

*A Report on*

**OLD WISLEY,  
CRANBROOK, KENT**

*by*

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Historical Analysis & Research Team  
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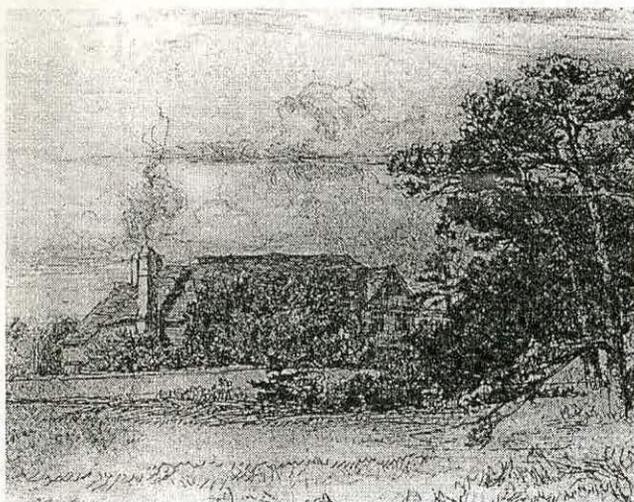


ENGLISH HERITAGE

## OLD WILSLEY, CRANBROOK, KENT

### *Introduction and scope of study*

This report is a summary of a recent architectural recording and analysis project undertaken by English Heritage at Old Wilsley, at Cranbrook in Kent, a Grade I-listed, late-medieval, timber-framed hall house, situated in the central high weald of the county, approximately half way between Tonbridge and Ashford. The aim of the exercise was to produce a comprehensive drawn and photographic record of the house and, in the process, establish a clearer understanding of the historical development of the building. The measured survey and architectural recording element of the work was undertaken by Nigel Fradgley (Metric Survey) and George Wilson (Architectural Survey: Projects). A comprehensive photographic record of the site was produced by Derek Kendall (Architectural Survey: Projects). The fabric analysis and written report was undertaken by Richard Bond of the Historical Analysis and Research team (HA&RT) of English Heritage. The recording and analysis fieldwork was carried out during December 1999.<sup>1</sup>

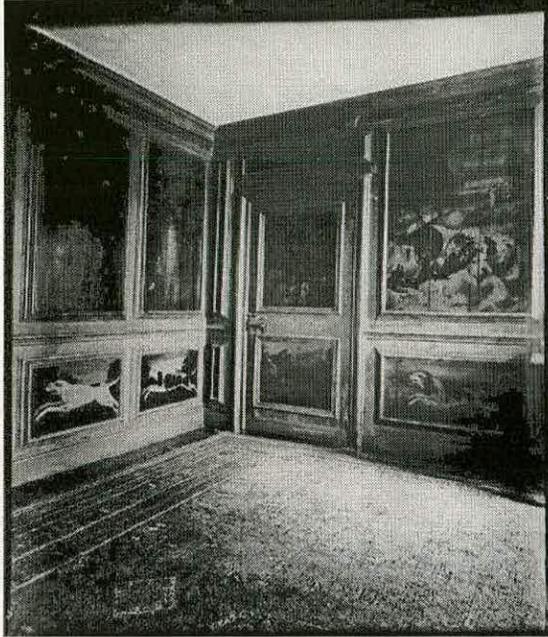


**Figure 1** Old Wilsley, from a 19<sup>th</sup> century engraving

The record survey was carried out in collaboration with Andrew Saint of the Department of Architecture at Cambridge University. In recent years Professor Saint has been a frequent visitor to Old Wilsley, and has come to know both the house and its owners, the Alexander family, very well. In his view, the house is 'not only a fine example of a Wealden hall house in good state of preservation, but a uniquely surviving example of the way in which such houses were once restored, decorated and lived in, in a highly sophisticated Arts and Crafts taste'. With the Alexander's consent and enthusiasm, Professor Saint had already begun to put in train an informal programme of recording, including a site visit with a building historian, Mr Tony Baggs, to look over the architectural development of the building, and arranged for a film crew to come down from Cambridge to make a documentary about the house.

<sup>1</sup> A formal request was made for a dendrochronological (tree-ring dating) analysis to be carried out at Old Wilsley but was unfortunately turned down, principally on the grounds that, being an essentially research-based project, it failed to meet the existing criteria for undertaking EH-funded tree-ring dating projects.

