

THE BANBURY REGION

MINOR DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE BEFORE 1600.

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THE Banbury region is an upland area within the Jurassic system, where the marlstone of the Middle Lias comes to the surface, providing good building stone and ironstone. The rock is a sandy ferruginous limestone—a soft, rusty looking stone, varying in colour from a rich rust to a grey-brown—and is still quarried at Hornton.¹ The incidence of this stone, and its use for vernacular building, defines an irregular area averaging 16 miles around Banbury, the only large town, and the social and economic centre of the region, which includes parts of three counties—North Oxfordshire, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire. On three sides the area is clearly indicated by changes in the walling material, but on the north-east, the boundary is less clearly marked, as the brown-stone continues intermittently through Northamptonshire and Rutland.

Architecturally, the Banbury region is a singularly homogeneous zone, based on the almost exclusive use of brown-stone walling, with roofs of straw thatch, apart from a limited distribution of the Stonesfield limestone slates. The villages form closely knit centres of population, growing up around the fresh water springs, and it is rare to find any building before 1700 outside a village. The region is a natural extension of the Cotswolds, though differing in building stone and having a clearly defined architectural character, and in common with all this upland belt running across central England, entered a period of prosperity with the development of the wool trade, reaching its climax in the 16th century. As elsewhere, this resulted in much new building, which has left little evidence of its antecedents. By the middle of the 17th century, however, the civil wars, the decline in the cloth trade, and bad harvests had reduced Oxfordshire from second—in 1503—to seventeenth in order of prosperity among the English counties. The majority of the vernacular dwellings in this region therefore date from the late 16th and the 17th centuries, and a large proportion has survived without serious change until the present time.

It would appear that a stone-building tradition was established in the region from very early times, and from the 17th century completely

¹ *British Regional Geology*, London and Thames Valley.

replaced timber¹ or mud-walling for building. A detailed survey of over 1,000 traditional buildings in this brown-stone region has revealed only a very few late timber-framed dwellings, in Banbury and in Kings Sutton, both lying in the lowland valley. The characteristic regional style of minor domestic building emerged towards the end of the 16th century, and matured during the 17th century. Unfortunately, the practice of dating buildings did not start until the end of the 16th century—1579 is the earliest authentic example recorded—and the majority of dated examples belong to the middle of the 17th century. The date of 1600 has therefore been taken as an approximate indication of the beginnings of the full regional style of minor domestic architecture.

The survey has produced a small number of buildings which exhibit characteristics not present in the regional style, and which appear to represent survivals of an earlier stage in the tradition. The rarity of such examples make their architectural examination of particular importance, as providing evidence of the antecedents of the regional house-type of the 17th century. In over 1,000 buildings examined, only 11 have been found which seem to belong to this earlier phase, although, as all have undergone extensive alteration, leaving little if any external indication of their earlier dating, the number of these surviving structures can not be determined without entering almost every building.

The first signs of the regional style have been recorded in non-domestic vernacular building, notably the barns at Church Enstone, Swalecliff, Upper Heyford and Tadmarton, all in North Oxfordshire, which all exhibit characteristics closely related to the earliest houses. Of these the most interesting is the rectorial barn at Church Enstone, (Fig. 1) lying in the fringe area of mixed building stones to the south of the region. A Latin inscription on the south wall records that the barn was built in the year 1382 by the Abbot of Wynchcombe in Gloucestershire, who held the appropriated living. The date stone has almost certainly been rebuilt in its present position, and it is questionable whether any of the present structure can be attributed to this date. The grey oolitic limestone walls, with brown-stone dressings, average 2 feet 10 inches in thickness, and the roof covering is of Stonesfield slates, now sadly deteriorating. Truss principles are of cruck form, dividing the structure into 12 foot bays, and spanning 27 feet, and the foot of each cruck springs from a seating on the stone wall at a height of 5 feet above ground level. The cruck blades are of oak, averaging 18 by 9 inches at the base, shaped with a sharp "knee", and paired from the same tree trunks, and are joined at the apex by a

¹ "The Hills, 'tis true, before the late unhappy Wars, were well enough befet with Woods, where now 'tis fo scarce, that 'tis a common thing to fell it by weight, and not only at Oxford, but at many other places in the Northern part of the Shire." Robert Plot, *Natural History of Oxfordshire*. 1676.

