

The West Range of Ulverscroft Priory and its Roof: a survey

by *N. J. Baker*

Ulverscroft Priory (SK502127) lies 12km (8 miles) north-west of Leicester, on a gravel knoll beside the junction of two streams flowing through marshy ground in the valley bottom.

The priory was a minor Augustinian house, founded before 1153, with a complement of three priests in 1220 rising to eight by 1438. Ulverscroft had an uneventful history, and was finally dissolved in 1539 (*VCH Leics.* II, 19-20).

From then on, those buildings that could not be maintained or adapted to suit the site's new role as a farm were demolished, this pattern continuing until the 1930s, when William Keay, a local architect, began recording, excavating and restoring, principally within the church (Fig. 1; Keay and Keay 1933). The monastic complex is now scheduled as an Ancient Monument.

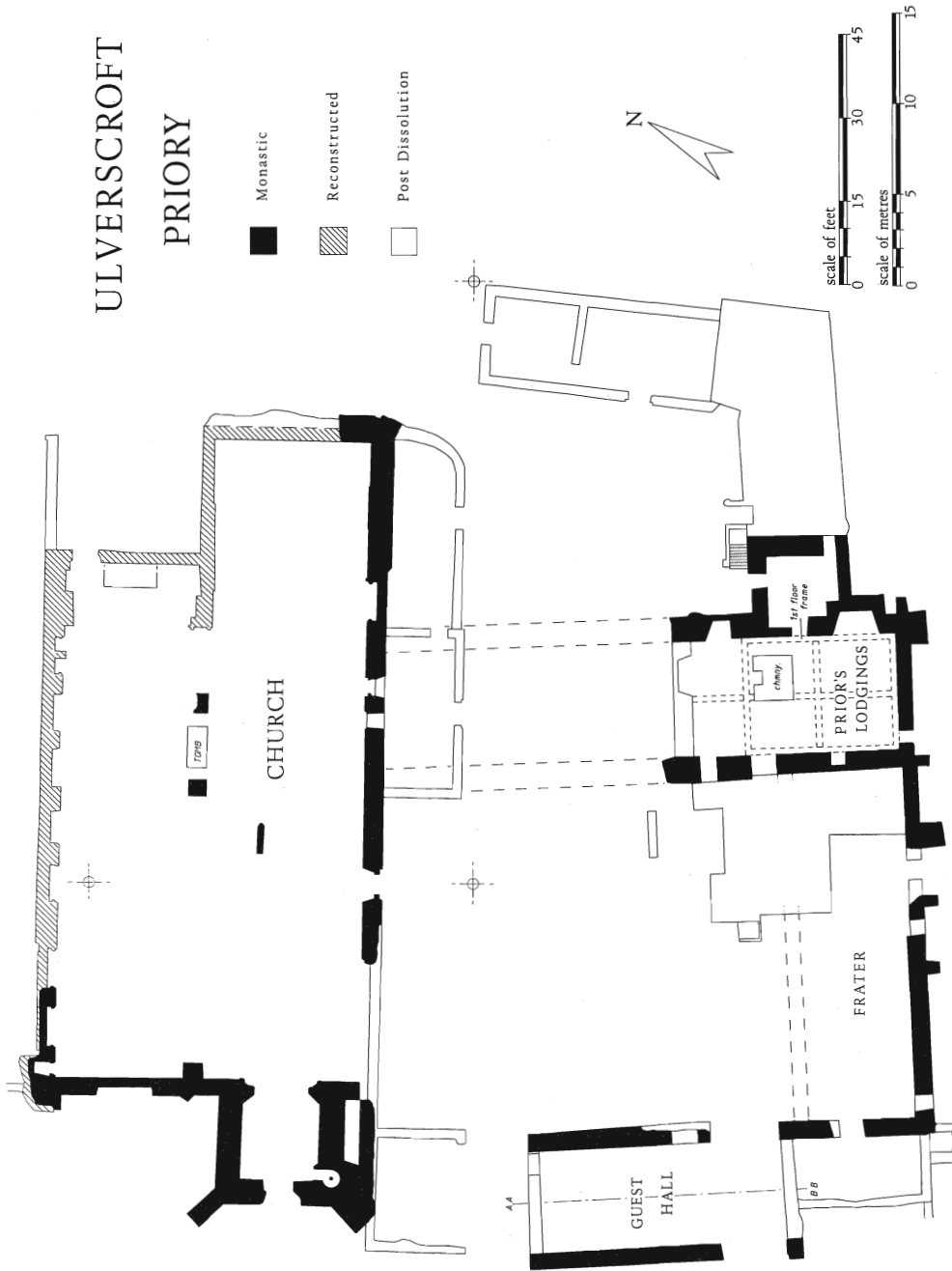
In 1979 the Department of the Environment commissioned a survey of the surviving building of the west range, a late medieval open hall, that had been in use as a barn until the 1940s or 50s and had since been neglected. By 1979 all three internal roof trusses had failed and the stone side walls were bulging and cracking, the east wall opposite the central roof truss being 4.54m (1.5ft) out of plumb. Defective roof covering had led to extensive wet-rot, particularly at the truss feet. The building was recorded in advance of consolidation and restoration work, the survey consisting of detailed drawings of the roof, with interpretative drawings of the wall faces supported by photographic coverage in monochrome and colour. The drawings were based on a three-dimensional grid laid out by theodolite. The drawings, photographs, archive report and large-scale overall site plan are housed at the Jewry Wall Museum, Leicester, and a copy is held by the National Monuments Record.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The building now measures 14.2 by 7.5m (47 by 25ft) externally, 13.0 by 5.6m (43 by 18 ft) internally. The walls are constructed of roughly coursed local granite rubble, and their interior faces are rendered.