Although Old Wilsley has long been recognised as a fine example of a late-medieval timber-framed hall house, with a history of improvements and alterations stretching back over a period of some five hundred years to the beginning of the sixteenth century, before the present survey there existed no proper drawn plans of the building, and a number of questions remained surrounding the date and structural development of the building. The house was the subject of two lengthy articles by Christopher Hussey in *Country Life* in 1920 and 1948,<sup>2</sup> and it was evidently also known to Nathaniel Lloyd, author of *The History of the English House*, first published in 1931 (fig 2).



**Figure 2** Photographic plate of C17th painted panelling in former service wing. Nathaniel Lloyd Collection. NMR Swindon

More recently, Old Wilsley was visited by staff of the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) and is mentioned in the *Gazetteer* section of the three-volume 'Medieval Houses in Kent' series, published in 1994.<sup>3</sup>

2 Christopher Hussey, Wilsley House, Cranbrook, Kent. *Country Life*, 104 (21 August 1920), 240-6; idem, Old Wilsley, Cranbrook, Kent. *Country Life* 104 (2 July 1948), 26-30, and (9 July 1948), 78-82..

3 Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, *A Gazetteer of Medieval Houses in Kent*, p.41. 1994

### Summary of findings

The house was a *Wealden house*, i.e. 'a type of medieval house, concentrated in but not confined to the Weald, with an open hall in the middle and a two-storeyed bay at each end, roofed in line. The upper floors of the end bays are jettied to the front and the eaves are continuous, so that the hall roof projects in front of its wall and is carried on a *flying wall plate*'.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 3 West (original front) elevation**

The original house faced towards the west (*fig 3*), with the 'upper' end of the house, consisting of a ground floor parlour with solar above, situated to the south of the hall (*fig 4*), and the 'lower' end, i.e. the buttery and pantry, to the north. The hall was entered via two diagonally opposing doorways. The front door was situated in the conventional medieval position next to the service rooms at the lower end of the hall. The rear door was in the opposite corner of the hall and opened into a short staircase bay, which lay behind the parlour (see below).<sup>5</sup> There was no cross passage, and the buttery and pantry were entered directly from the hall.

An empty mortice in the underside of the flying wall plate at the front of the house may indicate the position of a former full-height oriel window, pre-dating the extant two-storey oriel bay window. The hall was probably heated by a fireplace in the centre of the rear wall from the outset, although the existing brick chimney stack is much later (it appears to date from the works carried out in 1898-9), and the current fireplace dates from the inter-war period. During the late-nineteenth century repair works to the hall, a number of fourteenth century counters were found beneath the existing sixteenth century floor tiles, prompting speculation that, prior to the construction of the present house, there may have existed an earlier house on the site.

As constructed, the central hall and upper and lower end bays were covered over by a single large, hipped, roof. Within the roof void between the south end wall of the hall and the inner slope of the southern cross wing can be seen one of the original end rafter couples of the original roof. The rafter

<sup>4</sup> This definition of the term 'Wealden House' is taken from *Recording Timber-Framed Buildings: An Illustrated Glossary*, (Practical Handbook in Archaeology 5) by N W Alcock, M W Barley, P W Dixon & R A Meeson. Council for British Archaeology, 1996

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the rear door opened into an outshot built against the side of the rear staircase bay, and not directly into the bay itself.

couple included an upper collar upon which rested the end of the middle rafter of the end roof hip. The top edge of the collar is bevelled and there is an empty peg hole running at a 45-degree angle through the timber. Probably a century or so after the house was built, i.e. during the late-sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, the end hips were removed and replaced with a pair of short, gabled, roofs aligned at right angles to the main hall roof. As a result, the house lost its former 'wealden' identity, and took on more of the character of a 'hall with cross wings' type house. As well as transforming the visual appearance of the house, the work led to the creation of two new areas of additional attic accommodation over the upper and lower end bays.



**Figure 4 South (side) elevation**

The skewed plan of the northern extension wing of 1998-9, and presence of what may be *in situ* reused stone foundations at its western end, suggest the existence of a former rear extension wing at the service end of the house<sup>6</sup> (see *plan drawing at rear of this report*). The main service accommodation was probably relocated to the rear of the wing following the construction of a new kitchen block behind the hall in the seventeenth century (see below). The original site of the buttery and pantry was converted to a parlour in c.1700 (*fig 2*).

<sup>7</sup> There may be further historical information available showing the house and site as it existed prior to the 19th century alterations, e.g. the local tythe award map, estate maps, deeds of sale, etc.



