

PLAS-UCHA, LLANGAR, CORWEN

By Peter Smith and Ffrangcon Lloyd

SUMMARY

Plas-ucha is an almost complete example of an early Welsh house. It consisted of an exceptionally large service area, cross-passage, hall and room beyond, probably a parlour, all in one range. After careful examination it was clear that the present stone walls and structural framework were substantially original and of a single build although this had been questioned. Three mediaeval window frames were found in the walls and parts of the open hearth under the present floor. The roof structure proved of especial interest, a main framework of cruck-couples with intermediate spere, collar-beam and louver-trusses, all carrying king-post and ridge. The quality of the work is exceptionally good and the extensive use of the ovolo-moulding combined with certain other structural features suggests an early date, perhaps late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. The house can claim to belong to a small group of halls, the cradle of domestic architecture in North Wales.

Plas-ucha was clearly of gentle status, a status it long retained judging from the quality of the sixteenth-century alterations (involving the destruction of the room beyond the hall, the insertion of a floor over the hall, and the addition of a chimney). It was still listed by Edward Llwyd, ca. 1707, amongst the houses of the gentry in Llangar.¹ Since then, alas, it declined into two labourers' cottages, and now abandoned is a near total ruin.

Plas-ucha in the Merioneth parish of Llangar near Corwen was first described by L. Monroe when it was still inhabited.² Its present empty and derelict condition invited re-examination in the hope that a little probing might resolve some of the problems which Monroe encountered.

The house stands on a low hill in the Dee Valley. Though built on gently rising ground, it is sited more-or-less along the contour,

¹ Edward Llwyd, *Parochialia* (ed. R. H. Morris), II, p. 56.

² L. Monroe, "Plas Ucha", *Arch. Camb.*, 1933, pp. 81-87.

so that there is only a slight fall from the upper to the lower end, and not up and down the slope as most early Welsh houses.³

The building consists of a long rectangle. The stone rubble walls had three doorways with shaped doorheads, one four-centred and two three-centred, and a number of window openings. The slate roof covering was much decayed.

Inside it was not difficult to see that, as Monroe had stated, here were the service area, passage, and hall, of a substantial mediaeval house. However, as our examination proceeded under the ideal conditions of total dereliction, it became clear that the remains were greater than even Monroe had supposed. Most of the walls and all the roof were of a single design and construction and mediaeval. The sixteenth-century rebuild had been confined to the insertion of a floor and the construction of the west gable with chimneys on a new alignment.

We begin our study with a detailed account of the roof structure as most of our interpretation of the building depends on it. The main framework seems to have consisted of five cruck trusses labelled A B C D E and F on the drawing, A, B, and F no longer surviving, B and F easily, and A somewhat more problematically inferred. These cruck couples were set out in bays 13 feet—15 feet wide and about 19 feet 6 inches across. Interposed between them, in the hall only, are two intermediate trusses of differing design labelled (1) and (2) on the drawing, and one louver truss, the latter a very rare survival.

Of the three surviving cruck trusses, truss C was the most ornate as befitted its position as the main truss over the hall. It also furnished conclusive proof of the cruck construction. The foot on the south side of the couple has been cut away in a late repair, but on the north a fall in masonry revealed in its entirety, bedded about 1 foot 6 inches above floor level. The back face of the

³ The up and downhill siting was first noticed by Sir Cyril and Lady Fox in connection with earthworks on Margam mountain. These consisted of platforms arranged at right angles to the contours, presumed to be the foundations of early dwellings (see "Forts and Farms on Margam Mountain, Glamorgan", *Antiquity*, VIII, 1934). This stimulating paper led to much study of the subject, and it has become clear that this is the commonest form of siting whether of ruined or surviving houses before the seventeenth century when under the influence of the Renaissance the now usual siting along the contour began to be preferred. Exceptions before the seventeenth century are uncommon and should be noted.

