

Langley Priory

by Stephen P. Douglass

INTRODUCTION

This report represents the results of a structural and documentary survey of Langley Priory undertaken on behalf of the present owners Mr and Mrs J.B. Wagstaff. I would like to thank the owners for their interest and patience, Professor Maurice Barley for his invaluable advice and all of those others who offered assistance in the form of advice and help with the measured survey. Langley Priory is a remotely situated country house set in a fine landscaped park with lake, two miles south-west of Diseworth and three miles south west of Castle Donington. It was formerly in the West Goscote Hundred of Leicestershire now Derbyshire. The present house is built on or near the former site of a Benedictine nunnery.

BRIEF HISTORY

Langley Priory was founded about 1150 by William Pantulf, a descendant of William Pantulf companion to the Conqueror, and his wife Burgia, for Benedictine nuns. As Bishop Tanner writes 'William Pantulf and Burgia his wife, in the beginning of the reign of Henry II, or before, built a priory for Benedictine nuns here, to the honour of the blessed Virgin Mary' (Nichols 1804).¹ Pantulf also gave the nuns the church of Little Dalby with six oxgangs of land, the church of Somerby with one yard of land and tofts and crofts belonging to this. They were also given the whole of Langley wood, four bovates of land and a water-mill at Tonge.

William de Ferariis, the Earl of Nottingham and Derby, in about 1180, confirmed it to the nuns who apparently were brought from the priory of Farewell in Staffordshire founded by Bishop Roger de Clinton c.1140. Pope Alexander III refers to them in about 1185 when it appears that the nuns of Langley enjoyed the privileges of *Cisterciae* and so were exempt from tithes.

Pantulf was succeeded by his son William from whence the priory passed, by marriage of his daughter Isolda, to Robert Lord Tatershall (the second lord), confirmed as patron in the *Martriculus* of 1200, who died in 1213. Isolda remarried to William de Baskerville and confirmed to the nuns all that William had given them; the whole of Langley wood, a water-mill at Tonge with nine acres of land, four bovates of land, free common in the wood and pasture, and one virgate of land in Kettleby. At this time they had been granted also use of the church of Diseworth by Benedict of Diseworth and the church of Dalby from Robert of Leicester, its first vicar being Ralph of Lincoln.

During the thirteenth century Langley received further numerous gifts of land in Diseworth. In 1291 it was said to be worth £20.0s.9d. By this time the nuns were unable to maintain their claim to the exemption of their possessions from tithes and so were forced to pay tithes to Breedon Priory for a carucate of land held and cultivated by them within Breedon parish. It appears that at this time the nuns had the privilege of electing their own prioress and several of these are mentioned both in Nichols and in the Victoria County History.² These were as follows:

1229	Roesia
1229-30	Burgia, elected
1236-7	Isabel of Leicester, elected

1269	Juliane of Winchester appointed
1275	Alice of Tatyrstal
1276	Margaret of Leicester, elected
1284	Christine of Winchester, resigned 1294-5
1295	Amice de Burgh, confirmed
1302	Alice Giffard, elected
1306	Elizabeth of Caldwell, elected
1333	Joan of Outheby
1350	Matanye)
1355	Maud) Perhaps the same prioress
1355-1374	Margaret de Sulveye) under different names
1430	Margaret Salhowe
1441	Margaret Pole, resigned 1447-8
1447-8	Margaret Bellairs, elected, resigned 1485
1485	Anne Shafton, elected

In 1440 the priory was visited by Bishop Alnwick who found it inhabited by eight nuns, including the prioress and at this time the priory was £50 in debt. It seems that young girls were boarded and presumably taught by the nuns who maintained separate households in pairs but ate in the frater daily, and the secular women or girl boarders slept in the nuns cloister. In 1545 the patroness was the wife of Sir Francis Bigot, the yearly income was said to be £36 and they were in debt 20 marks.

