

32075 FORNCETT

Chestnut Tree Farm,
Long Stratton Road, Forncett End

Situation

The hamlet of Forncett End is supposed to occupy the site of the Domesday vill of Kettleton. F. Davenport, in his Economic Development of a Norfolk Manor 1086-1565, published in 1906, gives a map "made from a descriptive survey of 1565" which shows Long Stratton Road, then called Freegate Way, running on its present course across the south side of the property, with a symbol on the site of the present house indicating a "vacant messuage held by soiled tenure". However, Faden's map of 1797 shows the road as turning abruptly north on the east side of the property, to join a road called Drag or Littlemore Way, which ran along the parish boundary past a large farm - both road and farm have since disappeared. Faden shows Chestnut Tree Farm, though not named, as on the edge of Forncett Common. One must therefore query whether Mr. Davenport was correct in relation to his map, otherwise the road course must have changed after 1565 and reverted to the old course after 1797.

Moated Site

To the east of the building and north of the road is a rectangular pond, about 3m wide and deeply sunken. This appears to have formed the east arm of a moated site. The northeast corner has been infilled to form an orchard but the north arm is visible as a depression in grass and continues round to the western side. The present road to the south runs northwest-southeast and so it is probable that the moat extended slightly beyond this, into a field where medieval pottery and metalwork have been found (site 23845).

THE HOUSE

Exterior

The west front is plastered, with very narrow brick gable returns hardly more than the thickness of the gable wall. There are five bays, the southernmost bay being blank at first floor level, the second bay from the south having a recent porch and an ovolo mullioned window above, in line with the stack. There is also a doorway in the second bay from the north. The other windows are of recent date.

The roof is thatched. The offcentre stack has three polygonal brick shafts set in a triangular group. There is also an internal north gable stack with a shaft of triple lozenge section.

The south gable wall is of brick painted over, apparently not of great age. The north gable wall is of 19th century brick in Flemish bond.

The east wall has a brick plinth and is partly screened

by a pentise. To the south of this is one plastered bay with a ground floor window. Above the pentise, painted studwork and pargetting is visible, and two windows, one of which is ancient. To the north of the pentise there are two windows on each floor (one ground floor window is ancient) and a door converted to a window.

Interior

Ground floor

In the room south of the main stack there is widely spaced studwork visible in the east wall. The southern section of this wall has a sillbeam about 1 metre above the floor level, but to the north, near to the stack, there is a break and the sill rises to 1.5m. The central window in this wall is in an original space. The south and west walls have no visible features. There is a bridging beam, large and plain except for tongue stops, which now rests on a post in front of the east window, and an H-shaped frame around the west window; this arrangement dates from c.1900. A second stopped beam passes in front of the stack.

The fireplace in this room has a four-centred plastered arch with ovolo moulding and a "keystone" of plaster bearing the letter V (no doubt a reference to the appearance of this letter in Roman architecture on keystones). The plan of the hearth is of the three-sided "parlour" type.

To the west of the stack is a lobby, now run through into the porch; to the east is a space now serving as a second lobby to the pentise. It is entered from the north side only, where the original door head has been removed and raised. Winding stairs rise in this space, and have been capped. Two rails are visible in the studwork of the east wall. The room north of the stack has the higher sillbeam visible in the east wall, with studs pegged to it. A bridging beam across the stack rests at the east end on a horizontal member cut between two studs; the beam has tongue stops. Further north, and now appearing offcentre to the room because of the screen, is a large and heavy bridging beam again with tongue stops, which rests on one of three horizontal members between studs in the east wall. A more recent post has also been inserted beneath it. The attachment of its west end is concealed. All the ceiling joists are stopped and chamfered. Below the east end of the beam is a three light small window with square mullions and leaded lights.

The fireplace in this room is, surprisingly, also three-sided in plan, despite the presence of a hanging iron. The bressumer has been concealed by a recent plank. It was stated that a wall painting was discovered on the chimney breast with similar details to that on the first floor; it has been covered over.

As noted above, what now appears as the north wall of the room is a screen forming a cross passage. The screen is divided into panels formed by vertical and horizontal rails, each with a double rollmoulding of very small size and light scantling; indeed, one might be tempted to take it as a recent feature were it not for the obviously early nails that connect

the rails, and a blocked doorway towards the east, pairing a remaining door to the west. The ceiling joists pass through the screen.

The structural north wall of the room, forming the north wall of the passage, has a door at the east end and another offcentre to the east, suggesting there may be a blocked door towards the west end. These do not line up with the doors in the screen. A beam set into the wall has chamferstops and pegs for studs; one of these is above the left hand door, and the left hand door jamb though resembling a stud, is not pegged to the beam. The other stud mortises are some distance apart. It was stated that the beam used to have a design in red paint, and that the infill of the wall is of brick and clay.

