

FLORE'S HOUSE, OAKHAM, RUTLAND

by

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This house, traditionally associated with the Flore family, stands on the south side of the High Street, about midway between the end of Church Street and Market Street. It faces east, and is the only house in the High Street standing at right angles to the frontage. Its early date, the character of the original design and the association with an important local family, together justify a detailed description.¹

The house now (1973) consists of a hall range of $1\frac{1}{2}$ storeys with a two-storey cross-wing at north and south ends. A leanto extension on the north side, shown in a photograph of c.1890, was removed in 1914 for road widening. The northern cross-wing has for a long time been in separate occupation, and since 1971 in separate ownership. Beyond the modern kitchen to the south of the southern cross-wing, other single-storey modern buildings, which have not been planned, continue for a further 35 ft. or so. The property extends to South Street to the south, a total length of 207 ft.²

The oldest part of the house is a hall, built with stone walls and originally open to the roof; it has 3 short bays and is 27 ft. in length internally. The building continued at the north end for at least one more bay which was removed when the existing cross-wing was built; the crown-post at truss D (Fig. 2) was braced four ways, the brace to the north having been taken out and the collar purlin cut off 2 ft. beyond the crown-post. The stone wall at the south was certainly the end of the structure, since the crown-post at truss A has no brace, or trace of one, on its south face. The easterly opening through the south wall may be original, though it is quite plain, for the recess with a pointed head and a medieval laver (Plate 3A) is more or less midway between the opening and the back wall of the house: the opening perhaps gave access to a detached kitchen and other service facilities to the south. There was apparently one entrance doorway only, and no structural screens passage; but slight differences between trusses B and C suggest that the latter was designed to be over the centre of the hall, and the south bay would thus have been regarded as an entrance area. On the garden side there remains (Plate 2B) the head and mullions of an original window, in oak, probably originally of six lights, with reticulated openings at the head. In the east wall of the hall, an apparent lintel, whose lower edge is chamfered for a length of 5 ft. 5 ins., suggests that there was an identical window on this side; if this is so, it is clear that the west window has been reset at a lower level.

Of the original roof, three trusses (A, B and C) survive unaltered (see Fig. 2). Truss A, against the south wall, is of aisled form, the posts springing

from stone corbels, plain but for chamfered edges, their tops 12 ft. 6 ins. above the ground. The posts have jowled heads. The short crown-post is plain, with concave braces up to the collar and the collar purlin. Trusses B and C have base-crucks which can be followed downwards as far as the present first floor, where their inner faces are slightly behind the present wall surface. It is unlikely that they descend much further; that is, their feet must be about 11 ft. from the ground. Although the inner faces of the blades are curved until the arched braces take off, above that their inner and outer faces are straight and parallel.³ The only decoration consists of a slight chamfer to the posts, the tie beam and the arched braces, but the inner wall plates, most of which survive, are moulded and stopped at each truss. Truss C (not figured) differs in having a half pyramid stop to the chamfer on the blades, about 2 ft. above the level of the bedroom floor; the arched braces leave spandrels large enough for the insertion of short vertical studs between braces and tie beam. Between the main trusses, each pair of common rafters is arch-braced to the collar and original ashlar pieces are visible in the north bedroom. The roof is generally somewhat smoke-blackened, but there is no evidence for the position of an original central hearth. It will be noted that when the hall was chambered over and a fireplace built for the ground floor room, it was placed with its back to the cross-passage then constructed.

The house has been variously dated to the 13th century (V.C.H.), the late 13th century (M. E. Wood) and the early 14th century (Pevsner), and these variants illustrate the difficulties of dating particular features. The entrance doorway (Plate 2A) has two orders; there are filleted shafts, without bases but with moulded capitals. The pointed head has matching filleted rolls separated by a deep hollow absent from the jambs, and the head does not fit the jambs accurately. The hood mould has head stops. Is it possible that the shafts are of the 13th century, and that the head of the doorway is c.1375—a date suggested by the female head-dress of the left-hand stop? The laver (Plate 3A) has three rather crudely carved floral bosses which seem rather of 14th than 13th century date. The reticulated tracery in the hall window suggests a date not earlier than c.1340.