cruck was rough but the sides and inner face were smoothly finished with an ovolo moulding on each arris stopped about 1 foot 0 inch above the foot but disappearing as the cruck emerged from the wall. It was apparent the moulding had gone because the inner face of the cruck had been cut back, probably to increase the headroom, when the upper floor was later inserted. Our discovery of a fragment of ovolo-moulded face on the opposite couple buried in the plaster confirmed our conjecture that the whole cruck soffit must originally have been ovolo moulded. The truss was jointed by a collar-beam on which were mounted four steeply raking studs with a king-post between them, the latter with ovolo-mouldings identical with those found on the blade buried in wall and plaster. The king-post carried the square ridge to which it was connected with sophisticated joinery more easily understood from our drawing than explained in writing.

The second surviving cruck truss D standing below the cross-passage is a particularly massive piece of work with two collars and a tie, the latter destroyed. The upper collar supports a king-post which is braced to the ridge on the passage side only. The truss housed a post-and-panel partition of which many of the posts still exist. The panels have gone. The 2 inches square mortises in the collars between the posts are unlike the usual round augur holes for the rods of the wattle reinforcement of a daub infilling. These only occur in what are clearly later modifications to the building, the infilling of the originally open spere-truss. A likely infilling is packed clay reinforced by 2-inch square posts set in the mortises.

The last surviving member of the main framework truss E is now filled in with modern masonry infilling and only the face and upper edge is visible. The siting of the augur-holes suggests that it was jointed with a tie and two collars similar to truss C, but it is impossible to determine whether these contained a partition or not.

Clear evidence that there was a further bay is to be found in the housings for windbraces on both sides of the upper surface of the truss, which shows that the lower part of the house was in two full bays, and that the present lean-to arrangement is a late and degenerate modification.

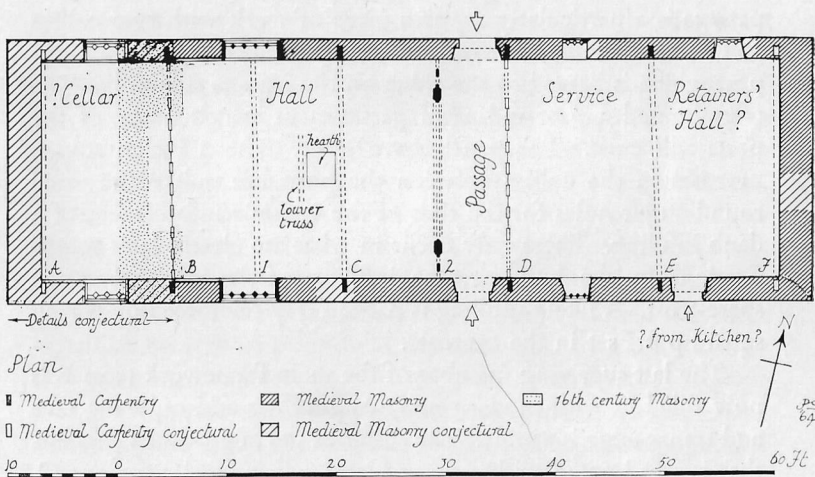
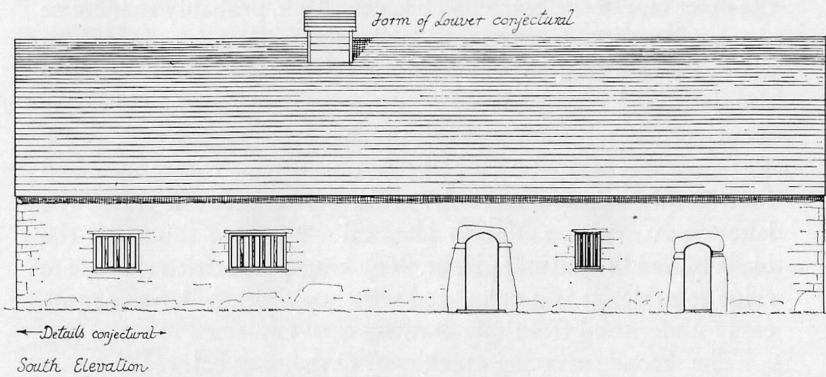