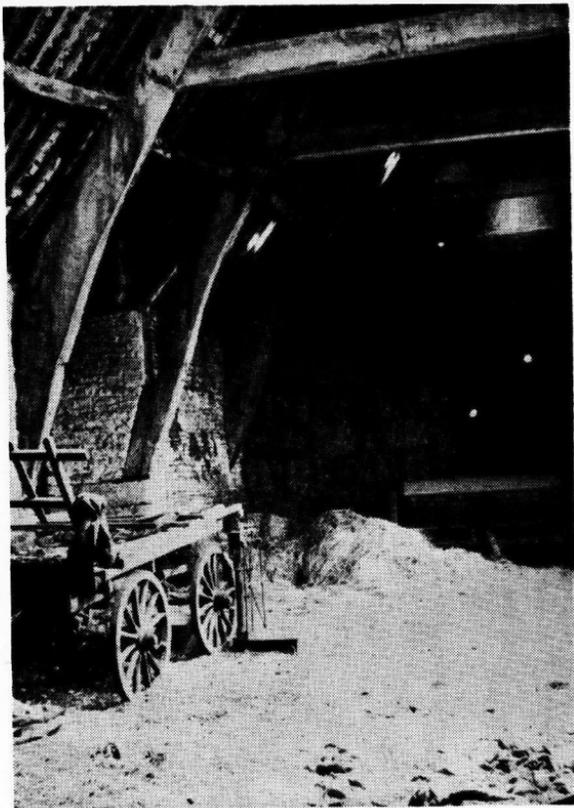


FIG. 1
CHURCH ENSTONE—interior looking West.

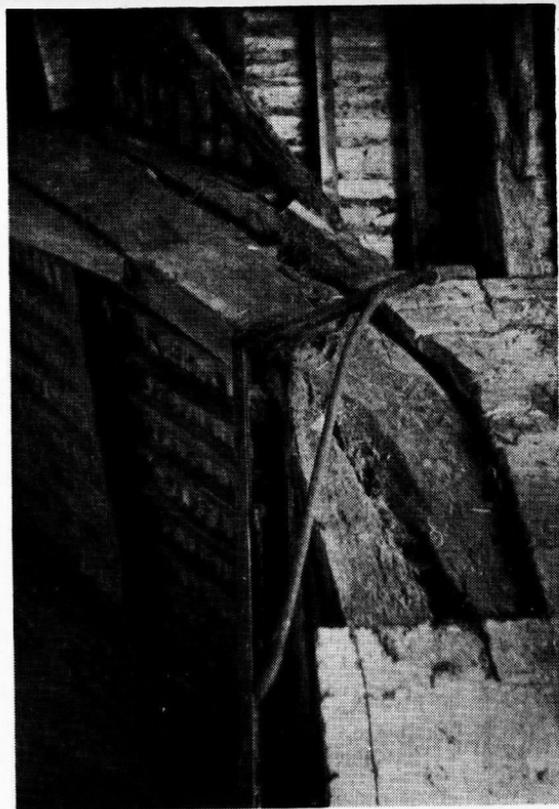


FIG. 2
SWALECLIFF—foot of truss.

NORTH OXFORDSHIRE TITHE-BARNS.

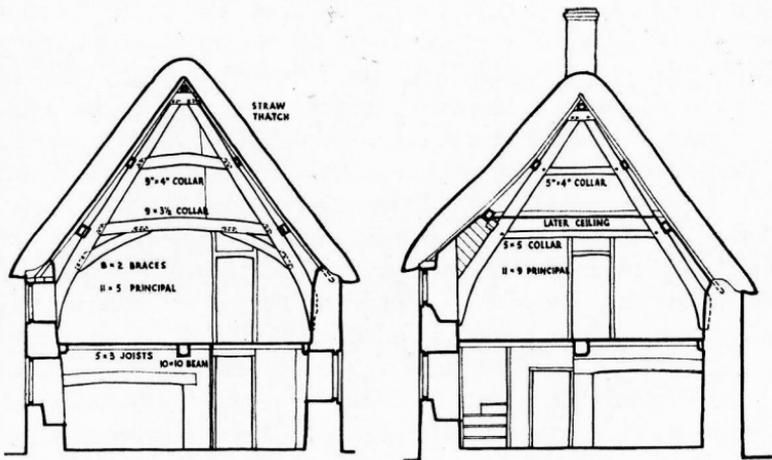
saddle, morticed to the tops of the blades. There is no proper tie-beam or spur at eaves level, the first collar occurring at a height of 17 feet above the ground with a second collar above, both being secured to the crucks by pegged dove-tailed halved joints. There are no wind-braces, and more significantly, no wall-plate, the rafters terminating on the stone walls with the masonry built up in between.¹