To the north of the passage there is now a larger room to the west and a smaller room to the east. The west room has plain ceiling joists and a fireplace in the north stack, of large size with a crude bressumer. There are said to have been stairs beside it, since removed. The west wall has an original window space. A crude studwork wall divides the two rooms and rests on a brick corbel against the gable wall. In the eastern room, a high sillbeam is visible in the north and east walls, with studwork above, and a midwall rail in the east wall now covered by recent strengthening. In this room the ceiling of east-west joists is higher than that of the hall and passage, and the ends of the north-south joists of the latter can be seen on top of the beam in the south wall.

First floor

The room south of the stack has studwork and wallplate visible in the east and west walls. In the east wall, above the break in the sill at ground level, there is a scarf joint, but this may be a modern attempt to cover a gap between the wallplates. There is no brace at the south end against the gable return.

A central bridging beam is only visible in the attic floor, from above. Level with the south face of the stack is a beam set between two so-called "upper crucks"; these posts are set in front of wallbraces that pass behind them, springing from south to north. One brace continues onto the landing to the east, to which there is access by a rounded archway, and the other into a closet west of the stack, to which a door, now blocked, formerly gave access.

The fireplace in this room is of stone or rendered brick, the masonry joints outlined in black paint. It has a four-centred arch and is very shallow. On the chimney breast is a recently uncovered wall painting showing Adam and Eve in Paradise surrounded by animals and trees. This is in very naive style.

In the closet west of the stack a three light ovolo mullioned window has clearly been cut into pre-existing studwork.

North of the stack the present layout is a corridor along the east wall, passing two rooms to the west. There is an arched tiebeam across the north side of the stack; its east end rests on a post which has a slot as if for a brace, now at

floor level. The west end, however, is looped over the top of the wallplate. Studs are attached to the beam to form a partition; they are dovetailed and nailed into the beam, and the base of studwork above is visible. They bear assembly numbers. In the east and west walls, inverted arched braces spring northwards level with the ends of the beam.

To the north the wall that divides the two rooms is part of another upper cruck truss. In the east wall just south of this is a three light ovolo mullioned window, again cut into the studwork. In the west wall to the north of this truss, the wallplate has been cut by what appears to be an upright sash window since removed - it was said that other evidence of these has been found in the house.

A wall crosses the house to the north, forming the north wall of the second room and the end of the corridor. It is attached to the west wallplate by an iron tie. In the east wall, just south of this wall rather than level with it, is a post again with a slot at floor level, and an inverted arched wallbrace springs north from this, cut by the partition. There is a horizontal timber just to the south of the post and just above floor level.

North of the partition there is a larger room to the west and a smaller room to the east. The north stack has a fireplace in the west room with a bressumer cut to form a four centred arch. A wallpost is visible in the north west corner of the building, from which inverted arched braces rise in each wall. The east room has a raised ceiling of joist set on edge and a possible original window space in the east wall. A beam across the north stack is again supported by upper crucks. East of the stack is a winding stair to the attic. Wallbraces are visible in each wall in this corner too. In the east wall above the stair is a tiny blocked window with two lights divided by a diamond wooden bar, and retaining leaded lights.

Attic

To the south of the main stack the roof is of two bays with two orders of butt purlins. The southern bay, and the south end of the northern bay, have S-windbraces. The common rafters are ancient. The south gable is all of late brickwork. Level with the north side of the stack is a studwork wall with lath and wattle infill, that whose base was visible on the floor below. North of this point there are five bays with one order of butt purlins, no windbraces, and simple collars with chisel-punched assembly numbers. The north stack and the stair occupy the final bay.

DISCUSSION

The moated site, and the position on the edge of the common (as Faden shows), are typical for a medieval messuage. The moat very probably pre-dates the present building.

The present house was quite clearly a hall house. This can be seen by the way that the beams each side of the stack, and that to the present single-storey hall, are supported on inserted horizontal members; the stack bay does not relate to the wallbraces, but cuts across them; the original posts have

slots for braces now at upper floor level; and the horizontal member just above first floor level in the east wall of the hall is possibly the lintel of a large hall window.

The original building would have had an upper floor above the service end, and this is still evidenced by the change in ceiling height and construction at this end. It is quite possible that the easternmost of the two doors in the north wall of the cross passage originally led to a stair to this upper room or "solar", and that the other door was once one of a pair leading to two service rooms. On the first floor the former south wall of this section corresponded with the post bearing the brace slot; the present partition here has been moved slightly northwards.

