

Architectural Description of 22-24 Low Street, Hoxne, Suffolk

Map ref: Tm 181773

22-24 Low Street which sits on the edge of the green in Hoxne, Suffolk, is a fairly complete late 15th century medieval hall house of which the central room, the hall, was open to the roof and heated by an open hearth (Fig 1). The hall is now mostly occupied by No 23. In the 16th century the hall was floored over and a chimney inserted, replacing the open hearth. In the 18th or 19th century single storey outshots were added along the back of the house and an additional chimney added at the right hand (south) end of the house. At some stage it was divided into three separate houses as shown in Drawing 2.



Fig 1: 22-24 Low St - left from the north and right from the south

Medieval houses of the 14th and 15th century had a fairly standard layout with a hall open to the roof at the centre. The entrance to the house was at one end of the hall, called the low end. At the other end of the hall, the high end, there was a large window lighting the hall and the high table. Beyond the high end was usually a single room, called the parlour, normally with a chamber above, while beyond the low end it was divided longitudinally into two service rooms with a single chamber above. These two rooms were entered from doors in the middle of the low end wall of the hall (Fig 2).

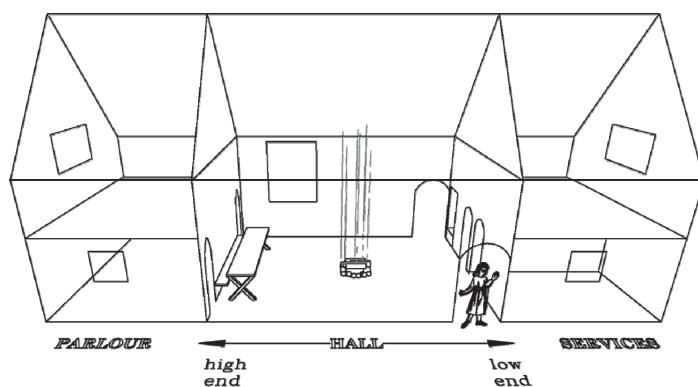


Fig 2: Layout of a 'standard' medieval house in East Anglia

22-24 Low Street was built to this plan but with a variation in the layout of the service rooms (Drawings 1a & 2a). Drawings 1 & 2 show how the building would have looked when built. However these were based on a very rapid survey and all measurements should be regarded as approximate. The parlour end was not examined other than the roof. Most of the timber framing in the service end is visible as is a large proportion of the rear wall of the hall. The reconstruction of the front wall of the hall in Drawing 2 is largely based on the form of the rear wall as very little of the front framing is visible.



Fig 3: Crownpost on centre truss of open hall at Railway Terraces, Wenham, Suffolk

Description of Medieval House at 22-24 Low Street

The building is 58ft long, longer than most medieval hall houses, mainly because it has an exceptionally long service end. The hall is 24ft long, not especially long but at the upper end of the range, and was of two almost equal bays. It had a crownpost roof - an example of which is shown in Fig 3. Here each pair of rafters is joined by a collar which are supported by a long horizontal timber running under the collars, called a collar purlin, that is carried by the crownpost. Most of the rafters survive, heavily smoke blackened from the medieval open hearth, but the central tiebeam and crownpost have been removed (Fig 4). In the north (high) end bay of the hall the timber framing of the rear wall is fully visible and the mortices for the diamond mullions of the large medieval high end window can be felt under the wall plate.



Fig 4: Heavily smoke blackened roof over the hall of 23 Low Street looking south. The crownpost has been removed and the collar purlin truncated.

The service end is long, 19ft compared to 10 to 13ft for a majority of such houses (Drawing 1a), and is divided into two bays because of its length - usually they have just one bay. It was divided longitudinally into two rooms with a single chamber above as is usual, but the rear ground floor service room had an external doorway in the south gable, very much a non standard feature (Fig 5). This door may have gone to a detached kitchen or possibly a separate workshop. Today there is another house built against the south wall (Fig 1), but originally there was an open space as there is a diamond mullion window, now blocked, in the south gable lighting the front service room (Fig 5).