The only evidence for original lighting to the hall is two blocked windows in the west wall. There may have been a third in the same wall, but inserted barn doorways have destroyed the southern end of both side walls (Figs. 1 and 3; plate 1). The window at the northern end of this wall is the more complete, with a pointed head, originally probably of three lights, divided by simple Y-configuration bar-tracery, of late 13th or early 14th century date. Only the sill and part of one jamb survives of the other window, enough to show that it differed slightly from its neighbour. Both windows appear to be primary features within the wall.

The only surviving original access to the hall is a blocked door in the east wall (Fig. 3); the boulders that form its threshold suggest that the medieval floor level was about 0.3m (1ft) higher than the present (Victorian) brick surface. There are no indications of this door on the outside, the southern part of the east wall having been refaced from a point roughly opposite Truss 3 (Fig. 1). This refacing is probably contemporary with the insertion of the barn doorways.



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PRIOR'S LODGING INTERNAL DETAIL - AFTER KEAY 1933

Fig. 1 Ulverscroft Priory: General Site Plan

The refacing has also destroyed a string course which runs along the east wall 3.1 m (10ft) above ground level (Fig. 2); this is the truncated fragment of a continuous corbel that once supported the top of the lean-to roof of the cloisters.

THE ROOF

The roof consists of five trusses: two closed end-trusses and three open internal trusses. The southernmost of the four bays thus formed is slightly longer than the others, with eight pairs of common rafters rather than six. The end trusses consist of tie-beams, principal rafters and collars, with close-studding supporting lath and daub infill. Truss 1, in the north wall (Fig. 2), is almost complete above the tie-beam; only one principal and the stub of the tie-beam survive of Truss 5 in the south wall, sufficient to show that it was of identical construction to Truss 1. The soffit of the tie-beam in Truss 1 contains mortices for vertical studs at 0.9m (3ft) centres, demonstrating that the present stone north wall under Truss 1 is a replacement of a timber-framed predecessor. It is likely that the south wall was also fully timber-framed but not enough has survived of the tie-beam to prove this.

The outer faces of the tie-beam and principal rafter of Truss 5 are flush, and appear to represent a true, weatherproof external surface. In contrast, the outer faces of the components of Truss 1 are not, suggesting the former existence of an adjoining structure to the north; close inspection of this face was not possible. Conventionally, such a building would be the outer parlour, with porter's or other accommodation over.