According to Nichols 'The valuables of the priory at this time were,	
In the church 160 fotte of glass,	168
Item, the pavement,	060
Summa - £1.12s.8d.	
The Quyer	
Item, a clocke, with plomets of lede,	050
Summa - 5s.	
Item, a vestment of blew velvett, 30s;	
one of redde velvett, 23s.4d; and one	
of grene, 16s.8d.	3100
Summa - £3.10	
Summa reman' in Langley predict	578

At the dissolution the site and lands were given, by the bailiffs, a yearly value of £7.5s.4d. for which it was leased to Thomas Gray. In 1558 Grey owed £192.10s. to Henry VIII for the purchase of Langley. Thomas Gray died on the 22 February 1564 at Castle Donington where he owned Donington Park at which time the priory of Langley was worth £8.4s.4d. yearly. Langley then passed to his son and heir Thomas who in turn died on the 14 January 1608-9 leaving Langley worth £10. His son and heir Thomas was at this time 6 years old who was in 1630 the only freeholder in Langley (Nichols 1804).

This Thomas Gray who purchased Sutton Bonington house from Repton priory, had four sons, Thomas, George, William and John respectively. His eldest son Thomas was disinherited for matching against his fathers consent and Langley was shared between the remaining sons. An intricate court case arose out of this matter eventually settled in 1670 by Ellis, Walker and Willimot.

The house, by now called Langley Hall was bought from the Grays in 1686, for £7,769.17s.6d. by Richard Cheslyn, Esquire of London (1634-1717). Richard was an eminent founder in London and in 1695 was appointed high-sheriff of Leicester but because of his age the appointment was given to his son William. Richard was succeeded by his son Robert whose son Richard, born at Langley in 1717, was a barrister of the Middle Temple. This Richard married a widow, Katherine Bainbrige of Lockington who brought him great wealth with which he purchased much land in Diseworth and Castle Donington as well as spending £5,000 on plantations and gardens. On his death on December 18 1787 he was buried in the family vault at Diseworth Church and Langley passed to his nephew Richard, the owner at that time of Nichols writing. Nichols describes Langley as having 'numerous fine old oaks' being 'situated on a very sequestered spot in a low situation; and has in the front of it a fine piece of water, with large pleasure grounds laid out in very good taste by the late owner'.

In 1847 the house was purchased by John Shakespeare from the Cheslyns. Shakespeare was the son of a Leicestershire farmer who became a Professor of Oriental languages and through prudent living and saving was able to buy the house that he had coveted since his boyhood. On the death of John Shakespeare in 1884 the house passed to his nephew Charles a Justice of the Peace. Numerous nineteenth century directories refer to the Priory having a lake and about 660 acres with a population varying between about 25 and 303.

DESCRIPTION

Entrance Front:

The entrance front is quadrangular, the fourth side open with Georgian iron railings. The centre part (Fig. 1) is of two storeys of ashlar with six stone mullioned and transomed windows on each with leaded lights. Two of these on the upper storey are false of blind windows. Between storeys is a stone band and the whole stands on a coursed sandstone footing.



Figure 1: *Entrance front*



Figure 2: North wing



Figure 3: South wing

The central doorway is of ashlar with a bolection moulded surround and segmental pediment supported on consoles or brackets. To each side of centre are balancing doorways (now blocked) with stone architraves, pulvinated friezes and cornices. It has a wood modillioned eaves cornice and tiled roof, hipped at one end, with five gabled, leaded casement dormer windows with triangular pediments.

Two similar wings project to left and right (Figs. 2 and 3) of two storeys of coursed random rubble, with gables in the centre facing inwards, coping and ball finials. The two wings are constructed of a local red coloured sandstone. The north wing, to the left (Fig. 2) has four stone mullioned windows with leaded lights and four replaced by wooden ones. One window to the right (perhaps a landing window) is now blocked. The doorway to the left of centre has a wooden frame and a window over it. Its gable to the west (Fig. 4) has three stone mullioned windows, a blocked door on the ground floor, with semi-circular head, and on the first floor with part of a four-centred lintel visible and a blocked window at first floor level. The roof is tiled to the south and of slate to the north with a gabled leaded casement dormer to the right and a small wooden bellcote to the left.

The south wing (Fig. 3) is similar to the north, being of coursed random rubble with a gable in the centre, coping and ball finials. It has seven stone mullioned windows, two-light on ground floor level and three-light above. This wing has three doorways in its north elevation, two of these with four-centred heads the central one with a carved stone head above. To the left of this is a blocked landing window. The south-west gable has two stone mullioned windows and a central doorway. The interior has gypsum plaster flooring throughout laid on reeds over the joists. This type of flooring was common in Leicestershire in the seventeenth century but known since the thirteenth century.

