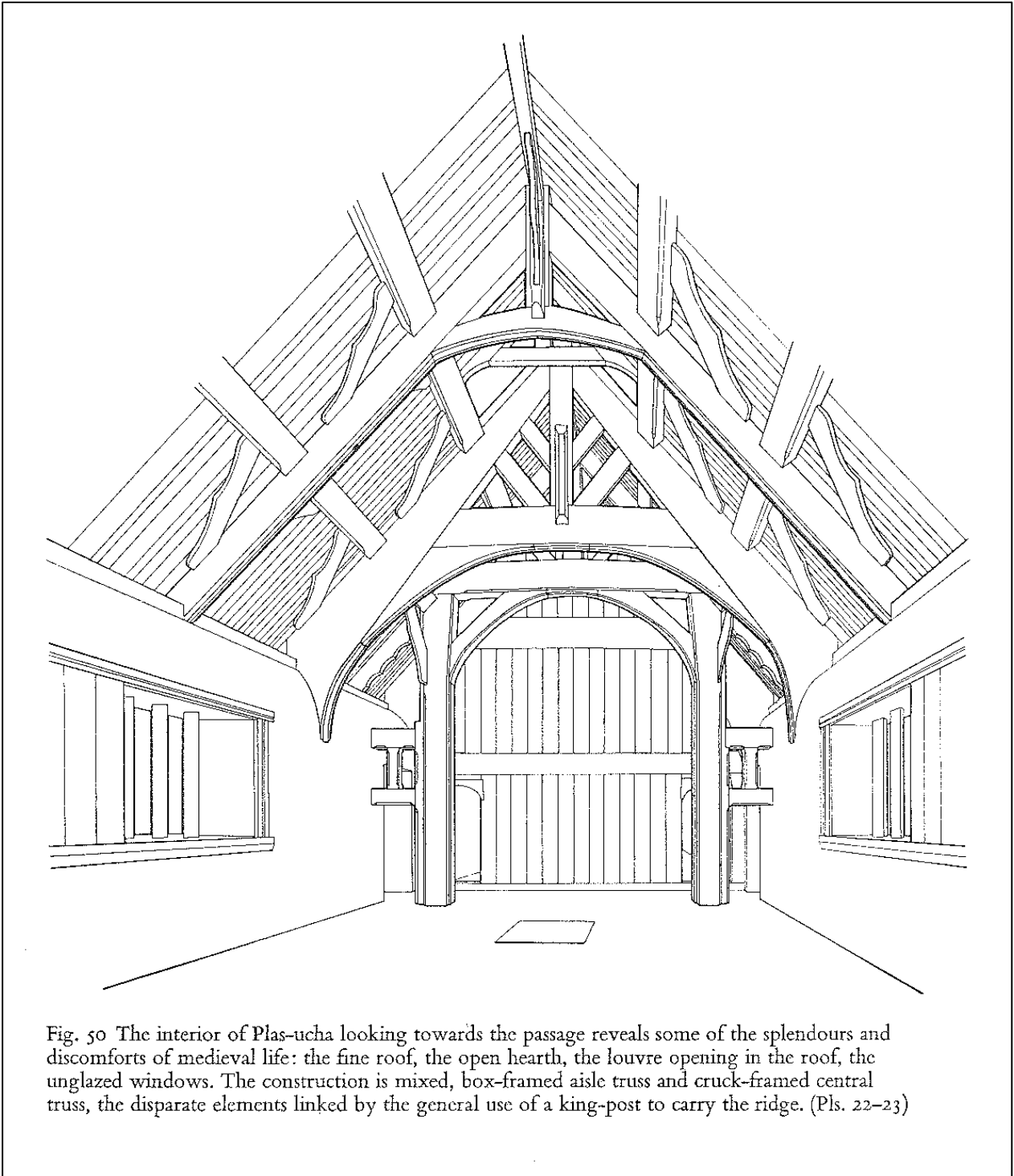


Fig. 50 The interior of Plas-ucha looking towards the passage reveals some of the splendours and discomforts of medieval life: the fine roof, the open hearth, the louvre opening in the roof, the unglazed windows. The construction is mixed, box-framed aisle truss and cruck-framed central truss, the disparate 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). Note the spere truss dividing the hall from the screens passage.

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.

Major refurbishment in 2010

Landmark has a rolling programme of major upgrades refurbishments right across its portfolio, in addition to more routine maintenance. This is in part to maintain standards of comfort and enjoyment for our visitors but increasingly to make our buildings more resilient and energy efficient by converting them to renewable energy sources and improve their thermal performance through better draught-proofing and insulation. This is all funded by the income from letting the buildings for holidays.

Plas Uchaf was one of our first conversions to renewable energy. In late 2010 underfloor heating was installed in the main hall. The flagstones laid as part of the original 1970s' restoration were carefully recorded, then lifted. The concrete subfloor below was taken up replaced with stone hardcore. 125mm of limecrete slab was then laid, topped by 50mm screed as bedding for the heating pipes, and finally a variable depth bedding for the replaced stone flags. An Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP) was installed in an outbuilding to heat the water for both the underfloor heating elements and radiators elsewhere, powered by an air-source heat pump. A new wood burning stove was also installed in the sitting room. The opportunity was also taken to re-wire where necessary.

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 and a Velux window in the twin bedroom was replaced with a Conservation roof light.

The team in 2010 were struck by how much cement-based render and pointing had been used in the 1970s restoration, as well as the use of gypsum plaster on the walls, for all the great care and skill taken in the repair of the timber framing. Their surprise is a measure of the huge advance in the understanding of conservation techniques there has been since the early 1970s, when it was still

commonplace to use such unsympathetic, impermeable materials even in the repair of historic buildings. We hope one day to have the resources to justify re-doing some of this 1970s work and monitor the building closely meanwhile to ensure that its condition is not being compromised.



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).



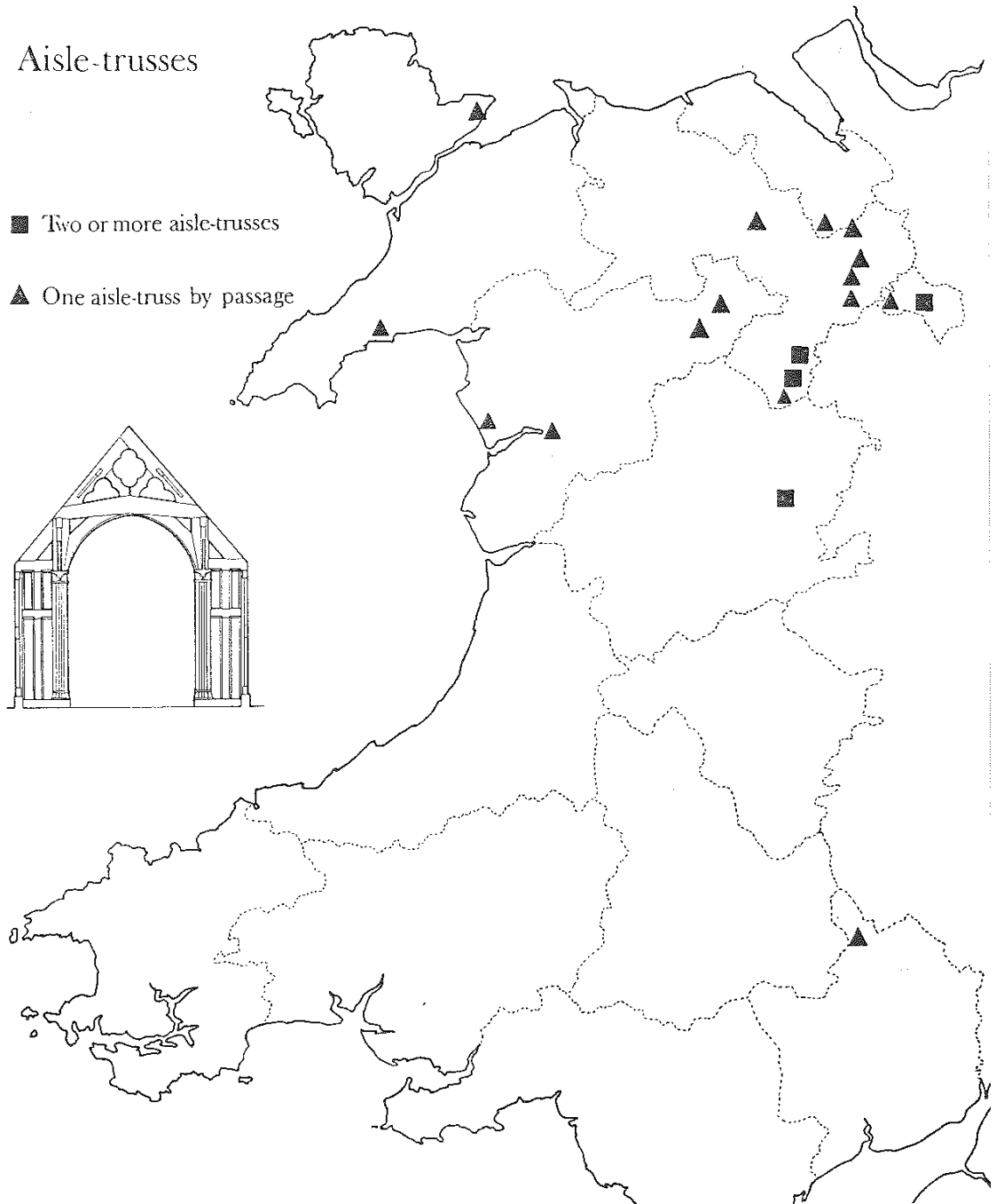
Interior after restoration.

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-19th 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).

