

THE GEORGE HOTEL, YEOVIL, SOMERSET

(PLATES IV, V AND VI)

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HISTORY

The architectural poverty of Yeovil has often been noticed by discerning visitors; with the pulling down of The George Hotel in 1962, it lost the last of its medieval buildings except for St. John's Church, an early example of Perpendicular Gothic. Though dignified by the description "Hotel" since the end of the 19th century, The George has for three hundred years served as a small inn, never even rising to the rank of a coaching inn. Yet it began as a 15th-century dwelling house and, because it was owned by the Woborn's Almshouse Trustees from 1478 to 1920, its history can be traced in their records.

Writing in the *Proceedings* for 1930,¹ Mr John Goodchild identified The George as "the tenement in Pyt Lane" (now Middle Street) valued at 6/8d. a year, one of three in that street recorded as Almshouse property in a list printed in the Charity Commissioners' Report.² This list (now missing) was drawn up in 1502 by William Skarre, *procurator domus elemosinariae de Yevele*, and it included 14 tenements in Yeovil and Stoford, which are also mentioned in Letters Patent dated 25 November 1478, confirming the grant of these properties to the newly founded Woborn Almshouse. Rents for these tenements appear in extant 16th century Account Rolls (now deposited in the Somerset Record Office), and it is reasonable to suppose that the tenements had remained continuously in the hands of the Almshouse Trustees after its foundation in 1478.

The largest of these properties in Pyt Lane, valued in 1502 at 6/8d. a year, was held in 1531 by William Shorte at a rent of 14/- a year:³ a lease of 1550 records the grant of a burgage at the same rent to Gyles Hayne for a term of 60 years.⁴ The document is endorsed "lease of my dwelling house in Pyt Lane". The increase in rent may well be explained by the addition of the south wing. There is no reason to doubt that Gyles Hayne's dwelling house was already standing in 1478, and this is consistent with its architectural features.

Gyles Hayne retained his lease till his death in 1580; he acted as churchwarden in 1561 and 1562, was rated to provide one light horseman in the muster roll,⁵ supplied timber and tiles to the church-

¹ *Proc. S.A.S.*, 76 (1930), xii-xiii.

² *C.C.R. (Somersetshire)* 1819-37, 318.

³ Woborn Almshouse Account Rolls, Somerset R.O., DD/X/GF/W/52.

⁴ Woborn Muniments, Yeovil (all leases mentioned are in this collection).

⁵ E. Green, *Somerset and the Armada*, 43.

