

**Some older houses in West Street, Dunster**

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# SOME OLDER HOUSES IN WEST STREET, DUNSTER

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2013 the SANHS Building Research Group (West Somerset) was set up with an initial event in Dunster, which seemed a very appropriate setting for our focus on the west of the county. The launch included an exhibition, and, in preparing for this, members became aware of the high number of properties in Dunster with true cruck trusses, which generally date to earlier than jointed cruck trusses in the Somerset Dendrochronology Project (McDermott 2005). Coincidentally, Time Team were carrying out work in Dunster from 2013 to 2019 and through tree ring dating have shown a concentration of very early dates for roof structures there (Ainsworth *et al.* 2019). In early 2018, Historic England appointed the group to investigate these further through its 'Early Fabric in Historic Towns' initiative.

The abundance of early buildings in Dunster is proving fascinating in terms of plan types, for purposes of comparison of early features, and in relation to later alterations. Work is ongoing, with 20 surveys carried out to date and at least as many again to be investigated. Reports will be lodged at the Somerset Heritage Centre and with Dunster Museum. Analysis is best considered at the end of the project, but a group of houses in West Street are worthy of consideration at this stage (Fig. 1). This study looks at a small group of houses in West Street, two of which may have been linked together.

The project has surveyed nos 11 and 17 West Street, and others have been previously recorded by E. H. D. Williams (1981, 1983). Between the two properties, a fire destroyed early evidence and no. 15 was entirely rebuilt, but it will be shown that the lower room of no. 11 did extend further to the south into no. 13.

## DESCRIPTION OF PROPERTIES

### 11 West Street

In 2015, the group was asked to investigate a property at 11 West Street where the owner had embarked on an ambitious programme of restoration work. His enthusiasm and input have been of great assistance to us. The initial survey has been summarised previously in this journal (Ewing 2018). Since then, there have been further surveys as building work has progressed, revealing more



*Fig. 1 Location plan based on 1842 Tithe Map held at Somerset Heritage Centre*

features; by then the undertaking of the Early Dunster project had raised a number of questions about medieval town housing. The original survey of no. 11 suggested that the roof continued beyond the south party wall, but further investigation was limited by the condition of the first-floor ceiling. A member of the project team has since been allowed access to the roof of no. 13, adjoining no. 11 to the south, and has taken photographs of the attic confirming continuation of roof structure. Other features noted since the original survey were possibly original floor joists to the solar, connected with an earlier post and panel partition (now gone) and what appears to be a jetty joist at the opposite end of the hall.

The property consists of a front range of four bays with at ground floor a cross-passage, original open hall, inner room and solar above the inner room (Figs 2 and 3). At the other end of the hall, which was part ceiled, was another chamber which extended above both it and the cross-passage. The rear wall of the property was built of cob but this was altered when a rear range was added, running east to west at the solar end, with a section of the wall still intact.