Fig 5: South wall of service bay.
the partition between the two rooms has been removed and the chimney stack inserted in the 18th or 19th century



Fig 6: South wall on ground floor of service end with original windows highlighted

It is not known why the service end was so long, or what the two ground floor rooms were used for. The front service room has a large number of windows, three in all; a diamond mullion window in the south gable - with its mullions still in situ (Fig 5) - and two tall windows in the front, west, wall (Fig 6 and Drawing 2c). It is not known if these two tall windows had diamond mullions like all the other windows. It is possible they were open and this front service room was some type of workshop. It is not possible to tell today.

The roof over the service and parlour ends have been rebuilt, mostly with reused un-smoke blacked rafters from a collar rafter roof, but with the collars removed, probably from the original roof. Thus originally the roof over these two ends would have been the same as over the open hall, mostly likely with a crownpost and collar purlin as well. The roof today is tiled as it probably was when built. There is no indication on the rafters that it has ever been thatched.

There is a cellar under the service end. This could be an original feature but equally it may be a later insertion. It is now occupied by the house next door, No 23 (see Drawing 2c).

Timber Framing

The hall has close studding framing with the studs spaced at 1ft 7 to 1ft 9in centres and has a mid-rail dividing the studs, while the service end has full height studs rising from the ground sill to the wall plate and spaced much wider at 2ft 9in to 3ft 3in centres. This variation could not be seen externally as most of the timbers were plastered over on the outside with the only timbers visible being the main posts, mid-rails, wall plates, doorframes, the studs either side of the windows, window cills and ground cills (Fig 7). The common studs are 3¾in deep and set back 1¼in from the external face of the wall plates, mid-rails and principal posts, while the studs framing the large hall window and the windows in the service end are 5in deep and set flush with both the internal face of the common studs and with the external face of the wall plates, mid-rails, etc. Evidence for this can be seen in the rear wall of the open hall in No 23 where on the first floor the infill between the studs has been removed on the north side of the opening for the large medieval hall window, revealing the depth of the common and hall window studs. This type of framing with the exterior mostly plastered over seems to appear in the second half of the 15th century and is a common feature of north Suffolk and Norfolk.

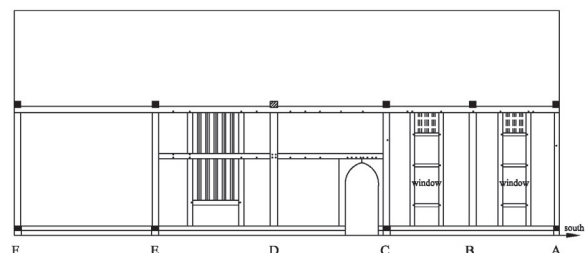


Fig 7: Reconstruction of exterior appearance of the medieval front wall



Fig 8: Convex or drooping brace in 24 Low Street



Fig 9: Durn doors at Broad End Farm, Stradbroke, Suffolk

Braces are convex, or drooping, half the thickness of the studs and halved across the internal face of the studs, and thus are visible only inside the building (Fig 8). The service doors and the external entrances into the hall were durn doorways, that is where the two door jambs are bent at the top to form an arched door head (Fig 9 and Drawing 2a). These doorways are common in north Suffolk and Norfolk up into the 16th century, whereas in south Suffolk they are relatively rare after 1400. However the doorway in the south end wall of the rear service room of 24 Low Street, and probably the one in the north wall of the hall into the parlour, are the more convention type made up of the two door jambs and a separate arched head. These doorways with separate arched heads are the common form in south Suffolk, less so in north Suffolk.



Fig 10: Arch headed door in Abbey Farmhouse, Hoxne

The scarf joint used to join the separate lengths of timber in the wall plates is an edge halved and bridled scarf joint, the type in use from around 1400 to at least 1650 when it was superseded by a new type of joint which first appeared in the late 16th century.