**Figure 5** East (rear) elevation with wing of 1898-9 and 1915 at right

A tall, narrow window in the rear wall of the building lit the dais at the upper end of the hall (*fig 6*). The window was blocked following the insertion of an upper floor into the hall range, probably during the seventeenth century. The window forms an integral part of the timber frame of the hall, and dates from the original construction of the house. The timbers forming the jambs to the opening are decorated with carved ogee mouldings.



**Figure 6** Courtyard. Junction of hall and S wing. The horizontal timber forming the head of the sixteenth century hall window (now blocked) can be seen to the right of the first floor window of the adjoining wing

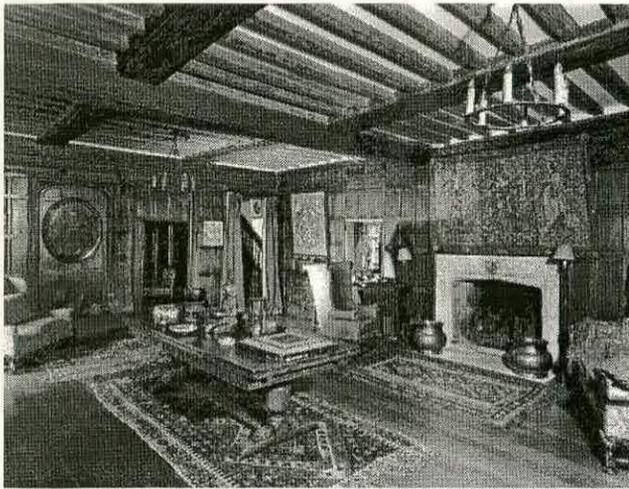


Figure 7 Hall range. Ground floor. View to NE



Figure 8 Hall range. Ground floor. View to SW

As constructed, the hall was open from ground floor to the roof, and was dominated by the splendid decorative crown post truss (*see section drawing at rear of this report*). The central tie beam has long since lost its original deep arch braces<sup>7</sup> which would formerly have extended downwards to the side walls. The crown post itself has an octagonal-section shaft, and a roll-moulded capital and base. The longitudinal crown plate (which the crown post supports) extends up to and beyond the line of the end partition walls of the hall.

<sup>7</sup> The braces were probably removed when the first floor was inserted into the hall range during the 17th century.



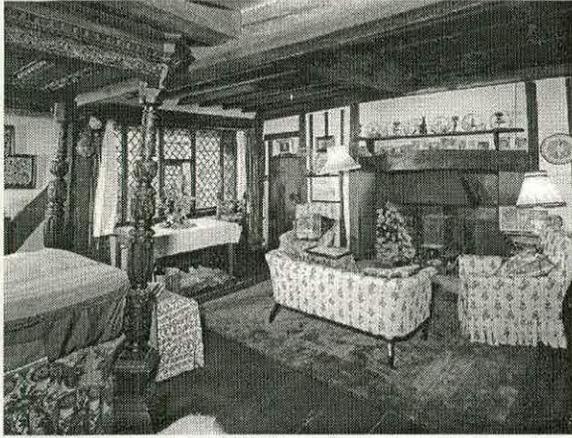


**Figure 11** Early photograph showing the rear of house as it appeared before the alterations to the north wing of 1898-9



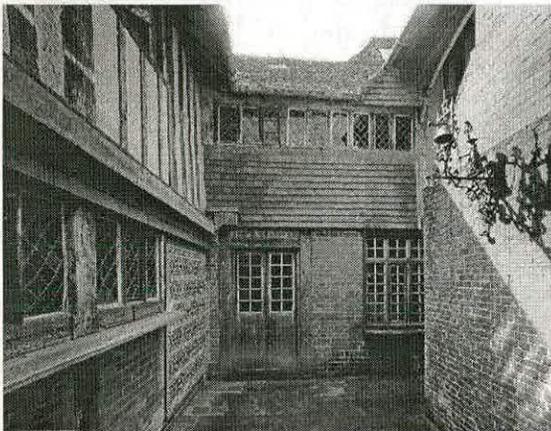
**Figure 12** Dining room (main ground floor room on north side of rear kitchen block). View to SE

A series of mortise holes in the underside of the rear wall plate of the kitchen block indicates the position of a former long frieze window (or pair of windows) which originally lit the first floor chamber(s) of the block. Due to the differential weathering of the timber plate it is still possible to make out the shape of the original seventeenth century ovolo-moulded mullions around the individual mortices.