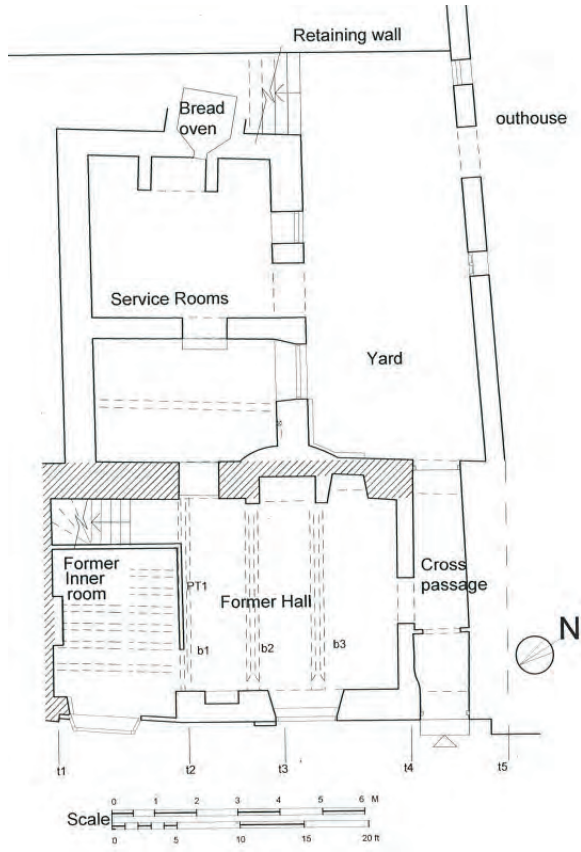


Fig. 2 Plan of 11 West Street

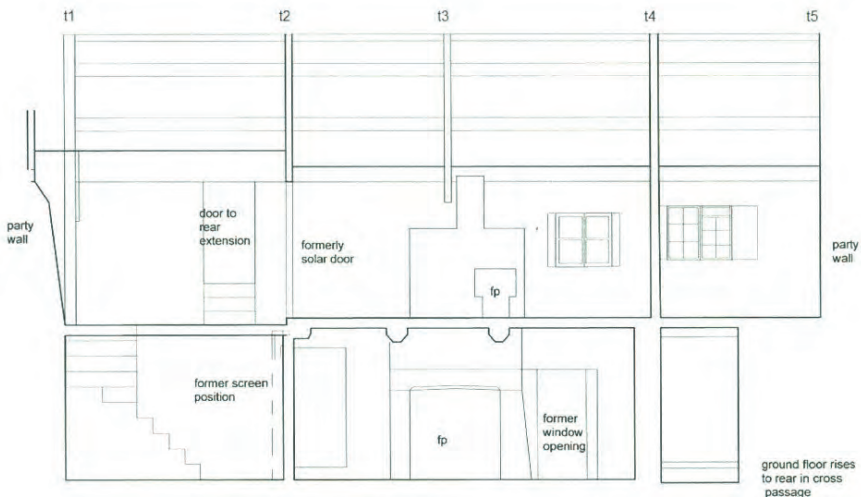


Fig. 3 Long section of 11 West Street looking east

At the party wall with 9 West Street, there is a true cruck truss (Figs 2 and 3, t1), very much repaired in the east leg, but with the west leg fairly well exposed at the 'elbow' when the building was first stripped out (Fig. 4). Below this externally is a pent roof which is thought to have served a former shop front and may have been the reason for removal of the lower part of the west leg. The top of these two oak principals is visible with a flush tenon joint (type E; Alcock 1981), but it is damaged and filled with other material at the apex (Fig. 5). The through-purlin mortices seem to line up with those of the next truss. From the battered profile, the party wall at this end appears to originally have been of cob with an inserted brick stack. The cob stops above first-floor ceiling level where there is timber framing beside the brick stack.

Truss t2 is a jointed cruck truss with infill panels on the first floor and in the attic. In the attic, the smoke blackening on the hall side was very visible and the other (the side of the solar) was relatively unblackened. The timbers to the framing at first-floor level, when unpainted on the side of the solar, could be seen to have many burn marks which are now widely considered by



Fig. 4 True cruck (t1) truss exposed, west leg



Fig. 5 Apex of t1, party wall with no. 9 beyond

members of the Vernacular Architecture Group to be apotropaic or witch marks (Fig. 6). At the eaves at the east end of this wall, the jamb and top joint of an early doorway were visible. This door would have led from the side of the hall into the solar, probably with ladder access (Fig. 7). At ground-floor level a modern partition concealed an earlier half beam with evidence of flooring behind, and this will be considered in more detail below.

All other trusses to the south appear to be jointed cruck trusses, although the elbow of some have been removed through later alteration. One of these trusses has been dendro-dated by Time Team to between 1371 and 1403 (Ainsworth *et al.* 2019). We have included the property in

