# Eavesdropper

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IMPORTANT! - AGM Notice, page 25

# GETTING TO THE CORE : RE-ANALYSING AN HISTORIC BUILDING AFTER SUCCESSFUL DENDROCHRONOLOGY

*An article by Timothy Easton based on his talk given at Haughley Barn on Wednesday 17th October 2007.*

Thomas Dunston, who is buried under a black touchstone ledger slab in the nave of St Nicholas Church opposite the Hall, substantially rebuilt the house in the first half of the 17th century (Fig. 2). This included a ceiling scribed with marks to ward off evil spirits and decorative schemes that denoted a hierarchy of room use, which at the time was a comparatively new departure for vernacular houses in Suffolk.

Earlier this year we asked Dr Martin Bridge to do a survey for dendrochronological purposes at Bedfield Hall. A large amount of interpretive observation and documentary research had been carried out on the building and site for which we had a list of owners and occupiers from about 1080. We were interested to discover what further evidence could be obtained especially about Thomas Dunstan's time at the Hall.

**The Keriche Family**

However before Thomas Dunstan there were the occupiers during the 16th century. Two generations of the Keriche family left wills and an inventory, which showed how the spaces in the house changed. The central Hall, with one hearth mentioned, was given a first floor chamber by 1577 (Fig. 1A overleaf). Comparison of the wills of Robert Keriche 1577, and his son Thomas Keriche, will and inventory 1591, also indicates that the parlour chamber changed its use from storage to include sleeping, due to the inclusion of two beds in the 1591 inventory. An extra room was mentioned on the upper floor in close proximity to the Parlour Chamber as 'the room between the doors', not referred to in the 1577 will (Fig 1B overleaf). Because the archaeology of the wing containing the Parlour, Parlour Chamber, and chimney stack, showed that a significant number of structural changes had been made (Fig.1C overleaf), I felt that this additional room to the north of the parlour chamber may have replaced the old in-line parlour within Thomas Keriche's life time. The larger size of joists used in the East Wing, by comparison to those used for the Service Wing at the west end, also indicated that it was built earlier.

The final plan of the house by the 17th century showed the late medieval core flanked by two wings. This plan is seen in many larger farmhouses in this part of Suffolk, but nearly always involving additions of differing dates. This can be compared to the area south of the A14 and in Essex, where the plan is found fully developed from the outset.

**The Dunston family at Bedfield Hall and the Historical Context**

Having thought we understood the Hall's development, we were particularly interested in trying to establish positively what were the extent of Thomas Dunston's