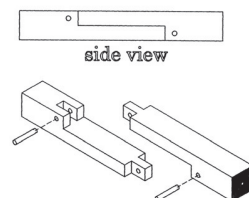


Fig 11: Edge halved & bridled scarf joint

Insertion of chimney and changes to house in the 16th century

In the 16th century there was a major change in the way people lived with the open hearth being replaced by a chimney. 22-24 Low Street was modernised by the insertion of a chimney at the upper (high) end of the open hall and, either at the same time or possibly a little later, the hall had a ceiling inserted creating a first floor over the old open hall (Figs 12 & 13). The chimney



Fig 12: Fireplace inserted into hall



Fig 13: Inserted hall ceiling

stack had fireplaces on the ground floor heating the hall and the parlour, and most likely also heating the parlour chamber in what is now No 22 and which has not been examined.

The ceiling inserted into the hall is heavily moulded (Fig 13) with multiple rolls on both the main joists and the common joists. All of it is constructed of relatively large timbers, including the common joists which are also fairly large. It probably dates to the first half of the 16th century, though it could be a bit later in the third quarter of the 16th century. Towards the end of 16th century the mouldings tended to become more subdued. The ceiling in 22-24 Low Street is unusual in that the common joists in upper bay of the hall run longitudinally while those in the low end bay run axially across the building. Usually the common joist run in the same direction in both bays (Drawing 1b).

Apart from adding chimneys and creating a room over the hall, the layout of the building would have remained virtually unchanged. The external entrances to the hall would have remained unchanged at the south, low, end of the hall, but probably at this time or just a little later the two service rooms would have been combined into a single room. The windows, which in the medieval house were unglazed, would have been glazed in at least the hall and parlour during at least the latter half of the 16th century as glass became cheaper and more readily available. And with these changes the modern two storey house began to emerge. New houses were being built two storey to this plan in the 16th and 17th centuries with this sub-medieval layout of three cells, the entrance to the building still at the low end of the hall but with back-to-back fireplaces at the other end of the hall. Some of these new houses still also had two service rooms, but increasing they had a single service room at the low end of the hall.

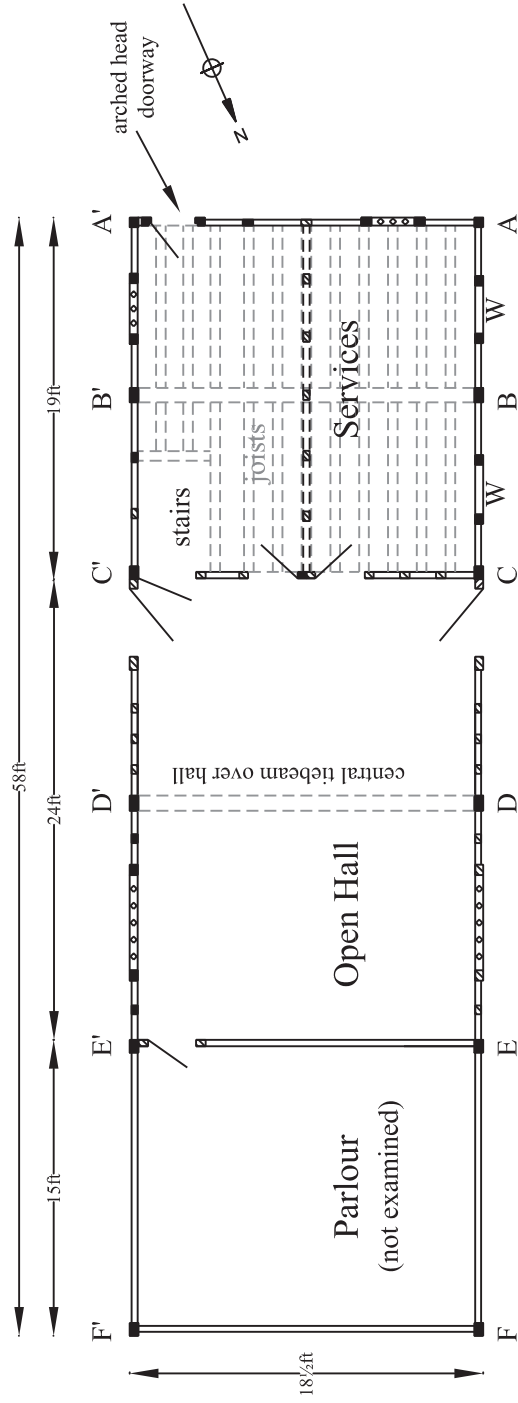
Now the building was not filled with smoke from the open hearth, vernacular buildings also began to be decorated inside with various paint schemes, some of which were very complex. There are indication in the chamber over the service room that all the timbers in the room, and probably the walls, were painted red. A number of single colour paint schemes, usually referred to as plain schemes, have been recorded in 16th and 17th century houses in Suffolk with the timbers studs painted usually in grey, green or red and the space between them painted white.

