

House at Orchard Barn, Ringshall, Suffolk

An Historical Survey



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(TM 019 534)

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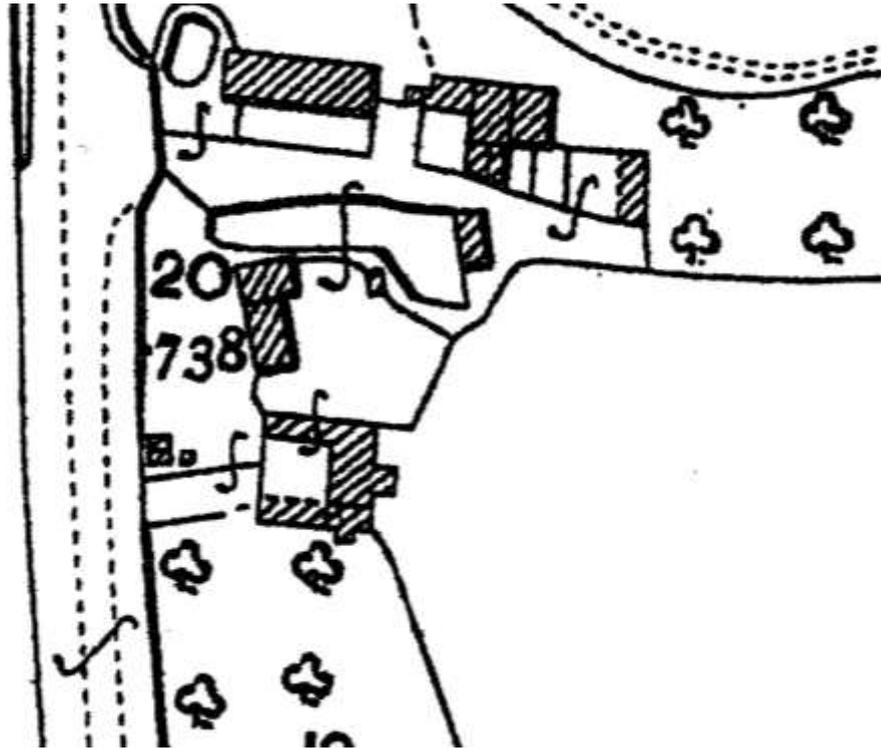
*This report is designed to inform and accompany a planning application,
and is based on a site visit of March 5th 2007.*

Summary

The house adjacent to Orchard Barn is among the most remarkable buildings in Suffolk. A fine timber-framed structure of the late-16th century, extending to over 50 feet in length and complete with original diamond-mullion windows, 'inglenook fireplace' and symmetrical wall bracing, lies empty and partly collapsed in a bramble patch. Despite its predicament, most of the principal components of the frame, including wall studs, tie-beams, arch-braces, storey posts and massive principal joists, remain in sound condition and the building could readily be restored by a specialist in historic carpentry. Notwithstanding its impressive historic credentials and proximity to a road the house is not listed and does not appear on the Register of Historic Buildings at Risk, presumably because it was hidden from successive English Heritage Inspectors by external render and undergrowth. If the structure was properly restored, incorporating the surviving timbers, it would retain sufficient original fabric and historic integrity to remain worthy of listing.