**Figure 13 Bedroom (main first floor room on north side of rear kitchen block). View to SE**

The roof of the kitchen block is of clasped purlin construction, and includes a set of carpenter's marks of a type similar to those found in the seventeenth century roofs over the front wings. The outer faces of the rafters at the southern end of the western roof slope are devoid of all traces of nails, nail holes, tile battens, or any other evidence to indicate the roof was originally tiled or thatched at this point. This implies that the parlour wing was widened and extended (to create the present arrangement of a linking range between hall and kitchen) at the same time as the kitchen range was constructed (rather than later), and in addition would appear to suggest that the kitchen block was constructed at the same time as the alterations were made to the main roof.



**Figure 14 Courtyard. View to south**

As constructed, the house included a short staircase wing serving the solar at the southern end of the hall. At the northern opposite end of the house, the staircase was probably situated within a narrow bay within the northern bay itself, and was lit by a window in the rear wall (*fig 18*).

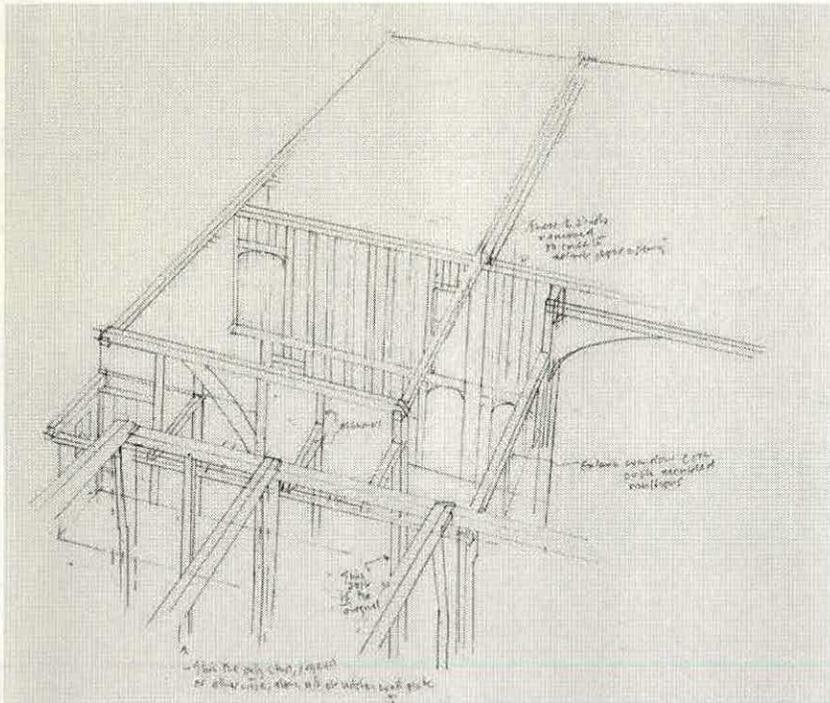


Figure 15 Sketch showing the relationship of the west staircase wing to the south (solar) wing