Garden Front

The garden front is of two storeys of red brick. The two gabled block to the right (Fig. 5) is of brick (Flemish bond with vitrified blue headers common in Leicestershire from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries) with stone quoins and coggled string between storeys. It has coped gables with finials and two-sash windows. A lead rainwater head bears the inscription 'R.S.1690'. Facing north and south are blocked windows. The centre part (Fig. 6) is of brick with eight wooden mullioned and transomed windows. There is a canted bay on ground floor level with three windows. Brick building is common in Leicestershire, because of the presence of good deposits of local red clay, especially from just before 1700. Presumably the bricks used here were made on site or at a brickyard in Diseworth, a village with a large number of brick buildings. In the most important houses the bricks were dug and made on the spot and it is likely that this is what happened here.

To the left is a projecting gable of coursed rubble with coping and ball finial. This gable (Fig. 7) has a seven-light, mullioned and transomed window of stone with chamfered mullions on ground and first floors with drip moulds and early leaded glass with diamond panes. Above is a three light stone mullioned attic window. The side elevation to the south (Fig. 8) has mullioned windows and a projecting chimney breast. The north side elevation is covered by nineteenth century additions of brick and a rather fine Victorian porch. Part of this elevation has a roof covered with local Swithland slate, a material highly in demand because of its attractive appearance. As is common the slates decrease in size towards the ridge, the disadvantage of this form of roofing being that its weight necessitates fairly massive roof timbers.

Interior

The interior appears to have been largely redecorated in the nineteenth century, with the exception of the south wing, and is quite plain. It however retains two later seventeenth or

