A TIMBER-FRAMED TOWN HOUSE IN MANCHESTER

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A mediaeval timber-framed house, known locally as "The Rovers Return" until recently stood in Shudehill, Manchester. It had survived the incendiary bombs of the German air raid of 1940 but was demolished at the request of the Local Authority in the spring of 1958. The following notes describe the significant structural and planning features which were recorded by the writer, as the demolition proceeded.

The house was in two bays, measuring 18 ft. x 26 ft. overall, and was built as a two-storey timber frame supported on an ashlar plinth of red sandstone. It had a jettied gable to the street and this was more elaborate than the one at the back, having a herring-bone pattern of diagonal timbers or struts—none of which were curved. The front section of the house was approximately 17 ft. wide internally and 13 ft. deep. The upper room may formerly have been open to the ridge, as the purlins had decorative chamfers and stopped ends. There was a two-storey bay with sash windows on the street front which was probably inserted in the late 18th century, and another alteration estimated to be of this period was the cellar which had a brick vault. This was located under the front part of the house.

The roof construction was particularly interesting since it showed western "Highland"[1] influence in a town-house structure. The roof timbers were in surprisingly good condition possibly due to adequate ventilation through the former roof covering. Although Welsh slates were in position when the house was pulled down, it is almost certain that the former roof covering was of the local heavy stone slates. The purlins were in one piece of timber, being approximately 27 ft. long and 9½ ins. x 5 ins. in section, chamfered on two edges. They were square cut and regular, supported by stout principals and stiffened by sway braces measuring 2½ ins. x 8½ ins. The sway

[1] For the purpose of comparison, the structure of a "lowland" Town House sited in the City of Lincoln is illustrated on page 112. This latter example shows a mediaeval roof which is typical of Lincolnshire and south-east England. There is no ridge-piece and the coupled rafters do not receive support from purlins, consequently the roof here has less stiffness than the Manchester example.

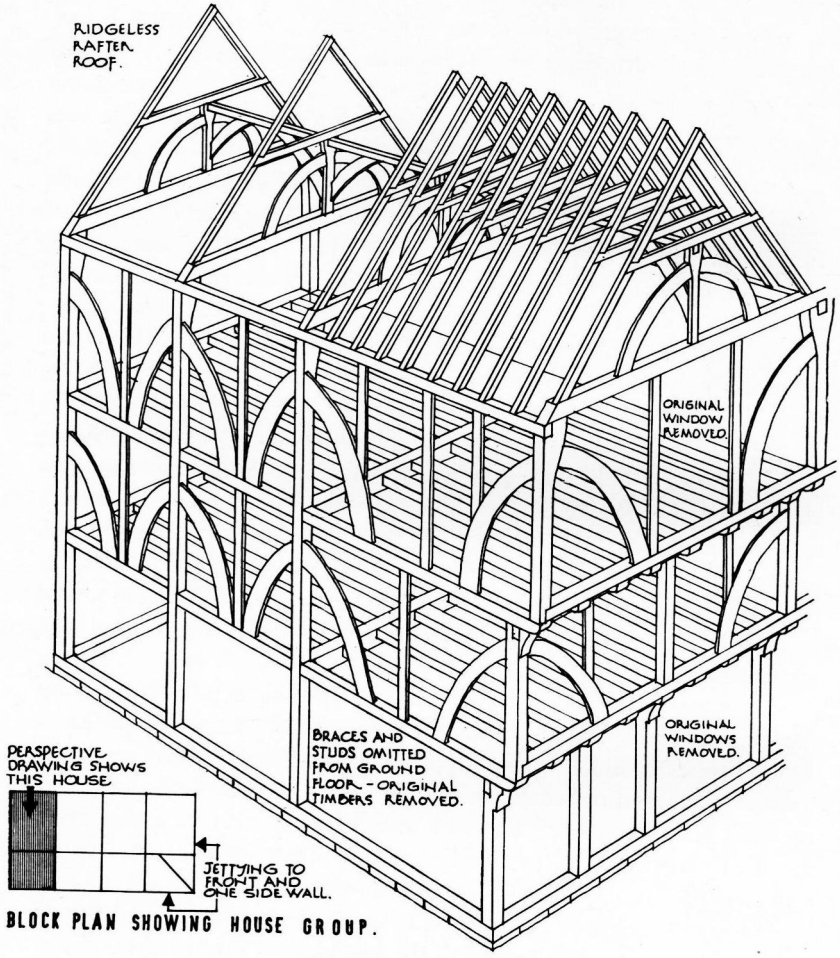
braces were approximately straight and unlike the curved braces so frequently found in the south-eastern counties in timber-framed buildings. All the main roof timbers were in good condition except the ridge-piece. This was held diagonally and supported over the king posts at three points (two gables and a centre truss); like the purlins, it was in one piece.

