53-54 Low Street, Hoxne, Suffolk

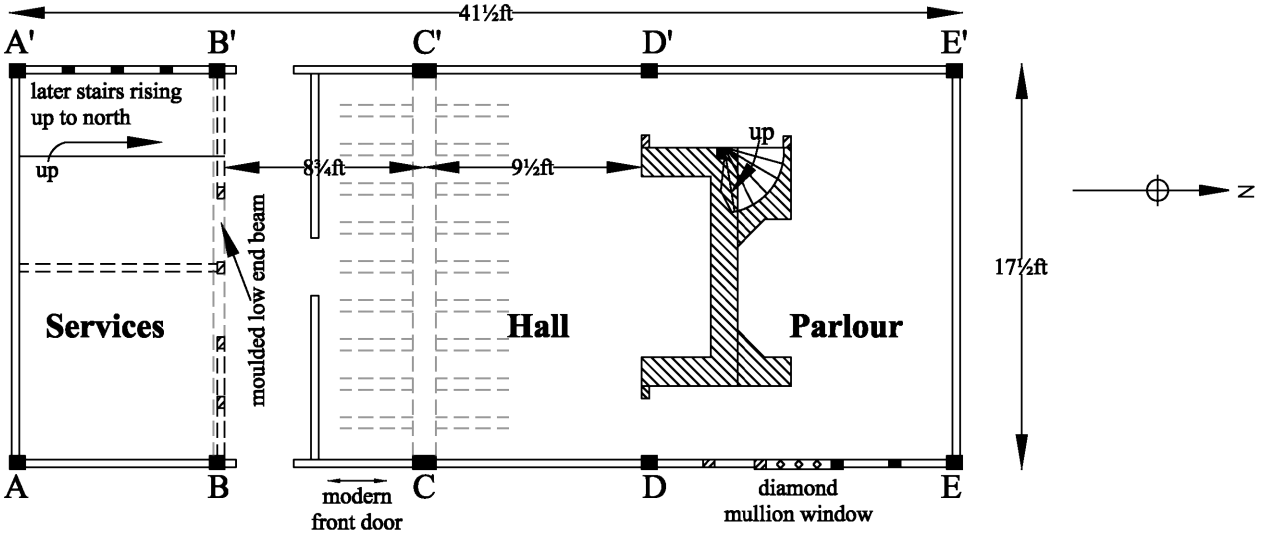
Map ref: TM 180773

This is a 16th century timber framed transitional house built with a medieval 3-cell plan but with an upper storey over all the ground floor rooms and heated by a chimney stack at the high end of the hall (Figs 1 & 2). It has a queen post roof.

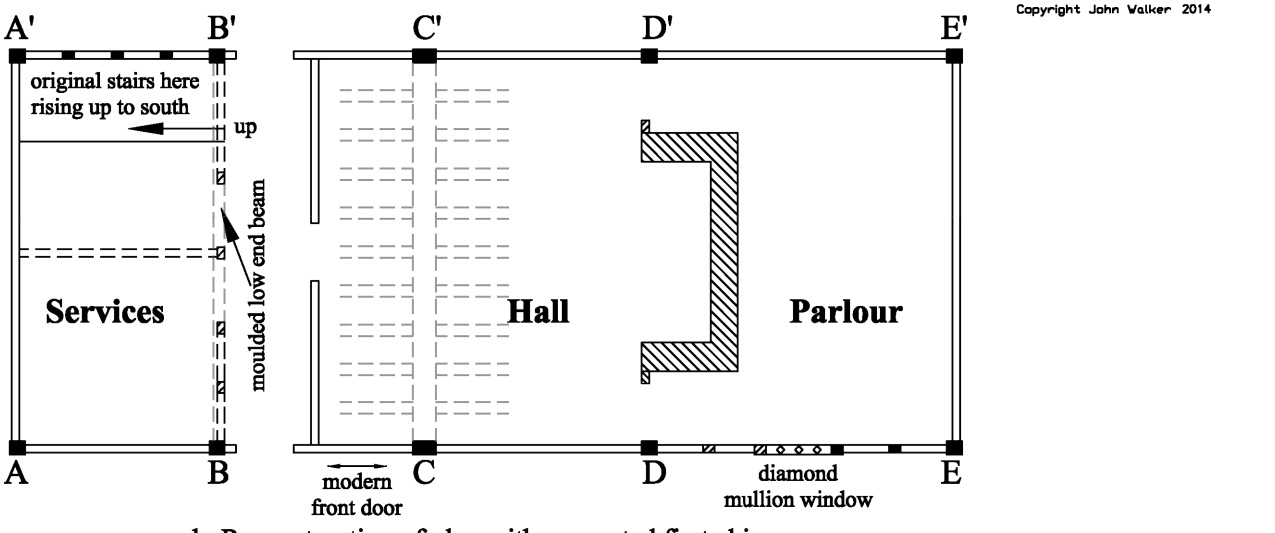
Fig 1: East front of 54 (left side) & 53 Low Street