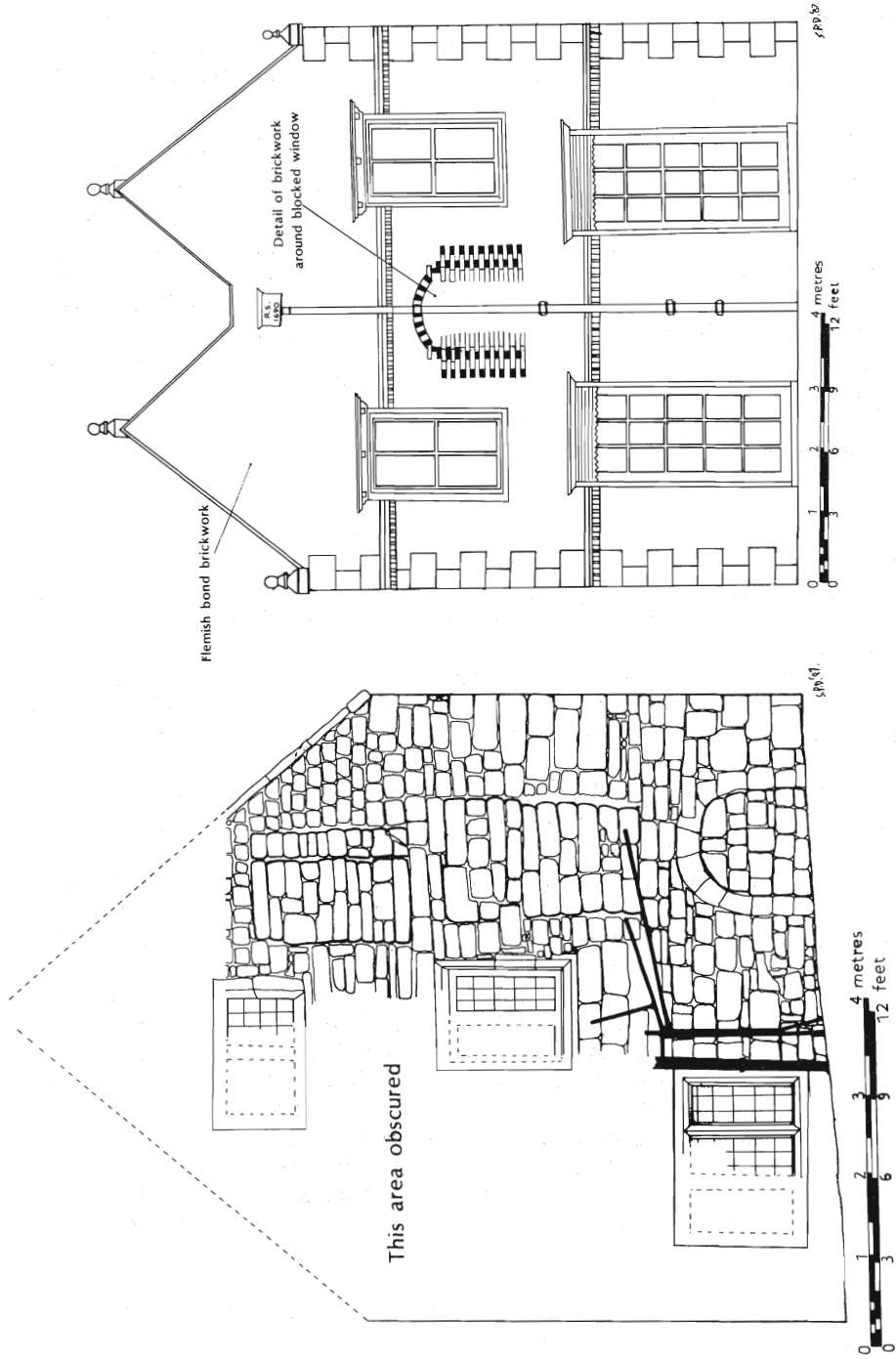


Figure 4: North wing West gable end

Figure 5: North-east gable end

eighteenth century staircases one in the main range and one in the north wing. The staircase in the south wing has been re-routed to form a dog-leg when a door was inserted and evidence of this is visible in the form of a blocked brick archway at its foot. The main staircase has barley sugar twisted balusters but appears to have been altered and has perhaps been moved from its original position.

One room on the first floor has a fitted tapestry said to have been made by the nuns here but apparently Flemish and made in the seventeenth century. The tapestry room has a fine fireplace with bolection moulded surround and blue and mauve delft tile lining. Leading from this room is a staircase of seventeenth century date with cut-out wavy balusters. The windows in this room and the one below have a number of pieces of stained glass of medieval and later date, one said to bear the arms of William Pantulf, some supposedly foreign and one piece bearing the date 1612. These are said to have been found in the grounds. 'In a window of the tapestry room at Langley Hall stands the achievement of William Pantulf;' with the motto: GLORIA DEO ALELUIA VICTORIA. 'Underneath in the same pane, these verses without points, false spelt, bad verse, and barbarous latin:

Omnibus hoc notu cupio qui temporis hujus
 Presentis memores existunt atque futuri,
 Quod williems Patulfus clarus in armis
 Miles concessi Domino, Sanctaeque Mariae
 De Langaleia, donuique fuae, pietatis amore,
 Et domina Burga sponsa mea, in cujus dota
 Domus est sundata, concedit.
 Omnia cristata, galea, atque insignia seper,
 Nostra, sicot soleant veteri de jure tenenda;
 Rex dederat quae olim Rogero muere Knowthus,
 Pantulfo, qui miles erat, genitorque meorum,
 Himanem gallum quod vicit rominus armis,
 Rege et Gallorium paribus spectantibs illum,
 Carta ut quam teneo nobis antiqua reliquit'

(Nichols 1804)

ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

It is clear that Langley Priory has undergone a series of distinct constructional phases and was presumably altered to suit changing needs and tastes. The decipherment of these phases relies on three sources of evidence. The first of these is documentary. In this case Langley is fairly well served as far as its owners are concerned but few surviving documents actually refer to the house. This has allowed a fairly detailed history of the owners to be established which is summarised above. However this gave few clues to the use and contents of the house throughout its history. It was hoped that Probate inventories, listing rooms and contents, would be included with the wills of the various owners, however these were not to be found either in the Leicestershire County Record Office or the Public Record Office, since its owners held property in several counties their wills would have been proved at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury the records of which are now deposited with Public Relations Office, Chancery Lane. Those wills which were present merely confirmed the sequence of owners.

