

CANNINGTON ALMSHOUSES

J. F. LAWRENCE, M.A., M.Litt. AND CDR. E. H. D. WILLIAMS, O.B.E., R.N.

The almshouse lies in the main street of Cannington, about 300 yards north of the parish church (O.S. Grid ref. ST 256397). It comprises a main range lying east-west, parallel to the street, with a smaller range at right angles to it in the rear, adjoining the east end. Before recent alteration the building was of stone rubble construction with tiled roof; both ranges were of two storeys, access to the upper floor of the main range being by a stone stair on the south wall of the main range. The external walls were thinly rendered and colour-washed. There was little of architectural interest visible other than an inscription stating that the almshouses had been founded under the will of Henry Rogers dated 1672, and a bell-turret on the roof capped by a weather vane inscribed 'H.R. 1699'.

By will dated 8 May 1672 Henry Rogers of Cannington gave to the parish the sum of £600.¹ By Chancery decree dated July 1688 £573 6s. 8d. was to be devoted to the purchase of land to provide an income to maintain the poor; the remainder was to be given to the churchwardens and overseers 'for and towards the repairing and fitting-up of the church-house of Cannington . . . for a workhouse for setting the poor to work in the same, being a convenient house for that purpose'. The appropriation of the church-house was agreed by the parish.

There is no documentary evidence to show how the building was used immediately before the death of Henry Rogers, though it was still called the church-house as late as 1773, a reminder of its original parochial function.² It seems clear that it was not used permanently as a workhouse, since a proposal to establish one was agreed to at a vestry meeting in overseers as parish paupers but from 1714 given money by the Rogers Charity trustees.⁴ In 1773 five of the six women then in residence died within a few days of each other from fever contracted in Taunton Gaol.⁵ They were tended by a nurse employed by the overseers, but only one of them received money from the same source,⁶ the others presumably being supported by the Rogers Charity.⁷