FIG. 1. Plas-Ucha

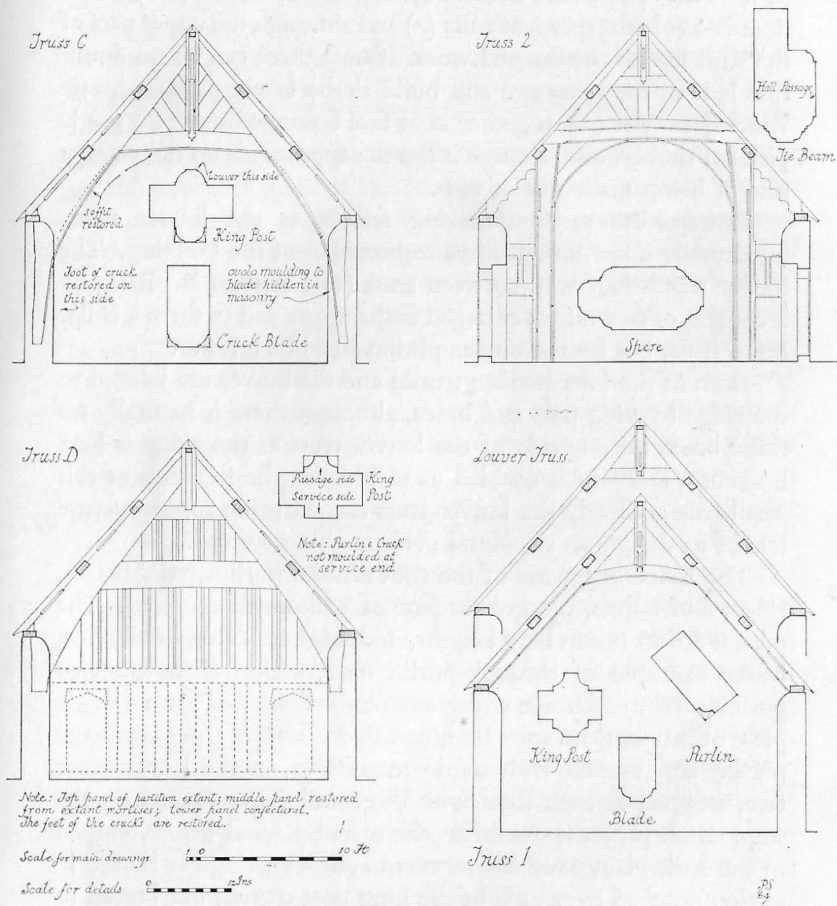


FIG. 2. Plas-Ucha

There remain in the hall the two intermediate trusses, the simple collar truss (1) and the elaborate spere (2). The collar truss has the ovolo moulded soffit which we have already surmised in truss C. The ovolo moulding also decorated the soffit and a double-ovolo the speres of truss (2) and although the upper part of the truss has no ornamental work of note there can be no doubt that it is of the same age and build as the lower part as the tie which joins the two together is in fact fashioned out of a single piece of timber, even though it has the appearance on the passage side of being made out of two.

Perhaps the rarest surviving feature is the louver truss, incidentally a key link in the interpretation of the building. The louver stands half way between truss (1) and truss B. Basically it consists of two rafters enlarged at the upper end to form a collar beam truss, but resting on the purlins just like a rafter.

Both of the intermediate trusses and the louver are jointed to the ridge by king post and brace, although there is naturally no ridge brace on one side of the louver truss as the ridge is here broken, a fact which enabled us to identify the function of this small truss. Clearly the louver truss carried some superstructure but of its design no structural evidence has survived.