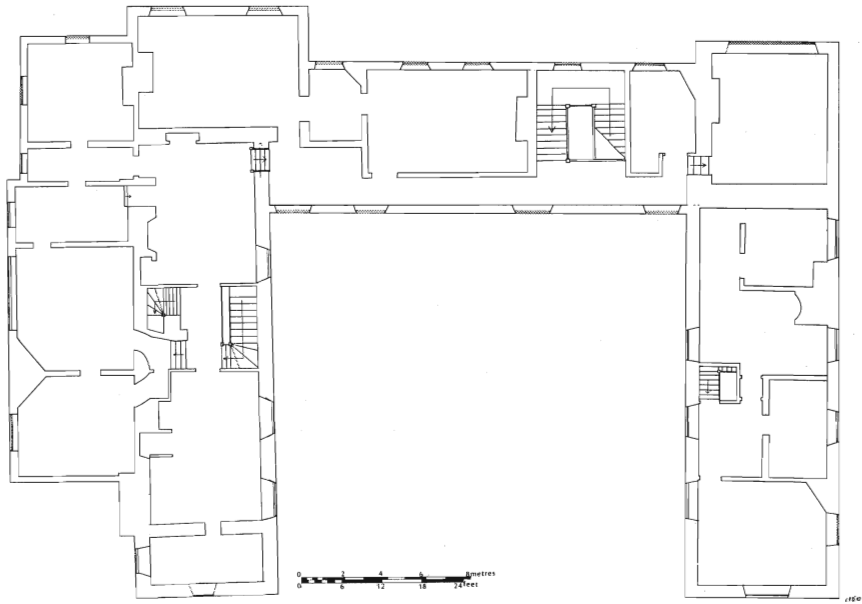


Figure 10: *First floor plan*

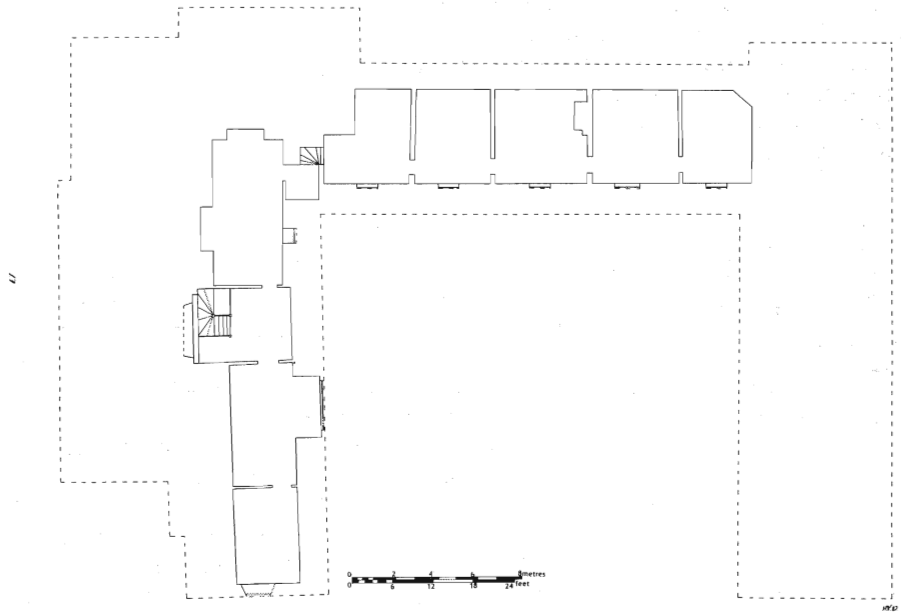


Figure 11: *Second floor plan*

The second source of evidence relies on archaeological principles akin to those of stratigraphy. By a detailed study of the fabric of the building the relation of each wall or timber to its neighbour can be revealed. Similarly, features such as blocked windows and doors, irregularities in coursing or visible breaks in walls can also be revealing. Theoretically this requires little or no knowledge of architectural history however it can be most useful when combined with this the third source of evidence. A knowledge of changing architectural styles and details combined with that of archaeological principles enables us to decipher much of the long history and series of constructional phases which a building has undergone.