The Swalecliff barn, larger and architecturally finer, is also attributed to the 14th century, having been erected by William of Wykeham, founder of New College, Oxford, and has many related features. The curving principals spring still higher up the walls (Fig. 2), and the lower collar is arch-braced, whilst in other respects the structure is markedly similar. A comparison with this building would appear to confirm the similar, if not earlier date for the Enstone barn, and it is reasonable to conjecture that in the latter, the crucks, parts of the walling and the repositioned buttresses represent the original dated structure of the 14th century.

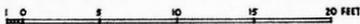
The "raised cruck" form of construction of these barns, clearly derived from the true cruck principle, finds a close counterpart in the construction of the earliest surviving dwellings. At Kings Sutton, Oxfordshire, two small houses have been recorded which show a remarkable affinity with these 14th century barns. The first house, with arch braces to the collar, contains trusses of identical form to those at Swalecliff, whilst the second finds a counterpart in the barn at Church Enstone. In both cases the scale is smaller, spans averaging 16 feet, and the collars are morticed and tenoned to the principals, instead of being joined by dove-tail halving as at Enstone.

The first house, fortunately recorded in detail before and during its demolition in July 1956, was a small thatched structure, measuring 29 feet by 16 feet internally, which has been adapted later as a two-unit regional house of one and a half storeys, with through entrance passage and a single fireplace. (Fig. 3) The walls averaged 2 feet 8 inches in thickness, and on the inner face of the north wall there survived the lower chamfered jambs of an opening 6 feet wide, later roughly built up. It is unfortunately not clear whether these jambs defined an original position of the stair—as commonly placed in this region—or a wide opening to a building originally designed for non-domestic purposes. It is interesting to note that in all these pre-regional houses the first-floor joists do not bear on the outside walls, but either span between cross-walls, or from a central spine-beam to wall-beams placed laterally against the side walls of the house. The principals are carefully dressed, matched and chamfered, with curving feet, and a bay spacing of approximately 10 feet. There is also an intermediate half-truss, built into the centre stack, and filled with mud walling

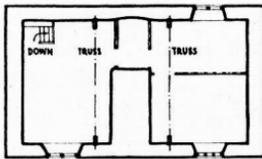
¹ *The Rectorial Barn at Church Enstone*, by R. B. Wood-Jones, *Oxoniensis* Vol. XXI, 1956.



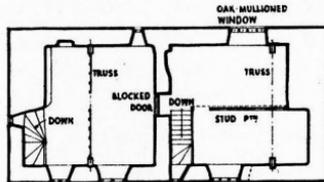
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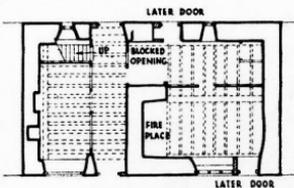
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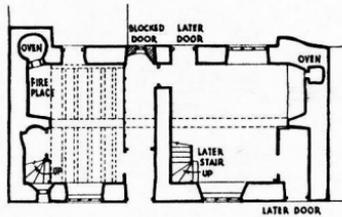
FIRST FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