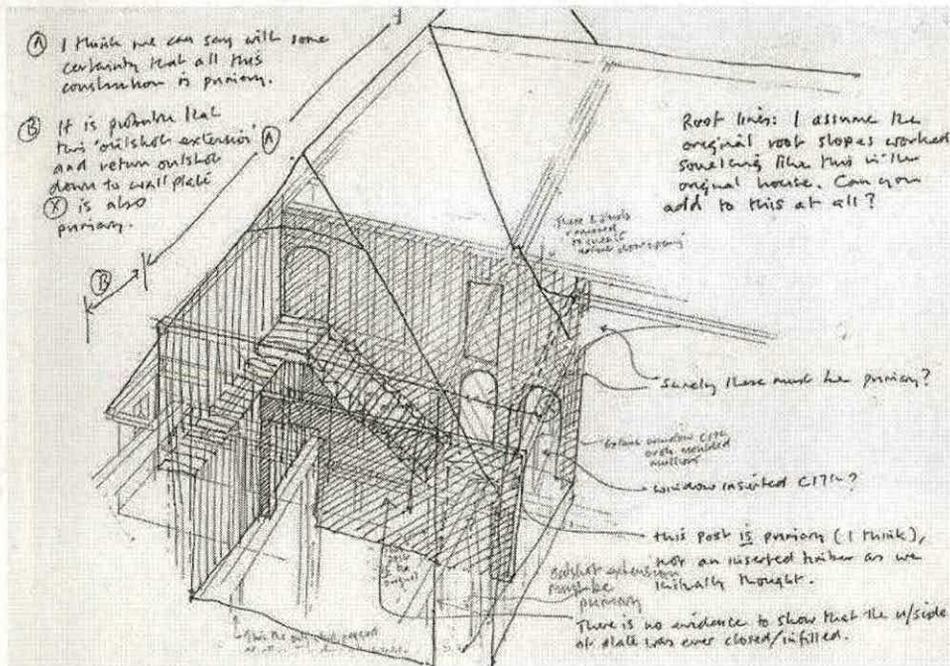


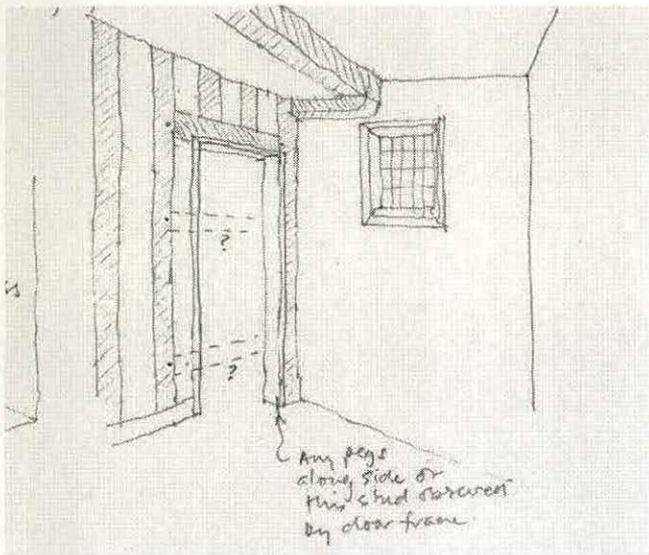
Figure 16 Sketch reconstruction showing the probable original staircase arrangement at the southern (solar) end of the house

The plan of the rear wing at the south (solar) end of the house has been substantially altered, however there still remains sufficient evidence to reconstruct the basic layout of the sixteenth century staircase (*figs 15 & 16*). The roof over the main part of the rear projection wing (marked 'A' and 'B' in figure 16) may date from the original construction of the house, or alternatively may have been rebuilt when the existing clasped purlin cross wing roofs were added in the late-sixteenth or seventeenth centuries.

The wing was extended and a new access passageway created on its northern (courtyard) side at the same time as the kitchen block was constructed at the rear. The rebuilt north side wall includes an original ovolo-moulded window at first floor (possibly of the same type as the former frieze windows within the kitchen block) which looks out onto the small rear courtyard. The existing staircase dates from the restoration of 1898-9, but it may replace an earlier staircase of a similar form in the same position (*fig 17*).



**Figure 17 South wing. Ground floor. Present staircase**



**Figure 18 North wing. First floor. Sketch showing the position of the sixteenth century window opening (now blocked) which lit the former staircase bay at the northern (service) end of the house**

### *Conclusion*

Given the limited resources of the project, it has not been able to date the building closely; however there can be few grounds for disputing the date ranges proposed by the RCHME following its 1994 survey of the building, i.e. AD 1480-1510 for the construction of the main house, and late-sixteenth or early-seventeenth century for the addition of the kitchen block and the associated alterations to the south wing. Overall, the plan of the medieval house reflected many of the changes that were taking place in the design of lesser gentry houses in England and Wales during the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries. The introduction of a fireplace in the rear wall to heat the hall (in place of the earlier open hearth situated in the middle of the hall floor) and the adoption of diagonally opposing doorways (instead of opposing front and rear doors opening into a separate entrance passage at the lower end of the hall) led to a gradual breaking down of the traditional, socially segregated medieval house plan. With the relocation of the kitchen to the rear of the house, and the removal of any physical separation between the hall and entry, it became increasingly common during the sixteenth century for the front room at the former 'lower end' of the house to be elevated to the status of a second parlour.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the later development of the house to have emerged from the present study is the scale of the alterations and additions carried out during the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. Whether the works were undertaken in a single operation, or sequentially, in a series of planned stages as part of an overall scheme of improvements, remains unclear. The new works were clearly aimed at improving the quality of the service accommodation and increasing the amount of living space available throughout the house. Following its upgrading, the house took on more of the appearance of a small courtyard house, with an imposing gabled façade, and separate, linked ranges. Further research may shed more light on the later history of the site, and the reasons that lay behind the changes to the house brought about during the post-medieval period. The kitchen block especially would be worthy of a detailed architectural study, given the rarity of such buildings, and the little research that has been carried out on those that survive.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Andrew Saint for providing information on the later history of the house. Special thanks are due to Nigel Fradgley, George Wilson and Derek Kendall, for assisting with the work; and to Camilla and Ianthe Alexander, for the kind hospitality and encouragement they have shown throughout the project.