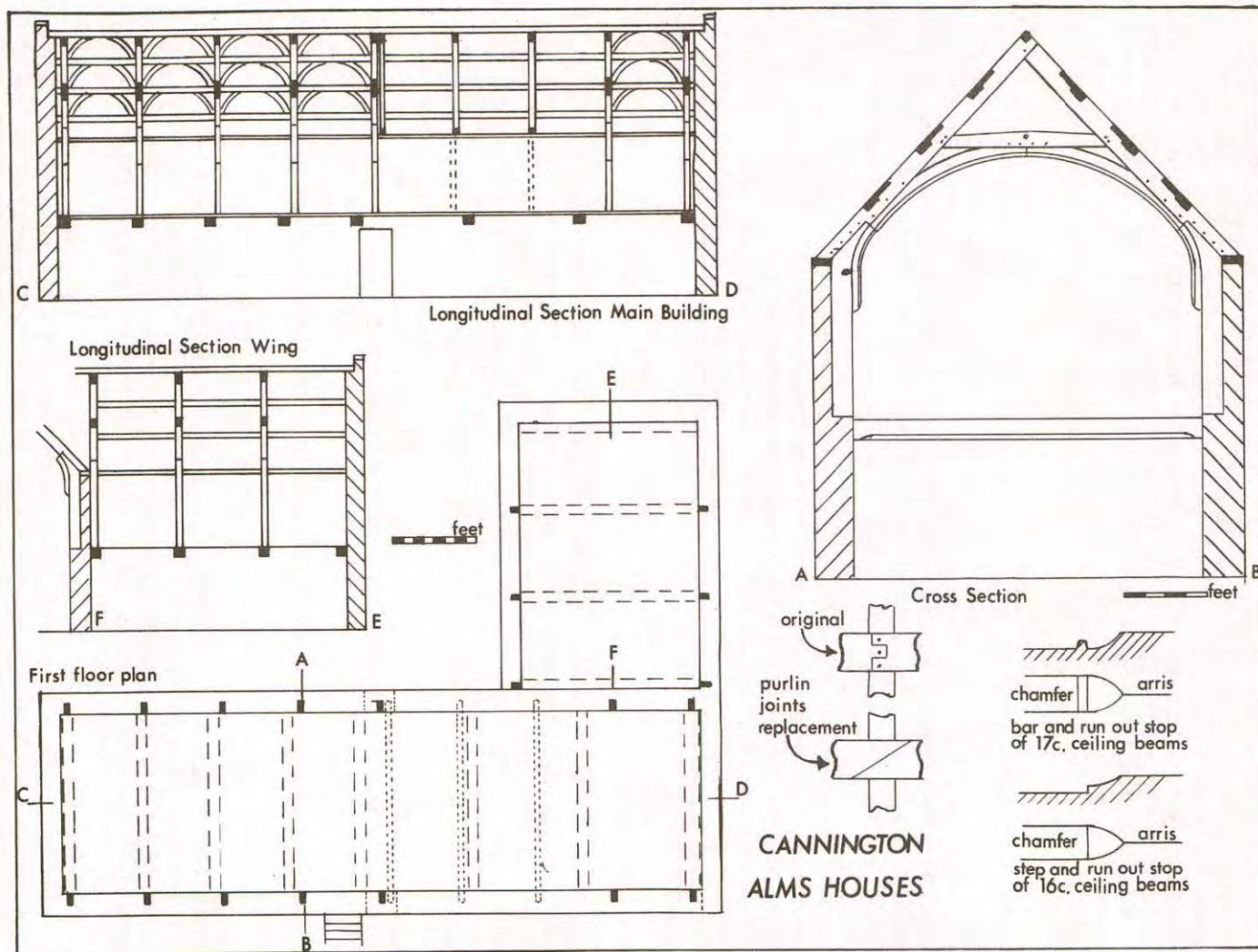
For the next few years the overseers used the house first for a male pauper and, in 1779, for man who was held under lock and key and watched over by a guard.⁸ These temporary inmates would not have used much of the building, and it is likely that poor women continued to be housed there independently of the overseers. The house, which was said about 1790 to have been 'capable of holding 24 persons',⁹ held nine aged women in 1825.¹⁰ As far back as people can now remember there were four flats in the main range, two upstairs and two downstairs, housing eight people. A fifth flat was held in reserve upstairs in the wing. The room downstairs in the wing was a kind of common room. The building as reconstructed in 1971-2 contains five living units with accommodation for ten people.

Like church-houses in Devon, the Cannington house was also the home of the parish school in the 18th and early 19th century.¹¹ In 1732 the vestry agreed to pay a master to teach 8 children. The overseers paid for repairs and furnishings in the 'school house chamber', involving the provision of a new floor, a new door, and stone stairs, as well as a dais for the master and desks and benches. The total cost was £14 11s.¹² The school continued there until 1836, though the Almshouse was described as 'school house and garden' in 1839.¹³

* * * *

The Almshouse was condemned in 1968 and planning permission for alterations was given. There was, however, no warning of demolition, and not until November 1971, when work had already started, was attention drawn to the building. Examination and recording were thus carried out under most adverse conditions, but it was immediately apparent that the 17th-century date stone recorded alterations to a late-medieval building comprising the main range initially open to the roof, into which an upper floor had been inserted at the west end in the 16th century and at the east end in the 17th century.

The original roof was supported on nine open arch-braced jointed crucks at 7' 6" spacing, tenoned at the apex and extending down to the level of the later ground-floor ceiling beams. The ridge was set diagonally, and on each side of the roof were three sets of purlins, slotted in the tops of the crucks, their joints tongued, slotted and pegged to the crucks. Between the purlins were three rows of curved windbraces. The common rafters were pegged. The straight tenoned collars of the crucks had slightly cambered upper surfaces, and the purlins and the



soffits of the arch braces had small plain chamfers. Fragments of a curved wooden frieze were recovered from the top of the south wall at the east end, carved with a series of quatrefoils, with a square en fusil and a leaf motif at the centre of each. It was of a high standard of workmanship and bore a striking resemblance to the frieze in the parish church. A date of c. 1500 is suggested.