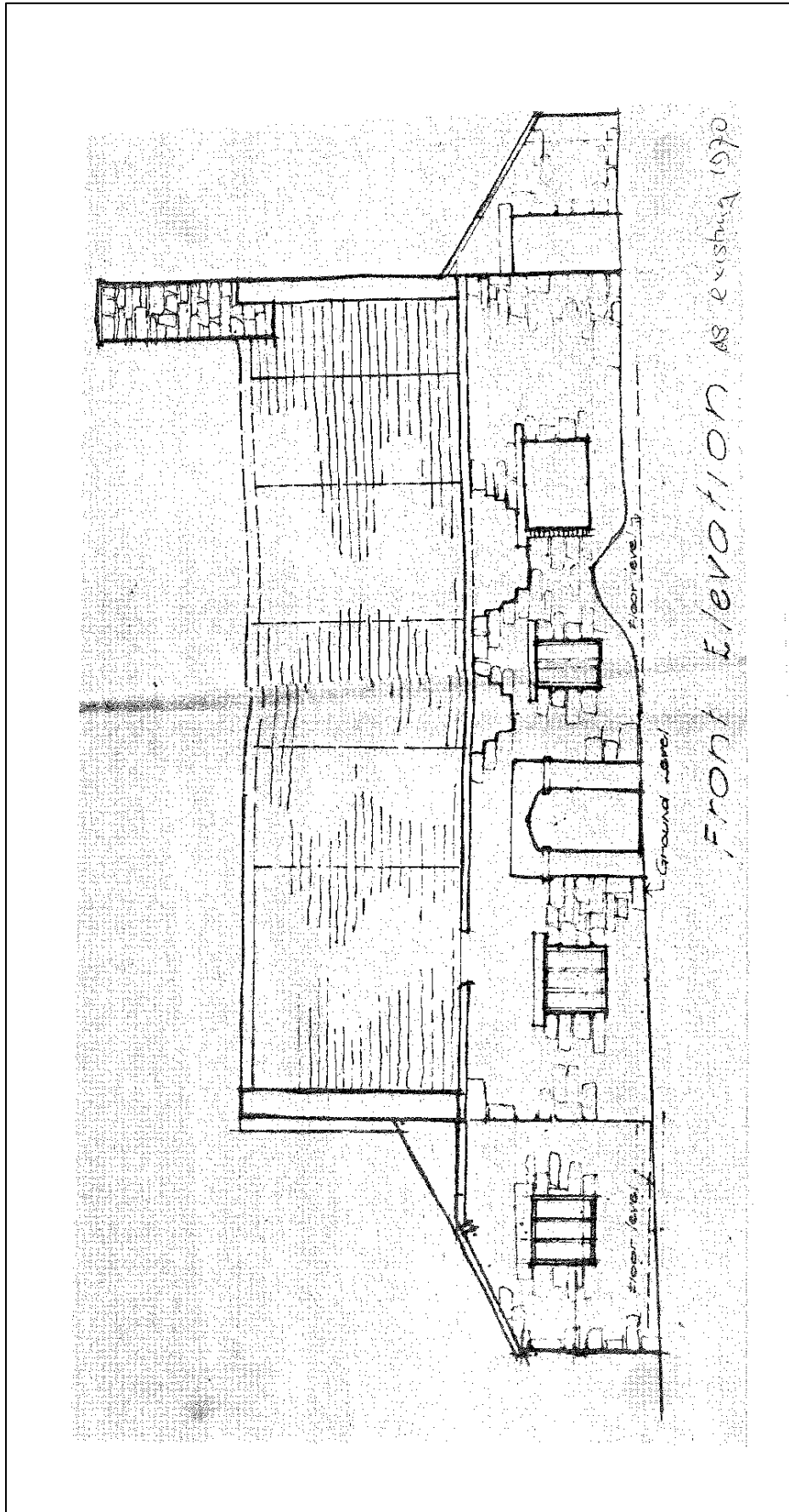
Aisle-trusses

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.

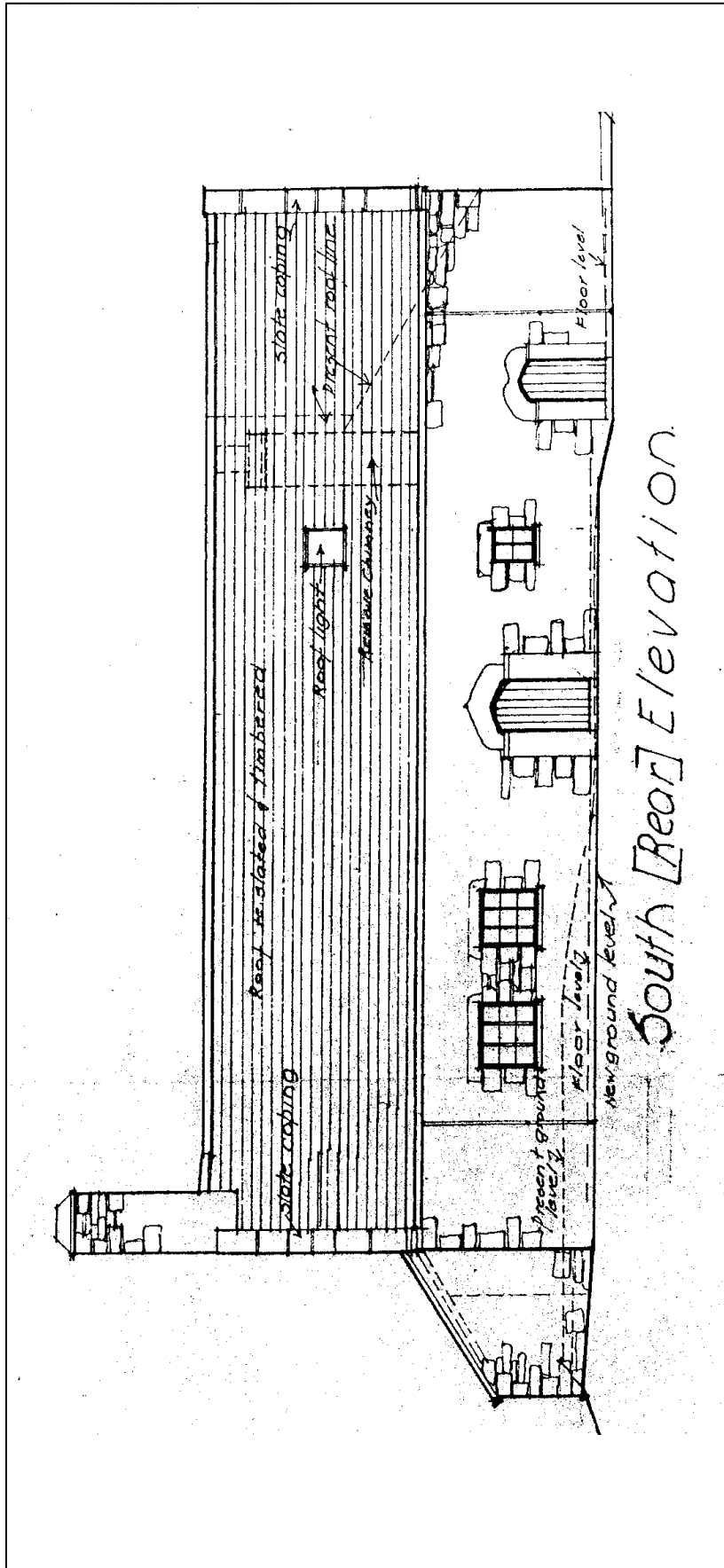
The distribution of aisle-trusses in Wales is predominantly northern. The aisle-truss roof was eventually superseded by the hammer-beam roof.

* more than one aisle-truss in building

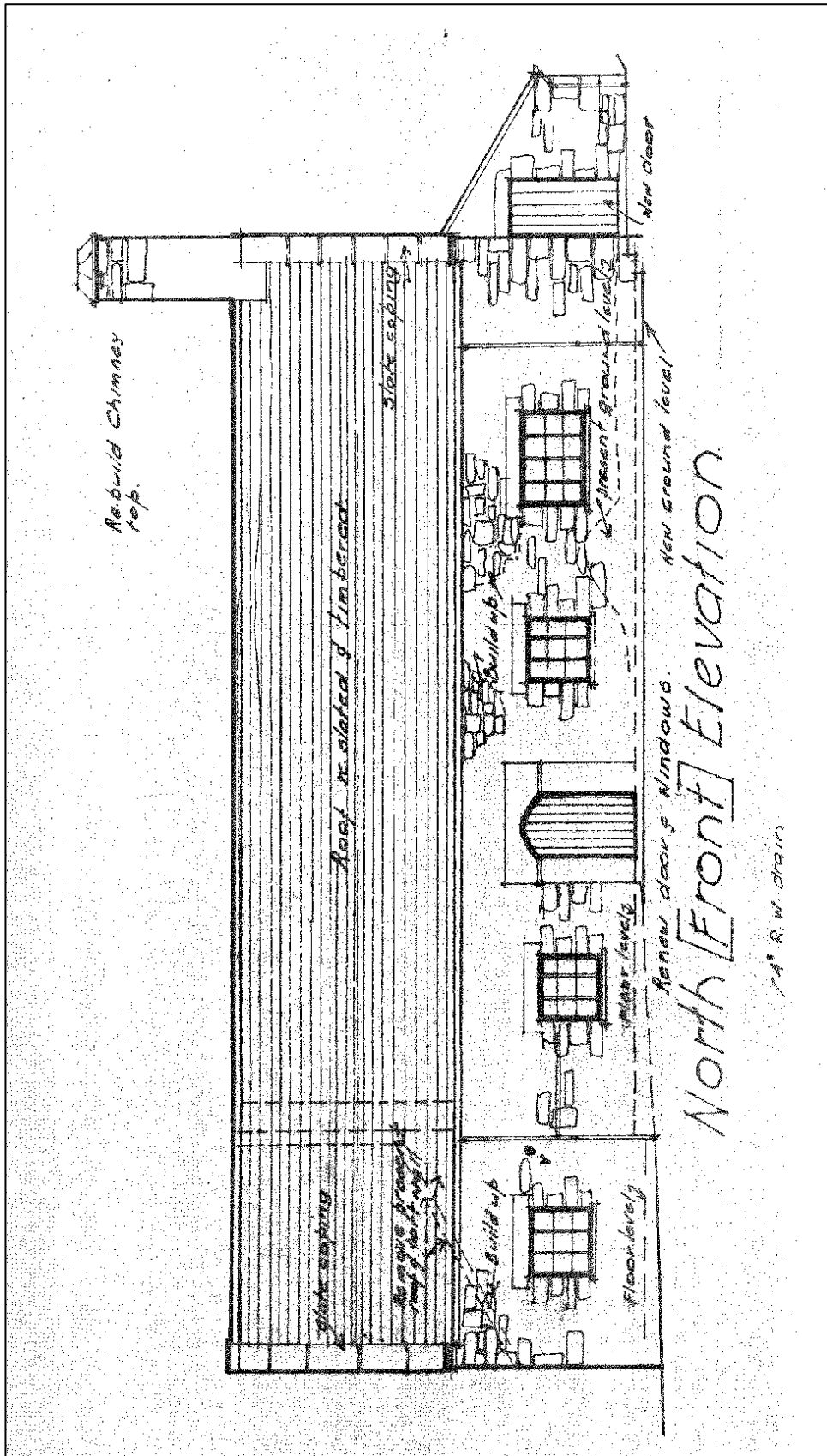
		Flintshire	
		Althrey Hall	SJ 3791 4408
Anglesey		Bryniorcyn	SJ 3005 5694
Henblas	SH 6045 7615	* Horseman's Green	SJ 4474 4145
		Merioneth	
Caernarvonshire		Branas-ucha	SJ 0155 3735
Penarth-fawr	SH 4192 3768	Cwrt-plas-y-dre	SH 728 177
		Egryn	SH 5950 2034
Denbighshire		Plas-ucha	SJ 0529 4277
Castle Hotel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