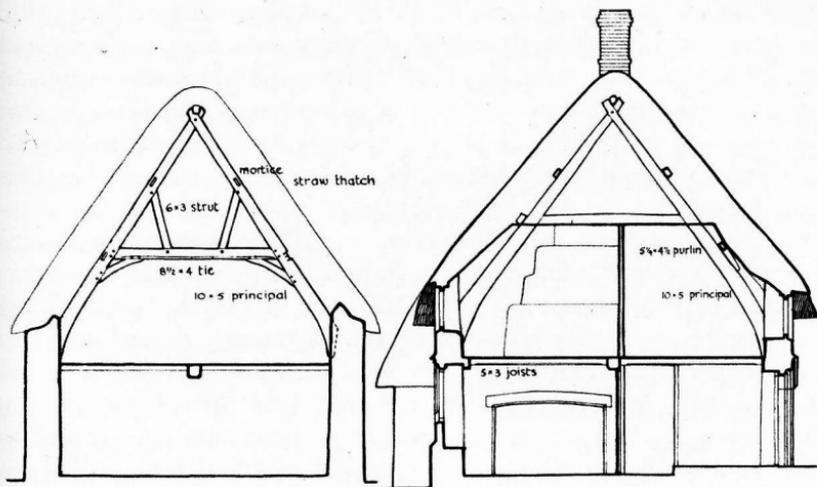


FIG. 3
TWO HOUSES AT KINGS SUTTON, OXON.

forming a first-floor partition. At the apex, the principals are morticed to a saddle, as in the barns.

The second house, (Fig. 3) is somewhat larger, but structurally similar. Also conforming to the later type of regional two-room small house plan with fireplaces on the gable walls and a through passage, it has more recently been converted into two cottages. The principals are similarly shaped, with two collars but no arch braces, and a saddle at the apex. The walls average 2 feet 8 inches in thickness, and the roof is thatched. The truss spacing appears very arbitrary, unless a central truss is assumed to have been removed on building up the partition wall, which would then give the usual 12 feet bay. There are curved wind braces springing from behind the foot of the principal in the south-east corner of the house, which appear to be simply embedded in the wall and not secured in any way to the principal, but these are probably later insertions, to stiffen a weakness in the roof, perhaps caused by the removal of the central truss. In neither building was there a timber wall-plate for securing the rafter ends.

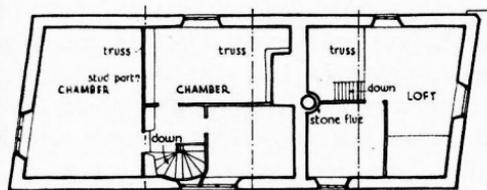
At Bloxham, Oxfordshire, there is a further group of houses which may represent a subsequent stage in this development before the emergence of the full regional style. It is probable that these houses were built originally with a first floor, partly in the roof space, but that similar methods of constructing roof and first floor continued. The house called "Blue Gates" is an exceptionally fine building, fortunately well and sympathetically maintained. It reveals the full three-unit yeoman plan of the 17th century, with a particular relation of stair, fireplace and entrance passage peculiar to a number of later dwellings recorded in Bloxham. (Fig. 4) There is an elaborate four-centred arched doorway of 16th century style in this middle of the east wall, which has almost certainly been removed to this position from the west wall when the large bread-oven was added, blocking the through passage through the service room. This alteration would conform to the common later regional practice of keeping the front door off the road front. (Fig. 6) A similar doorway can be seen in the porch of the vicarage at Banbury, dated 1649, indicating the survival of architectural fashions in these outlying regions. The doorway at the east end of the passage is also now blocked, and is of simpler detail with a four-centred arched stone head, of a common early 17th century type. The principals are similar to those already described, of flat, squared section, with only one collar. The apex of the blades—revealed in the service room which is still of single-room height with a modern loft—corresponds to 17th century practice, the blades being crossed to receive the ridge pole. Purlins are not housed into the principals but rest upon them, and are pegged or supported by cleats. The walls still average



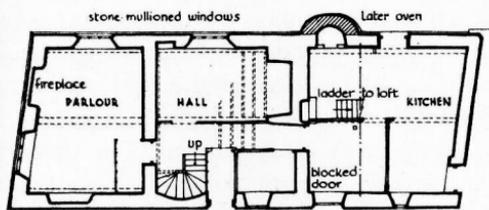
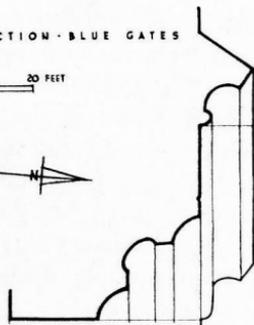
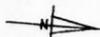
SECTION - HOUSE A

SECTION - BLUE GATES

1 0 5 10 15 20 FEET

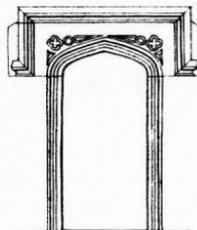


FIRST FLOOR PLAN



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

10 0 10 20 FEET



DOOR DETAILS

FEET 1 0 1 2 3

FIG. 4

TWO HOUSES AT BLOXHAM, OXON.