Hills (1863, 179) provides the earliest account of the hall, and describes the insertion of the barn doorways. He also mentions that the north end had been 'reduced in length and walled up with modern masonry'. There is no reason to doubt this statement, unless Hills was confusing the removal of an adjoining building to the north with the shortening of the hall itself. There is no positive evidence in the surviving fabric of the hall for the truncation of the north end, but it is quite possible that a bay was removed and the end truss (Truss 1) moved inwards to the position of the redundant first open truss, the lower part of this new end wall being built of masonry rather than retaining the original timber-framing. The hall would, therefore, have had approximate internal dimensions of 16 by 5.6m (52 by 18ft) before the removal of the north bay, a length/width ratio of roughly 3:1.

The internal trusses (2-4) consist of principal rafters with arch-braces to the collar and vee-struts above (Fig. 2). The trusses are of a type not normally seen in the East Midlands, in which the arch-braces spring from the wall-plate rather than from a corbel below it. This type of truss is usually associated with the west and south-west, for example at Woodlands Manor, Mere (Wood 1965, 312); Ewelme, Oxfordshire (Howard 1914, 317); or at the Guesten Hall of Worcester Priory (Charles 1971). At Ulverscroft, the arch-braces extend to the bottom of the principals, and their feet are tied together by short sole-pieces halved over the wall-plates. Above, the arch-braces are slip-tenoned to the principals.

The finish of each truss varies slightly. The undersides of the arch-braces are chamfered on each of the internal trusses, as are the top edges of the collars and the undersides of the principal rafters facing them. In Truss 4, the lower edges of the principals below the collar are also chamfered, to take account of the thinness of the arch-braces (Fig. 3). Also in Truss 4, the spandrels between the principals, arch-braces and collar are left open on the south face, whereas on the north face, and on each side of the other internal trusses, the spandrels had been filled by planks, nailed or pegged into rebates, flush with the truss faces. These spandrel-panels are of no structural value and must have had some sort of decorative role. Their use is paralleled in the Guesten Hall at Worcester (Charles, 1971, 51-2). The end-trusses also vary slightly, the principal rafter of Truss 5 being chamfered and the edges of all the members of Truss 1 left plain.