MAJOR PERIODS OF CONSTRUCTION

Medieval

The priory itself, as previously stated, was found in the middle of the twelfth century. However little remains of the original buildings and it is uncertain whether the present buildings occupy the same site as the original. There is little of the house which suggests a medieval date. Several fragments of stained glass now fixed to two of the windows are undoubtedly of medieval date and are said to have been found in the grounds. However, in view of the thickness of what was the outer wall of the North wing, now covered by Victorian extensions and approximately 3 feet 6 inches thick, which is greater than that of the other walls, it would be interesting to speculate that this represents a survival of the early priory. This is supported by the presence of a visible break in the stonework at the quoin of the North wall with the North West gable end. The stone with which this wall is constructed bears tool marks similar to some present at Sutton Bonington House (said to have been built with stone taken from Repton Priory) and bought by the same Thomas Gray who died at Langley in 1608-9, and to some stonework of Churches in Diseworth and Breedon-on-the-Hill. Several nineteenth century directories of Leicestershire state that the house contained within its walls some remains of the ancient priory and this view is supported by Arthur Mee.⁴

Late Sixteenth/EARly Seventeenth Centuries

The two projecting stone built wings appear to be of this date and it would perhaps be interesting to speculate that the house was rebuilt at this time by Thomas Gray who acquired the property in 1558 or thereabouts. The courtyard design with blocks one room thick lit from both sides is common of this period as are many of the features of the two wings.

The south wing is perhaps the least altered of the two. It is floored throughout with gypsum plaster laid on reeds over the joists. This is a common type of flooring in this region usually from the mid-seventeenth century, though examples are known from as early as the thirteenth century. The large rectangular stone mullioned and transomed windows with diamond or square panes set in leaded cames and the drip moulds above several of the windows are also a common feature. Similarly the general style of these wings, being two storeys of rubble with gables, coping and ball finials is also indicative of this date as are the doorways, two in the south wing, with four-centred heads. The doorway in the gable end and that to the left of its north elevation (Fig. 8) are apparently later insertions.

The roof over these wings is again, perhaps, best preserved in its original form in the south wing. Over the north wing the roof has been extensively repaired and a series of rooms inserted in the roof space making access to the roof timbers difficult. Over the south the roof retains much of its original timberwork and figures 12, 13 and 14 are the