The sixth and seventh crucks from the west and their associated purlins were replaced in antiquity by three tie-beam trusses, their purlins having long sloping cuts to give an overlapping joint resting unpegged in the slots. The windbraces were not replaced.

The ceiling beams in the main range were of two types and dates. The four western ones, at 7' spacing, originally had stepped, run out stops to plain chamfers similar to the 'Wern-Hir' type,¹⁴ though two had later been repaired and had straight right-angled stops. The date-range of the 'Wern-Hir' type is considerable, but is typical of the 16th century in Somerset. The four eastern beams, at 10' 8" spacing, had bar and run out stops to plain chamfers, and are attributed to the 17th century, thus probably here to be associated with the conversion from church-house to almshouse. Removal of plaster showed that the holes made to receive all the beams' ends had been packed up with wood; the beams were thus insertions at two dates, later than the construction of the walls. The wooden lintels of the ground-floor windows on the south side appear to form a continuous line along the whole length of the wall, except where cut out by the entrance. There is no evidence of similar work in the north wall, so the possibility of original upper timber walling must remain open.

The roof of the rear wing was carried on three jointed crucks, at 8' 2" spacing, with angled tenoned collars and tenoned apices, the feet of the crucks resting on, though not tenoned into, the ceiling beams of the ground floor. The wing was thus always of two storeys. Rebates for windbraces were visible in some purlins, but none seem to have been fitted, and the purlins must therefore have been re-used from elsewhere. The ceiling beams had plain chamfers and run out stops.

The relationship of the main range with the rear wing is obscure. There is no visible straight joint at the junction of gable wall and wing, whilst the gable and front wall at the south-east corner do not seem to be bonded together. Removal of plaster revealed a jagged masonry face and the possible remains of an upper doorway. In the east gable are two openings on the ground floor and one at upper-floor level, all blocked when a fireplace was inserted, to accommodate the stack of which the end cruck was cut. It thus seems that the gable may have been rebuilt when the wing was added, perhaps in the late 17th century, with possibly an external stair to the newly-completed upper floor of the main range. When the fireplace was added, possibly in the early 19th century, the entrance stairs were moved to the centre of the south wall where, as revealed by their demolition, they blocked an earlier window. The inserted smaller fireplace at the west end also probably dates from this period.

Other internal alterations could not be traced owing to the advanced state of demolition and the absence of any original doors or windows, although some occupied modified original openings; at least one window in the upper floor was an insertion, a cruck having been cut to accommodate it.

All that now remains of this late-medieval church-house are the walls, the legs of the jointed crucks, and a few ceiling beams.

¹ *Fifteenth Report of the Charity Commissioners* (1826), p. 383.

² Cannington, register of burials, *sub anno* 1773.

³ Cannington, churchwardens' accounts, 1706-52.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Cannington, register of burials, *sub anno* 1773; overseers' accounts, 1763-86.

⁶ Cannington, overseers' accounts, 1763-86.

⁷ There were separate charity accounts which have not been found: overseers' accounts, *sub anno* 1786.

⁸ Cannington, overseers' accounts, 1763-86, *sub annis* 1774-5, 1779.

⁹ J. Collinson, *History of Somerset*, i. 237.

¹⁰ *Fifteenth Report of the Charity Commissioners*, p. 383.

¹¹ R. R. Sellman, *Devon Village Schools in the Nineteenth Century*, 19, 27.

¹² Cannington, churchwardens' accounts, 1706-52; overseers' accounts, 1704-63.

¹³ Somerset Record Office, tithe award; Education Committee files, 1903.

¹⁴ Sir Cyril Fox and Lord Raglan, *Monmouthshire Houses*, ii. 24 and note 2.