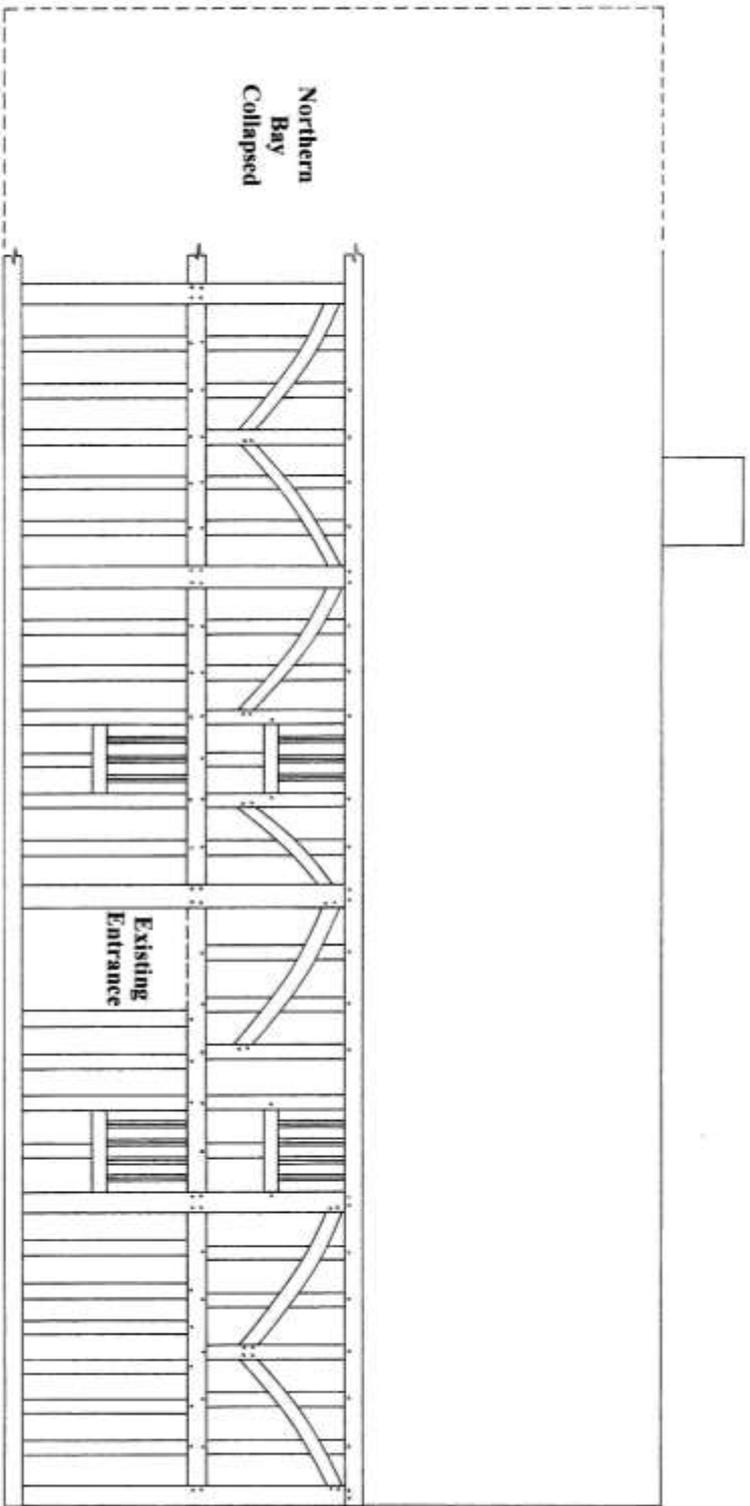
Illus. 1 The intact 16th or early-17th century fireplace, extending to 9½ feet in width



Site Plan (From 25 inch Ordnance Survey 1904)
Showing the house (centre) apparently divided into two cottages with Orchard Barn to the south and Nine Elms Farm beyond the pond to the north.



Illus. 2 The original window of 'diamond' mullions in the western elevation, with three intact mullions now lying horizontally (rebated sill to right).



House at Orchard Barn, Bildeston Road, Ringshall
Front (Western) External Elevation
Reconstruction

Figure 1

Introduction

The house lies on high ground to the east of the road between Wattisham and Battsford at the western edge of Ringshall parish. Its present name is of recent origin and relates to a late-17th century barn on the same property, which in turn derives its title from an orchard which adjoins the site to the south. The historic name of the premises is currently unknown. The Site Plan above shows the layout of the buildings in 1904, where the house lies between the barn and its associated cattle yard to the south and Nine Elms Farm which lies beyond a wide pond to the north.

Analysis of the Timber Frame

The following analysis is both partial and provisional, as access to the timber frame is severely hampered by undergrowth which if removed may render the remaining walls more vulnerable to further damage by wind and weather. For this reason investigation has been largely confined to the (front) western elevation shown in figure 1, but it would be possible in future to analyse the rear wall and southern gable to the same degree of accuracy. The entire northern bay of the building has collapsed, having apparently been undermined by the migrating bank of the pond shown on the Site Plan, but its timbers remain where they fell and their arrangement could be reconstructed by

moved from their present positions before such recording has occurred.

The building is aligned north-south and extends to 17½ feet in width by 45 feet in length from its southern gable to the point at which it has collapsed; the northern bay may be presumed to have extended by at least a further 10 feet to the former edge of the pond. The walls rise to 13 feet at the eaves but may have been taller as the present ground level lies above the original sill beams. The western elevation facing the nearby Bildeston road is leaning precariously and in places the first floor studs are horizontal after the failure of their tenons. Despite this parlous



Illus. 3 An external wall brace in the western elevation, still trenched across the studs despite its precarious angle.