(All drawings are of the house called "Blue Gates" with the exception of the section of "House A".)

over thirty inches in thickness, and the roof is of straw thatch on rough unshaped rafter poles. Ground floor windows originally had flat-splay stone mullions, and a flat label mould with dropped ends, a form which persists throughout the 17th century, the earliest dated example recorded being the Manor House at Hornton of 1607. All first floor dormers are later, and this may possibly be taken as an indication that the upper floor is not contemporary with the original building, especially as the first floor joists here also span from the central spine beam to lateral wall beams close against the side walls. The regular 14 feet spacing of the principals ignores the intrusion of the supporting fireplace wall, again possibly indicating the later addition of the typically 17th century fireplace.

Near to Blue Gates is a terrace of houses of varying dates, recently modernized, and in this range two cruck-derivative trusses have been located. The earliest buildings of the terrace are two-unit houses of early regional type, one and a half storeys in height, with flat-splay stone mullioned windows. House "A", (Fig. 4) in which one truss occurs, has been so altered internally that its plan can no longer be determined, but the wall thickness and truss are as already described, whilst the dormer window appears later, with elaborate ovolo section stone mullions. The flat section principals again curve at the feet, with one collar strutted to the principals above and arch-braced below, and the ridge is again supported in the fork at the apex. (Fig. 4) All other roof timbers have been replaced, but mortices in the principals appear to indicate the use of wind-braces.

The "Joiners Arms" in Bloxham, which outwardly shows similar details to Blue Gates may also fall into this early category, but as yet it has not been possible to investigate the interior. Cotswold Cottage at Tadmarton also contains a simple curving principal, which in conjunction with the extra thickness of walls may put it into this group. These buildings however represent the total number so far located in this pre-regional class. There remain two other houses in the region, which although of early date exhibit some variation in their architectural tradition. The earlier of these is the "Leadenporch House" in Deddington, Oxfordshire, where can be seen a remarkable survival of a fine mediaeval hall-house, probably of early 15th century date, converted in mid-17th century into the full regional type of yeoman house, and fortunately cared for and maintained in good condition to the present day.

In its original form the house was undoubtedly of some social importance, representing a higher order of building than the vernacular. The single storey hall was of considerable height—almost 29 feet from floor to ridge—with a clear span of 19 feet, and thirty inch rubble walls. The parlour end probably was a complete rebuilding of the 17th century, and the roof principals divide the original extent of the building into irregular

bays, averaging 8 feet, with a wider bay above the entrance passage. (Fig. 7) The form of the principals is again derived from the cruck, with the curving feet built into the wall above the later first floor level, and a long straight taper to the apex, again formed by a saddle, morticed and pegged. There is a single collar with fine arch braces, and a king post above the collar, strutted on either side to the principals with curving braces each side to support the ridge beam between trusses. Basically similar to those already described, there is a significant variation in the form of the principals which are of a square section, each in two pieces joined by scarfing and pegging above the collar. The trusses show a system of numbering, indicating a degree of prefabrication—the only occasion this has been detected in the area, although carpenter's marks can be traced on the Enstone blades. Each truss is numbered consecutively on either side of the collar with a different Roman numeral, from I and II on the most northerly frame, to a VI on the exposed southern face of the truss which is built into the later stack. The most southerly truss was presumably numbered VII and VIII, but its surface is so badly decayed that this cannot be verified. It would appear, from all these early buildings, that there were no end frames, but that the gable walls were always built up in stone to support the ends of purlins and ridge. Three tiers of wind braces were provided, rising from the principals and housed into the backs of the purlins. The roof timbers are finely worked and chamfered and are all heavily encrusted with soot, particularly between frames numbered I, II and III, IIII, indicating an original central hearth with smoke probably discharging through a louvre in the roof. The original rafters and roof covering have been largely replaced by a recent roof of Stonesfield slates, and the narrower spacing of the trusses suggests that this was the original roofing material.