It is similar to 16 Cross St. in that it does not have a chimney bay, unlike 37-39 Church St. which has a proper small bay for its high end chimney stack. Today 53-54 Low St. has a back-to-back chimney stack heating the hall and parlour (Fig 2a), but the parlour is very small and the chimney partly blocks a diamond mullion window in the front wall. This, and the lack of a chimney bay, suggests it was originally built with a single fireplace heating just the hall (Fig 2b), like 16 Cross St. With the demand for more heating, the chimney was rebuilt in the later 16th or early 17th century to provide fireplaces heating both the hall and parlour. This rebuilt chimney reduced the size of the parlour which was often then rebuilt to enlarge it, but not here.

One difficulty interpreting a house like this, with its medieval plan, no chimney bay and a moulded crenellated beam at the low end of the hall (Fig 3) (as found in numerous open hall medieval houses), is determining whether or not the hall was open to the roof or was built as a floored over hall. Here the roof is not smoke blackened, so it was clearly built with a chimney. But was the hall floored? Often the hall windows can resolve this - if it has a large window rising through the two storeys, then it clearly did not have a floor, but if it has small windows on the first floor then it must have always had a floor. Unfortunately the original form of the hall windows here is unknown, but the central joist CC' in the ground floor ceiling is tenoned into both the principal posts C and C', which means the ceiling is an original feature as the central joist CC' could only have been put there when the house was being built.



a: Reconstruction of plan with present chimney



b: Reconstruction of plan with suggested first chimney

Fig 2: Reconstruction of the ground plan and its development

Fig 3: North side of moulded beam BB' on ground floor with crenellated moulding. The stud partition below the beam has been removed

Fig 4: Close studding in the front wall of the hall chamber

The chamber over the service rooms was reached from the stairs that originally rose off the crosspassage and was partitioned off from the rest of the 1st floor by a solid timber wall on truss BB' with no access to the rest of the 1st floor, a quite common feature of 16th century transitional houses. The 1st floor chambers over the hall and parlour were connected by a door on the east side of the chimney stack but, as there was no door on the west side of the chimney, only the parlour chamber was accessed directly from the stairs against the west side of chimney stack, with the hall chamber being accessible only from the parlour chamber. The hall chamber was not heated originally as there is evidence of a stud framed timber wall on the first floor against the south side of the chimney.

Fig 5: Jowled principal posts & drooping arch bracing in the south end wall

The timber framing has jowled posts and close studding with drooping arch bracing halved across the studs and visible on the inside of the house (Figs 4 & 5). The studs in the external walls are set flush with the inside of the wallplates and the end tie-beams, showing that the common studs were recessed on the exterior and covered with plaster externally, leaving only the main posts, wallplates and mid-rails originally visible externally. The carpenter used the edge halved and bridled scarf joint which is the main scarf joint used from the late 14th century to around the middle of the 17th century (Fig 6). Thin original pole -like rafters survive on the front of the roof showing that the building was always thatched as it is today (Fig 7). The roof was originally hipped at both ends, and later converted into gables.

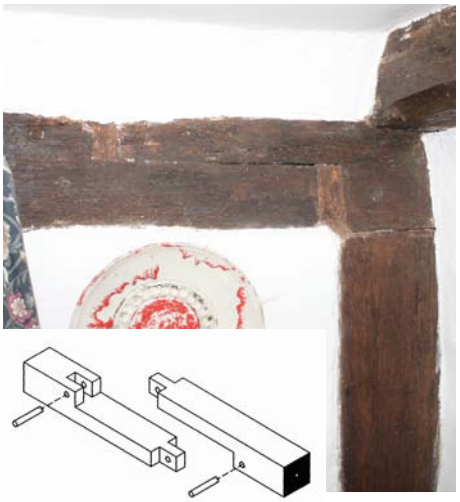


Fig 6: Edge halved & bridled scarf joint in hall chamber's front wall against post C

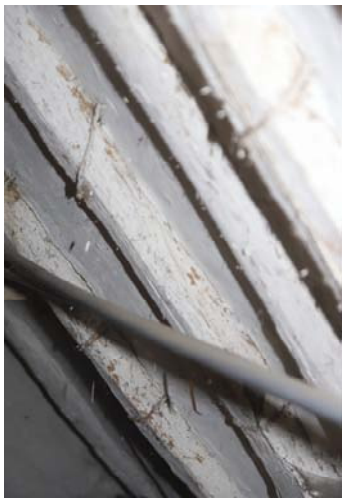


Fig 7: Narrow pole rafters suitable only for thatch

Fig 8: Queenpost roof looking south

Fig 10: Reused solid stairs down into cellar under service rooms

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