Later changes

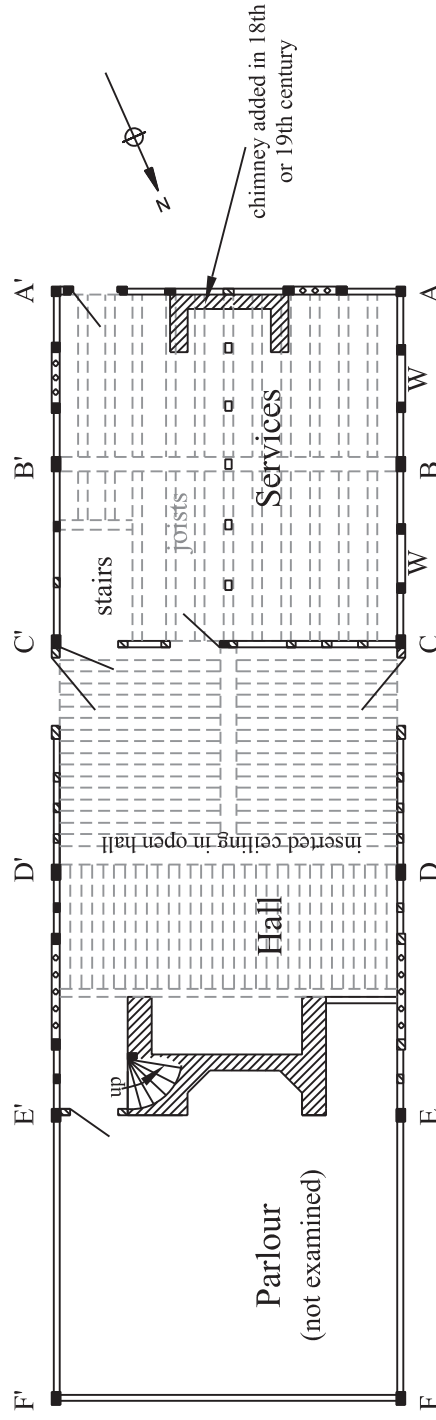
At some stage attics were inserted over the parlour and service chambers with the collars removed to create more headroom - previously these upper rooms were open to the roof - and a single storey outshot was added along the whole of the rear wall. This was not examined to see if this was added in a single building phase (Fig 14). In the 18th or 19th century a chimney was added at the south end of the building to serve the now single service room. This may have been done so this room could become the kitchen. Or it may have been done when the building was divided into three separate dwellings as it is today. The division is interesting as today the central unit has not only most of the old open hall other than the crosspassage, but also the attic over the parlour chamber and the cellar under the service room as shown in Drawing 2c.



Fig 14: Rear of 24-22 Low Street, Hoxne



a: Reconstruction of original ground plan of open hall house



b: Reconstruction of plan in early 16th century after chimney and ceiling inserted into the open hall.