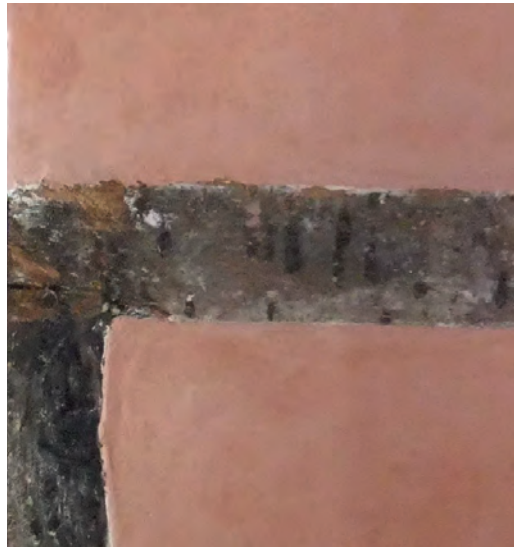


Fig. 6 Marks on timber wall frame





*Fig. 7 Remains of solar door frame with pintel*

the Early Dunster Project for further dendro-dating which we hope will give a guide to later alterations. Truss t4 was another infilled truss at first-floor and attic levels. In the attic, the damaged infill could be seen to be on a straw or water reed base rather than wattle and daub suggesting a later date. At first-floor level, the pegs of the timber frame were exposed during building works. Along the line of this wall, the owner found a timber beam in the first-floor space and, below it, a possible stud and panel partition was replaced with stone at one time to divide the open hall from the cross-passage. It may be that this boundary separated the private area from public access through the cross-passage to the yard, in the past. Truss t5 and one more lie above 13 West Street. Truss t5 is open, indicating the properties were once connected. Photographs of the adjacent roof more clearly showed the infilled truss at t6b to the south of t5. Beyond this again, t7b appears to be similar to the other jointed cruck frames with a cranked collar. The current roof has been raised above these trusses.

The extended roof is also apparent externally with a difference in roof height at the position of t6b, although no. 13 extends beyond (Fig. 8) with a rear range containing more jointed cruck trusses. The evidence suggests that this part of no. 13 was originally an outer service room to no. 11. The jointed crucks of the rear wing at no. 11 are similar to those in the front range and are heavily smoke blackened, but they are built over the roof structure of the front range and so are assumed to be of a later date.



*Fig. 8 Line of roof extending south under a different roof finish (at right of photograph)*

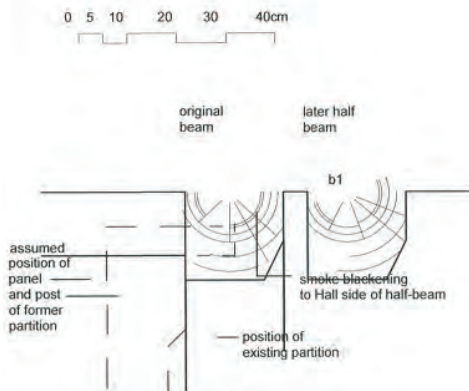


Fig. 9 Beam details at former screen to inner room

Later alterations at no. 11 include the insertion of a lateral stack, indicated by herringbone slatework below the hall window and a slight deviation in the masonry externally. When this front lateral stack was removed, a stone stack was inserted into the cob wall at the rear, partly blocking an earlier external door shown by a remaining door jamb in the extension. A curved section of masonry beside the stack externally may have been a staircase or an oven. At some stage, the hall was fully ceiled over to provide another chamber above.

Further information was found during building works. As mentioned above, in the wall below t2, a second smoke blackened half beam was hidden behind the modern partition with later half beam. Floor joists (13/15cm deep by 15/16cm wide and at spacing varying between 40 and 53cm centres) had come adrift from this original half beam where the mortices for their seating could clearly be seen. In each floor joist immediately behind the half beam, was a vertical mortice which would have taken sizeable uprights, these mortices being axial and 15cm long (Fig. 9). These uprights would have been part of a post and panel screen. Remains of such partitions can be seen in other parts of Dunster but not with such apparently hefty uprights. The undersides of the joists were formerly lime-washed. The half beam, rather than the posts, supported the framed wall above forming a shallow jetty.

Another feature revealed was the top of beam b3 which was found to be elaborately moulded (Fig. 10). Below the ceiling, it is similar to b2 with simple chamfers but may possibly have been plastered over concealing any lower moulding. In the floor above, joists laid flat between this beam and the wall separating the hall from the cross-passage were chamfered on the lower edges (17cm wide x 13cm deep and at c. 46cm