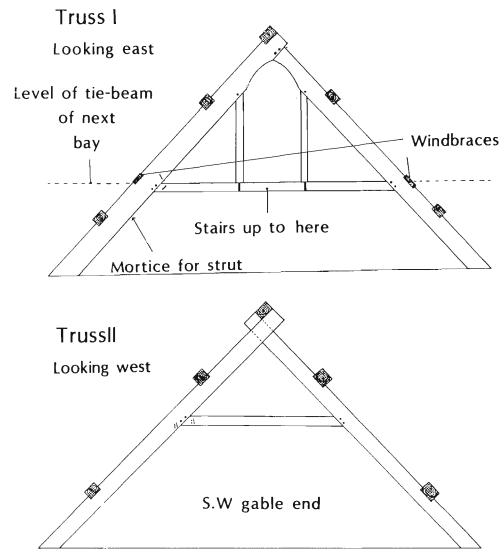


Figure 12: *Roof truss I and II*

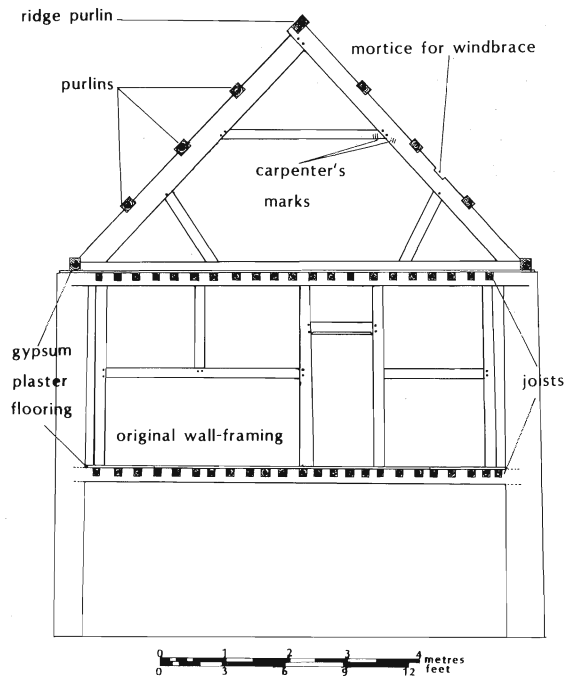


Figure 13: *Section through truss III*

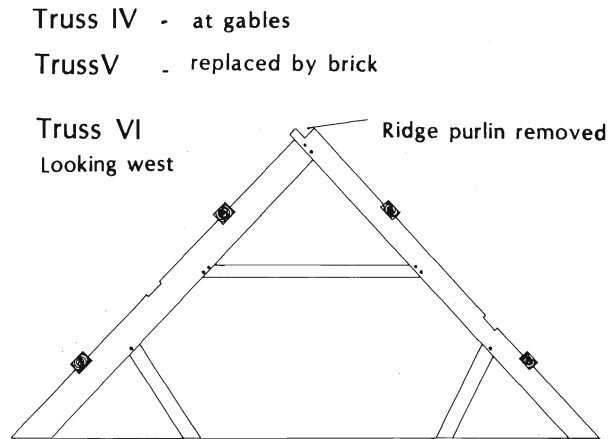


Figure 14: Roof truss iv, v and vi

results of a survey of the timbers at the western end of this wing. This roof is of a through-purlin principal rafter type with collar and raking struts from the principals to the tie beam (in some cases these have been removed or repaired). Three of the trusses bear carpenter's marks on the faces of the principals and the collar (1, 11 and 111 from the east) a feature which helps to indicate their originality. The principals are halved at the apex to carry a ridge purlin though the truss marked 11 had its principals crossed at the apex (a common feature of Leicestershire and South Nottinghamshire building until the end of the seventeenth century though usually lower down the social scale) which indicates the use of a local carpenter and perhaps the difference in this truss could be explained by the fact that the carpenter merely used the lengths of timber available to him with as little cutting as possible, these two timbers being longer. At the eastern end the building changes in height with a corresponding increase in ceiling height with the result that a stair has been inserted at truss 1 to give access to the roof at this end. This would seem to indicate that the roof previously only extended as far as truss 1 in line with the present entrance front and that the easternmost gable was added at a later date. This evidence is supported by a visible break in the fabric of the wall of its south elevation. Perhaps the eastern end was added when the use of this wing changed and two rather grand seven-light stone mullioned and transomed windows were added (perhaps to form a parlour wing). However this gable is of similar architectural style and this alteration must have occurred fairly soon after the construction of the two wings.

It is uncertain how (or whether) the two wings were joined at this stage, though Nichols (1804) refers to the entrance front having been 'cased over with stone about King Williams time'. Presumably this refers to William III which corresponds to the late seventeenth century appearance of the entrance front. Perhaps by this Nichols indicates that this range was previously timber framed and was cased over when altered. Unfortunately further evidence of this was not visible since the roof over the entrance front is either extensively repaired or inaccessible. Perhaps the sandstone footing on which this range is built was the original footing of the timber-framing.