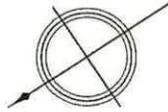
Richard Bond  
Historical Research & Analysis team  
English Heritage

October 2000

PLAN of GROUND FLOOR  
 OLD WILSLEY  
 Cranbrook  
 Kent

Loggia with room over  
 1915

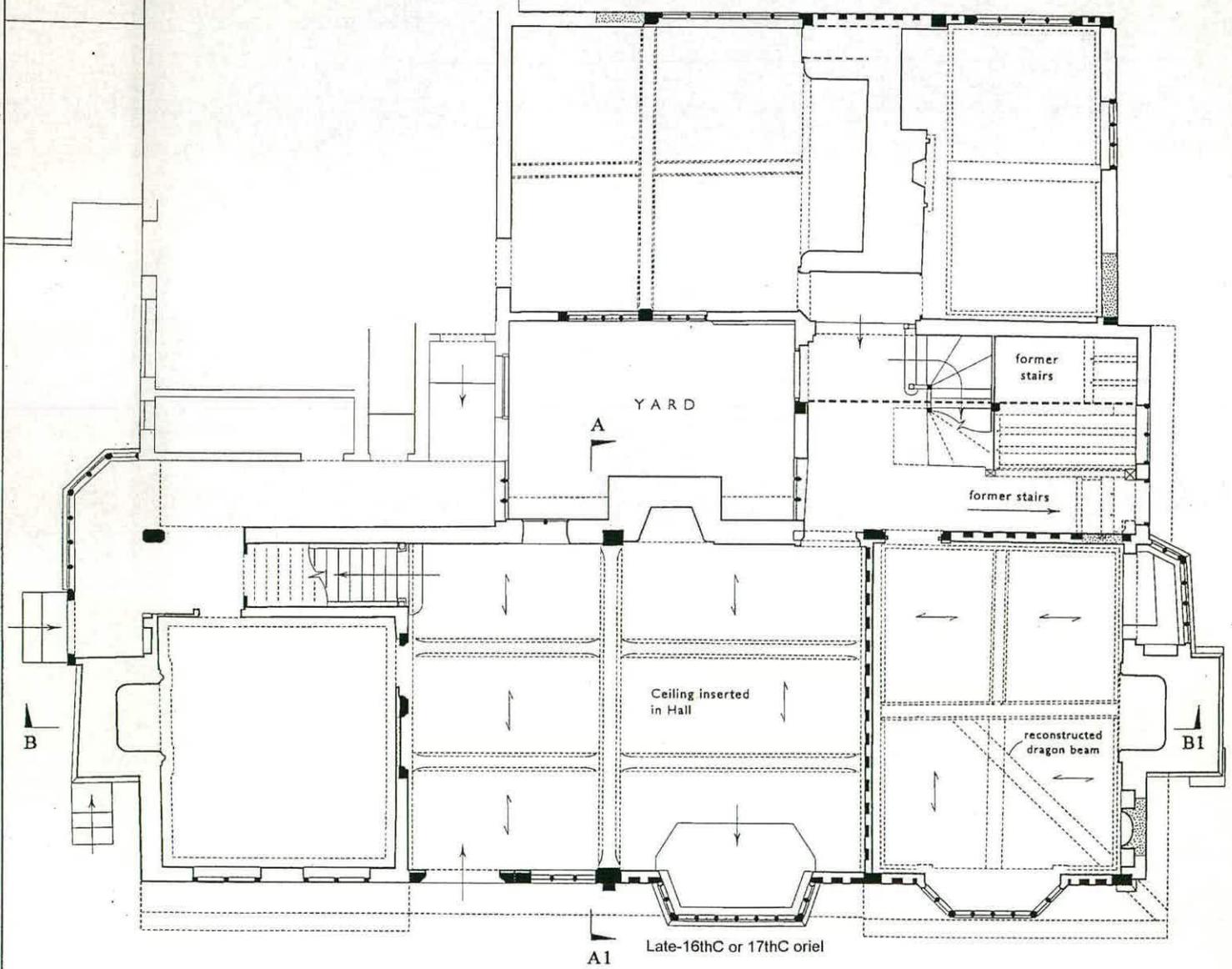
Service wing of 1898-9



Surveyed: December 1999 NRF  
 Print scale: 1:125  
 Drawing no: 1 of 3  
 Grid ref: TQ 7790 3695  
 NBR no: 40105



