

The Master's House

Inside a skin of brick and cloaked in years of municipal tat, were the remains of the Master's House. Buried at the core was a timber frame structure, in fact two separate structures: a halled house comprising of a four-bayed hall, solar and service wing, and a secondary range formed by a detached building which has been called the kitchen. This secondary structure stretched east west approx. 12 yards to the north of the main building, was indeterminate in dimension, but clearly later than the main house.

The main halled house has been dendrochronologically dated to 1487¹. Large amounts of the original timber structure remain remarkably intact, particularly at high level, embodied within the later, enveloping, mostly 18th and 19th century construction. Unfortunately, during the later alterations, large amounts of the lower part of the timber frame were removed or simply 'cut off at the knees'.

The most impressive survival is the roof structure of the main hall. It encloses all four bays forming the central hall and comprises of a queen strut cross frame with two trench purlins, ridge plate and curved wind braces between the purlins and down to the wall plate. The low end of the hall and first bay comprises of an entrance cross passage which was originally open to the roof.² The spere cross frame has a large arched opening under the tie beam, with an open lattice structure to the side panels at high level. The low end of the hall is two bays wide. The central cross frame has an interrupted tie beam, or assembly joint, surmounted by an arch brace to collar level. There is clear evidence that the roof had a large ridge ventilated structure located between the spere truss and central cross frame. The dias cross frame has a tie beam with a moulded bottom edge containing mirrored cyma reversa mouldings and cusped struts above the collar. The upper part of the north and south wall frames survives and both walls forming the east and west cross wings are mostly in place.

Interestingly, during the course of the works, the girding beam to the solar west wall and to the north and south oriel openings was revealed to have applied painted decorations contain panels of Latin text. This decorative scheme is early, although there is some evidence that the painted timber might have been reused from elsewhere.

39 original wattle and daub panels were in place, representing around 25% of the total wall surface of the hall. BHA Daub ran both educational workshops and worked with volunteers to repair these panels wherever possible, and when the

¹ The dendrochronological survey was carried out in autumn 2005 commissioned the by Ledbury and District Society. It is briefly summarised in Appendix 2 of Herefordshire Council's Conservation Plan Management Plan 2008. This identifies a felling date for timbers of the main structure Central Hall and both cross wings at the Master House as 1487.

² There is documentary evidence that the cross passage was floored as early as 1588. The floor was later removed, with London plate added to the west wall of the service wing and supported on infill structure under the spere cross frame.

damage was too great, the original daub was reused in the new daub.³ Where the panels required material for patching, clay from excavation on the site was used with sand and locally sourced straw added, and we, as required, introduced additional hazel wattles or new riven oak staves⁴ to consolidate the panels.

The solar wing was originally a single three-bayed space at ground floor level entered originally through the oriels to the north and south side of the hall. The north oriel is likely to have housed the staircase to a two-bayed upper chamber with a smaller chamber to the north end having a surviving attic floor. Interestingly, this surviving floor and the rest of the floor of the solar wing and both oriels were essentially daub. These were formed with dense triangular shaped riven oak staves inserted between grooves in the side of the floor joists with daub applied top and bottom to the full depth of the joists, creating both floor and ceiling. At a later date, a chimney was added to the west wall of the solar. The elaborately moulded chimneypiece is dated 1588 and associated with the alterations carried out by then, which also included the creation of a doorway that directly entered the north corner of the main hall.

The service wing is three bayed with two chambers at each level. The wing was entered from the cross passage via three doorways. Two doors gave access into the smaller northern chamber. The third door gave access to a corridor formed by the northern cross frame of the service wing and a stud wall under the chamber floor beam. This created a corridor from which access was gained to the south chamber. Such an arrangement would also suggest a corridor that lead to a detached kitchen to the east side of the Master's House. There is considerable evidence that the upper level of the service cross wing was used as a sort of guest or visitor accommodation. The two-bayed south chamber has a central arched brace cross frame. This suggests a high status room with the north chamber acting as an antechamber to this room with staircase access and a garderobe to the northeast corner. Interestingly, a stone chimney of early date has been added to the east elevation and the upper room has an inserted joist and planked oak ceiling, which has been repaired during the refurbishment.

The current detached building to the north of the house is likely to have been a later detached kitchen. The timbers to this range have not been dendrochronologically dated, although they were converted using a pit saw. Recent research by Duncan James⁵ suggests pit sawing was a new method not found in Hereford until the later mid 16th century. Other stylistic indicators confirm this. The extent of the range is uncertain, with the frame undergoing much alteration, especially in the 18th century. Only two and half bays at the east end of this five-bayed structure clearly survive of the earliest frame. In this two and a half bays area there was a low chamber floor. A smoke blackened daub panel survives in the westernmost cross frame. The half bay to the east end

³ This is a simple matter of crushing the found material and reworking it by adding water, a little extra clay and straw as necessary.

⁴ The staves of riven oak in the panels at the master house are generally vertical inserted into holes at the head rail and a continuous groove in the lower rail with mostly split hazel wattles