condition, most timbers remain solid and are still jointed to the frame. Figure 1 shows a reconstruction of this western façade, where the great majority of the components either remain *in situ* or are lying nearby. The upper storey incorporates a series of externally trenched wall braces that were designed to be visible and form an elegant pattern that would have been perfectly at home

in a high-status Tudor merchant's house in the streets of Lavenham. There is evidence

of four unglazed windows containing 'diamond' mullions (i.e. square mullions set diagonally in typical 16th century fashion), each of which was closed by internal shutters sliding in grooves. Three of the four original mullions in the right-hand first-floor window remain *in situ*, having been blocked by external lath-and-plaster at an early period. There is evidence that the entire frame was until recently hidden by secondary external render, although most has now rotted away, but small areas of original wattle-and-daub still remain between the studs.

from the site. The large arch-braces to the tie-beams remain *in situ*, representing a most unusual survival in a domestic context as most were removed to gain headroom in later centuries. The roof structure has collapsed, but a number of fallen collars, perched precariously in the undergrowth, demonstrate that it consisted of clasped purlins. These various carpentry features suggest the frame was built in the second half of the 16th century, and a date of *circa* 1580 can be suggested with some confidence.



Illus. 4 The south-western corner of the later hall, showing intact mid-rail and studs with secondary cross-passage screen to left.

Figure 2 shows the two internal open trusses that flank the bay containing the 20th century entrance door as indicated in figure 1. The ceiling consisted of axial joists tenoned to massive binding joists that measure an impressive 12 inches by 12 and boast deeply chamfered edges with well-formed decorative 'lamb's tongue' stops. In contrast to the binding joists, which remain in excellent condition, the chamfered axial joists have fallen to the ground and have partly decayed; they retain relatively small mortises with diminished shoulders, each measuring 3½ inches in width by 4½ inches in height, for common joists that are conspicuous by their absence and have either decayed entirely or (more probably) been stolen

A large south-facing brick fireplace adjoins the western wall of the window-less northern bay shown in figure 1. Despite the insertion of a smaller fireplace in the 19th century its original brick piers and timber lintel remain intact, albeit exposed to the elements. The chimney breast also survives, although the superstructure of the chimney has fallen. This fireplace is 9 feet 6 inches in width and is an impressive and remarkable survival under the circumstances. It may well be contemporary with the structure, but is possibly an addition of the early-

17th century. A smaller fireplace of the early-19th century has been built against the back of the main chimney in order to heat the room at the northern end of the building which has since collapsed; this fireplace also remains intact, despite the loss of its chimney.

The original layout of the building is not immediately clear. It ostensibly contained a central hall heated by a high-end chimney to the north with an unheated parlour beyond and a cross-passage and service area to the south. This layout is typical of the 16th and early-17th centuries and is undoubtedly reflected in the present pattern of the building which is entered by

a door in the cross-passage position that even retains a short internal partition of studwork to screen it from the hall. The present internal partitions all appear to be later insertions, however, as (probably) is the entrance door. The original binding joists contain no partition mortises and appear to have spanned a single large room that extended some 33 feet from the southern gable (which retains evidence of a central diamond-mullion window) at least as far as the present chimney. The windows are also unusually small and unostentatious for what was evidently a large and expensive structure. Investigation of the eastern wall, presently hidden by undergrowth, should yield further evidence, but in the meantime it seems likely that the building represents the rear wing of a much larger Yeoman

farmhouse that faced the pond to the north. This wing was subsequently converted into a house in its own right, and was separated into cottages in the 19th century (as it apparently remained in 1904, as indicated by the dividing line on the Site Plan). Such an orientation is also suggested by Nine Elms Farm, which dates from *circa* 1620 but also follows an east-west alignment. The proximity of the two buildings is striking, and Nine Elms may represent a replacement on the same tenement of a medieval farmhouse with its 'new' rear wing of the late-16th century. The eastward projection of the northern cottage in 1904 may also relate to the truncated main range of the house, although it could equally be interpreted as a lean-to extension.



Illus. 5 The interior of the hall, showing the western elevation with first-floor studs and wall brace overhead (the principal fireplace visible to the right). Note the horse shoe suspended from the mid-rail above the 19th century glazed window.