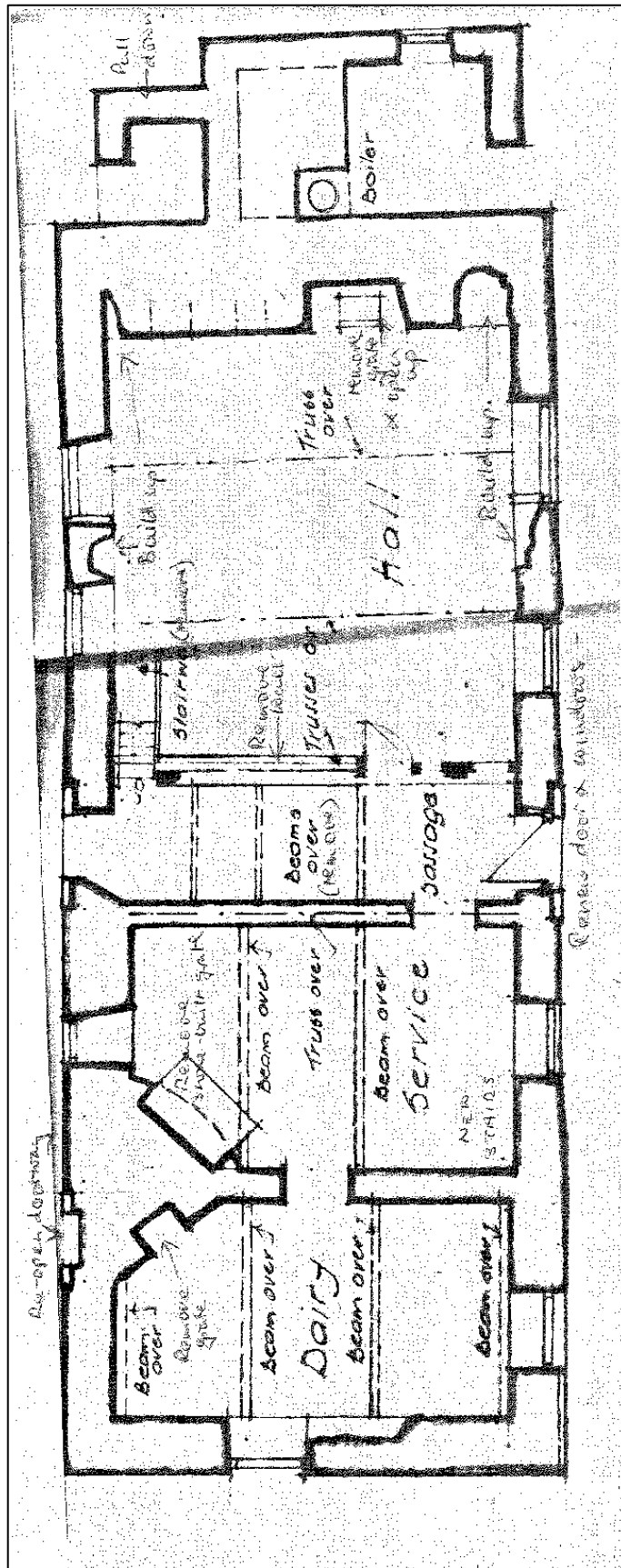
North elevation - before.



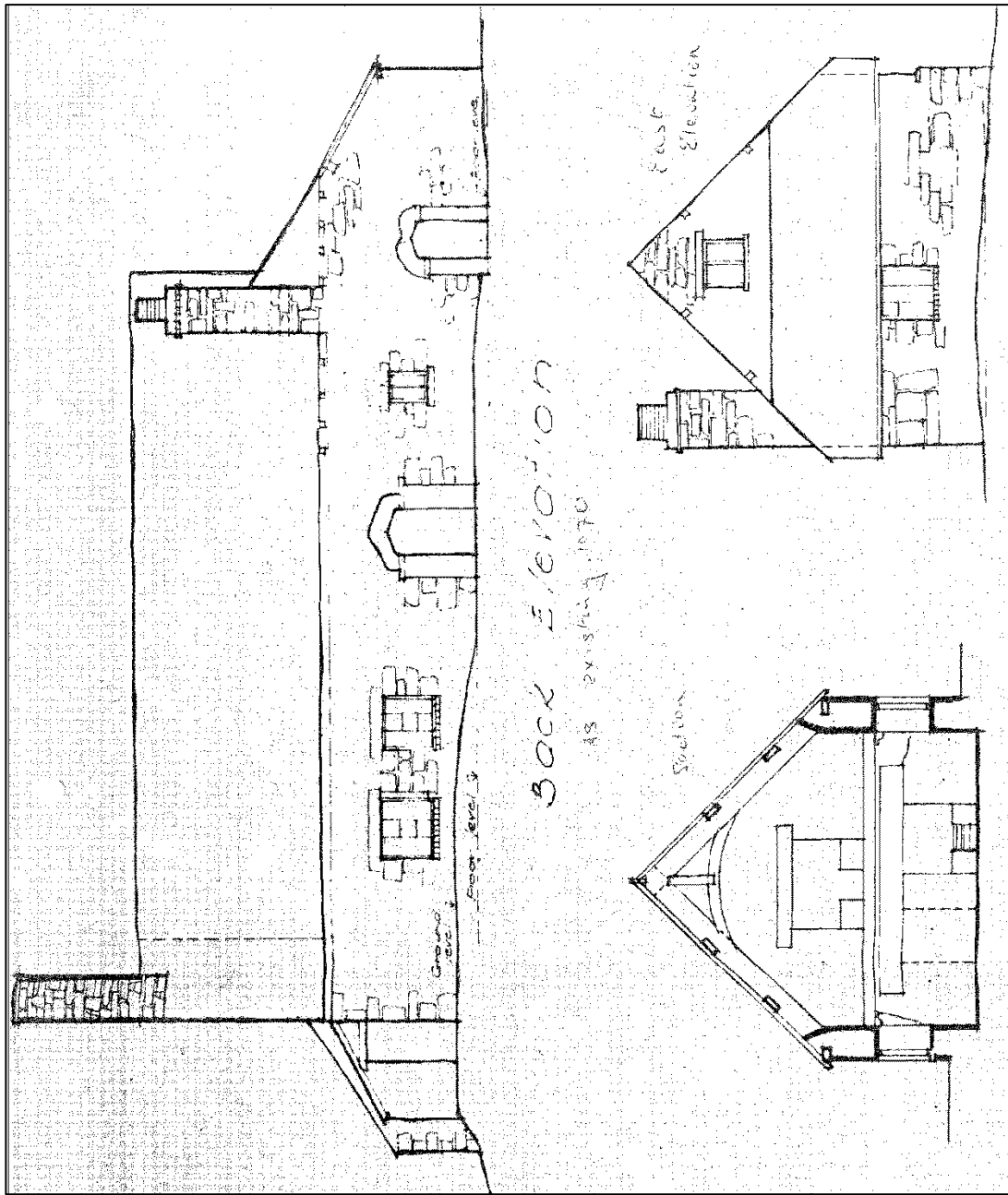
South elevation - after.



North elevation - after.



Ground floor – before work.



Rear elevation – as existing, 1970.

Archaeologia Cambrensis, 1933.

81

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

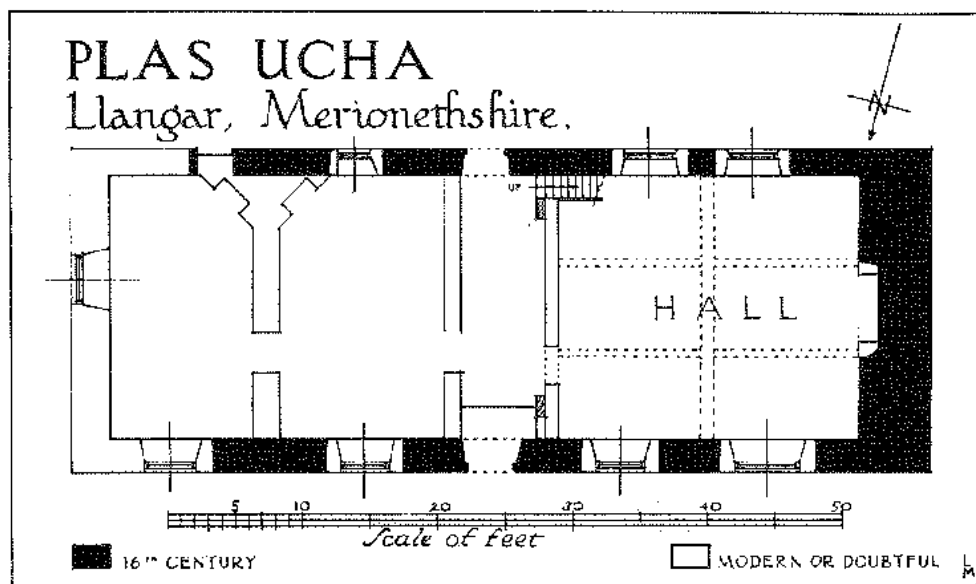


Fig. 2.

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.