At the same time, or a little later the two service rooms would have been combined in to a single room. The chimney at the south end of the service room was inserted in the 18th or 19th century and during this period lean-to outshots (not shown above) were added along the rear (east side) of the building.

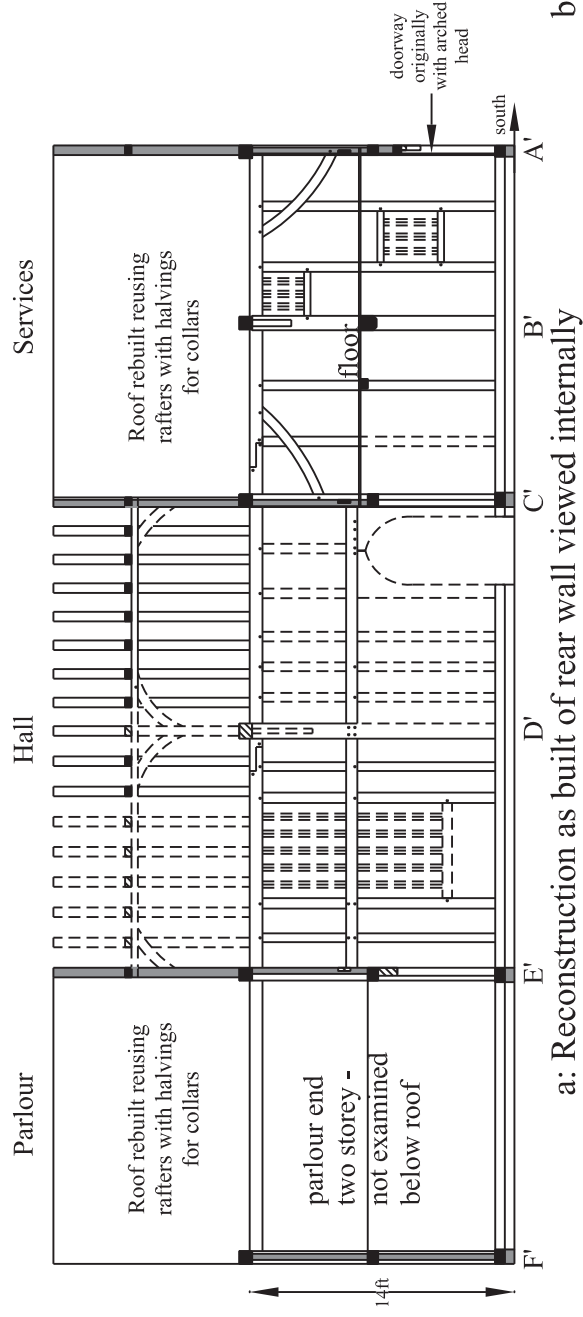
Drawing 1: Plan of 22-24 Low Street, Hoxne, Suffolk

(Map ref: TM 181773)