However, a notable feature is that though the present stack bay does not relate to the framing, there is a very narrow bay at this point; its south side was just south of the present stack, where the bracing is visible on the upper floor and where the sillbeam drops, and its north side is again marked by a post with a brace slot - the tiebeam having been either replaced or altered. This suggests that there was a timber and daub smoke hood pre-dating the stack.

So did the original building stop at this point, and lack a parlour to the south? This would be very unusual, as two-cell open halls tend to be hall and parlour alone; where there is no parlour there is usually an upper floor. This could be a variant case, but it is also possible that the present south end has been rebuilt rather than added.

The date of this original building is difficult to fix exactly on the visible evidence, but the spacing of the studs suggests later rather than earlier, perhaps around 1500.

The major change to the house came in the early to mid 17th century when the upper floor was inserted, also the two stacks, the service rooms were remodelled as a kitchen, and the parlour added or rebuilt. The inserted beams each side of the main stack, and that across the hall, support pairs of so-called upper crucks, really a type of knee brace. Ovolo moulded windows were cut into the upper framing. There are two very remarkable aspects to this conversion. Firstly, in Norfolk and Suffolk it tends to be a universal pattern that stacks were inserted between hall and parlour with a small fireplace to the latter and a large fireplace for cooking in the hall. Where a separate kitchen stack is found, this is almost always a much later insertion. But here it is quite clear from the form of the stacks and the brickwork that both stacks were of the same date; the hall was given a "parlour-type" fireplace and the service rooms were converted to a kitchen. A new service stair was made beside the north stack.

The second unusual feature is that after the upper floor was inserted, a screen wall was made on the line of the previous hall screen. The present writer has often suspected that this took place but has never found an extant example before, and certainly nothing resembling this wall.

The new stacks had wall paintings, assuming that they are of the correct period. That visible on the first floor has

some aspects that make the present writer wonder if it is genuine; it seems almost too naive, as if it were a later attempt to imitate the style; but this suspicion may be unjustified.