On the south-west elevation (Fig. 5) there survives the pointed arched doorway and one of the great windows of the original hall, the latter now built up against the later fireplace. Both are fine details, and although it is not uncommon to find such doors and windows purloined from ecclesiastical buildings and built into later houses, there is every reason to believe that these are undisturbed features of the hall-house. There is also a pointed arched window through two storeys on the east front, but this appears to be an insertion or remodelling of more recent date.

The 17th century alterations converted the building into a typical three-unit regional house, retaining the through entrance passage and adding a parlour with cellar under, and a first floor throughout, with wall beams to receive the ends of the inserted floor joists. New windows, with stone mullions of ovolo section and flat label moulds were added for both floors on the road front to the West, with dressings of light grey



FIG. 5
THE LEADENPORCH HOUSE, DEDDINGTON.



FIG. 6
BLUE GATES, BLOXHAM.

NORTH OXFORDSHIRE HOUSES.

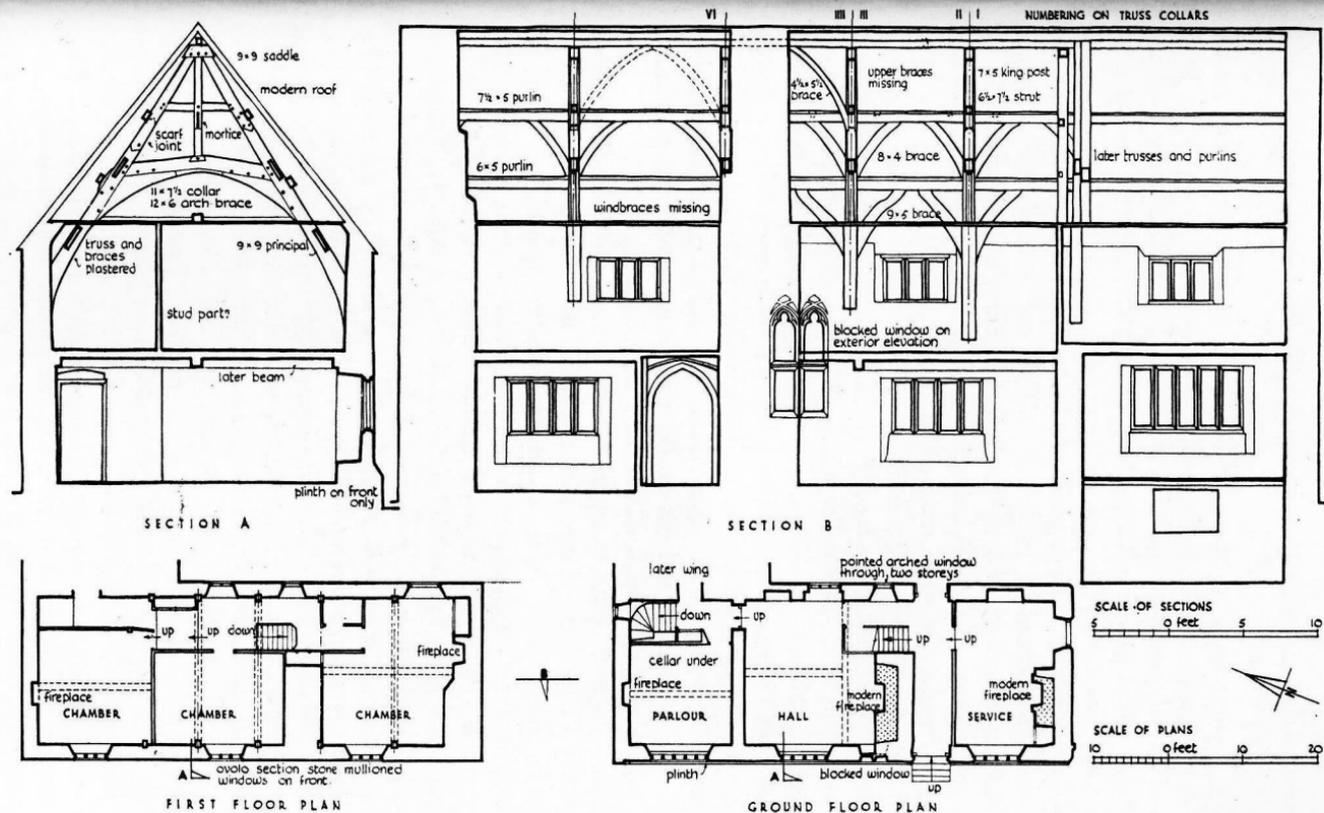


FIG. 7
 THE LEADENPORCH HOUSE, DEDDINGTON, OXON.

limestone—this admixture being commonly found in the fringe areas of the Banbury region.