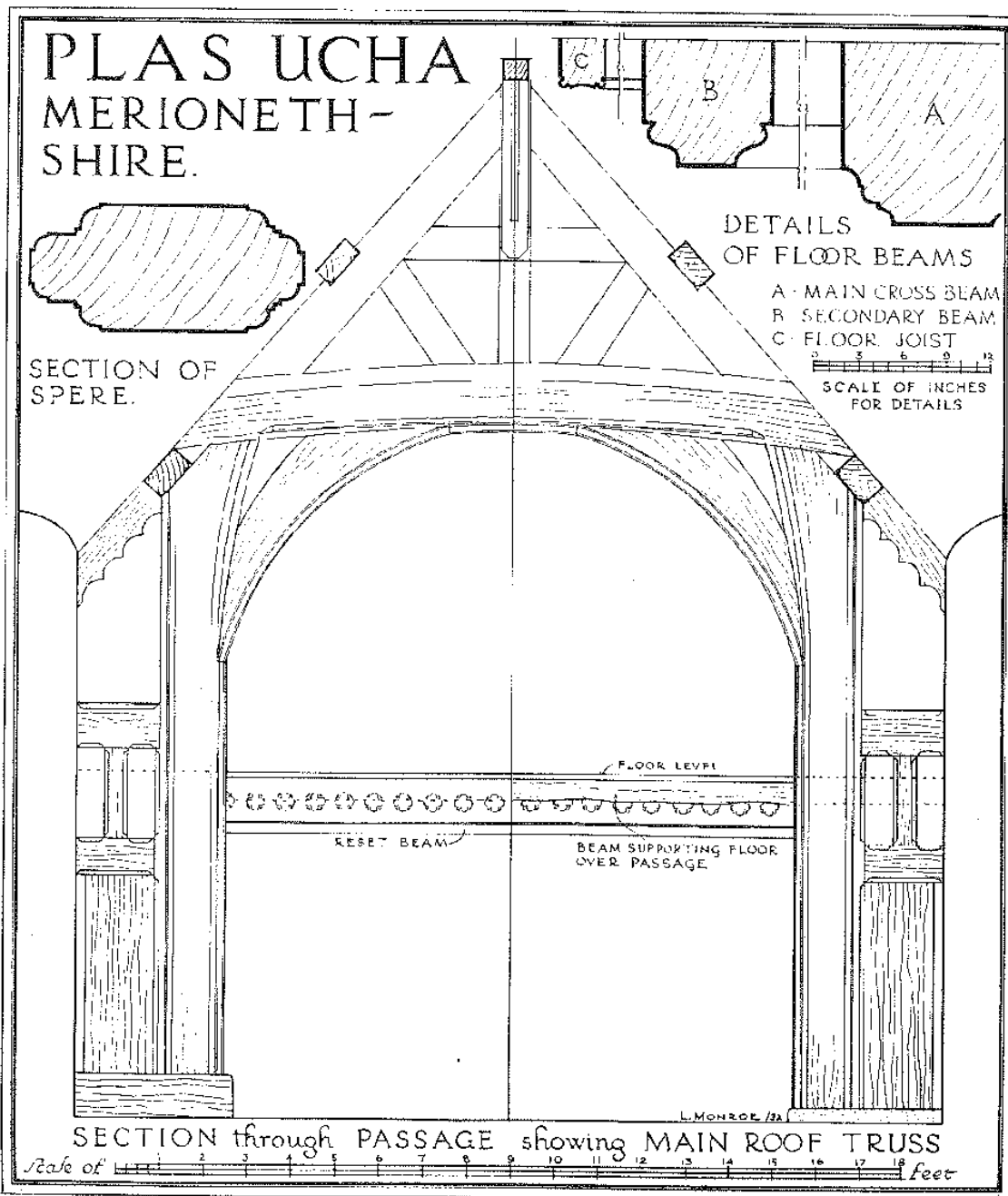


Fig. 1.

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

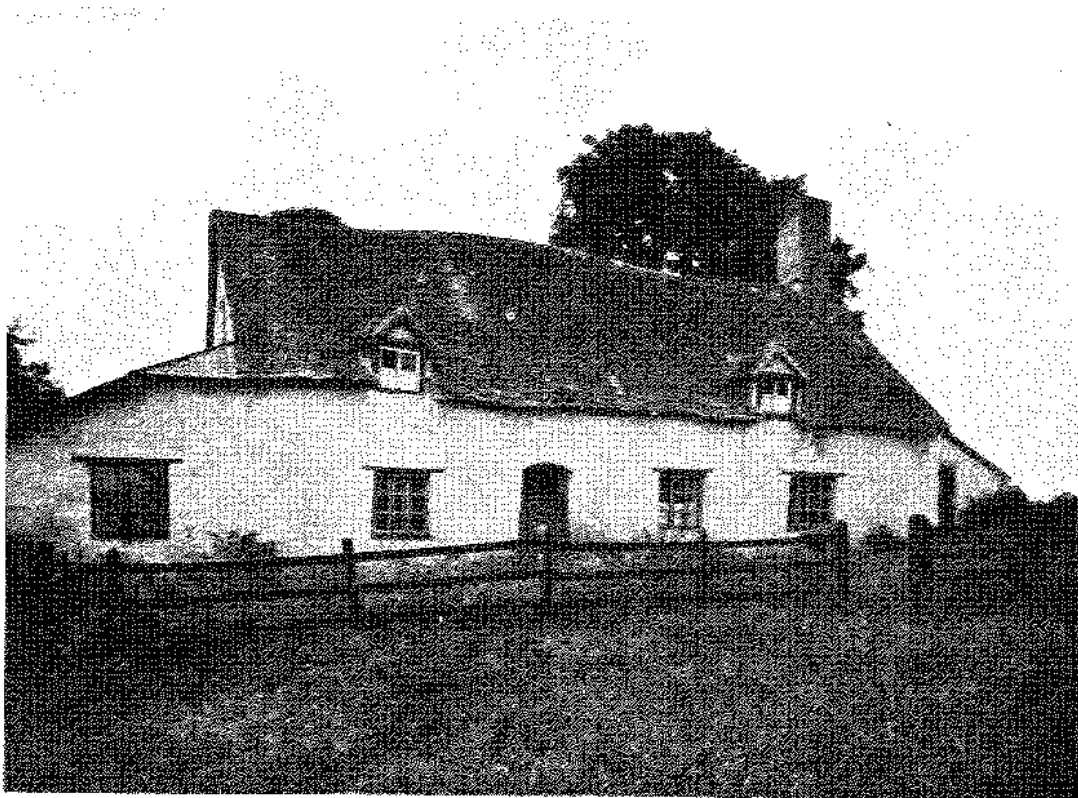


Fig. 3.—Plas Ucha from the North.

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.

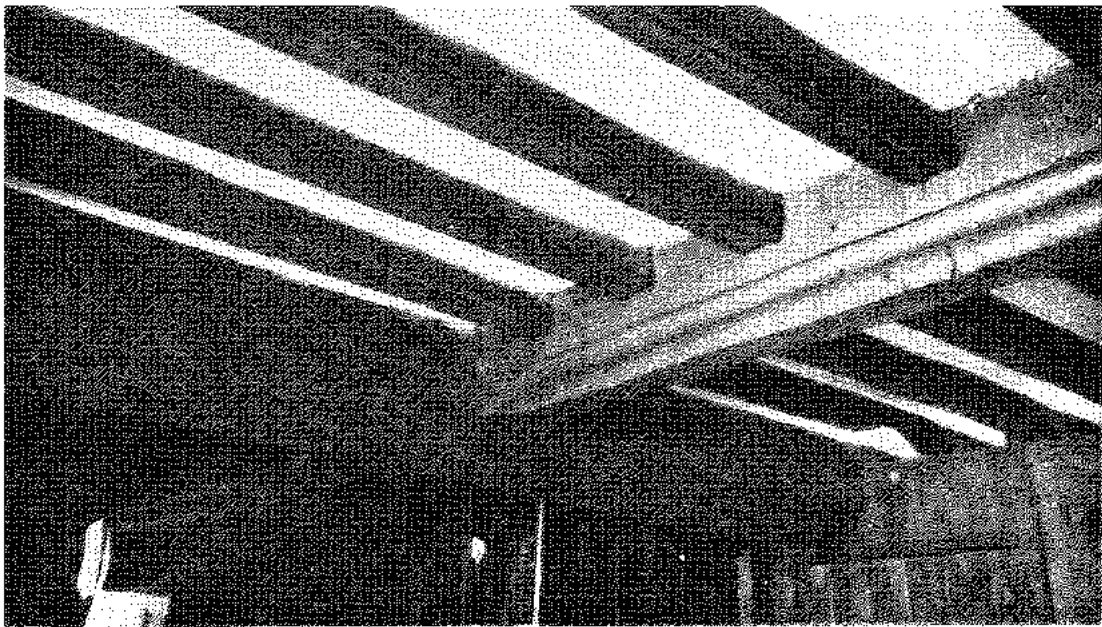


Fig. 4.—Plas Ucha. Beams of Inserted Floor.