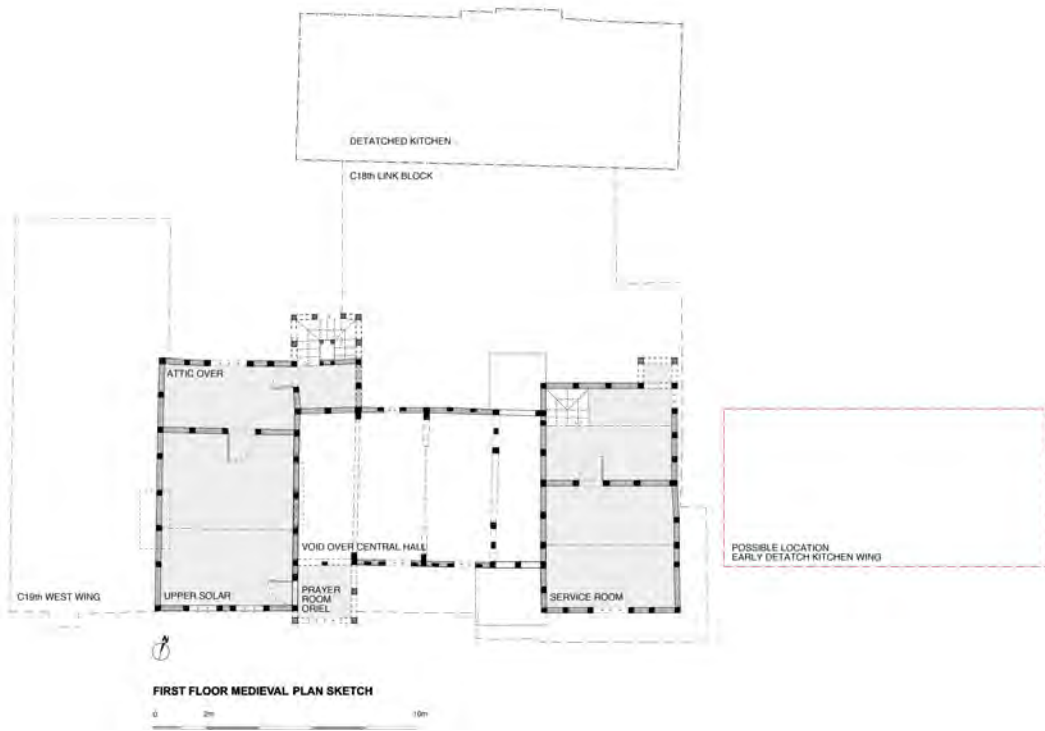
⁵ See James, Duncan; *Saw Marks in Vernacular Buildings and their Wider Significance*. Vernacular Architecture, Vol. 43 (S012) 7-18

appears to have been the result of the building being shortened and therefore the full extent cannot be determined. The roof to the east end is a clasp purlin arrangement supporting the later date of this range. Interestingly, the roof of the western bay changes to a single butt purlin arrangement, but the framing to this part of the range has clearly been extensively modified in the 18th century with the introduction of a floor and brick chimney. The surviving fragments of the wall frame at the west end of this range is a different pattern to the east, suggesting it was not floored and could be the result of an amalgamation of fragments of different buildings. The evidence as to the extent of the north range or its use is simply inconclusive, although clearly it is likely to have been used as a service space to the main house, and could have been a later detached kitchen, as the 18th and 19th century brick built bread ovens, range and copper suggest.

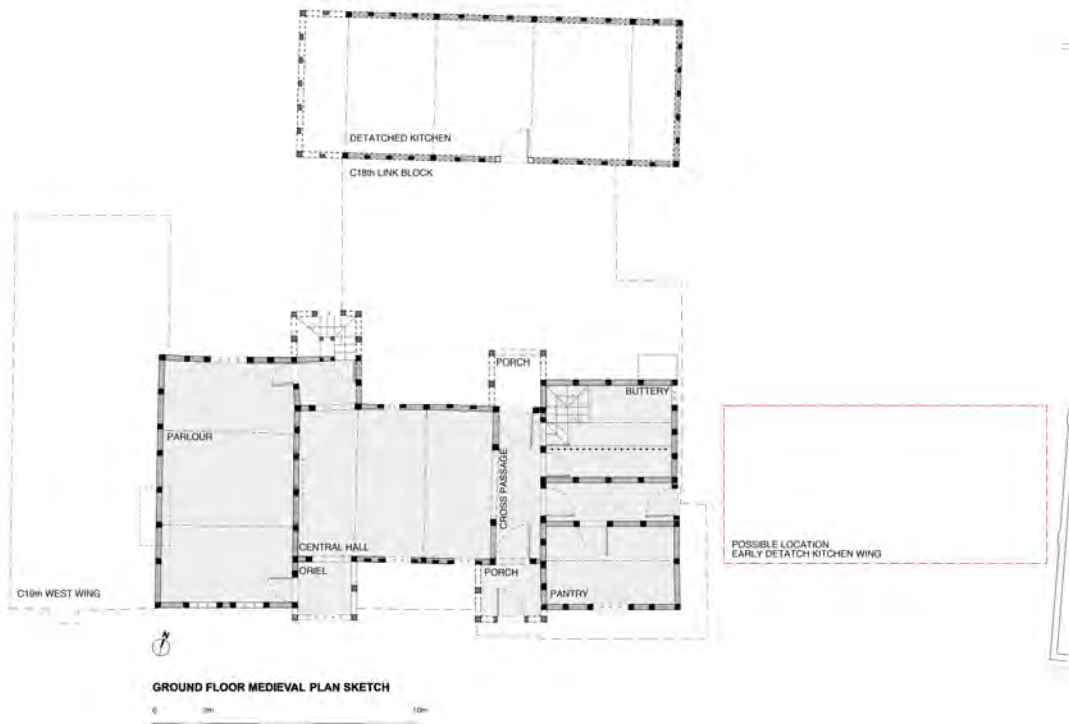
The Master's House is a palimpsest of building phases, as are many buildings of this date. The repairs recently undertaken were designed to resolve the inherent structural problem created by the later building modifications to the timber frame, bringing new uses to what was designated a "Building at Risk" and revealing for the first time in several hundred years an extraordinary timber frame. Please do go and see the building which is now open as a public Library.

Gary Butler March 2015





FIRST FLOOR MEDIEVAL PLAN SKETCH



GROUND FLOOR MEDIEVAL PLAN SKETCH