In the upper parts of the house, some wattle and daub infilling had survived, and formerly, the wall panels had been entirely of this material. Mud and plaster, which was knocked out of the rear gable for examination, proved to be clay, liberally mixed with straw and reinforced by splints. A piece of stone slate ½ in. thick and approximately 6 ins. x 4 ins. was removed from one panel, but this was not to be compared with the solidity of the stone slab infilling seen in a derelict Nottinghamshire town-house wall at Newark. In the Manchester house there was a difference in construction between the usual wattle-and-daub wall panel with interwoven wattles, and the narrow infillings of mud removed from the Shudehill gables. In the latter position there was little timber reinforcement other than a few—now very fragile—splints sprung into position between the grooves of the diagonal gable timbers. The mud-and-straw mix had a lime-plaster finish on both sides as a weatherproof, or protective skin. In the rear gable—not jettied and not decorative—there was a triangular mud panel which had two roughly rounded pegs projecting down 9 ins. from the underside of the principal into the mud panels, to secure the splints or other reinforcement to the mud infilling. Outer surfaces of the mud again had a thin skimming of lime-plaster approximately ½ in. thick.

The four timber corner posts, also the principal posts supporting the central baulk-tie and principal rafters, had shoulder and joint details corresponding with the pronounced shoulder found in the south-eastern counties of England. In these latter localities however, the wall plate is usually wide and laid flat while here in Manchester, the wall plate was comparatively narrow being 4½ ins. in width by 8 ins. on the lateral wall face.

During demolition a wattle panel approximately 3 ft. 6 ins. wide and 3 ft. 5 ins. high was cut out of the side wall. This panel had three upright splints sunk into auger holes on the upper member and sprung into a continuous groove in the lower member at first floor level; the splints were approximately 2 ins. x 1½ ins., tapered at the ends. Round interwoven horizontal wattles approximately ¾ in. to 1 in. diameter were used as reinforcement for the mud infilling.

The writer's first impression of the two chimney stacks located on the long timber wall, was that these were contemporary with the timber frame. Certainly the brickwork could be 17th century or earlier, but when the stacks were demolished, it was clear that the timber wall had been continuous on this side, and the wall plate,