The final building to be considered lies in Northamptonshire, on the north-east fringe of the region, although less than seven miles from Banbury, and here can be seen the influence of a different building tradition. Chinners Farm, Chacombe, like the Leadenporch House, is an earlier structure which has been modernized in the 17th century, bearing a date-stone of 1657. The original portion comprises a three-bay thatched hall, measuring internally 35 feet by 18 feet, and contains the only true crucks so far recorded in the region. (Fig. 8). There are two cruck frames, at 14 feet centres, the blades averaging 11 inches square at the base, and springing from a low stone stylobat 18 inches above ground level. The crucks are built into the thick rubble walls, and only the insertion of a modern bay has revealed the foot of one blade. At the apex a yoke secures the crucks, and there is one collar with arch braces, all joints being tenoned and pegged. There is no tie beam, but cruck spurs are provided at eaves level, morticed to the crucks and built into the walls, presumably carrying a wall-plate, whilst sprockets on the back of the crucks reduce the pitch and carry the purlins and wind-braces. All roof timbers are roughly shaped and chamfered, and the cruck frame is gracefully proportioned, with a slight ogee curve.

This cruck form is late, comparison with examples recorded elsewhere suggesting a date early in the 16th century. Whether the crucks were originally free-standing, with a different walling-material, or whether they were built in conjunction with these heavy stone walls, is a matter for conjecture. It is significant, however, that one of the cruck spurs has been cut off against the stone wall, instead of being built in, as if the wall had been taken up later. There is no evidence that the original walling was of timber the exposed cruck foot showing no sign of a wall-post on the back, but the possible use of original mud-walling cannot be precluded in conjunction with these cruck-frames. There is no indication of soot blackening on the timbers, and it is conceivable that the original use of the building was other than domestic, as a central fire would certainly have left some trace.

In 1657 the building was modernized, and a new three storey parlour unit added, with chamber and attic above. Probably at the same time, the hall fireplace was built perhaps replacing an earlier wall fireplace, and a first floor added in the easternmost bay of the hall, the cruck frame, being filled in throughout its height with stud partitioning.¹ This partition survives on the first floor. On the ground floor, however, the very restricted width of the enclosed hall must have soon proved in-

¹ This partition may however be the original division between hall and solar, the removal westward of the ground floor partition being part of the 17th century rebuilding.