The remaining parts of the roof are the purlins, windbraces, ridge, and rafters, the greater part of which still survived. The purlins are set out in long lengths. Indeed there could hardly be a better example of through-purlin construction than the two purlins on the south side which seem to be fashioned from a single piece of timber from truss E to truss B. In the hall and passage the purlins are finished with ovolo mouldings on the lower inner face, stopped at each truss with the moulding returned on the stop. Each purlin is braced to the truss by wind braces, cusped in the hall, plain over the service bays. The ridge is square in section notched over each of the king post trusses, but braced to them over the hall only.

Of the three surviving pairs of cruck trusses, only the open truss of the hall carried down to near ground level. The feet of the two closed trusses seem to have rested only a short distance below the wall-plate, presumably because the outward thrust was considered sufficiently retained by the tie-beams. It has been

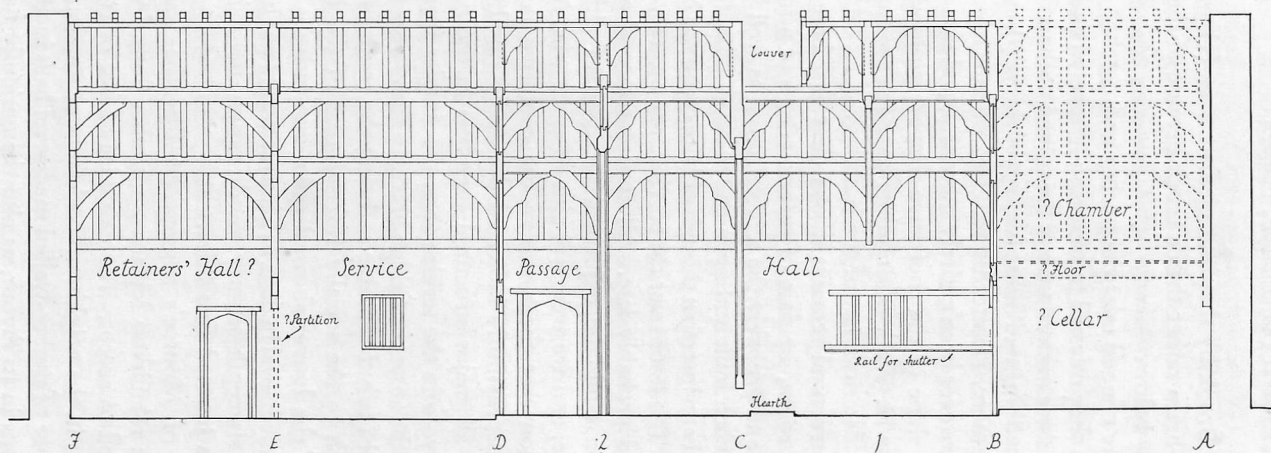
suggested by H. Brooksby that intermediate truss (1) was in the form of a collar-beam rather than a cruck because of the need to clear the window below.

The rafters are coggled over the purlins and notched over the wall-plate which they oversail terminating in tapered ends similar to those we have since noticed among the ruined timbers of Pen-y-bryn, Llansilin; the Ship Inn, Ruthin (destroyed this year), and Upper Lunebrook, Wigmore, Herefordshire. The attempt to secure the rafters has not however been entirely successful, and most of these on the northern slope of the roof have slipped, pushing out the wall plate and the N. Wall. This failure has been the main cause of the structural deterioration of the building.

From these structural remains it was clear that here was the hall and service room, or pair of service rooms of a mediaeval house. The hall and probably the service rooms as well had been single storeyed when built and open to the roof. The floor over the hall was clearly an insertion though of high quality as Monroe's drawings show. The floor over the service area was of very poor construction, and probably late. All apparent inconsistencies in roof construction could be explained in terms of either later damage or of use, and we were not able to agree with Monroe's hesitant suggestion that there was in the roof two periods of construction. As previously indicated the ovolo moulding was to be found on all major structural members in the hall. The absence of the ovolo in the service area, the simpler form of the windbraces; and the absence of ridge braces in the lower end of the house seemed all easily explicable as being the result of a more economical finish in the socially inferior part of the building. The survival of the louver showed quite conclusively that the whole roof was mediaeval in date, as a louver would not have been built after the sixteenth-century modification involving wall fireplaces and an inserted first floor.