Fig. 10 Profile of assumed jetty beam b3

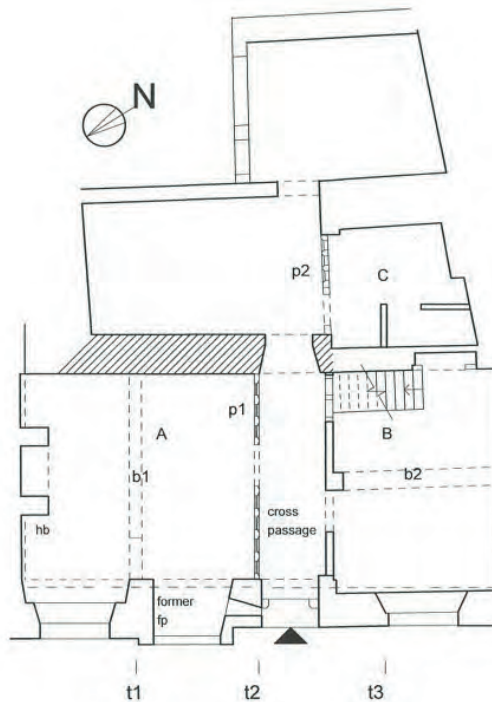
spacing). Together with the moulded beam this would have given an impressive effect to the overhang when built. In providing a partial ceiling to the hall below, another chamber was housed above this and the cross-passage together. Nothing was seen to suggest what form the wall or balustrade would have taken above the beam.

At the time of the tithe records in 1842, the property was listed as occupied by Thomas Morkham, having been in the family since 1763 together with the adjacent property, now no. 13, occupied by his sister Mary. It stayed in the family until around 1850. An extract from their father's will reads as follows:

*....to my son Thomas Morkham all that Freehold Dwelling House and small Garden together with half of the Upper Garden wherein he now lives for his own use situate in West Street Dunster; also ... to my Daughter Mary Morkham all that Freehold House, Wash house and Stable (with usual right of Passage to them from the Street) and the other part of the Upper Garden ...for her use during her life and after her death for the use of my son Thomas Morkham and his heirs for ever...* (SHC DD/L/2/34/9)

## 17 West Street

This roof may be the oldest of the group, the roof timbers having been dendro-dated by Time Team to 1366 (Ainsworth *et al.* 2019). The house now consists of two rooms – an open hall with a later lateral stack now removed and a cross-passage between this and the lower room (Fig. 11). Above the hall is an impressive arch braced cruck truss (Fig. 12) with wind bracing, now on display in the bedroom above. This is an extraordinarily fine feature for what is a



*Fig. 11 Plan of no. 17*

rather small hall at 4.9 x 4.7m span. Once again there was a door into a solar, but this time the solar was above the cross-passage and outer room. The indicative door jamb is much more basic than the one at no. 11 but it still has the pintels which show that it would have opened towards the south away from the hall. Above the lower room (B) and solar is another true cruck truss with massive timbers. There is further wind bracing here which may suggest that the whole roof was at one time visible from below.

The open hall (A) here again has a cob rear wall, in common with nos 11 and 27. Roof timbers to the single-storey wing at the rear were not visible, but believed to be modern. On the ground floor at p2 is a good quality late medieval window and door frame to what would have been an open yard at the rear of the cross-passage. It is suggested here that the cross-passage again provided public access through to the rear of the property and that this may have been a shop front. An internal door frame in the outer room may have connected with this. The property does not appear to have extended to the south.

The question regarding this house is whether there could have been an inner room to the north, where a fire burnt down the building between this and no. 13. Number 15 has a completely new frontage from when

it was rebuilt but internally, is effectively divided in two with a wall and different floor levels to each side of a possibly earlier boundary. Number 17 has the same size hall and cross-passage as no. 11, but it does not have an inner room which may well have been where the room, now a shop in no. 15, is located. With this addition, the intervening two part-properties, would accommodate a house similarly sized to the other West Street houses described.



