

# A HALL HOUSE AT SHEPSHED, LEICESTERSHIRE

by

T. H. RICKMAN

During 1969 the opportunity arose, of examining and measuring No. 7, Britannia Street, Shepshead, which was later, during the summer of 1971, to be demolished. The sound construction, finish and style of the original building imply that the first occupants were people of some local importance. The house stood parallel to the street, and well above it, being built on the street side, upon a rubble plinth necessitated by the fall of the ground from back to front. The building dated possibly from early in the sixteenth century as a three-bay structure, of which only the two 16 ft. bays survived that had formed the open hall; on the plan (*Fig. 18*) trusses B/B<sup>1</sup> and D/D<sup>1</sup> mark its limits. Empty mortises and peg holes in principal post D/D<sup>1</sup> establish that another bay formerly existed to the south-east, probably the service bay, perhaps with a cross-passage running from front to back between the bay and truss D/D<sup>1</sup>. In the nineteenth century the house was extended to the north, (A-B).

The framing was simple. Two studs, equi-distant between each principal post and rising from the sill to the plate, made up the wall frame; between them were rails forming rectangular panels grooved for wattle and daub. Short angle braces, straight in the front and slightly convex at the back of the building, tied the principal post to the wall plate<sup>2</sup>. Evidence of a sill beam came to light only during demolition.

Each principal wall post (10 × 7 in.) formed a jowl or shoulder to carry the tie-beams, which in turn supported queen struts and a collar; purlins were trapped between the principal rafters and the collar. Curved windbraces, halved on to the feet of the principal rafters, tied the roof frame together. Two sets of rafters, one from the nineteenth century placed above earlier ones, replaced the original paired common rafters which were 5½ in. wide and about 12 in. apart. On the wall plates the rafters were held in place by bird mouth notches and pegs. A simple splayed and bridled scarf joint secured with two side pegs was used on each wall plate.

Truss B had chamfered principals, a straight tie-beam with a quarter round moulding, and straight braces. Only one of the two hollow chamfered 7 in. studs remained, there had, no doubt, been rails. Between the tie-beam and collar, one queen strut was in position; mortises in the top of the tie-beam suggest close studding above it. The central open truss C, a fine piece of carpentry had a cambered tie-beam and plain arch braces. Principals and tie-beam were chamfered continuously, and—a mark of quality—the wall plates were chamfered throughout their length. Truss D, well-finished but

with the curve of tie-beam and arch braces not as accentuated as in C, was closed by two studs, each of which was linked to the principals by rails; a lower rail, indicated only by mortices, had joined the studs. Some evidence of sooting was found on the upper timbers of trusses C and D after the building had been demolished.

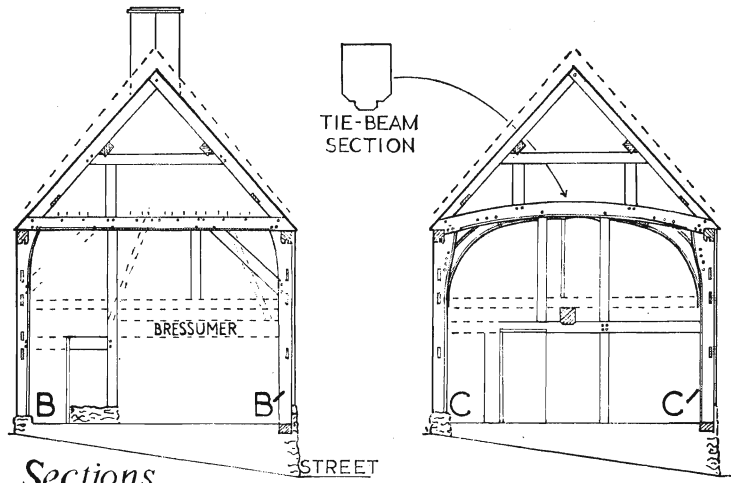
A window evidently originally occupied the central space between the studs in both wall frames. Between studs C and D, 3 *ft.* above floor level, was a window sill (5 × 3 *in.*) and 6 *ft.* above this were mortises for a lintel. Below this lintel, another portion of the original window (also 5 × 3 *in.*) was in position, the outside lower edge being chamfered and stopped at each end, presumably a transom. No mullions survived, but mortises for them were, cut through the wood, with holes to peg the tenons; there were also two 1 *in.* holes for vertical rods placed centrally in the two middle lights. During demolition portions of others were found corresponding to those at the back of the building, making two on each side.

The carpenter's assembly marks were chisel-cut in identical positions on the end of each tie-beam, as well as on the queen struts. They were in the following order; B<sup>1</sup> was I, C<sup>1</sup> was II, D<sup>1</sup> was III, D was IIII and C was marked IV. Nothing was discovered on B.