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 sper 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

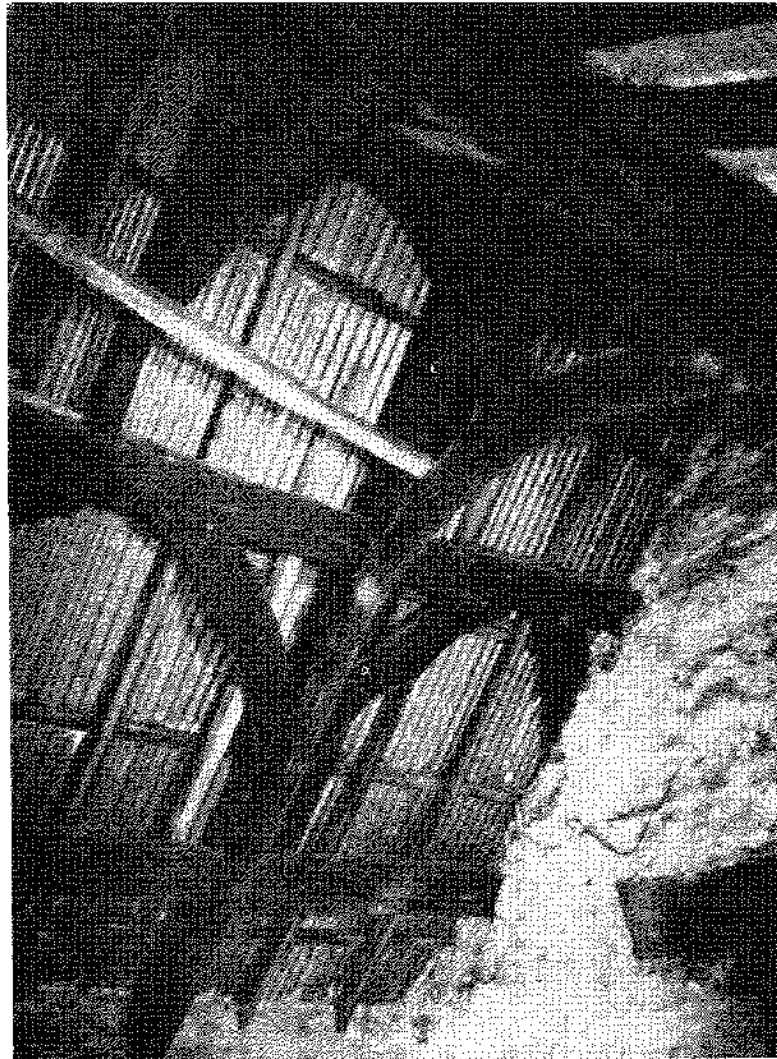


Fig. 6.—Plas Ucha. Secondary Roof Truss.

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 speres 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

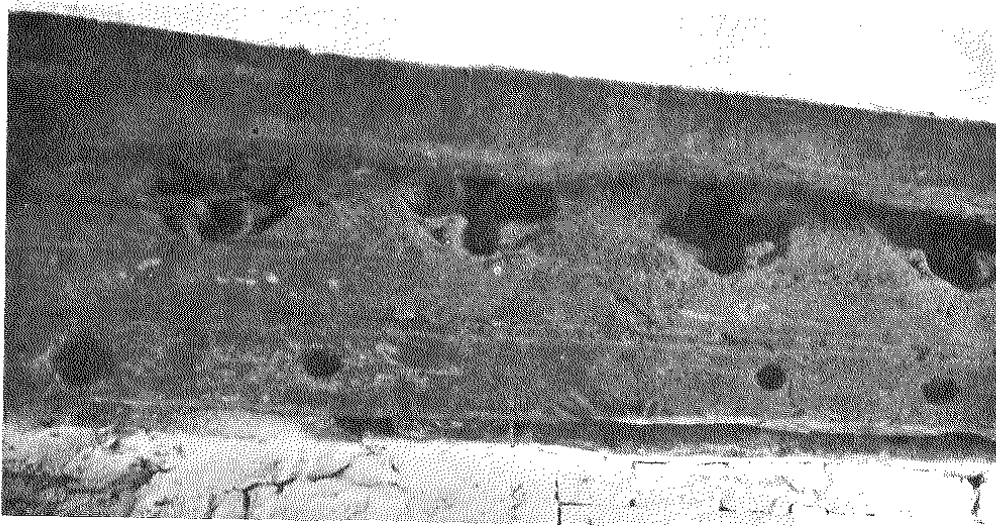


Fig. 7.—Plas Ucha. Decorated Beam Inserted between Speres.

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.¹

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.² 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.

¹ 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.

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

Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society, 1964, published 1965.

PLAS-UCHA, LLANGAR, CORWEN

By Peter Smith and Ffrangcon Lloyd

SUMMARY

Plas-ucha is an almost complete example of an early Welsh house. It consisted of an exceptionally large service area, cross-passage, hall and room beyond, probably a parlour, all in one range. After careful examination it was clear that the present stone walls and structural framework were substantially original and of a single build although this had been questioned. Three mediaeval window frames were found in the walls and parts of the open hearth under the present floor. The roof structure proved of especial interest, a main framework of cruck-couples with intermediate spere, collar-beam and louver-trusses, all carrying king-post and ridge. The quality of the work is exceptionally good and the extensive use of the ovolo-moulding combined with certain other structural features suggests an early date, perhaps late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. The house can claim to belong to a small group of halls, the cradle of domestic architecture in North Wales.

Plas-ucha was clearly of gentle status, a status it long retained judging from the quality of the sixteenth-century alterations (involving the destruction of the room beyond the hall, the insertion of a floor over the hall, and the addition of a chimney). It was still listed by Edward Llwyd, ca. 1707, amongst the houses of the gentry in Llangar.¹ Since then, alas, it declined into two labourers' cottages, and now abandoned is a near total ruin.

Plas-ucha in the Merioneth parish of Llangar near Corwen was first described by L. Monroe when it was still inhabited.² Its present empty and derelict condition invited re-examination in the hope that a little probing might resolve some of the problems which Monroe encountered.

The house stands on a low hill in the Dee Valley. Though built on gently rising ground, it is sited more-or-less along the contour,

¹ Edward Llwyd, *Parochialia* (ed. R. H. Morris), II, p. 56.

² L. Monroe, "Plas Ucha", *Arch. Camb.*, 1933, pp. 81-87.

so that there is only a slight fall from the upper to the lower end, and not up and down the slope as most early Welsh houses.³

The building consists of a long rectangle. The stone rubble walls had three doorways with shaped doorheads, one four-centred and two three-centred, and a number of window openings. The slate roof covering was much decayed.

Inside it was not difficult to see that, as Monroe had stated, here were the service area, passage, and hall, of a substantial mediaeval house. However, as our examination proceeded under the ideal conditions of total dereliction, it became clear that the remains were greater than even Monroe had supposed. Most of the walls and all the roof were of a single design and construction and mediaeval. The sixteenth-century rebuild had been confined to the insertion of a floor and the construction of the west gable with chimneys on a new alignment.

We begin our study with a detailed account of the roof structure as most of our interpretation of the building depends on it. The main framework seems to have consisted of five cruck trusses labelled A B C D E and F on the drawing, A, B, and F no longer surviving, B and F easily, and A somewhat more problematically inferred. These cruck couples were set out in bays 13 feet—15 feet wide and about 19 feet 6 inches across. Interposed between them, in the hall only, are two intermediate trusses of differing design labelled (1) and (2) on the drawing, and one louver truss, the latter a very rare survival.

Of the three surviving cruck trusses, truss C was the most ornate as befitted its position as the main truss over the hall. It also furnished conclusive proof of the cruck construction. The foot on the south side of the couple has been cut away in a late repair, but on the north a fall in masonry revealed in its entirety, bedded about 1 foot 6 inches above floor level. The back face of the

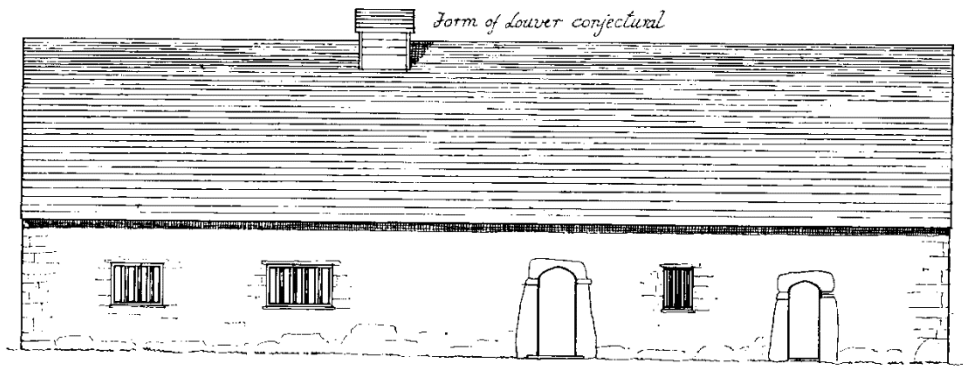
³ The up and downhill siting was first noticed by Sir Cyril and Lady Fox in connection with earthworks on Margam mountain. These consisted of platforms arranged at right angles to the contours, presumed to be the foundations of early dwellings (see "Forts and Farms on Margam Mountain, Glamorgan", *Antiquity*, VIII, 1934). This stimulating paper led to much study of the subject, and it has become clear that this is the commonest form of siting whether of ruined or surviving houses before the seventeenth century when under the influence of the Renaissance the now usual siting along the contour began to be preferred. Exceptions before the seventeenth century are uncommon and should be noted.

cruck was rough but the sides and inner face were smoothly finished with an ovolo moulding on each arris stopped about 1 foot 0 inch above the foot but disappearing as the cruck emerged from the wall. It was apparent the moulding had gone because the inner face of the cruck had been cut back, probably to increase the headroom, when the upper floor was later inserted. Our discovery of a fragment of ovolo-moulded face on the opposite couple buried in the plaster confirmed our conjecture that the whole cruck soffit must originally have been ovolo moulded. The truss was jointed by a collar-beam on which were mounted four steeply raking studs with a king-post between them, the latter with ovolo-mouldings identical with those found on the blade buried in wall and plaster. The king-post carried the square ridge to which it was connected with sophisticated joinery more easily understood from our drawing than explained in writing.

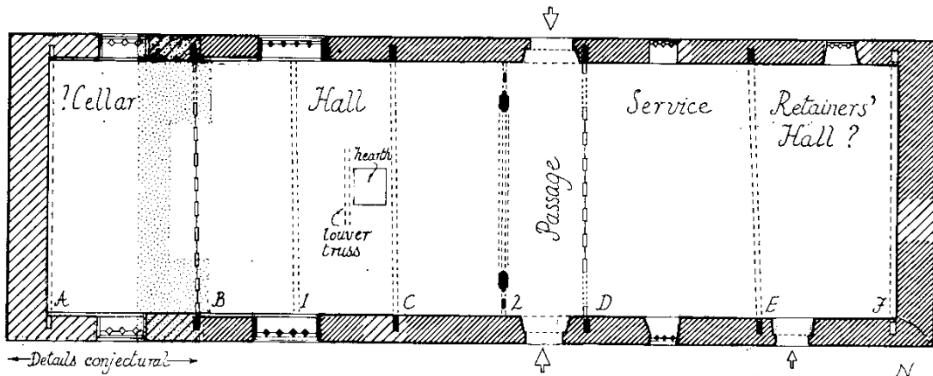
The second surviving cruck truss D standing below the cross-passage is a particularly massive piece of work with two collars and a tie, the latter destroyed. The upper collar supports a king-post which is braced to the ridge on the passage side only. The truss housed a post-and-panel partition of which many of the posts still exist. The panels have gone. The 2 inches square mortises in the collars between the posts are unlike the usual round augur holes for the rods of the wattle reinforcement of a daub infilling. These only occur in what are clearly later modifications to the building, the infilling of the originally open spere-truss. A likely infilling is packed clay reinforced by 2-inch square posts set in the mortises.