modern plank studs

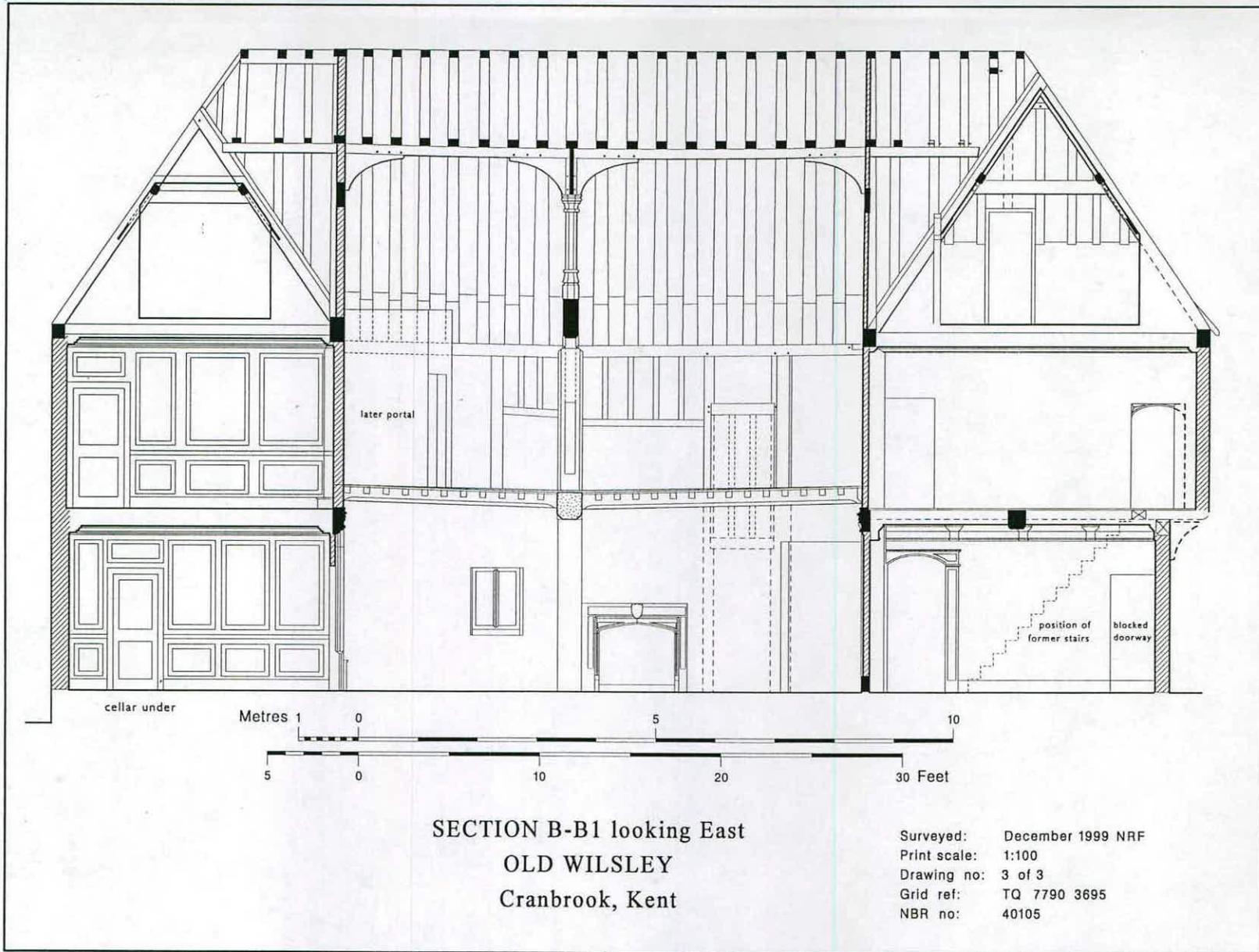


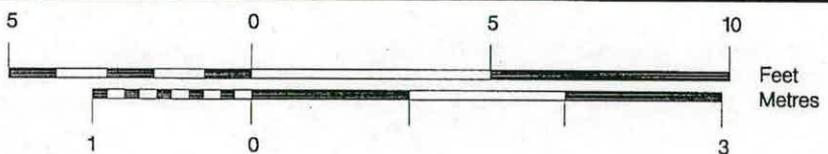
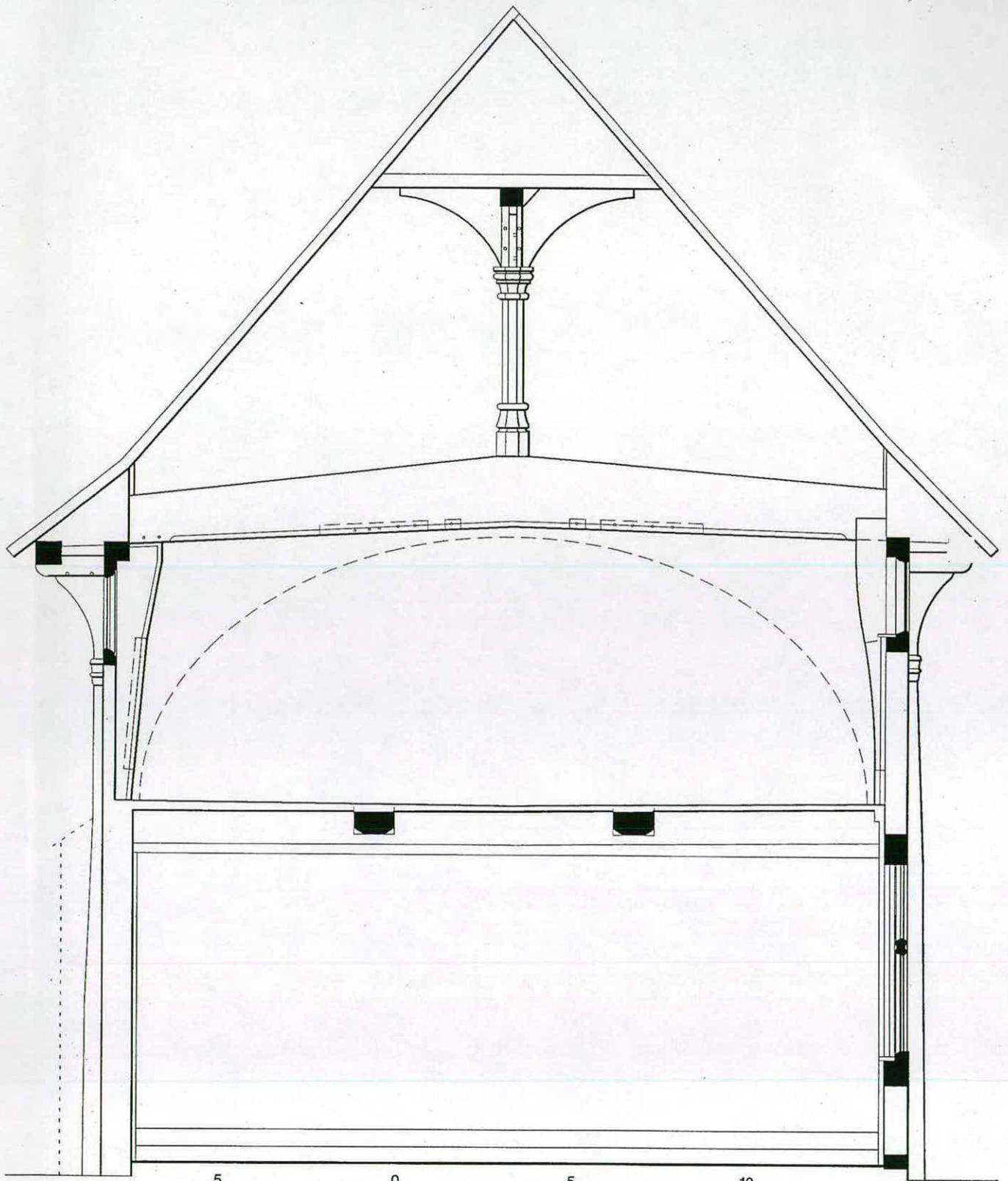
A1

Late-16thC or 17thC oriel

B

B1





**SECTION A - A1 of Hall truss looking South**

**OLD WILSLEY**  
**Cranbrook**  
**Kent**

Surveyed: December 1999  
 Print scale: 1:50  
 Drawing no: 2 of 3  
 Grid ref: TQ 7790 3695  
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