Late Seventeenth Century

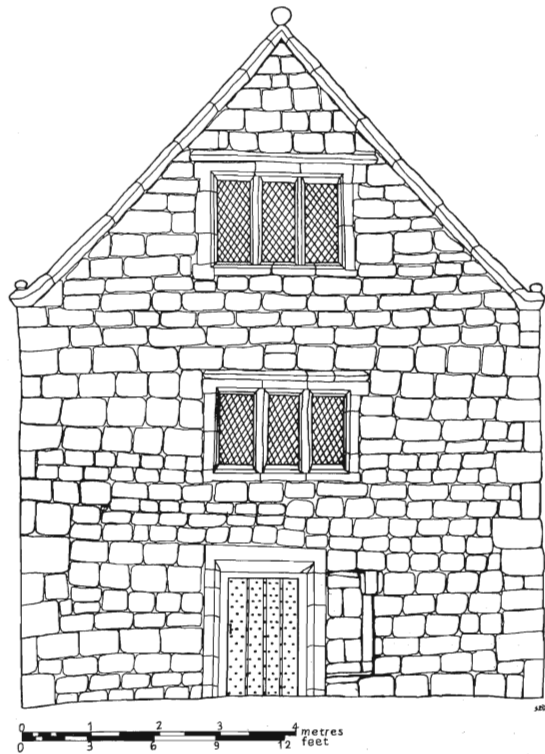


Figure 15: *South-west gable end*

The house was bought by the Cheslyns in 1686 who perhaps altered it to suit their tastes and needs. At this stage the double-gabled block on the garden front was constructed and it bears a date of 1690 inscribed on a rainwater head on its east elevation (Fig. 10). This block is constructed of two storeys of brick (local and clay), flemish bond with vitrified blue headers* (common from fiteenth to eighteenth centuries in Leicestershire), with stone quoins, coping and ball finials. It has large rectangular sash windows. In the centre of its east elevation is a round-headed blocked landing window which suggests that the staircase may originally have been sited here and has been moved to its present position. The staircase itself shows signs of alteration and is of late seventeenth century date. A variation in the number of twists in the balusters suggests their replacement.

The entrance front appears also to have been constructed in the late seventeenth century and has a fine central doorway of ashlar with bolection moulded surround and segmental pediment supported on consoles or brackets typical of this date. The whole gives an impression of the architecture of this period with its symmetrical facade, steep pitched roof (hipped at one end) with cornice and dormers with triangular pediments (Pevsner puts these in the nineteenth centuries), central doorway, balancing doorways either side and four-light rectangular stone mullioned and transomed windows. The tapestry room window in the north wing is also of this type and was presumably replaced at this time.

The tapestry room on the first floor of the north wing has a fitted tapestry of seventeenth century date. The small staircase with cut-out wavy balusters and bolection moulded fireplace with blue and mauve delft tiles are also of this period, though much of the rest of the interior has been refurbished in the nineteenth century. It is a possibility that the service wing was at this stage moved to the south wing where the chimney and fireplace were enlarged to form ovens and so on, and many of the rooms remain unaltered since this time, though later used as storage and dairy. Previously the services were perhaps sited in this north wing with its large stone chimney stack, adjoining the present kitchen.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

The house seems to have remained largely unchanged until the advent of the nineteenth century. A drawing by Stebbing-Shaw, reproduced in Nichols, of 1801 shows the house much as it appears now. A further series of alterations was carried out in the nineteenth century with the addition of extensions to the north, including a rather fine Victorian porch which bears a date in the 1860's. At this stage a bay window was added to the garden front (Fig. 6) and many of the windows were replaced along with the door in the north wing.

The interior of the house was redecorated at this time with the exception of the south wing by this time used as storage and dairy. The ceilings of the drawing room and dining room are decorated with squirly plasterwork similar to Coleorton Hall built in 1801-4 for Sir George Beaumont. The cornices are of similar date. The series of servants rooms in the attic are also of nineteenth century date, though the dormers were in existence prior to this and appear on the drawing of 1801. The interior has undergone at least two re-decorations, one in the early and one the later nineteenth century. The fireplaces are mostly nineteenth century and include one by William Foster and Sons, 1877⁵.

The house has been further refurbished in the twentieth century including some work by the present owner, principally to the lobby previously a butlers pantry, kitchen and grounds.

Notes

1. Nichols, *History of Leicestershire* (1804)
2. W.G. Hoskins (ed), *Victoria County History: History of Leicestershire* (1954), Vol. II and III
3. W. White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland, Grantham and Stamford* (1846)
4. C.N. Wright, *Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland* (1880) also: (1884, 1844, 1896)
5. N. Pevsner (ed), *The buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland* (1984), Revised by E. Williamson

Bibliography

- A. Mee: *The Kings England: Leicestershire and Rutland* (1967)
 Rev. J. Curtis: *History of Leicestershire* (1831)
 V.R. Webster: M.A. thesis presented to Nottingham University — *The Transition from Timber to Brick in rural Leicestershire* (1965)

Leicestershire County Record Office: wills and inventories, nineteenth century census returns etc.
Public Record Office, Chancery Lane: P.C.C. wills and inventories.
D.O.E. listing, 29.12.52