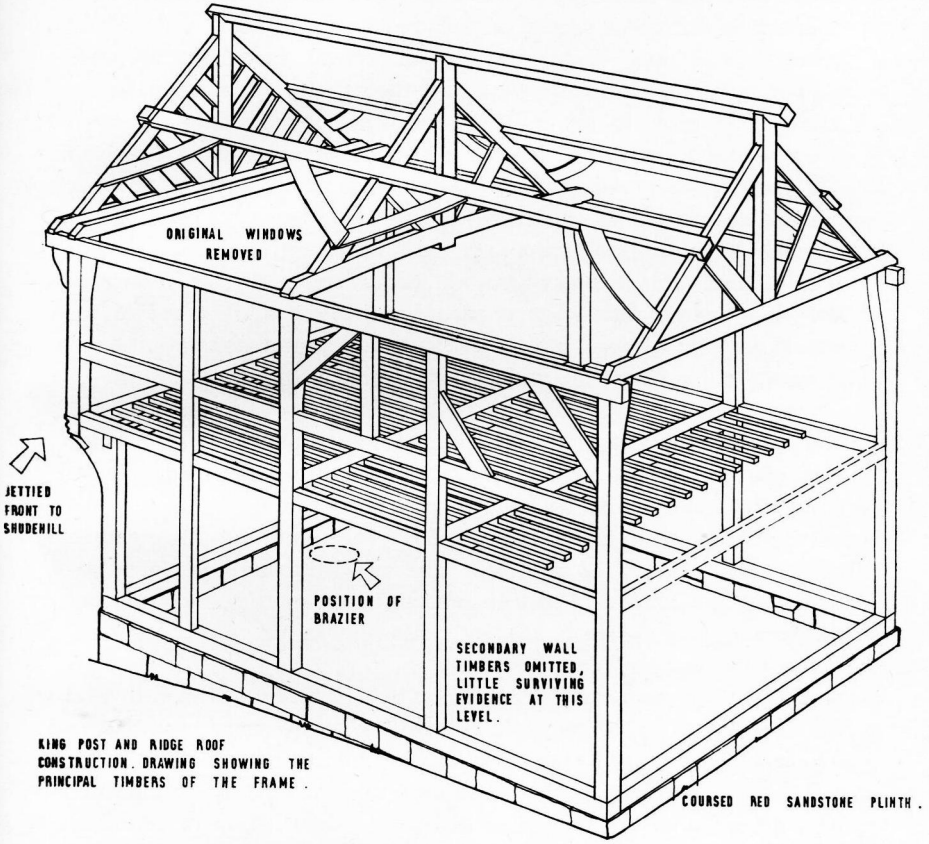


TIMBER-FRAMED TOWN HOUSE, LINCOLN

braces and horizontal timbers, had been cut through to allow the insertion of the stacks. It is therefore evident that there were no chimneys in the original building.

In the central roof truss, the baulk-tie had a pronounced camber.

This shape had been cut out of the solid as was proved by the decorative boss at the underside of its centre; although it appeared to be suspended, it was actually part and parcel of the tie. The baulk-tie on the *front* gable to Shudehill was differently fashioned. Its upper surface rose in a straight line from the eaves to its centre under the king post



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(depth on face 12 ins. under king post, 9 ins. at outer extremity). The lower surface was not cambered. This gable baulk-tie was jettied over the front, its support being surprisingly precarious. Formerly, brackets from the corner posts and the intermediate timbers underpinned the member from below. Its main support came from the 8 ins. x 4½ ins. wall plates cantilevered from the shouldered corner posts and these were heavily stressed. The shear on the two projecting

wall plates was very high during demolition, when the 18th-century supporting bay was removed. Under these circumstances, the considerable weight of the jettied gable could be readily appreciated. Additional roof load was transmitted from the long ridge and purlins.

When the front section of floor joists and boards over the ground floor room was removed, it was noted that the oak joists had been covered by laths and plaster on the underside, probably in the 19th century, and they could now be inspected. Fifteen joists were supported by the main cross beam and these ran forward to the façade and gave support to the timber front wall. Tenons into the main cross beam had survived, but the front-wall support tenons were cut off when the bay was inserted. The oak joists were 5½ ins. deep x 6 ins. wide with tenons remarkably light—approximately 6 ins. x 1¾ ins., tapered. The stopped-ends to the joists were neatly cut and one peg only secured each tenon, which was pegged from the top surface of the main beam. The joists formed a cantilever at the front of the house, and the stopped-ends to the chamfers terminated about 4 ins. from the point where the joists passed over the supporting beams.

By Thursday, 20th March, 1958, demolition of all the structure above the first floor was complete except for four upstanding ('through') principal posts. The ground floor plan was then examined. There were two main beams spanning across the building supporting the first floor, and these divided the ground floor ceiling into three panels, the centre one being the smallest. The forward main beam (approximately 13 ins. x 11 ins.) had no mortise holes on the underside, but the second main beam had auger holes underneath which formerly marked the line of a cross partition.

Evidence to support the contention that a brazier was used to heat the lower front apartment, was revealed when the ceiling laths were stripped. The central joists were blackened for a distance of about 3 ft. from the centre of span—indicating the probable use of a brazier near the window on the Shudehill façade. This discovery probably accounts for the fact that there were no chimney stacks in the original timber-framed house.