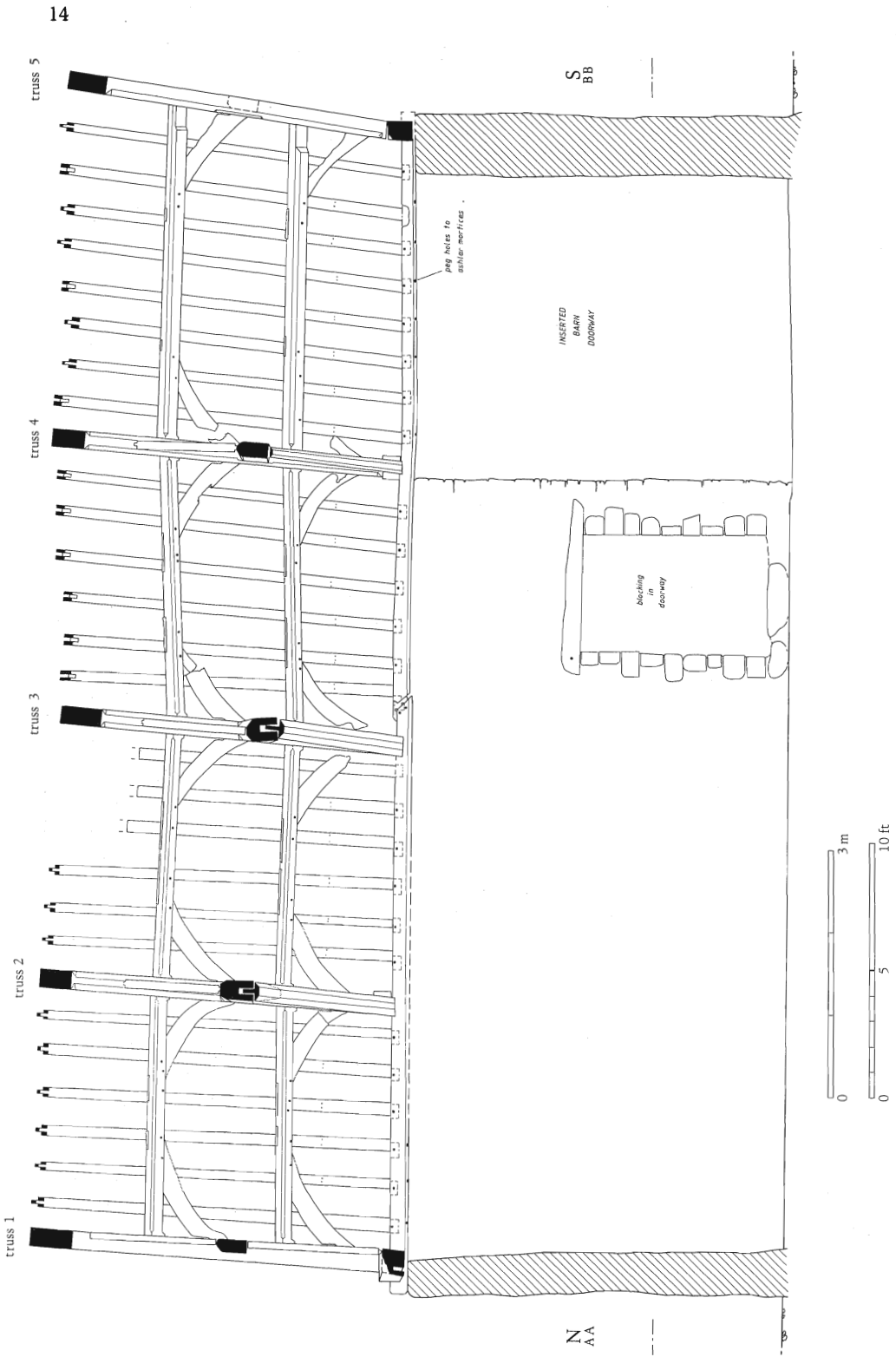


Fig. 3 Ulverscroft Priory Guest Hall: Longitudinal section and east (internal) elevation

The butt-purlins, in two tiers, are stiffened by curved windbraces and chamfered on their upper and lower inside edges (Fig. 3). There are twin wall-plates to each wall, joined together at the truss feet, and by cross-pieces tenoned into them at irregular intervals. The inner wall-plates are morticed for ashlar to each of the common rafters. These rafters are not similarly morticed but have nail marks, suggesting that the ashlar — none of which survive — were nailed to them and were purely decorative (Fig. 3). From the bottom right-hand corner of each ashlar mortice, a single peg-hole passes through the wall-plate emerging at the bottom of the inner face, visible wherever the chamfer has not been covered with plaster (Fig. 3). The function of these holes is unknown, and the soffits of the wall-plates are otherwise completely blank.

It is probable that the southernmost bay of the roof was dismantled when the barn doors were inserted; this is suggested by the mixed pairing of the common rafter apex joints in this bay, which contrasts with the regular pairing (male on one side, female on the other) in the other bays.

THE HALL: INTERNAL FEATURES

Reference has already been made to the surviving evidence for original lighting and access (page 00 above). There is no evidence of how the building was heated: there is no smoke blackening of the roof timbers, no indication of a smoke-louvre (the truncated rafters north of Truss 3 in Fig. 3 are part of a recent repair), and no fireplace in either of the side walls. As a fireplace would be unlikely to have been at the low (south/kitchen) end of the hall, it would not have been destroyed by the barn doors; it is most likely, therefore, to have been at the north end, probably in the timber-framed north wall. It is, of course, always possible that the building was never heated at all (Horn and Born 1979, I, 271-2), but this, given the Priory's recorded reputation for



Plate 1
Ulverscroft Priory: The Guest Hall, from south-west

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hospitality (L&P Henry VIII, X, 496), is not very likely. The south wall may have incorporated a door giving access to the kitchens, to the south of the Frater.

DISCUSSION

Function

The building is traditionally known as the 'Guest Hall' and was first identified as such in print by Hills (1863). There is no hard evidence — documentary or physical — for this identification, but it seems a reasonable one in view of the conventional public role of the monastic west range (Horn and Born 1979, I, 22), and the frequent provision there of a guest hall accompanying the Abbot or Prior's own lodgings.