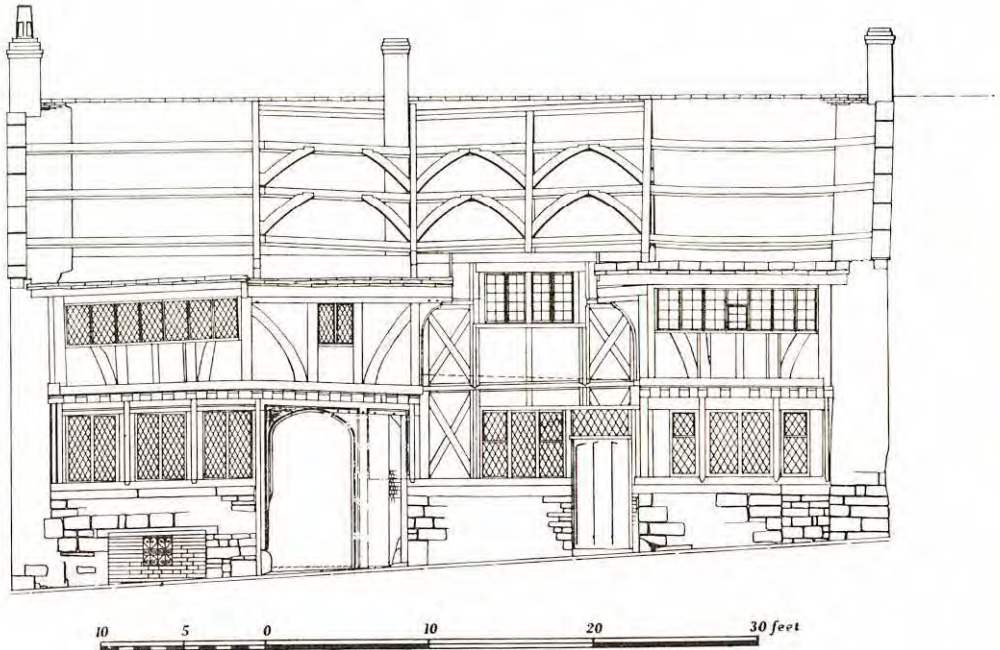


FIG. 1 North elevation

wardens, and was mourned by his widow Alice “with all the bells” at a cost of 3/4d.⁶ She continued paying rent for the house until 1597 when John Hacker became the tenant: three years later Joseph Hayne was the tenant, renewing his lease in 1602 “in consideration of a fine of 40/- of lawful money of England” for a term of 60 years. (This lease is also endorsed “my house in Pyt Lane”.) An enquiry into the conduct of Almshouse business in 1610⁷ roundly condemned this and several other leases as contrary to the foundation charter, which expressly forbade leases for more than 7 years. Hayne’s fine, it was stated, ought to have been £30. The harshness of this condemnation was mitigated after a further enquiry in 1619 on appeal by the defendants: the commissioners then found “that the jury . . . were not informed of many particulars which did much excuse the fault imputed to the defendants and in equity did lessen the burthen which the decree imposed on them.”⁸ Nevertheless, the commissioners ordered stricter adherence to the rules of the foundation charter, and the auditing of accounts annually.

⁶ Yeovil Churchwardens’ Accounts, 1573 and 1580 (St. John’s parish chest).

⁷ Transcript in St. John’s parish chest, Yeovil.

⁸ Woborn Muniments, Yeovil.

The next tenant, the widow Harrison, was followed by Thomas Grobham in 1617. When he renewed his lease for a term of 99 years (or three lives) in 1621, the rent was raised from 14/- to 16/- a year, an increase which probably reflects the addition of new chambers by the division of the hall into two storeys. Thomas Grobham, born in 1586, became a mercer, and was licensed to sell tobacco in 1634;⁹ on his death in 1642, his daughter Anne, who had married Joseph Underwood, a grocer of Dorchester, inherited his interest, subletting the house to Robert Butt, as appears from a lease "dated in the year of our Lord God according to the computation of the Church of England 1650." By this lease, Anne Underwood surrendered her interest to her son and daughter, Frederick and Rachell Underwood, for a fine of £14; the burgage is described as "formerly held by Thomas Grobham deceased and commonly called The Three Cuppes." The Grobham's were a well-to-do family, two of whom served as portreeve of Yeovil and warden of the Almshouse. It is likely that the house in Pyt Lane first became an inn when Robert Butt became tenant some time after Thomas Grobham's death. Its identification with the Haynes' house is made certain by the description "a burgage in Pyt Lane lying between the lands of Ambrose Locke on the east and George Marchaunte on the west" (Hayne's lease of 1602), ". . . of Ambrose Locke on the east and Lawrence Woodham on the west" (Grobham's lease of 1621), and ". . . of the late Ambrose Locke on the east and of Lawrence Woodham the elder on the west" (Butt's lease of 1650). At this period one or both of the additional doorways in the north front may have been inserted.

James Markes, who followed as lessee in 1668, is described as an innholder in his renewal lease of 1677; on his death in 1698, The Three Cuppes was rented for 7 years by his son James, and then by Mrs. Dorothy Markes until at least 1733. From 1741 the inn was occupied by the Hayne family until a new lease for 99 years at the 17th century rent of 16/- a year was engrossed in 1777 for Hugh Butts, a glover, on the lives of his daughter Mary and the two daughters of Giles Hayne, Elizabeth and Hellena; he paid a fine of £5 on surrendering his previous lease. The inn was then described as "a burgage in Pitt Lane or Middle Street", an early use of the present street name. From 1796, the account book lists Mrs. Kitson as paying 16/- rent "for Haynes"; she also rented The Pall Inn, another Almshouse property, so named because a pall belonging to the Woborn Trustees was kept there as the inn adjoined the Almshouse. This pall could be hired for use at funerals, as was done at the death of Martin Strong, vicar of Yeovil, in 1720.

In 1832 an entry in the account book runs "Mr. John Thomas paid 207 days rent of the George Inn (late Kitson's) which fell in hand Aug. 30, 1832". From 1841 the name The George Inn is

⁹ *S.D.N.Q.*, VIII, 88.

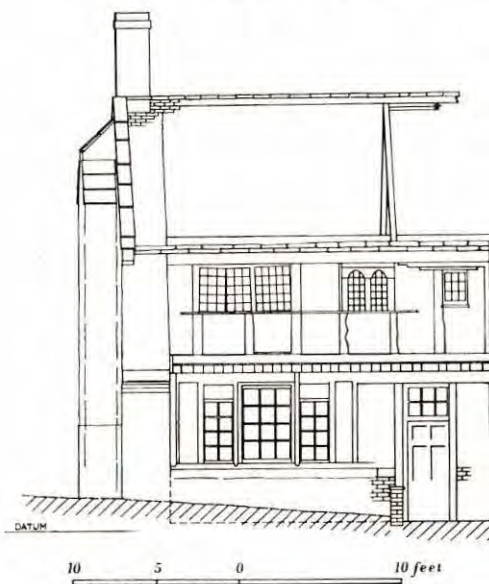


FIG. 2 South Wing: East elevation

normally used in the list of rents, although payments “for work done at The George” occur as early as 1820; the change of name probably indicates a loyal compliment to King George III, whose portrait, crudely painted in the present century, formed the inn-sign in recent times.