The last surviving member of the main framework truss E is now filled in with modern masonry infilling and only the face and upper edge is visible. The siting of the augur-holes suggests that it was jointed with a tie and two collars similar to truss C, but it is impossible to determine whether these contained a partition or not.

Clear evidence that there was a further bay is to be found in the housings for windbraces on both sides of the upper surface of the truss, which shows that the lower part of the house was in two full bays, and that the present lean-to arrangement is a late and degenerate modification.



South Elevation



Plan

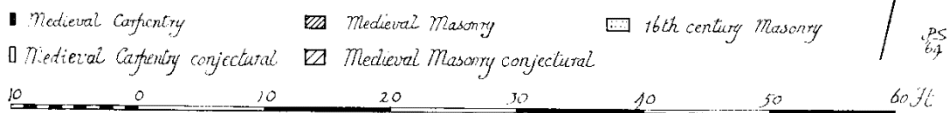


FIG. 1. Plas-Ucha

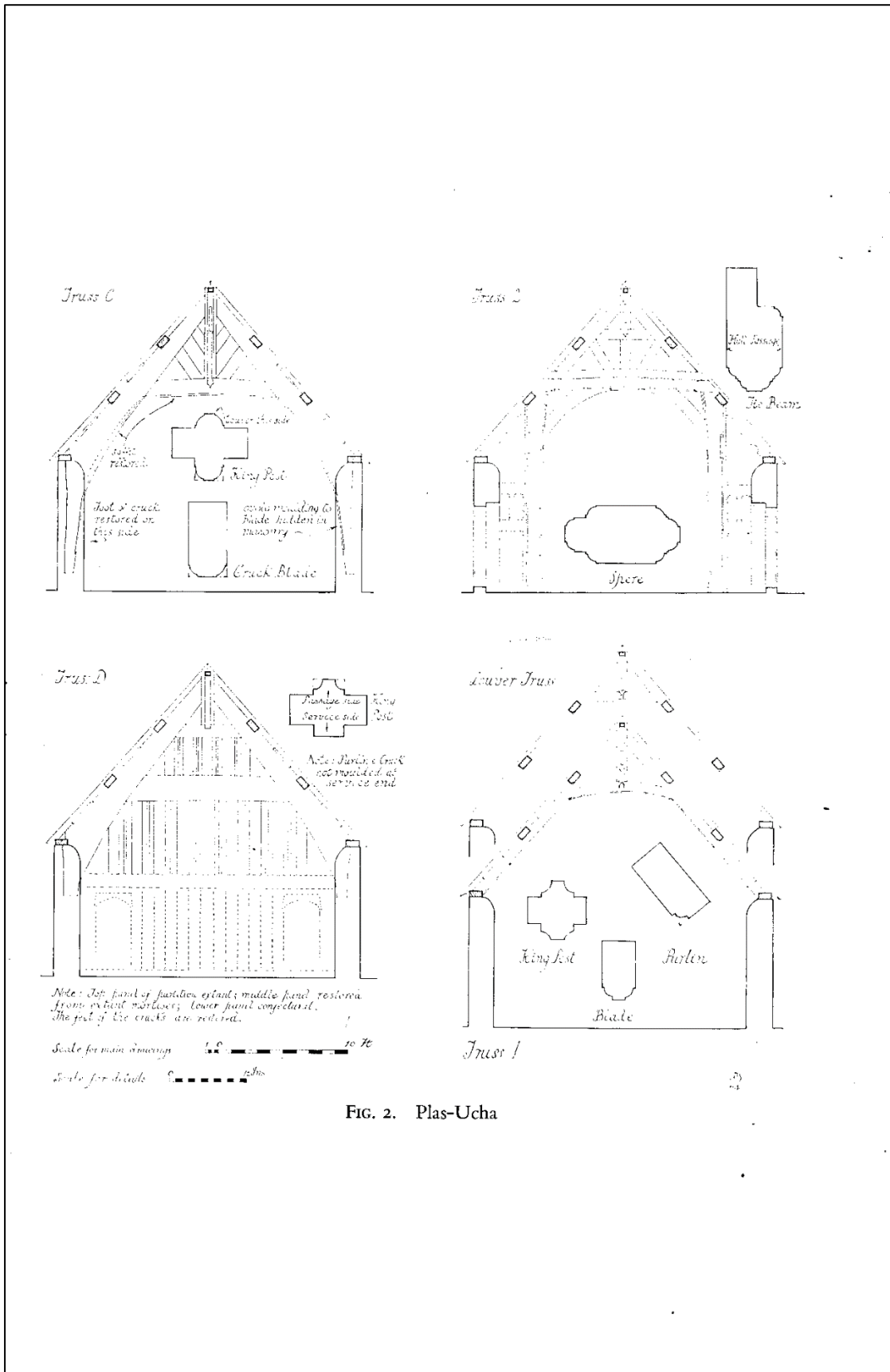


FIG. 2. Plas-Ucha

There remain in the hall the two intermediate trusses, the simple collar truss (1) and the elaborate spere (2). The collar truss has the ovolo moulded soffit which we have already surmised in truss C. The ovolo moulding also decorated the soffit and a double-ovolo the speres of truss (2) and although the upper part of the truss has no ornamental work of note there can be no doubt that it is of the same age and build as the lower part as the tie which joins the two together is in fact fashioned out of a single piece of timber, even though it has the appearance on the passage side of being made out of two.

Perhaps the rarest surviving feature is the louver truss, incidentally a key link in the interpretation of the building. The louver stands half way between truss (1) and truss B. Basically it consists of two rafters enlarged at the upper end to form a collar beam truss, but resting on the purlins just like a rafter.

Both of the intermediate trusses and the louver are jointed to the ridge by king post and brace, although there is naturally no ridge brace on one side of the louver truss as the ridge is here broken, a fact which enabled us to identify the function of this small truss. Clearly the louver truss carried some superstructure but of its design no structural evidence has survived.

The remaining parts of the roof are the purlins, windbraces, ridge, and rafters, the greater part of which still survived. The purlins are set out in long lengths. Indeed there could hardly be a better example of through-purlin construction than the two purlins on the south side which seem to be fashioned from a single piece of timber from truss E to truss B. In the hall and passage the purlins are finished with ovolo mouldings on the lower inner face, stopped at each truss with the moulding returned on the stop. Each purlin is braced to the truss by wind braces, cusped in the hall, plain over the service bays. The ridge is square in section notched over each of the king post trusses, but braced to them over the hall only.

Of the three surviving pairs of cruck trusses, only the open truss of the hall carried down to near ground level. The feet of the two closed trusses seem to have rested only a short distance below the wall-plate, presumably because the outward thrust was considered sufficiently retained by the tie-beams. It has been

suggested by H. Brooksby that intermediate truss (1) was in the form of a collar-beam rather than a cruck because of the need to clear the window below.

The rafters are cogged over the purlins and notched over the wall-plate which they oversail terminating in tapered ends similar to those we have since noticed among the ruined timbers of Pen-y-bryn, Llansilin; the Ship Inn, Ruthin (destroyed this year), and Upper Lunebrook, Wigmore, Herefordshire. The attempt to secure the rafters has not however been entirely successful, and most of these on the northern slope of the roof have slipped, pushing out the wall plate and the N. Wall. This failure has been the main cause of the structural deterioration of the building.

From these structural remains it was clear that here was the hall and service room, or pair of service rooms of a mediaeval house. The hall and probably the service rooms as well had been single storeyed when built and open to the roof. The floor over the hall was clearly an insertion though of high quality as Monroe's drawings show. The floor over the service area was of very poor construction, and probably late. All apparent inconsistencies in roof construction could be explained in terms of either later damage or of use, and we were not able to agree with Monroe's hesitant suggestion that there was in the roof two periods of construction. As previously indicated the ovolo moulding was to be found on all major structural members in the hall. The absence of the ovolo in the service area, the simpler form of the windbraces, and the absence of ridge braces in the lower end of the house seemed all easily explicable as being the result of a more economical finish in the socially inferior part of the building. The survival of the louver showed quite conclusively that the whole roof was mediaeval in date, as a louver would not have been built after the sixteenth-century modification involving wall fireplaces and an inserted first floor.

