

# A Medieval Hall and Cross-Wing House in Queniborough

*by Martin Cherry and Peter Messenger*

## INTRODUCTION

86, Main Street, Queniborough is an early-fifteenth century timber-framed house lying to the north of the principal village street about 120 metres west of the parish church. The object of this short article is to draw attention to the building's medieval construction, part of which — the wing — has been firmly dated by dendro-chronological analysis to the early 1430s, and to the subsequent development of the house and its associated out-buildings.

## THE MEDIEVAL BUILDING

The original house conformed to a common medieval plan type consisting of an open hall range (aligned east-west and running parallel to the street) with a cross-wing to the east. (Plate 1). The tree-ring dating analysis was unable to provide the age of the hall range (because it is not built of oak); however, it is highly probable that this is coeval with the wing. If so, the building is noteworthy in that it combines in a single-phase construction two separate units using different framing techniques, namely a hall range of full cruck construction and a wing of box-frame or, more specifically, of post-and-truss type. In Leicestershire, these different building traditions exist side by side,<sup>1</sup> but there is very little evidence as to how, if ever, the two traditions evolved into a single hybrid. Here we are suggesting that the two forms of construction were suited to different functions within a household and were comfortably fused into a single dwelling. The early history of the building is obscure but it is almost certain that it formed part of one of the medieval freehold tenements of the manor of Queniborough.

**The hall range.** This originally consisted of a one-bay hall with the service end, containing the cross-passage, to the west. Much of the evidence for the service end was obliterated when the building was extended westwards to connect with the neighbouring (but originally detached) cruck-framed house, now nos. 82-84, Main Street. It is possible that the service end was initially open to the roof and separately heated because the cruck truss which divides it from the hall (Fig. 1 marked A-A<sup>1</sup> on the plan), and which was always fully closed, is smoke blackened to both service and hall sides. However, the fact that the cruck blades and the saddle are chamfered and stopped to the service side only, implies the presence of a moderately high-status room, probably a solar over the services, and it seems likely that the sooting was caused by a brazier rather than by an open fire at ground floor level. The hall itself was open. Where original roof timbers survive they are smoke blackened and the infill material to the end partitions is heavily soot encrusted.<sup>2</sup> This infill is composed largely of straw, mud and dung (see Technical Note below). The hall abuts the framed side wall of the cross-wing (marked B-B<sup>1</sup> on the plan), and the roof space at this end of the hall is closed by a king-post and downward curved braces, all of which are set flush with the outer face of the wing wall-plate and securely tenoned and pegged into it.



Plate 1: *Hall from the street*

**The cross-wing.** This is of two equal bays of post and truss construction which originally had close studded panels. The sill is interrupted by the principal posts which are heavily jowled and rest on pad-stones. There are straight and concave braces as well as large tension braces on the side wall between hall and wing.<sup>3</sup> The roof is of the clasped purlin type with wind braces, supporting common rafters between the main trusses which have tie beams, collars and principal rafters. The principals of the central truss diminish above collar level only to thicken out quite markedly at the apex where they are tenoned and pegged. This central truss was closed through its entire height.

The north bay contained the stairs which were centrally placed (near to the position of the present stairs), the joists being tenoned into a trimmer (now removed). Blocked mortices on the underside of the joist marked C-C<sup>1</sup> on the plan indicate the site of the original outer (east) wall. The wing may have been heated by an external chimney stack, possibly of timber-framed construction, and set against this east wall, and the presence of a pre-existing structure at this point may explain the otherwise awkward and narrow lateral extension of the wing which necessitated the introduction of sprocketed rafters at this point.

#### CHRONOLOGY

Whilst carrying out sampling, the Nottingham University Tree Ring Dating Laboratory discovered that only the roof timbers over the cross-wing were made of oak.<sup>4</sup> The presence of bark on the underside of several of the timbers suggested that the felling date lay at the lower end of a range from 1427 to 1456, probably c.1430. Other characteristics of the

86, MAIN STREET, QUENIBOROUGH.