The second of Monroe's suggestions that the walls were secondary, stone rebuilding replacing a timber framed wall, we were first inclined to accept. The existence of one or two black and white houses in the neighbourhood and our previous knowledge of a number of timber-walled mediaeval halls in north-east Wales were points in its favour, as also the curiously unfinished

Long Section



Note: Bay E-F partly restored; B-A conjectural; ~ see text.

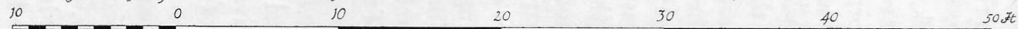


FIG. 3. Plas-Ucha



FIG. 4. Plas-Ucha

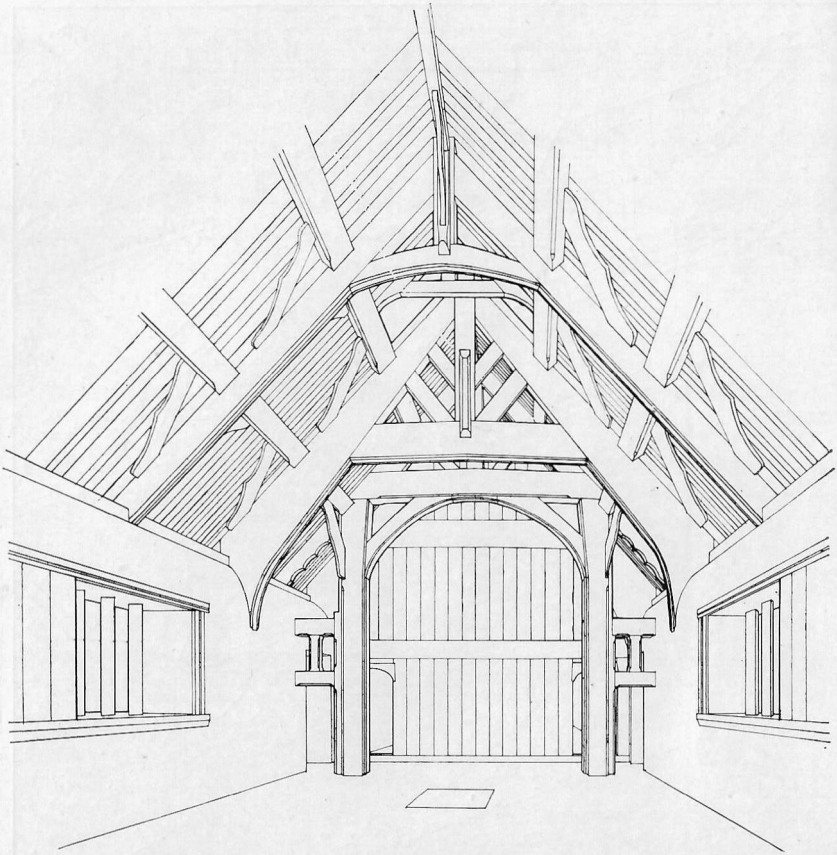


FIG. 5. Plas-Ucha

treatment of the side panels of the speres where they simply abut the stone walls. However it was very difficult to reconcile the collar-beam truss with any timber walled building because of the difficulty there would have been of stopping the feet from spreading. The massive wall-plate which fitted the roof structure well had no mortises for any timber framed substructure. Finally the fall of the wall from the face and back of truss B revealed a finish inconsistent with a light timber wall. It was rough at the

back and had no housings for spurs to tie in the wall and wall-plate as are always employed in cruck-framed timber-walled buildings. It was therefore clear that the wall had always been of stone.