*Fig. 12 Arch braced cruck truss with wind bracing*

## 27 West Street

This property lies to the south of Mill Lane and so is quite detached from the other buildings mentioned (Fig. 1). However, it is very similar in layout, construction and materials to the other properties described. It is now divided into two properties but was one at the time of the previous recording (Williams 1983) with a form of the standard three-room cross-passage type (Fig. 13). It had previously been divided into two dwellings as evidenced by two staircases. An original wall of cob, at the rear of the open hall, was recorded at 75cm thick. The south of the roof was believed to have been originally hipped (Williams 1983). The roof structure was not fully visible and although with later boxing in, the curve of two obviously cruck trusses were seen running into the walls above the lower room. In the rear wing, were two jointed cruck trusses. It was noted in the report that the low end together with the cross-passage was half the total length indicating a possible long house origin. Although not specifically considered here, it is possible that the long 'low' ends were sometimes used for goods' storage rather than livestock (Isabel Richardson pers. comm.). The lateral stack at this house is still visible at the front of the property.

## FURTHER HOUSES PREVIOUSLY RECORDED ON THE EAST SIDE OF WEST STREET

### 1 West Street

This was viewed by Time Team as part of their Dunster dendro-dating work (in 2018). They found the ground-floor layout to be that of a medieval three-room and cross-passage house although evidence above had been removed at a later date. Alterations generally were thought to date from the 17th century and around 1700.

From sample measurements on the east side of West Street they believed the properties all to be laid out in burgage plots in multiples of perch lengths.

### 7 West Street

This was recorded by the Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group in 2006. The house has a cross passage through to the yard, a hall and inner room and evidence of a former lateral stack on the front wall. The house, including the roof structure was found to be of the 17th century so may have been an infill or a rebuild. The roof line matches through with that of no. 11.

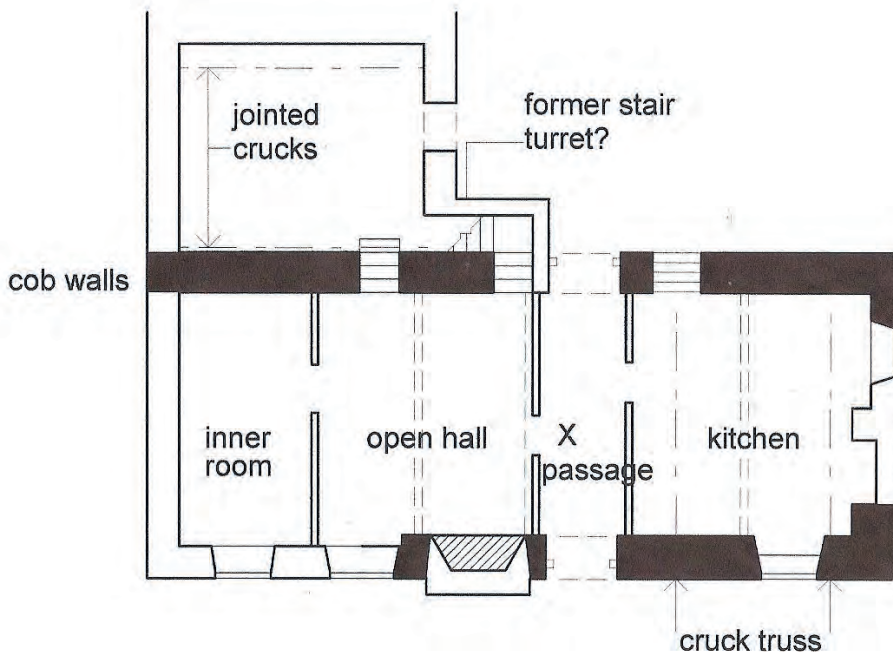


Fig. 13 Layout of no. 27 (copied from Williams 1983)



## UNUSUAL FEATURES FOR SOMERSET

Features such as internal jetties are not common in Somerset but are more so in Devon. On recording a house at 15/17 Marsh Street E. H. D. Williams, in 1981, highlighted an upper end jetty with another jetty at the other end of the hall similar to that at 11 West Street. He commented that 'a hall with jetty at both ends is a rarity but not unknown'. His experience covered something like 2,000 properties in the county. Two other houses in West Somerset with possible similar features are the subject of an article by Mark McDermott (1982) but are the exception rather than the rule.

An article by Alcock and Laithwaite (1973) describes a number of houses particularly in Devon, where there are jetties at both ends of the hall and also partly ceiled floors providing a room above the low end of the hall and the cross-passage. To quote from the article: 'At the upper end of the hall, where there was commonly a bench, the jetty served as a canopy and is often shallow. At the lower end it tended to be deep, presumably to form a larger room over the cross-passage.' This fits very well with 11 West Street, and the house in Marsh Street.