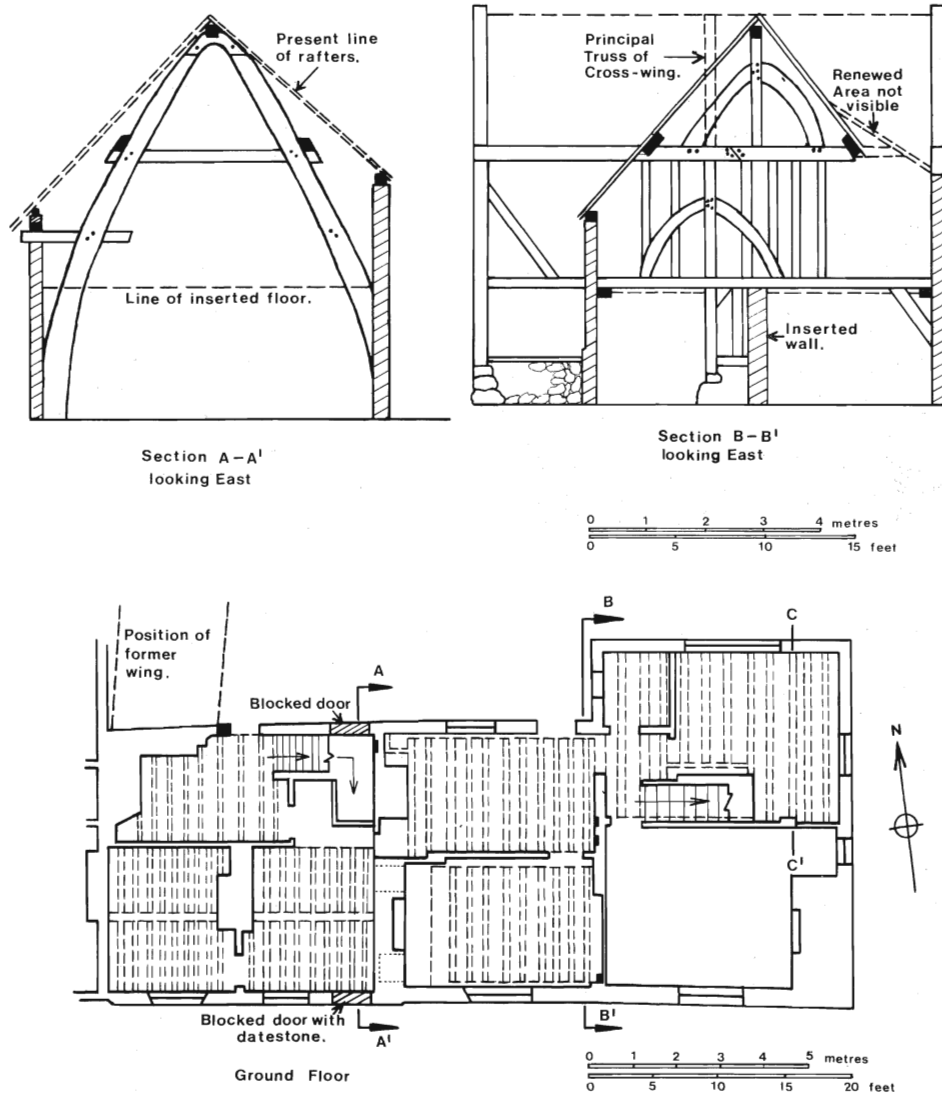


Figure 1: Plan of Hall

samples were highly consistent with a single felling date for the group of timbers in the cross-wing roof. Consequently, a building date early in the 1430s may be assumed, and the date of this structure will provide a tentative dating aid for analogous buildings in Leicestershire and the East Midlands.