The question remained whether the present walls replaced earlier stone walls, or were in fact the original walls. We found conclusive evidence for the latter view. If these were not the original walls then it seemed at least likely that the wall-plate would have been disturbed when the walls were rebuilt, and the wall-plate could hardly have been replaced without disturbing the rafters. However the rafters are all notched over the wall-plate as is the louver-truss and appear not to have been moved. It is moreover most unlikely that the latter would have been replaced in a sixteenth-century reconstruction as the wall fireplaces then added made it obsolete. The whole roof structure and wall-plate appeared mediaeval in date.

It was just possible to imagine that the exceptionally stout wall-plate had been shored up while the walls were rebuilt beneath it. However a final indication that the side walls were substantially original came from an examination of the two hall windows nearest the present end wall, an examination which incidentally threw much light on the original layout of the upper part of the building. Cutting away the plaster round both windows showed that the original box framework for a pre-glazing wooden-mullioned window. Such a window could as far as we knew be sixteenth century in date, and in fact a box-framed window was built into a Flintshire hall as late as 1589. However an integral part of the frame were grooves for sliding shutters and these grooves, embedded in wall ran well beyond the face of the present end wall. The windows therefore clearly antedated the chimney, and they and the walls were part of the original structure. A further original window was found in the south wall of the service area next to the doorway.

An examination of the north wall showed a clear straight joint between it and the west wall, as might have been expected as it was obvious the fireplace was secondary, but there was no break where one might have expected where the fireplace abutted the original end wall had this survived. It was clear that the end

wall, fireplaces, and chimney had been rebuilt together. This suggested that the sixteenth-century end wall was not on the line of the original end wall. Confirmation of this could be found in the siting of truss B. Though truss B has been destroyed its position can be located with precision from the surviving windbraces. It stands behind the inner face of the present end wall, but about 4 feet forward of the outer face. As the original walls are 2 feet thick, this suggests that there was not originally a masonry wall in this position at all, but that the house formerly extended further as Monroe suggested. The present quatrefoil enriched and ovolo-moulded beam now reset between the speres must as Monroe contends have been part of a partition above the dais. No other use can be found for it. Its rough finish at the back suggests it abutted a floor beam an indication that the upper bay was storeyed. Monroe's suggestion that the upper part consisted of a wing seemed more doubtful as excavation revealed no trace of a wall at right angles to the hall. We have therefore assumed that the extension took the form of another bay in the same range and have surmised a further somewhat conjectural cruck couple A on our drawing.

The only feature which might yet be recovered was the hearth. In Evans "Tour" (1798) it is stated that in the chimneyless cottages of Caernarvonshire the opening in the roof was not directly over the fire lest it be extinguished by the rain.⁴ Our hunch that this might also have been the mediaeval practice was falsified by the spade. A few slabs of blackened slate indicated the hearth directly under the louver opening. This must therefore have been covered by some superstructure so that the smoke escaped by rain-proof vents.

Though designed mainly on orthodox lines Plas-ucha did have unusual features. The two-bay service area, whether embracing one room or two, was exceptionally large, and the separate external door apart from the cross-passage unorthodox. However, this doorway, only 2 feet 6 inches wide, and narrower in fact than the 3 feet 0 inches doorways to the passage, showed that the

⁴ J. Evans, *Letters written during a tour through North Wales in the year 1798 and at other times*, edn. 1804, p. 161.

service area must have been purely domestic in character, a deduction which throws some doubt on one of the author's suggestions on the original use of the two-bay lower room in the not dissimilar Hafod Ysbytty, Llanffestiniog, Merioneth.⁵ A large service area need not indicate a room connected with the farm rather than the house.