Another distinctive feature found in Devon but not encountered so much in other parts of Somerset are properties with both true crucks and jointed crucks in the same building. According to the national cruck database (VAG website), the earliest jointed cruck recorded in Somerset is dated to 1344 and in Devon is 1258-63. One house in Dunster dated by Time Team to 1309 has both true (raised) crucks and a jointed cruck frame (Ainsworth *et al.* 2019). We are increasingly aware of the number of houses with high status roof construction such as arch braces and wind bracing.

The more obvious signs of Devon style are the use of cob walls and inserted front lateral stacks. The main three houses described above all have thick cob rear walls, cruck trusses, have or have evidence of a front lateral stack and are of similar layout with similarly sized rooms.

Alison Bunning had pointed out the similarity of 11 West Street with early properties at Silverton in Devon some 32 miles to the south of Dunster towards Exeter, and the subject of a report by John Thorp (1982). The rooms are of a similar size to those in West Street and of comparable construction and layout. The roofs have jointed cruck frames and one arch brace with wind bracing over the hall and later wings at the rear. The conclusion regarding these was that there had been one house of three rooms with cross-passage and at least one adjacent of two rooms and cross-passage, possibly larger. Lateral stacks and cob walls were also featured here. From a timber framed party wall at the north, it

is believed that there were further houses and the roof would also have continued to the south of the two-room house. In the three-room house, there is a jetty with part floored hall with an arrangement of first-floor rooms as at 11 West Street. A first-floor chamber was thus formed above the part ceiling and cross-passage with another room beyond this over the service (low) end. This, in particular, but also the high quality of the roof structure, the construction and layout are all very close in style to the houses in West Street.

## CONCLUSION

Most of the medieval Dunster houses are parallel with the road which fits with Pantin's (1962) analysis of early town houses. Those parallel with the road nearly all conform to the three-room cross-passage plan and are of similar dimensions. We have identified 13 houses with this plan to date and further examples are expected to be found. The layout is seen commonly throughout Somerset, mainly in rural areas, well into the 17th century. Apart from this layout, there is a possible remnant of a courtyard house at 16-22 West Street, with a wing at right angles to the road. The impressive nature of some of the roof structures compared with the size of the properties is notable in this as well as in other streets in Dunster. However, probate inventories of 1635-1746 seem to suggest that by the 17th century many of the three-room cross-passage type had been divided up as most of them now are, usually with an inner room or lower room separated off and frequently a rear wing added.

Early rows of houses in Somerset are unusual but not unknown, for example Mells, New Street (Williams *et al.* 1986). Somerset vernacular buildings are well described in the Jane Penoyre (2005) book, *Traditional Houses of Somerset*. The difference between the west and other parts of Somerset could at least in part be due to the building materials which here have more in common with those of Devon – random rubble and cob rather than the fine workable stones which are found further east in Somerset. Other factors may be pertinent, for example the cloth trade which could have given Dunster its peak time of prosperity in the 14th and 15th centuries, judging by the quality of the houses of that date. It was known by 1540 for a particular type of broadcloth called 'Dunsters' (VCH website).

There are perhaps three possible paths of influence – the Priory, the Castle and trade in medieval times. It has been suggested that the Priory was given the role of helping administer Bath Abbey's estates in the West Country and Ireland so it may well have had good overland connections with Devon. It is also noteworthy that Silverton Manor was in the ownership

of the Wyndham family at Orchard Wyndham, Williton. There were certainly marital connections between the Luttrells, the Wyndhams and the Harringtons (and thereby the Devon Courtenay family) of Porlock. Silverton, itself an important town for the cloth trade, was on a route between Exeter and Tiverton, possibly from Roman times and certainly by the time of Ogilby's maps (Nicholson 1995). It is now on the old road along the Exe valley south from Dunster to Tiverton and thence to Exeter. An article by Philip Ashford (2014) suggests trade in West Somerset between 1500 and 1550 to be predominately with Devon from mercantile debt evidenced from the Court of Common Pleas. This all suggests that there were many possibilities for links with Devon from where influence of style could spread, together with travelling craftspeople.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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