Date and Development

There are several problems in trying to date accurately the hall and its roof. Firstly, there are as yet no independent scientific dates for the roof timbers. Secondly, there is no documentary evidence that is clearly applicable to this particular building. Thirdly, the roof contains no dateable ornamentation and few dateable structural features. The roof type itself may be given only a very wide date-range: truss roofs with purlins are widespread from the mid-14th century on; the arch-braced collar type seen at Ulverscroft seems to be popular throughout the later 14th and 15th centuries (Smith 1970, 264; Wood 1965, 308) and, being a specifically decorative roof type, shares the demise of the open hall in the 16th century.

Within the limitations of the available evidence, it is possible to propose three alternative plausible models that explain the development of the west range and suggest more accurate dates for its major components; these models are given in order of increasing probability.

1. The west wall may be dated by the window in it to the late 13th or early 14th century (page 00 above). The east wall may well be contemporary. It is *possible* that the roof too is of early 14th century date: it could perhaps be seen as a rather pale imitation of the Guesten Hall roof at Worcester (Charles 1971) or Great Malvern (Wood 1965, 310). The Worcester parallel is superficially convincing: arch-braced collar trusses of shallow pitch, with some correspondence of detail — the spandrel panels. However, these two West Midland roofs are clearly exceptional, and predate the general introduction of the roof type into buildings of lesser status. Once built, they could have been a source of inspiration at any subsequent date. As will be described below, there is also some circumstantial evidence that suggests that the Ulverscroft roof post-dates the walls.
2. A report of 1536 describes the priory 'in good repair and much built within these three years' (L&P Henry VIII, X, 496). This building campaign could have included the guest hall, but, equally, may have affected any of the structures on site, including those that are no longer standing. The use of close-studding in the end gables *suggests* a date towards the later part of the date-bracket given by the roof type, and so theoretically, the west range could have been re-roofed as part of the building programme of c.1533-6.
3. The use of close-studding, while consistent with an early 16th century date, is equally consistent with a later 15th century date, and it is in this period that the construction of arch-braced collar roofs was most widespread (see, for example, Meiron-Jones 1971). In support of a later 15th (or 16th) century date for the roof, there is some evidence that it is, at least, later than the side walls, whose height appears to have been reduced. The carefully finished exterior of the surviving window in the west wall contrasts strongly with the untidy appearance of the lintel over the window opening inside, a piece of scrap timber about 0.45m (1.5ft) below the wall-plate, that gives the impression of having been inserted when the wall height was reduced and an original rear-arch removed. Similarly, the relationship of the hall roof to the cloister roof (whose height is shown by the string-course on the east wall) is anomalous, there being not enough room for clerestory lighting

to the hall, which might be expected in an original arrangement where hall and cloisters did not share the same roof.¹ Further, the existence of timber-framed end walls, contemporary with the roof, within earlier stone walls, suggests that the present building may be the retained part of a once longer range.

If the height of the west range has been reduced, there is a possibility that it formerly had an upper floor. If this were the case, the Ulverscroft west range could have conformed to the pattern known from Augustinian and other sites, in which cellarage on the ground floor or undercroft was combined with accommodation for the Prior and his guests, either in an attached wing, as at Notley or Wigmore (Pantin 1941; Brakspear 1934) or on the upper floor, as at Bradenstoke (Brakspear 1925). The Ulverscroft west range is unlikely to have been used for storage on the ground floor, given the quality of the windows, but it may be significant that, towards the end of the life of the priory, probably in the later 15th century, the south end of the east range was demolished to make way for a new, very well appointed building, at least part of which was clearly intended for the use of the prior (Archive Report, see page 16 above; Hills 1863, 178).

To conclude, the preferred model is that the west range, of late 13th-early 14th century date, was rebuilt in the late 15th century as a guest hall, and the prior, who had until then been housed in the west range — possibly on an upper floor, moved to new accommodation in the east range.

Note

1. The writer is grateful to G. Coppack for this suggestion.

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