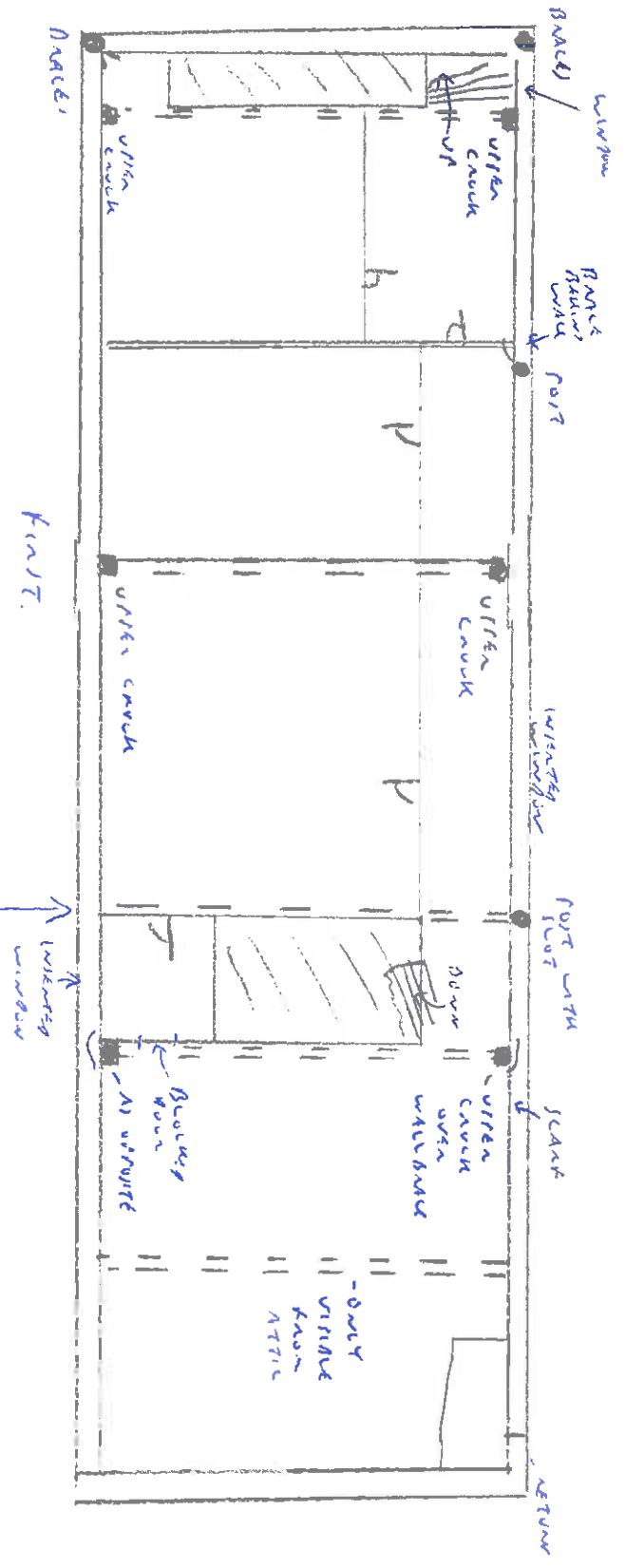
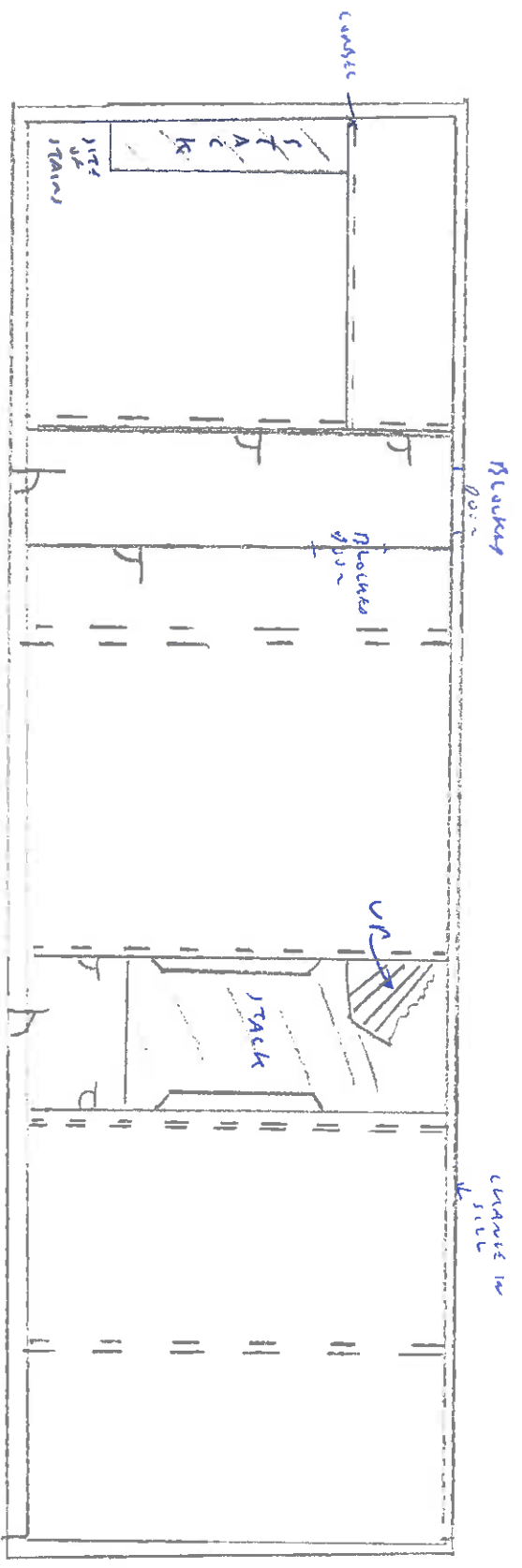
The chamber over the parlour end had an attic above, and this may have been reached by a stair now removed rising from above the ground floor stair. The roof structure north of the stack seems later, and there is a studwork wall rising from upper floor to roof on the north side of the stack. It may be that the attic floor in this section is a later insertion; the stairs beside the north stack are not old in their present form, but they do have the small window to light them and they may have been reconstructed. It is improbable that the screen wall across the stack is part of the earlier firehood, as the studs are nailed and dovetailed into the beam. It may be that the attic floor at this end was fitted into the existing hall roof, and that this has had to be replaced at a more recent date, unlike the parlour block roof. But on balance there would seem to be reason to suggest that the attic floor north of the stack is a later insertion than the first floor and the parlour attic.

Some later remodelling is evidenced by the traces of sash windows. The rebuilding of the gable walls in brick, and the first floor subdivision are 19th or 20th century work.

SUMMARY

A late medieval hall house within a moated site was floored and probably extended in the mid 17th century when two stacks were inserted, the services converted to a kitchen, and a new screen made along the cross passage. The attic floor above the hall may be of later date. There have been later, smaller alterations.

Edwin J. Rose
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