At this point the traditional association with the Flore family becomes relevant.⁴ William Flore, the first known member of the family and father of the Speaker, was controller of the works at Oakham Castle from 1373 to 1380; that is during the short period 1372-1385 in which it was in the hands of the Crown. A modest amount of maintenance and new building work was done during this time.⁵ It is tempting to believe that William Flore, who was a man of substance and was still alive in 1390, either built or effectively rebuilt the house, or else that it might be credited to his son, William, who flourished from 1378 to 1427.⁶

In the 15th century, the house was enlarged by the construction of a timber-framed cross-wing at the north end, jettied at the front. The character of the framing was largely concealed or removed in subsequent alterations. The wing contained a large parlour and a chamber over, both probably unheated. This involved an ingenious reconstruction of the north end truss (D) of the hall. A second tie-beam, visible in the chamber over the hall, was

inserted under the arcade plates (Fig. 2, Truss D); it passes beyond the slope of the hall roof at each end because, no doubt, it then becomes the wall-plate to the roof of the new wing. Below it are posts, curved braces and studs which constitute the only visible evidence for the walling of the new wing and indicate its bay system.⁷ The roof survives intact and consists of two main bays; the main truss has an angled tie-beam with curved angle braces to the principal rafters, and curved windbraces rising to the purlins (Plate 1B). The most distinctive feature of the wing is the east window of the parlour. It is of stone, and flanked by buttresses whose relation to the jetty suggests that stone walls, buttresses and window are secondary, but the mouldings to the window frame (Fig. 2) are c.1500, and therefore perhaps part of the rebuilding. In the pedigree of the Flore family, the senior branch is described as of Whitwell after c.1500; this wing may be the work of the junior branch to which the house then came, and which sold it "*temp. Elizabeth*".⁸

The hall range was improved, at a date perhaps c.1600, though there is no dateable evidence for the work; a cross-passage was formed and a doorway made at the west end, a fireplace built backing on to the passage and a staircase made in the south-east corner of the new hall leading to the chamber now formed over it. The south cross-wing with its slight jetties at first floor garret and eaves level is probably later than these changes in the hall range. Its framing is nowhere visible. The wing has no closely dateable features, but a *terminus ante quem* is provided by an incised design in the plaster floor of the chamber; here, within a double-framed square, are the outlines of a pair of shoes, as of a small child, and the date 1703. The ground floor room no doubt served as a kitchen, presumably replacing only at this late date a detached kitchen. In the 19th century this room became a dining room when another kitchen was built to the south. In modern times various other alterations, including both extensions and subdivisions have been made; these do not require comment, except for the casing of the ground floor walls of the south cross-wing, the refacing in a soft local marlstone of the hall range, the alterations of its windows and the rendering of the framing of the upper parts of the cross-wings. The north wall of the north wing was rebuilt in stone in 1914.

NOTES

1. It is described briefly in VCH *Rutland* II (1935), 5-6, and the association with the Flore family accepted on the authority of James Wright's *Hist. and Ant. of Rutland* (1684), 97. The character of the construction was first noted by J. T. Smith, and it was listed among halls with a base-cruck roof in *Ant. J.* LII (1972), 160. On the map of Oakham in *Arch. J.* CXII (1955), 182, it can be picked out immediately below the first E of the word Street; now 34 High Street, it stands west of a Congregational chapel.
2. I am greatly indebted to the lessee, Lt.-Col. R. B. Marshall, and to Mrs. Marshall, for their kindnesses to me and to Miss M. Bismanis, Mr. P. W. Dixon and Dr. P. Strange who helped in the survey. I am also indebted to the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for photographing the house and allowing me to reproduce some of the photographs.
3. The roof is in fact another example of the combination of base-crucks with stone walls already described in *Ant. Journal* LII (1972), 147-8.
4. Professor J. S. Roskell has assembled the evidence about the family in "Roger Flore of Oakham, Speaker of the Commons in 1416, 1419 and 1422", in *Trans.*

Leics. Arch. Soc. XXXIII (1957), 36-44. The following references to the Flores can be found in this source

5. H. M. Colvin (ed.), *History of the King's Works* (1963), II, 765-6
6. He is first mentioned as executor of the Will of a vicar of Oakham, who died in 1378; A. Gibbons, *Early Lincoln Wills*, 65
7. At some subsequent time, and presumably in the 17th century, one stud was removed, and another reduced in width, to make a doorway from the chamber into the wing. Since alterations within the wing in 1971 the roof space is accessible only from the roof of the hall range. It has been photographed but not surveyed
8. J. Wright, *op. cit.*, 97, 136