Where a hall and cross-wing of different dates abut one to the other, one of two arrangements is likely to be found: either each unit is supported by a separate wall or, alternatively, the earlier structure is disrupted to accommodate the later building. It is reasonable to expect that, if in this instance the hall had been earlier than the wing, its end wall (or framed construction) would have been retained, albeit in a modified form, when the wing was added. However, there is no evidence for this; instead, the end wall is formed by the cross-wing structure. It is clear that the hall must have been built against a wing, and in order to assess whether or not the two were erected at the same time it is necessary to examine the junction of hall and wing.

Although only the roof is dated there is no doubt that it forms an integral part of the structure of the wing. The wing rafters sit securely in housings on the wall-plate that are purpose made to receive them and the wall-plate is an integral and unaltered part of the wing. The same wall-plate also supports the king-post and tension braces that close the roof space of the hall. These are flush to the outer face of the plate and have every appearance of being part of the original cross-wing but designed to carry the ridge piece and side-purlins of the cruck-framed hall. Examination of the hall and wing does not suggest any disruption of a pre-existing wing; on the contrary the timber work suggests the two parts to be coeval. In addition any renewal of the roof would have disturbed the relatively insubstantial, smoke blackened, infill to the east end wall of the hall but this survives intact. Two other points are suggestive although not conclusive: firstly, the timbers in the side wall of the wing show no indication of weathering and therefore must always have been internal; secondly, the king-post end of the hall is almost identical, in terms of width and height, to the cruck truss.

## DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, Leicestershire is generally regarded as a border region between different building traditions. Whilst the combination in an open hall range of a cruck-frame with closed box-frame partitions to either end is not unusual,<sup>5</sup> the juxtaposition in a single-build structure of cruck-framed hall range and box-framed wing is less common. It is not possible at present to know how houses of this sort were distributed throughout England. Dr Currie has discovered significant numbers in Oxfordshire and Berkshire, whereas fewer have been recorded in the West Midlands.<sup>6</sup> Whilst this might reflect the vagaries of post-medieval survival (for example it may be that a larger proportion of cruck-framed halls were demolished in the West than in the South Midlands), it may indicate that this type of building becomes increasingly rare towards the north west of the country. Doubtless further examples remain to be discovered (not least in Leicestershire).

Where different building traditions existed side by side, carpenters could avail themselves of either, or in the case of the Queniborough house, of both. The choice of technique was probably determined by the needs of the household. Where a single storey hall open to the roof was required, the most appropriate form of construction was the cruck-frame. Where a more commodious two storey wing was required a box-frame was far more suitable.<sup>7</sup> The presence of both techniques in this building reflects a certain versatility on the part of the craftsmen who erected it and adds weight to the argument that crucks were complementary to box-framed construction rather than alien to it.<sup>8</sup>

POST-MEDIEVAL DEVELOPMENT

Little is known of the early occupants of the building. It was apparently in the ownership of the Hardy family at the end of the seventeenth century and passed by marriage to William While who owned a farmstead in Birstall.<sup>9</sup> A century before this the first major alterations had already been made to the house with the insertion of a floor into the open hall. Judging from the detailing of the deeply chamfered ceiling beams this seems to have occurred in about 1600.

A timber-framed wing at the rear of the house (and originally attached to it) was built at about the same time. Two bays are still extant and, although it is impossible to determine the function of the building, it was storeyed and divided into separate bays by a close studded wall (with thin pieces of ironstone as the infill) and a stud partition originally filled with wattle and daub. The heavy square jowls of the posts are very similar to those found at number 80, Main Street, Queniborough.

The only addition William While seems to have made was the erection of a dovecote which originally stood to the rear of number 86. (Plate 2). Dated 1705 and bearing the initials WW the building was threatened by new development in 1985 and a decision was made to dismantle and re-erect it on a new site to the east of the church. This work was carried out by the Building Craft Unit, an M.S.C. Community Programme team supervised by the conservation staff of the County Council. The dovecote is built of brick on a



Plate 2: *Dovecote 1705*

low granite plinth with a Swithland Slate roof. It contains well over 600 nesting boxes. Medieval dovecotes were the property of the lord of the manor; however, by the end of the seventeenth century examples are known to have been built by freeholders usually with the permission of the lord of the manor.<sup>10</sup> Presumably this was the case in Queniborough for it was not until 1761/2 that the freedom to build a dovecote was granted to any freeholder on his own land or by a tenant with his landlord's permission.