John Thomas paid a rack rent of £57 from 1832 to 1834, but the amount fell to £25 in 1849 and stayed at that figure till 1858, despite re-thatching and other work done in 1838, 1847 and 1851. A date stone inscribed “R. T. Custos 1847” showed his position behind the building that the work done in Robert Tucker’s year of office included the repair of the west wall of the yard. One of the tenants during the period of decline was Edmund Henning, who carried on a brewery in Hendford. Then its value rose steadily until the owner of the Osborne Brewery took over the lease: he was Earle Vincent, carrying on business in Sherborne Road where Messrs. Sparrow’s Osborne Garage now stands. During his tenancy and that of his successors, J. D. Knight and W. H. Baxter, the rent rose to £92 15. 0. a year. The last chapter in its history began in 1920 when Messrs. Lovibond, the Salisbury brewers, purchased the building for £2,500, and while preserving the exterior, made many alterations inside. Meanwhile, street widening near The George began when the new Post Office (now Marks and Spencer’s) was set back several feet in

1902; other owners followed suit, especially after the Second World War, until in 1960 the Town Council, influenced by traffic and business arguments, agreed to approve Messrs. Lovibond's plan for demolition and rebuilding, and to buy that part of the site which projected into the roadway. After the statutory enquiry, the Minister of Housing and Local Government gave his approval, and The George was pulled down in April 1962.

STRUCTURE

No documentary record survives of the building of The George. Originally it consisted only of the main range fronting on the street; the back wing was added later. The house was of the type known as 'Wealden', a type which was particularly common in the Weald of Kent, but which is also found sporadically in other parts of England—in Sussex, Berkshire, Cambridgeshire, Warwickshire and in the City of York. The George was the most westerly specimen that has been noticed and it had some unusual features which will be described later.

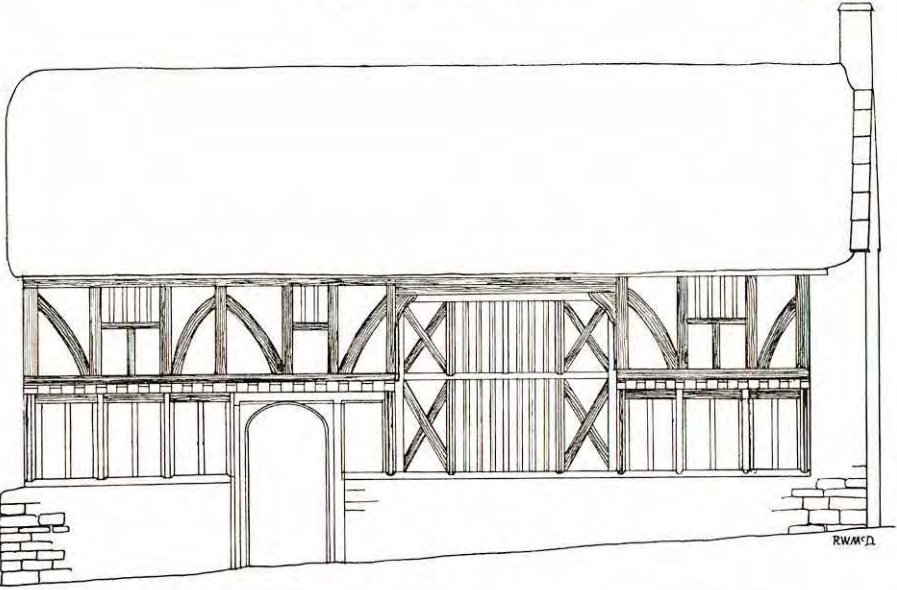
The essential feature of a Wealden house¹⁰ is a central open hall between jettied end bays under a single rectangular roof. The roof, coming sufficiently far forward to cover the jettied projection of the end bays, then has very widely overhanging eaves in front of the hall between the jetties. The braces that carry this overhanging roof and the cove under the overhanging eaves form a very attractive feature in the best examples of the type. The jetties and the overhanging roof between them that make the characteristic Wealden elevation may appear on the front only or may be repeated on the back as well. The George had these Wealden features on the street front but the overhanging roof had been mutilated in fairly recent years by the removal of the oversailing beam between the braces and by the cutting back of the eaves to give more light to the upper room (room 8) which had been formed in the upper part of the hall (Figs. 1 and 5). The back wall had been rebuilt and the remaining timbers indicated that there had been a jetty to the east of the hall but evidence for the original form further west had been destroyed.