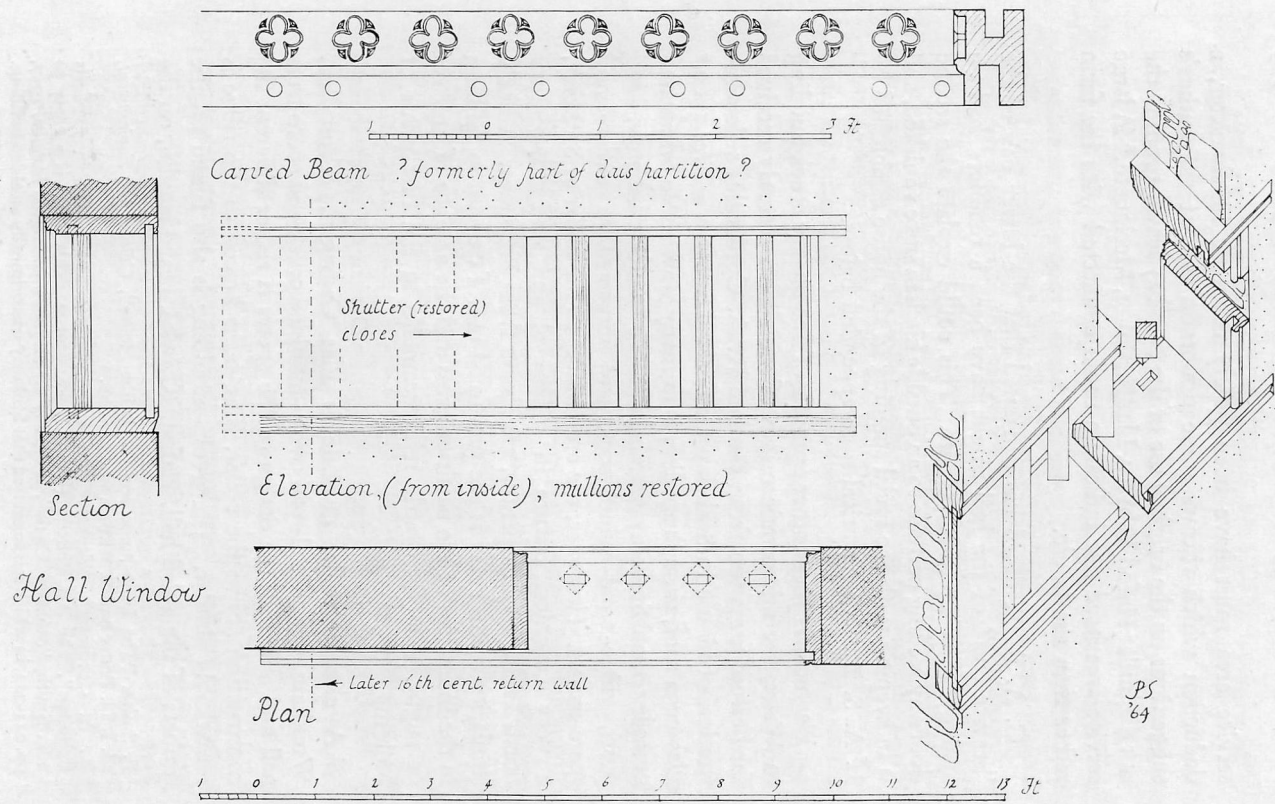
C. A. R. Radford has suggested that the lower bay of the "service end" of the hall might have been a retainers' hall on analogy with Tretower Court. This could explain the second doorway leading perhaps to an outside kitchen since vanished, and is in keeping with the social standing of the house established by L. A. S. Butler's historical note appended below.

Plas-ucha is yet another example of fine quality cruck building in Wales, the aristocratic origin of which has recently received further confirmation from the late R. A. Cordingley's demonstration of its use in Stokesay Castle Hall as early as *circa* 1300.⁶ Plas-ucha roof, though smaller, is in many ways more ornate and complex than Stokesay which lacks the ovolo-mouldings, king posts, ridge- and windbraces, and intermediate collar- and spere-trusses. However, the arch braces to the collar at Stokesay, a very common feature in mediaeval and sixteenth-century north Welsh roof carpentry, are absent from Plas-ucha. A likely similarity to Stokesay is the presumed use of clay lump infilling in the interstices of the partition truss and the absence of grooves or augur holes for wattle reinforcements in the first phase of building.