The first major alterations to the house possibly began in the early part of the seventeenth century, with a fireplace installed against truss B<sup>3</sup>, which had a timber-framed flue lined with wattle and daub and supported by a 12 × 10 *in.* bresummer. The bresummer, decorated with hollow and quarter round moulding, eventually had the rear end sawn to accommodate a staircase of later date. The flue frame consisted of two uprights with rails on three sides; it tapered towards the truss and roof, being secured at the top by pegging the rails down on to the tie-beam.

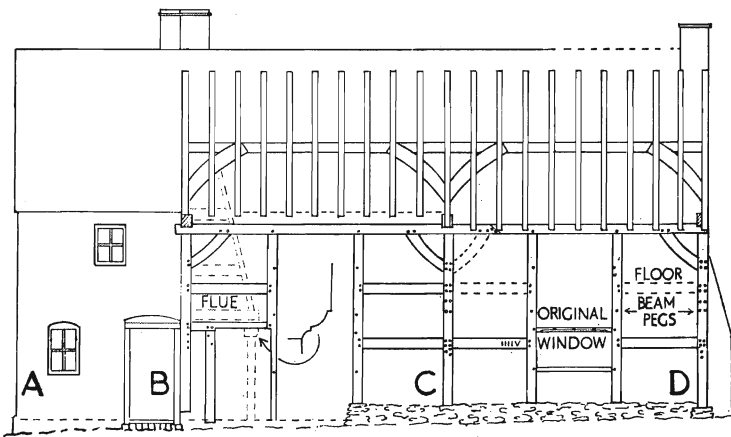
An upper floor was also installed about this time between trusses B and C, supported on a chamfered spine beam 12 *in.* square, one end of which rested upon the fireplace bresummer, and the other was carried by a rail 5 *ft.* 6 *in.* above floor level, stretching from post to post of truss C. Two studs were attached to the centre of truss C, to support the rail and to partition the upper floor. The spine beam extended 4 *ft.* beyond truss C, this was perhaps for a gallery, with a ladder giving access to the new upper room. The 5 × 4 *in.* joists rested their ends upon similar sized wall beams, and were set vertically for the full length of the spine beam. The last floor-boards here were of 1 *in.* deal, 4½ *in.* wide.

Perhaps nearly a century later, the service bay was demolished. Hand-made bricks clad the outside of truss D, and also replaced the original panels in the rear wall,<sup>4</sup> similar to bricks used locally at this time. With the original entrance destroyed, a rear doorway was formed between post B and the adjoining stud; a rail was raised and partly cut away to form a lintel, the lower portion of the stud was reduced in width, and a short stud added to form part of the door frame. At an uncertain date the rest of the space above the hall was floored over, using a spine beam similar to the old one but of poorer finish. The joists too were of poor quality, although similar in

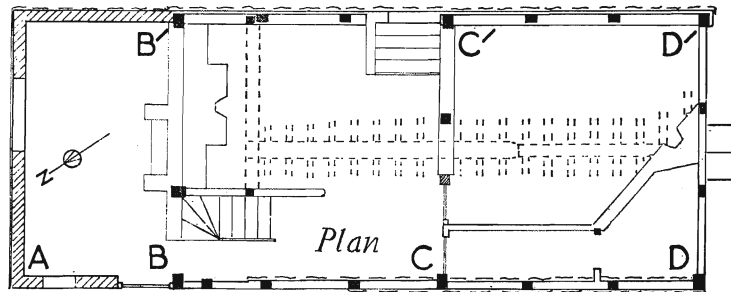


Sections

0 5 10 15 20 Feet



Rear Elevation



Plan

7, BRITANNIA STREET. SHEPSHED, LEICS. 1970 T.H.R.

Fig. 18

size and spacing to the earlier floor; they were set flat and not vertical and gypsum plaster on a reed base formed the floor. A wooden staircase was inserted next to the fireplace, occupying half the space between this and the rear doorway. The original windows too were replaced by Yorkshire sliding sashes.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when what remained of the timber framework was covered with bricks and roughcast, the front of the house was given much of the appearance it recently had. A central front entrance was formed and the seventeenth-century doorway blocked, a new brick extension was added on the north-west end, with a new rear entrance. Most of the thatch was removed, new rafters were laid on top of the old ones, and the roof tiled.

#### NOTES

1. I am indebted to Professor M. W. Barley, Mr. J. T. Smith and Mr. D. H. Smith for their advice and help
2. For the distribution of angle bracing see J. T. Smith, "Timber-framed Building in England". *ARCH JOURN* (1965) CXXII (1965), p. 149
3. L. F. Salzman, *Building in England*, p. 97
4. Sizes varied, average size  $9\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4}$  in.