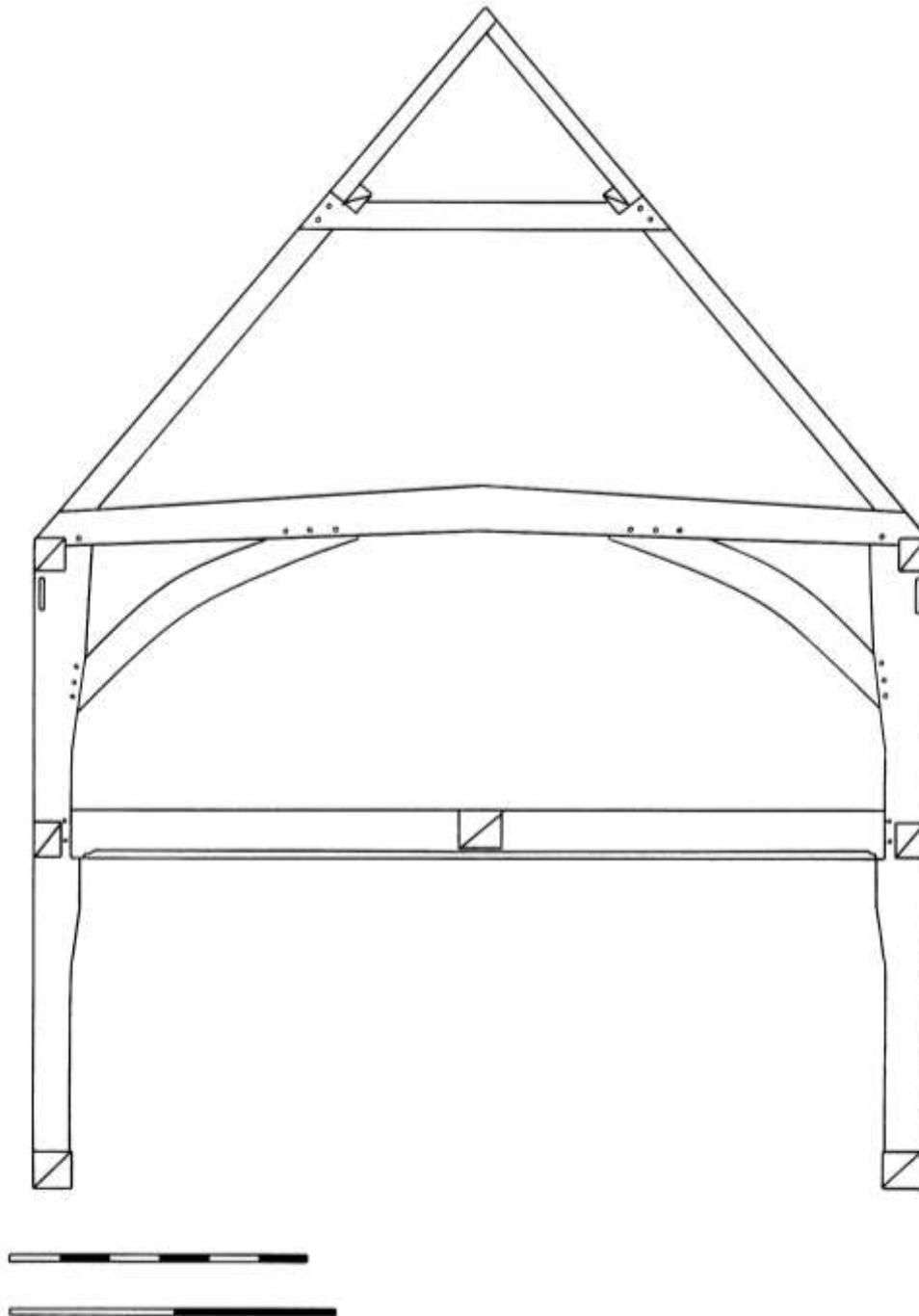


Figure 2

Reconstruction of the two open trusses flanking the bay that contains the present entrance door (scale in feet (top) and metres). The tie-beams, mid-rails, binding joists, storey posts and roof collars all survive, but the walls are no longer vertical.

Historic Significance and Condition

The surviving 16th century timber frame is of excellent quality and obvious historic value. Its loss would be highly regrettable from all perspectives. Despite first appearances the key timbers remain in sound condition and could readily be repaired or incorporated into a new timber frame constructed on the same principals as the original. If the building remains exposed to the elements and ground moisture for very much longer these timbers will quickly decay beyond the point of no return, but at present they remain eminently salvageable. While some components such as the common ceiling joists will require complete replacement, a reconstruction that incorporates all the remaining sound components would retain more historic fabric than most Tudor houses and remain worthy of listing at grade II. It is to be strongly hoped that this remarkable structure, which has survived for so long despite gross neglect, can be saved for the future in such as manner.



Illus. 6 Detail of distinctive late-16th century chamfer stop to binding joists

Drawing Convention

The figures accompanying this report seek to record the features of the original building, and do not necessarily include later alterations. Broken lines indicate timbers or walls for which evidence exists but that are either concealed or missing, although some features may be reconstructed where indicated. Mortise pegs are shown wherever visible.