When first built The George had an open hall with its roof divided into two small bays, one jettied two-storeyed bay to the west, and two similar two-storeyed bays to the east. The back wing was added in the 16th century, probably before 1531¹¹ and was of two storeys, with the upper floor jettied on the east side. It was probably in the first half of the 17th century that the hall was divided into two storeys, and chambers were formed out of the upper part (rooms 8 and 9 on the plan).¹² The same century also saw the insertion of the

¹⁰ M. W. Barley, *English Farmhouse and Cottage* (1961), 26-9; Margaret Wood, *The English Mediaeval House* (1965), 218.

¹¹ See p. 84.

¹² See p. 86.



NORTH ELEVATION



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

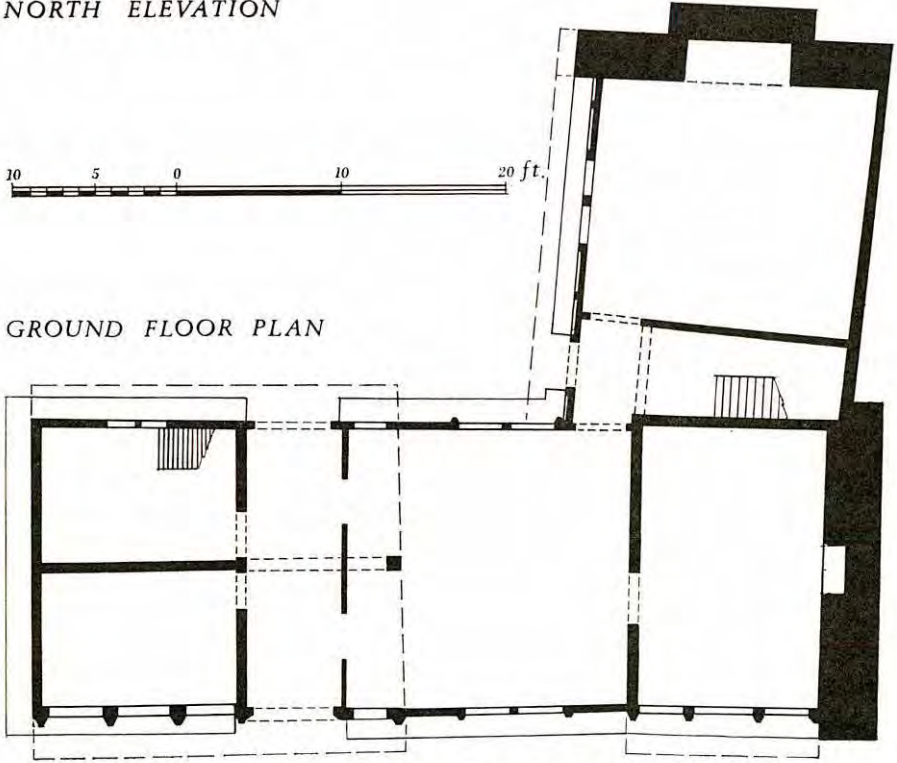


FIG. 3 Reconstruction: plan and elevation as in 1600

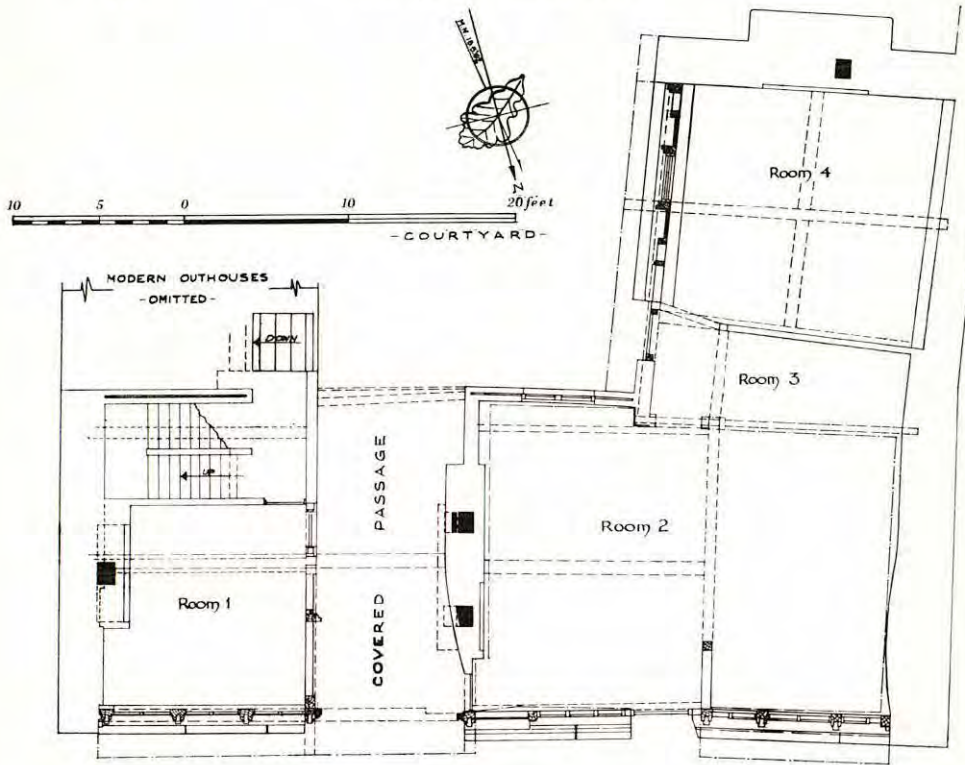


FIG. 4 Ground-floor plan

seven-light windows in the first floor of the end bays of the front elevation.

Payments for repairs are recorded at various dates in the 19th century and alterations were carried out in 1900 at a cost of £295. In the middle of the 19th century the roof was still covered with thatch. The later alterations included the covering of the roof with tiles, new ground-floor windows in the north front of the hall and west bay, the cutting back of the eaves of the south wall of the hall, the rebuilding on a new alignment of the south wall of the hall, the rebuilding of much of the south side of the east end bay, the rebuilding with new windows of the east ground-storey wall of the back wing and the opening up of the lower part of the hall to the west to form a large public bar (room 2). The insertion of a chimney stack at the east end of the hall must have been at a fairly late date as it blocked a 17th-century doorway between rooms 6 and 8 on the upper floor (Figs. 5 and 8).