The second of Monroe's suggestions that the walls were secondary, stone rebuilding replacing a timber framed wall, we were first inclined to accept. The existence of one or two black and white houses in the neighbourhood and our previous knowledge of a number of timber-walled mediaeval halls in north-east Wales were points in its favour, as also the curiously unfinished

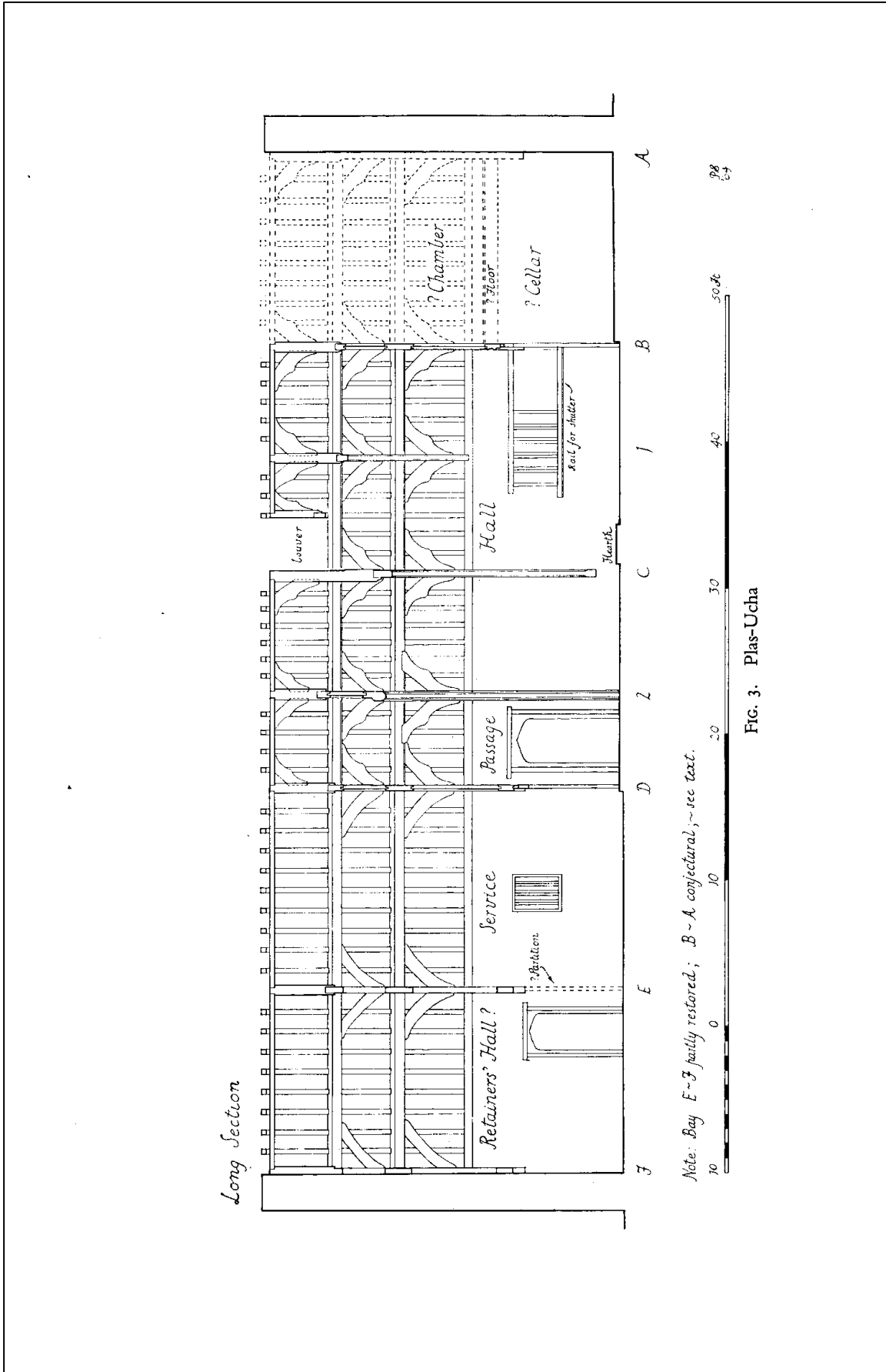


FIG. 3. Plas-Ucha

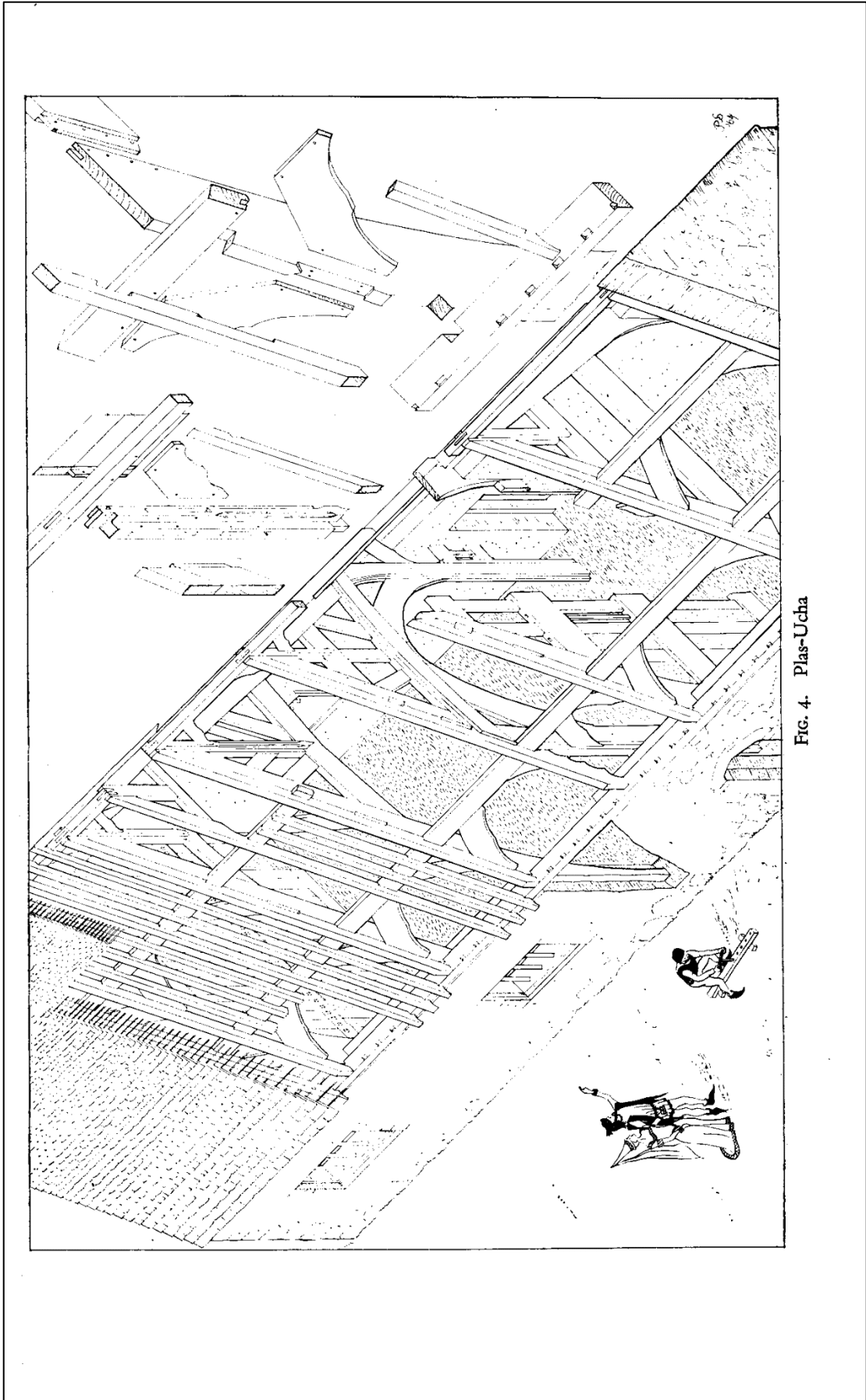


FIG. 4. Plas-Ucha

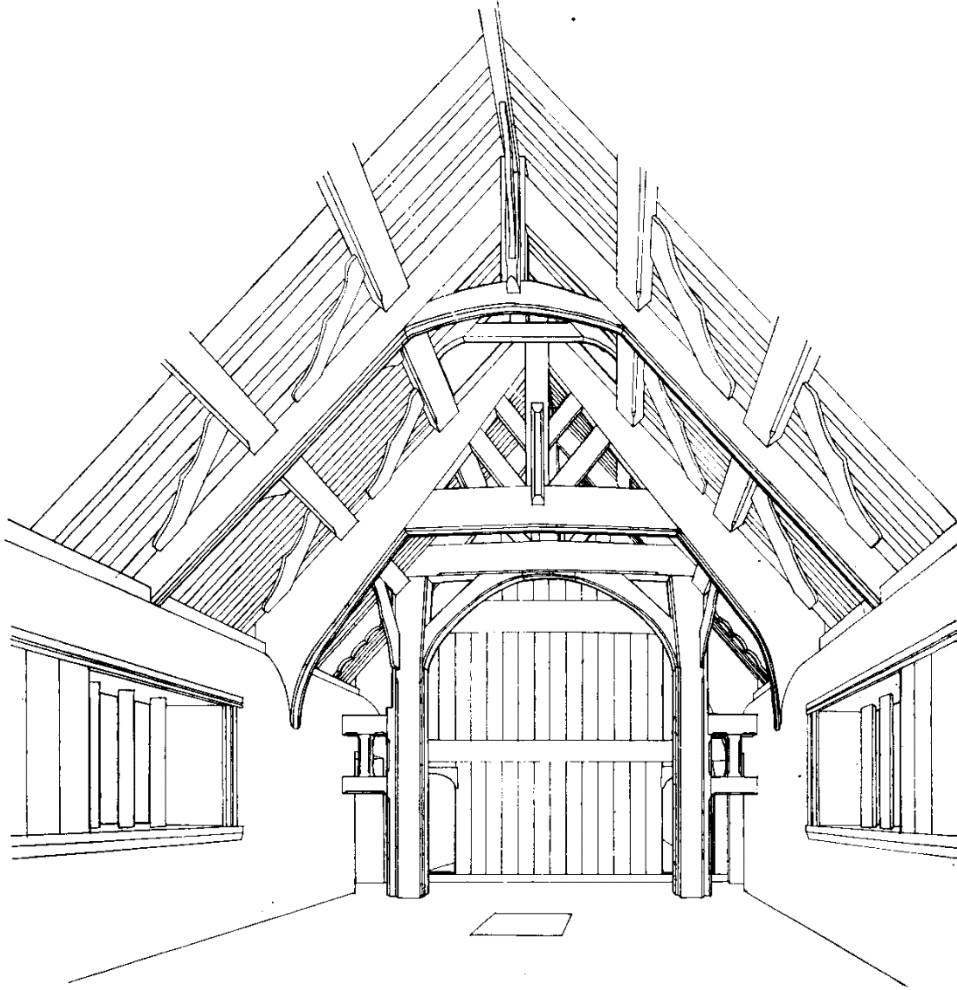


FIG. 5. Plas-Ucha

treatment of the side panels of the speres where they simply abut the stone walls. However it was very difficult to reconcile the collar-beam truss with any timber walled building because of the difficulty there would have been of stopping the feet from spreading. The massive wall-plate which fitted the roof structure well had no mortises for any timber framed substructure. Finally the fall of the wall from the face and back of truss B revealed a finish inconsistent with a light timber wall. It was rough at the

back and had no housings for spurs to tie in the wall and wall-plate as are always employed in cruck-framed timber-walled buildings. It was therefore clear that the wall had always been of stone.