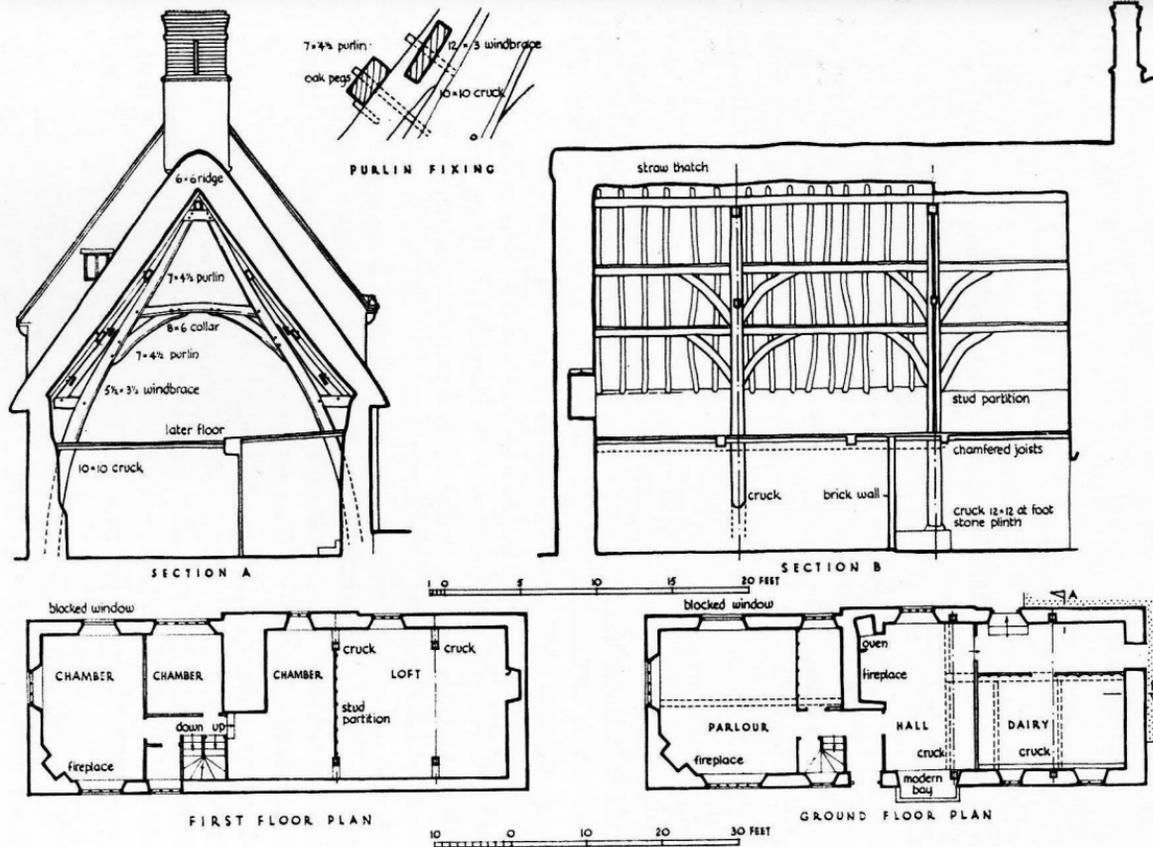


FIG. 8
CHINNERS FARM, CHACOMBE, NORTHANTS.

convenient, and the partition was later rebuilt in brick further west, the first floor being extended on rougher joists. The remaining part of the hall does not appear to have been so subdivided, although a recent ceiling has been inserted to reduce its height, forming a loft above.

The consideration of these six dwellings, and the barns previously noted, immediately presents certain common factors. All have walls of rubble stonework averaging 2 feet 7 inches thick, reducing in thickness to the eaves, in contrast to the consistently 22 inch stone walls of the later regional houses. The trusses clearly reveal their cruck derivation, although the full cruck has only been recorded at Chacombe. Principals generally are of flat section, curving sharply at the foot, and tapering to the ridge, and the feet are built into the walls to a depth of 3 or 4 inches, at a height of between 5 and 8 feet above ground floor level. Bay spacing averages 12 feet—14 feet at Blue Gates—but spans have little significance, the same variation occurring throughout the regional period. The ridge pole is supported in the earlier examples on a saddle, and later in a squared recess between the crossed forks. Where thatch is the roofing material for these houses, there are no wind-braces or wall-plates. A variation is seen at Deddington and Chacombe, where the principals are of square section, and wind-braces are included. In the north-east section of the region distinctive variations have also been observed in the plans of 17th-century houses from the standard regional type.

The "raised cruck" form appears to have developed naturally into the normal 17th-century roof structure, the principals becoming quite straight but otherwise similarly constructed, forked to receive the ridge, with one collar, and still lacking any wall-plate. The regional house is usually a full two storeys in height, with an attic, whereas these dwellings—with the exception of the Leadenporch House—only attain one and a half storeys, i.e. with the second floor partly in the roof, and many of the earliest houses which can be classed as being of the regional type, are similarly of one and a half storeys. First floors, whether added or original in these houses described are all independent of the lateral walls, a feature not common to the regional house. All houses are sited along the roads, from which they are entered, and contrast with the deliberate attempts at south orientation and at keeping the principal entrance off the road, which characterise many later dwellings.

The 17th-century small house in the Banbury region represents a singularly clearly defined regional style, in material, structure, plan and architectural detail. With so little surviving to indicate the form of minor domestic architecture prior to the emergence of this style, these early buildings are of considerable value in assessing the architectural history of the region.