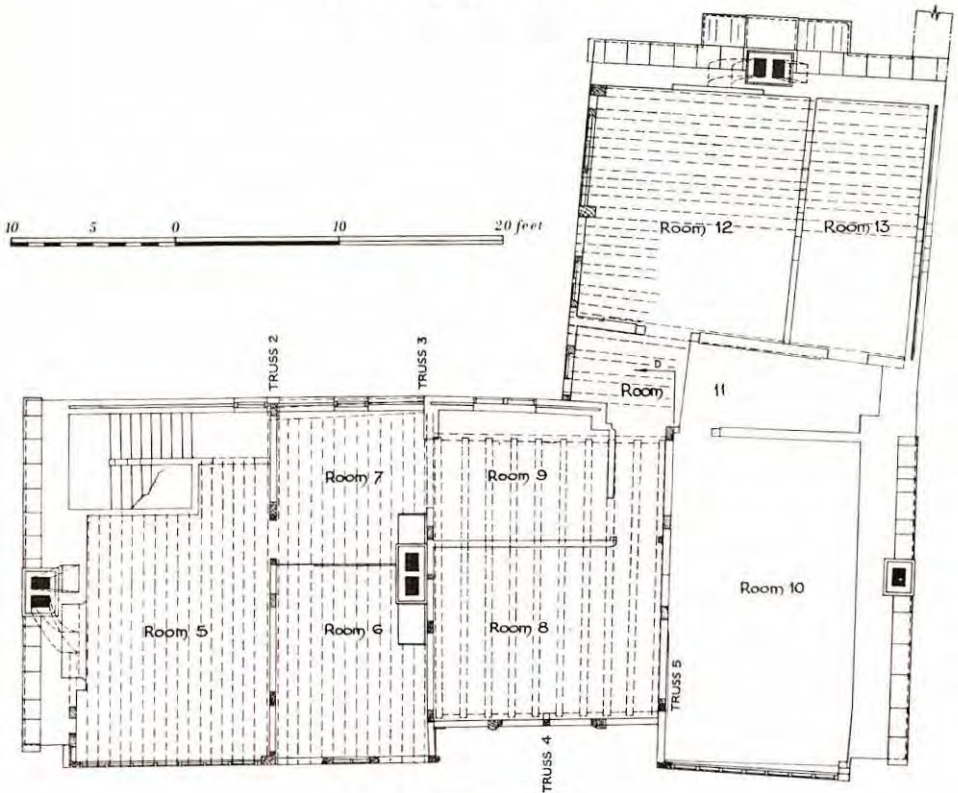


FIG. 5 First-floor plan

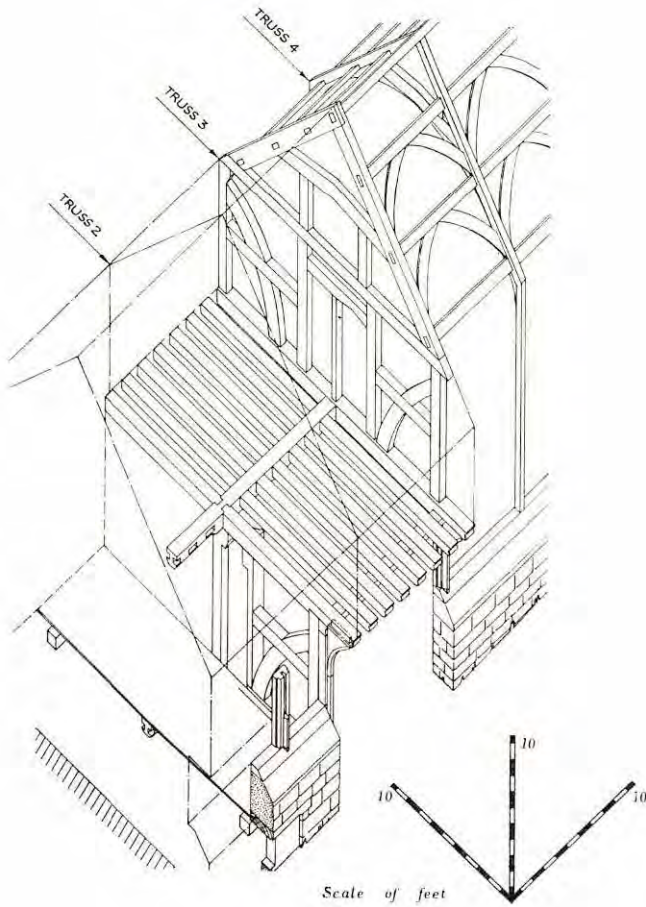
The George was unlike most Wealden houses in having stone walls at the two ends, and there was also a stone wall at the south end of the south wing. The wall at the east end of the front block may not have been original; on the upper floor were some timbers which perhaps formed part of a timber-framed end wall; at the west end however there were no such traces to suggest a timber-framed end wall; timber and stonework were more closely integrated and the western stone wall can be accepted as original. The south wall of the south wing was built at the same time as the timberwork of the rest of the wing and the end of the wall was corbelled out at first-floor level to conform to the profile of the jetty (Pl. VI).

Buildings of mixed construction, partly of stone and partly of timber, are not uncommon in the towns of the south-west. The use of stone for party walls used to be a noticeable feature in Exeter; the timber-framed house that was moved from the corner of Frog Street in 1962 was built against a stone wall (R.C.H.M. *Monuments Threatened or Destroyed*, 30, 31), and in the village of Cerne Abbas

the small timber-framed houses in Abbey Street, of c.1500, have stone party-walls (R.C.H.M., *West Dorset*, Cerne Abbas (5)). The desirability of stone walls between houses as a fire-break had also been pointed out in London as early as 1189 in the Assize quoted in Turner and Parker, *Domestic Architecture in England from the Conquest to the end of the Thirteenth Century* (1851), 18. The stone walls of The George may therefore have been put up as a precaution against the spread of fire.

A commoner form of mixed construction occurring in many towns in the south-west consists of a front wall only of timber in a building with the other three walls of stone. This use of timber was no doubt intended as a fashionable display. A conspicuous example of this type is The George at Norton St. Philip which is a three-storeyed building having the two upper storeys of the front timber-framed and jettied, while