The question remained whether the present walls replaced earlier stone walls, or were in fact the original walls. We found conclusive evidence for the latter view. If these were not the original walls then it seemed at least likely that the wall-plate would have been disturbed when the walls were rebuilt, and the wall-plate could hardly have been replaced without disturbing the rafters. However the rafters are all notched over the wall-plate as is the louver-truss and appear not to have been moved. It is moreover most unlikely that the latter would have been replaced in a sixteenth-century reconstruction as the wall fireplaces then added made it obsolete. The whole roof structure and wall-plate appeared mediaeval in date.

It was just possible to imagine that the exceptionally stout wall-plate had been shored up while the walls were rebuilt beneath it. However a final indication that the side walls were substantially original came from an examination of the two hall windows nearest the present end wall, an examination which incidentally threw much light on the original layout of the upper part of the building. Cutting away the plaster round both windows showed that the original box framework for a pre-glazing wooden-mullioned window. Such a window could as far as we knew be sixteenth century in date, and in fact a box-framed window was built into a Flintshire hall as late as 1589. However an integral part of the frame were grooves for sliding shutters and these grooves, embedded in wall ran well beyond the face of the present end wall. The windows therefore clearly antedated the chimney, and they and the walls were part of the original structure. A further original window was found in the south wall of the service area next to the doorway.

An examination of the north wall showed a clear straight joint between it and the west wall, as might have been expected as it was obvious the fireplace was secondary, but there was no break where one might have expected where the fireplace abutted the original end wall had this survived. It was clear that the end

wall, fireplaces, and chimney had been rebuilt together. This suggested that the sixteenth-century end wall was not on the line of the original end wall. Confirmation of this could be found in the siting of truss B. Though truss B has been destroyed its position can be located with precision from the surviving windbraces. It stands behind the inner face of the present end wall, but about 4 feet forward of the outer face. As the original walls are 2 feet thick, this suggests that there was not originally a masonry wall in this position at all, but that the house formerly extended further as Monroe suggested. The present quatrefoil enriched and ovolo-moulded beam now reset between the speres must as Monroe contends have been part of a partition above the dais. No other use can be found for it. Its rough finish at the back suggests it abutted a floor beam an indication that the upper bay was storeyed. Monroe's suggestion that the upper part consisted of a wing seemed more doubtful as excavation revealed no trace of a wall at right angles to the hall. We have therefore assumed that the extension took the form of another bay in the same range and have surmised a further somewhat conjectural cruck couple A on our drawing.

The only feature which might yet be recovered was the hearth. In Evans "Tour" (1798) it is stated that in the chimneyless cottages of Caernarvonshire the opening in the roof was not directly over the fire lest it be extinguished by the rain.⁴ Our hunch that this might also have been the mediaeval practice was falsified by the spade. A few slabs of blackened slate indicated the hearth directly under the louver opening. This must therefore have been covered by some superstructure so that the smoke escaped by rain-proof vents.

Though designed mainly on orthodox lines Plas-ucha did have unusual features. The two-bay service area, whether embracing one room or two, was exceptionally large, and the separate external door apart from the cross-passage unorthodox. However, this doorway, only 2 feet 6 inches wide, and narrower in fact than the 3 feet 0 inches doorways to the passage, showed that the

⁴J. Evans, *Letters written during a tour through North Wales in the year 1798 and at other times*, edn. 1804, p. 161.

service area must have been purely domestic in character, a deduction which throws some doubt on one of the author's suggestions on the original use of the two-bay lower room in the not dissimilar Hafod Ysbytty, Llanffestiniog, Merioneth.⁵ A large service area need not indicate a room connected with the farm rather than the house.

C. A. R. Radford has suggested that the lower bay of the "service end" of the hall might have been a retainers' hall on analogy with Tretower Court. This could explain the second doorway leading perhaps to an outside kitchen since vanished, and is in keeping with the social standing of the house established by L. A. S. Butler's historical note appended below.

Plas-ucha is yet another example of fine quality cruck building in Wales, the aristocratic origin of which has recently received further confirmation from the late R. A. Cordingley's demonstration of its use in Stokesay Castle Hall as early as *circa* 1300.⁶ Plas-ucha roof, though smaller, is in many ways more ornate and complex than Stokesay which lacks the ovolo-mouldings, king posts, ridge- and windbraces, and intermediate collar- and spere-trusses. However, the arch braces to the collar at Stokesay, a very common feature in mediaeval and sixteenth-century north Welsh roof carpentry, are absent from Plas-ucha. A likely similarity to Stokesay is the presumed use of clay lump infilling in the interstices of the partition truss and the absence of grooves or auger holes for wattle reinforcements in the first phase of building.

A closer parallel in scale is Plas Cadwgan, Rhostyllen, Wrexham, which is also an ovolo-moulded cruck and spere-truss hall and although the design of the speres is rather different the construction above the collar, king-posts braced to the ridge is remarkably similar. The ovolo-moulding is also found on the timbers of the aisled hall, Hafod, Rhiwlas, near Llansilin, on the

⁵ P. Smith, "The Long-house and the Laithe House", *Culture and Environment*, ed. I. Ll. Foster and L. Alcock, pp. 427-428.

⁶ R. A. Cordingley, "Stokesay Castle, Shropshire: The Chronology of its Buildings", *The Art Bulletin (U.S.A.)*, pp. 91-106. This paper is a reply to J. T. Smith, "Stokesay Castle", *Journal of the Royal Archaeological Institute*, 1957, pp. 211-214, in which it is suggested that Stokesay was originally an aisled building.

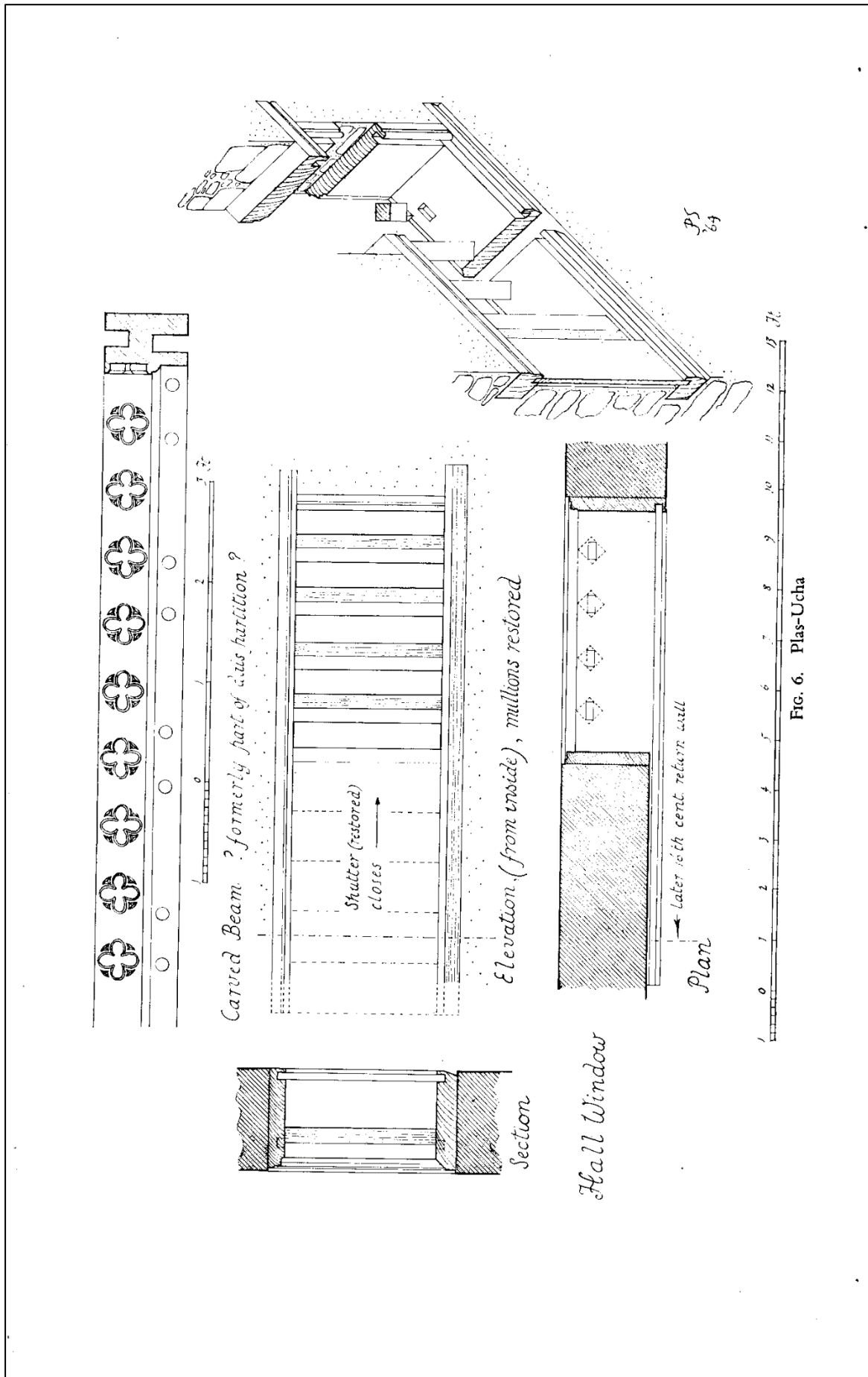


FIG. 6. Plas-Ucha

sphere trusses of Lower Berse, Bersham, near Wrexham, and on the main king-post and collar beam truss at Hafotty in Anglesey. The latter house was considered by the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments as likely to be fourteenth century a date suggested by Monroe for Plas-ucha.⁷

Whatever the precise date of this house it is clear that Plas-ucha belongs to the *incunabula* of the Welsh House. It was recently visited by the Ancient Monuments Board who recommended that the ancient timber fabric deserved preservation either *in situ* or elsewhere. It is to be hoped that if preservation *in situ* which would be preferable, should prove impossible, the timbers will be saved for re-erection in a museum, ideally the Welsh Folk Museum, in Cardiff. For very few houses of this age and type survive in Wales, and as the future of the only close and reasonably complete parallel Plas Cadwgan, does not look encouraging, Plas-ucha is not a structure lightly to be lost.