A closer parallel in scale is Plas Cadwgan, Rhostyllen, Wrexham, which is also an ovolo-moulded cruck and spere-truss hall and although the design of the speres is rather different the construction above the collar, king-posts braced to the ridge is remarkably similar. The ovolo-moulding is also found on the timbers of the aisled hall, Hafod, Rhiwlas, near Llansilin, on the

⁵ P. Smith, "The Long-house and the Laithe House", *Culture and Environment*, ed. I. Ll. Foster and L. Alcock, pp. 427-428.

⁶ R. A. Cordingley, "Stokesay Castle, Shropshire: The Chronology of its Buildings", *The Art Bulletin* (U.S.A.), pp. 91-106. This paper is a reply to J. T. Smith, "Stokesay Castle", *Journal of the Royal Archaeological Institute*, 1957, pp. 211-214, in which it is suggested that Stokesay was originally an aisled building.



Carved Beam ? formerly part of dais partition ?

Shutter (restored)
closes →

Elevation (from inside), mullions restored

Hall Window

Plan

← Later 16th cent. return wall

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FIG. 6. Plas-Ucha



FIG. 7. North front

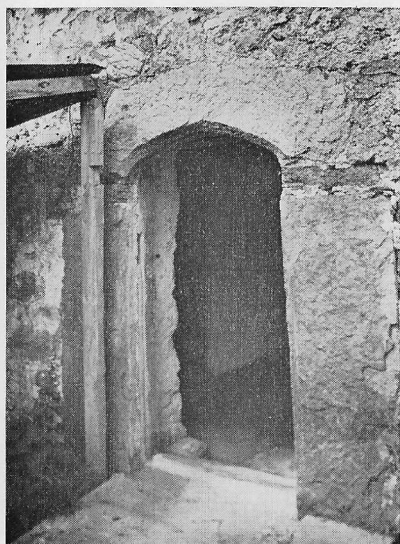


FIG. 8. South doorway



FIG. 9. North doorway

sperre trusses of Lower Berse, Bersham, near Wrexham, and on the main king-post and collar beam truss at Hafotty in Anglesey. The latter house was considered by the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments as likely to be fourteenth century a date suggested by Monroe for Plas-ucha.⁷

Whatever the precise date of this house it is clear that Plas-ucha belongs to the *incunabula* of the Welsh House. It was recently visited by the Ancient Monuments Board who recommended that the ancient timber fabric deserved preservation either *in situ* or elsewhere. It is to be hoped that if preservation *in situ* which would be preferable, should prove impossible, the timbers will be saved for re-erection in a museum, ideally the Welsh Folk Museum, in Cardiff. For very few houses of this age and type survive in Wales, and as the future of the only close and reasonably complete parallel Plas Cadwgan, does not look encouraging, Plas-ucha is not a structure lightly to be lost.

PLAS-UCHAF IN CYMMER

A HISTORICAL NOTE

by L. A. S. Butler

The early history of Plas uchaf is obscure and it is first recorded by a correspondent of Edward Lhwyd as being in the possession of Charles Hughes of Gwerclas. Subsequent tenurial details indicate that Plas uchaf was inseparably linked to Gwerclas. While the two houses of Gwerclas and Plas isaf held mountain pasture high on the Berwyn range and while each of these two houses owed labour services in the repair of Llangar churchyard wall and were called upon for tithes, there is no trace that Plas uchaf had any share in parochial duties or tenurial rights. Gwallter Mechain records in

⁷ Mr. J. T. Smith has kindly looked at our drawings of Plas-Ucha and expressed the view that both masonry and joinery details are not inconsistent with a late fourteenth-century date on analogy with comparable English material.