the rest of the building is of stone. At Norton St. Philip, as in The George at Yeovil, the ends of the stone walls are not corbelled to follow the profile of the jetties but rise vertically in line with the walling of the lower storey and the jetties project in front of the stonework. In Garner and Stratton, *The Domestic Architecture of England during the Tudor Period* (p. 26) the projection of the timber jetties in front of the stonework is cited as evidence that the timberwork is of later date than the other walls but the evidence of the front of The George at Yeovil does not support that argument.

A careful examination of the front elevation shown in Fig. 1 reveals some interesting features of the internal arrangement of The George. The two-tier hall window can be traced between solid panels which are conspicuous because of their cross-bracing in the form of a letter X. The window, now partly blocked, was separated from the side panels by moulded posts; it was divided into two tiers by a weathered transom which continued to each side between the upper and lower cross-braced panels (Fig. 3); the timber forming its head had been cut away to make way for the window to room 8 but remained where it was continued over the side panels. To the east of the hall the lower part of the next bay formed, in modern times, a wide covered passageway; the head of the modern opening showed that originally there were two openings: there was a doorway 5 feet wide, with moulded jambs and arched head with carving in the spandrels, and also a small window about 2 feet wide to the west of it. Broken lines on Figure 1 indicate the original openings. The small window must have lit part of the hall which extended, on the ground floor only, into the bay containing the passage (Fig. 3). Another way of looking at this arrangement is to consider the passage-bay as part of the hall and room 6 and 7 on the upper floor as intrusions into the hall. At the end of the Middle Ages the demand was growing for a larger number of chambers, and a big hall all open to the roof came to be regarded as a waste of space. Where there was