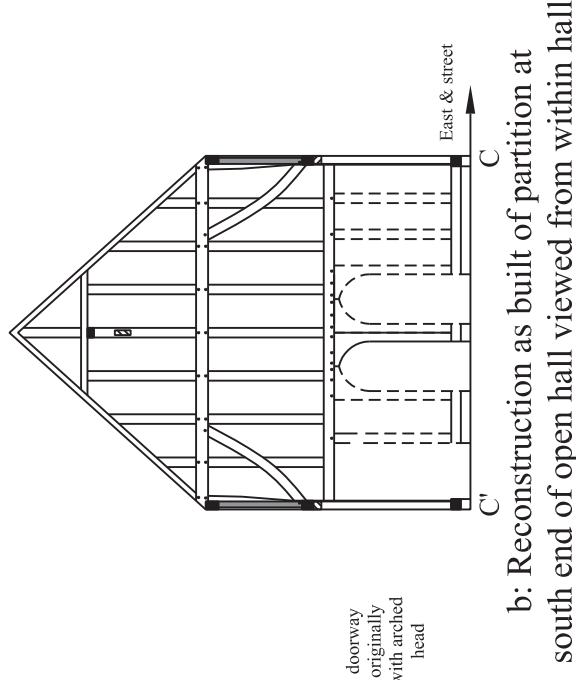
Key

- W = window
- surviving timbers
- ▨ missing timbers

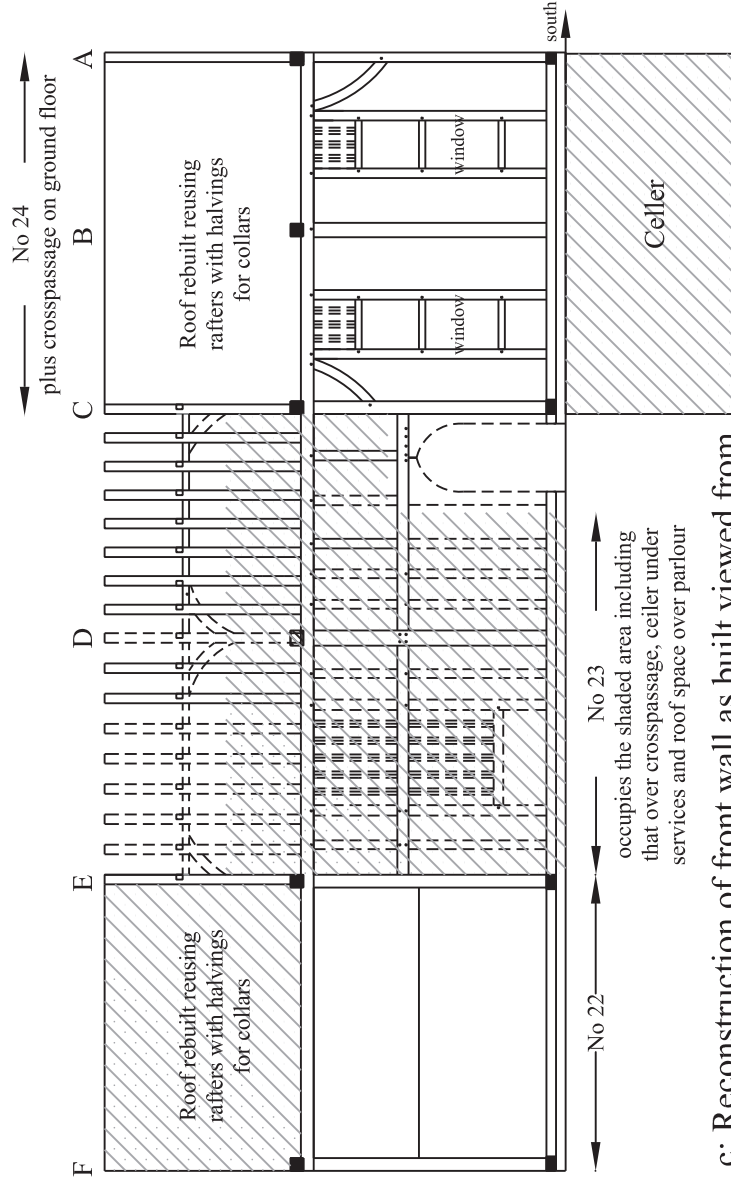




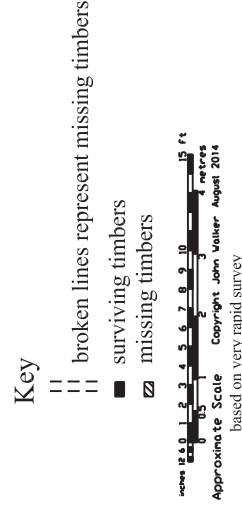
a: Reconstruction as built of rear wall viewed internally



b: Reconstruction as built of partition at south end of open hall viewed from within hall



c: Reconstruction of front wall as built viewed from exterior and how building now divided into three houses



Drawing 2: Reconstruction of elevations and a section of 22-24 Low Street, Hoxne, Suffolk

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