William While died in 1728; he had already made a marriage settlement for his eldest son Thomas and so his land and property were left to his wife Anne. The inventories<sup>11</sup> of both the Queniborough and Birstall properties accompany William's will but neither describes the house. The total value of his property amounted to £438.3s.Od. Judging by the wills<sup>12</sup> made by Anne and Thomas, who both died in 1747, the two farms must have been split up with Anne having the estate in Birstall and Thomas that in Queniborough. Both Anne and her son Thomas While left their respective farmsteads to John While,<sup>13</sup> Thomas's brother, so that in 1747 the properties were re-united.

Thomas's initials appear above the blocked doorway on the Main Street elevation together with the date: TW 1730. This is the date of the final phase of development of the building when much of the original walling was replaced or refaced with brickwork on a rubble plinth. Parts of the timber framing remain visible but elsewhere, such as in the east wall of the cross-wing it was completely removed when the building was extended by several feet to incorporate a brick stack which probably replaced an earlier stack.

#### TECHNICAL NOTE

Smoke blackened wall infill from B-B<sup>1</sup>.

This material appeared to be a black, tarry, sandy lump with straw impressions. It did not dissolve in dilute acid, suggesting that it was not lime plaster. It did break down in dilute caustic soda, pointing to the presence of phenolic type compounds which are present in smoke. The evolution of ammonia at this stage suggested that an ammonium compound was present. This was probably animal dung, also suggested by the straw impressions. The resulting residue was sand and silt or clay. Summarising; this material was probably a plaster of mud and dung, including some straw, which had been intensely smoked. It was not possible to determine at this time whether coal or wood was used.

G.C. Morgan

#### Notes

1. R.A. Cordingley, 'British historical roof types and their members', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, NS, Vol. 9, 1961, 74 and Fig.1. Leicestershire is included in an 'Intermediate Zone' where the two traditions 'intermingle, are combined, or produce hybrids'
2. We are grateful to G.C. Morgan, Senior Curator, Department of Archaeology, University of Leicester, who carried out the examination of the infill
3. Similar 15th Century side wall framing is found at the Old Manor House, Enderby
4. The tree-ring dating carried out by the Nottingham University Laboratory established that only the purlins and principal rafters in the wing were of oak and one of the purlins in the hall. This latter sample together with two samples from the wing could not be dated. All the non-oak samples were undateable. We are extremely grateful to Robert Howard and his colleagues for undertaking this analysis
5. See in general the comments by J.T. Smith in 'Cruck Construction: A Survey of the Problems', *Medieval Archaeology*, 8 (1964), 119-51, and the numerous examples cited in Sir Cyril Fox and Lord Raglan, *Monmouthshire Houses, Part 1: Medieval* (1951), and P. Smith, *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* (1975), 78
6. C. Currie, *Harwell Houses to the Eighteenth Century: An Interim Gazetteer* (1987); *Victoria County History of Shropshire*, VIII, (1968), 171. We are grateful to Dr Currie for his observations on some of the ideas contained in this article

7. E. Mercer, *English Vernacular Houses*, (1975), 17-19
8. *Ibid.* 105
9. The authors are grateful to Gordon Bennett for this information. William While of Birstall married Anne Hardy, daughter of Thomas Hardy in the 1690s. The parish registers that survive indicate that they had at least seven children
10. This information was provided by Drs Jean and Peter Hansell; see their forthcoming book, *Doves and Dovecotes*
11. Leicestershire Record Office. Will and Inventory of William While, 1728, (referenced by name and year)
12. Leicestershire Record Office. Wills of Anne and Thomas While, 1747.

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