CONSTRUCTION OF MAIN RANGE

FIG. 6

no chimney, part of the hall had to be open to the roof to allow smoke from the fire on the open hearth to escape, but a room could be built into the hall over the screens passage and projecting a little further into the hall than the screens. The position of the screens at The George was shown by a mark on the ceiling beam to the east of the chimney inserted between the covered passage and the hall (room 2). Examples of an upper room projecting into the hall in this way have been recorded in Kent at Northfleet Rectory,¹³ in Sussex

¹³ *Arch. Cant.*, 20 (1893) 73. Baker's drawing shows the hall continuing under the solar for c. 2½ feet.

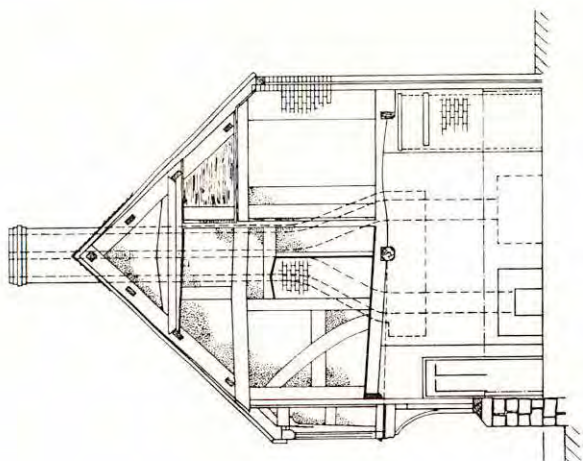


FIG. 8 Section showing Truss 3

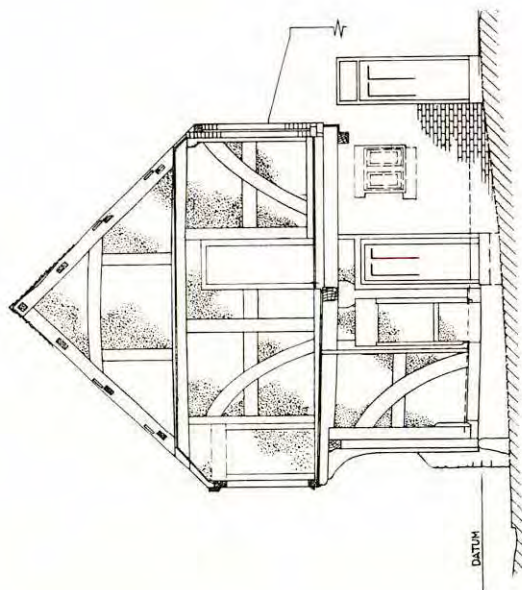


FIG. 7 Section showing Truss 2



at Iping Manor,¹⁴ in Essex at Borough Farm, Thaxted, and also by Mr. W. A. Pantin in Oxford and Mr. S. R. Jones in Coventry.

Another arrangement not uncommon in Wealden houses and giving a rather similar result was to put the screens passage into the end bay of the house as in the small Wealden house at Bignor, Sussex, illustrated in N. Lloyd, *A History of the English House*, 205, in Durlock Grange, Minster-in-Thanel (E. W. Parkin in *Archaeologia Cantiana* LXXVII (1962), 82) and in a house not of Wealden form at Brabourne, Kent (R.C.H.M. *Monuments Threatened or Destroyed*, 44).

Above the entrance to the covered passage is a modern window replacing an original one which had been blocked when the photograph (Pl. IV) was taken. The only original windows surviving in their original form, though restored, were the three windows to the ground floor of the east end bay; these windows were divided by posts enriched with a series of chamfers and carrying curved brackets to the jetty above. The corresponding windows in the west bay had probably been similar but no old work remained. The upper windows in the end bays were 17th-century insertions; the original windows were no doubt confined between the vertical studs, leaving a solid panel to each side crossed by a curved brace. Studs and braces had been cut short under the sills of the 17th-century windows.

The arrangement of timber studs and brace varies greatly from one part of the country to another; the principal arrangement here is best seen over the entrance to the passage and is of a pattern that is common in the south of England from Somerset to Kent. The cross-bracing flanking the hall window is less common; conspicuous examples can be seen in Salisbury and at Thame and Steventon, Berks.¹⁵ The cross-braces at The George were evidently not original, being only thin boards bowed to pass each other, but they probably replaced stouter timbers making the same pattern.

The south wall of the front block had been entirely rebuilt. The interior had been considerably rearranged; alterations to the hall have already been noticed: its division into two storeys, its curtailment to the east to allow for a wider passage, and its modern enlargement westwards into the end bay. The fireplaces at the west end on both floors were modern but may have replaced earlier ones. At the east end there was originally a partition under the ceiling beam across room 1, making two ground-floor rooms, the back one probably containing a small ladder stair to the upper floor. The doorways to these two rooms were side by side in the covered passage, between posts with hammer heads which can be seen in the section (Fig. 7). The partition must have been removed when the 17th-century fireplace was put into room 1; it had a nearly flat four-centred stone head, and there was another fireplace of the same type in room 5 above.

¹⁴ R.C.H.M., *Monuments Threatened or Destroyed* (1963), 62.

¹⁵ Illustrated in Margaret Wood, *op. cit.*, Pls. XXXIII B and XXXV A.

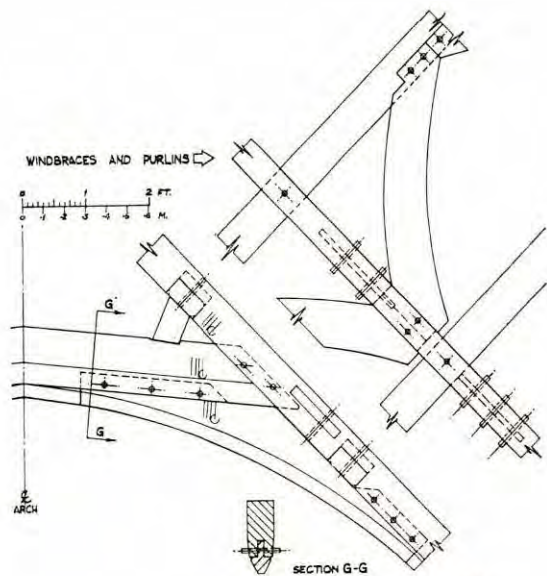
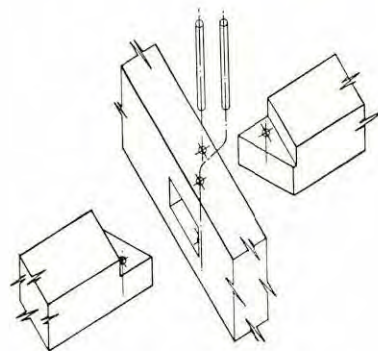


FIG. 9 Truss 4

FIG. 10 Purlin joints in Trusses 2, 3 and 5
(not to scale)

In the south wing one original window remained; it was in the upper storey, facing east, and was of two lights with arched heads and sunk spandrels. It is now preserved in the Yeovil Museum. The west wall of the wing had been entirely rebuilt. The main ground-floor room (4) had the ceiling divided into four compartments by intersecting moulded beams with matching timbers returned along the walls. This room had a fireplace with an arched stone head of uncertain date.

Over the main range four roof trusses¹⁶ remained in position; on them were carpenter's assembly marks 2 to 5, numbered from east to west, showing that there once had been a truss number 1 at the east end. Trusses 2, 3 and 5 each consisted of a tiebeam, principal rafters halved together at the apex, horizontal collars between the principal rafters and vertical queen-struts under the collars. Purlins were housed into the principal rafters with two tapered tenons meeting in one mortice (Fig. 10). Also spanning from truss to truss were ridge pieces; these would not have been used in a Kentish Wealden house, for in the south-east the tops of common rafters were usually halved together without any other support. Truss 4, in the middle of the hall, was more decorative than structurally sound. It had no tiebeam but only a collar with arch-braces under it between the principal rafters, and a short strut above the collar (Fig. 9). There were curved wind-braces under the purlins which are shown in the elevation (Fig. 1) and in the detail drawing (Fig. 9). Over the east and west bays and over the south wing the roofs had been mostly reconstructed.

The writers warmly thank the following for their help in the preparation of this article: Messrs. Watts, Moore and Bradford (the present custodians of the Woborn Muniments), Mr. I. P. Collis and his staff at the Somerset Record Office, Mr. E. A. Pearce for Pl. V and Mr. L. Tavender. The measured plans, elevations and sections (apart from Fig. 3) are the work of Mr. Tavender, who was on the site throughout the demolition and discovered many points of detail. He also compiled a photographic record; sets of his photographs, together with other drawings in addition to those reproduced with this article, have been deposited with the Yeovil Borough Library and with the National Monuments Record.

¹⁶ For a discussion and classification of types of roof truss see Professor Cordingley in *Trans. Ancient Monuments Soc. N.S.* 9 (1962), 73.