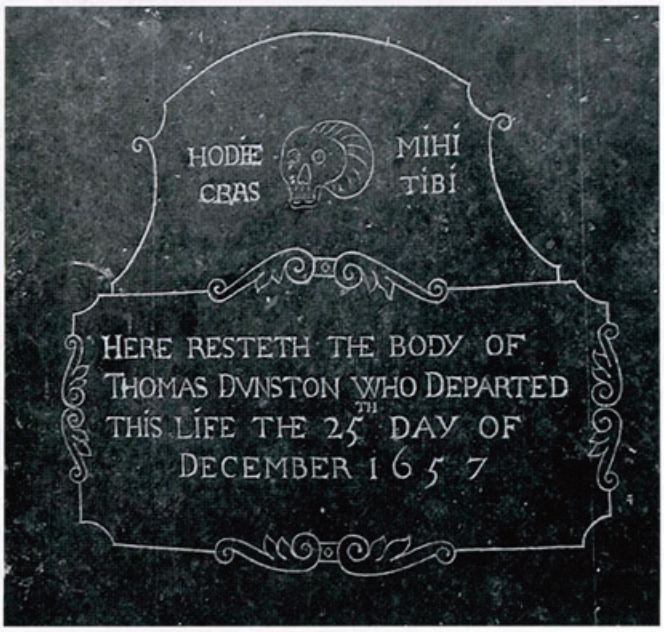
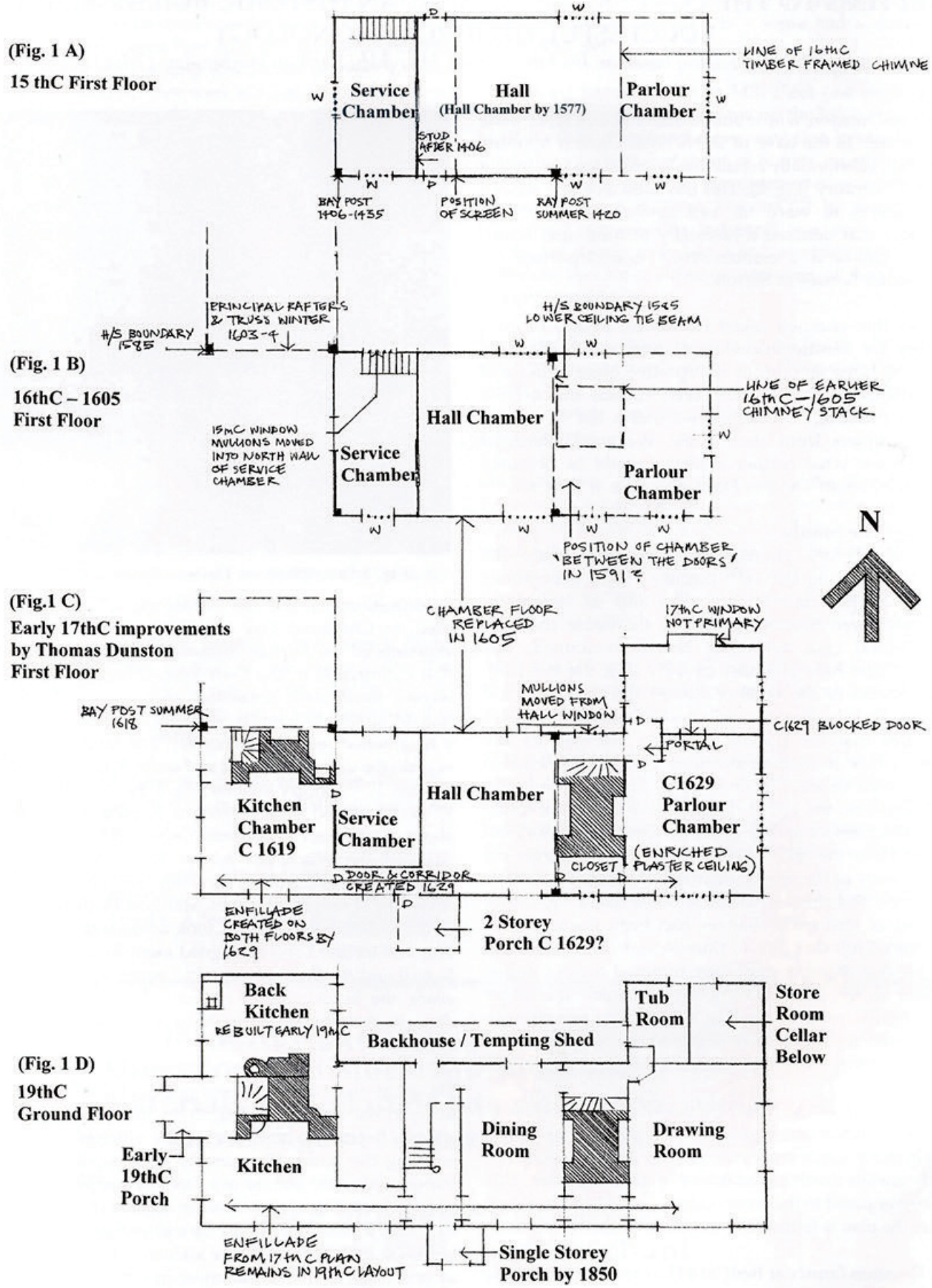



**Fig. 2:Inscription on Thomas Dunston'e ledger**

modifications carried out during the 17th century. He died on Christmas Day in 1657 in his 80s. He had experienced the Puritan discontent in Elizabeth's reign that culminated in the Civil War, bringing with it the second iconoclastic smashing and obliteration of the remaining religious imagery in his church, together with a heightened fear of witchcraft. The latter fear could explain the unusual painted and scribed plaster ceiling in his new 17th century kitchen (Fig. 3. Ref.1). When James 1st was crowned King in 1603, he re-published his book about witchcraft, 'Daeomonologie' and subsequently changed the Witchcraft Act in 1604 making it more punitive. In 1645, one year after William Dowsing's smashing of religious images, Matthew Hopkins, known as the Witchfinder General, took advantage of the Civil War and tortured and consigned many local individuals to trial and death. Although his purge lasted only two years, the knowledge of so many 'witches' operating close to their homes must have made a superstitious community even more fearful.

The great quantity of secreted personal material hidden in 'spiritual middens' (Ref. 2) in this part of Suffolk silently testifies to that fear of the witches' 'familiars' entering the house *'For some of them, sayeth that being transformed in the likeness of a little beast or fowl, they will come and pierce through whatsoever house or church, through all ordinary passages be closed, by whatever open(ing) the air may enter in at.'* (Ref. 3). The kitchen could be regarded as one room in particular most in need of protection. In part this was because of the cooking hearth's open flue, and therefore the possible contamination of the family's food. Apart from the remnants from within a ground floor spiritual midden to the right of the hearth




# BEDFIELD HALL

**Fig. 1: Bedfield Hall - Plans**

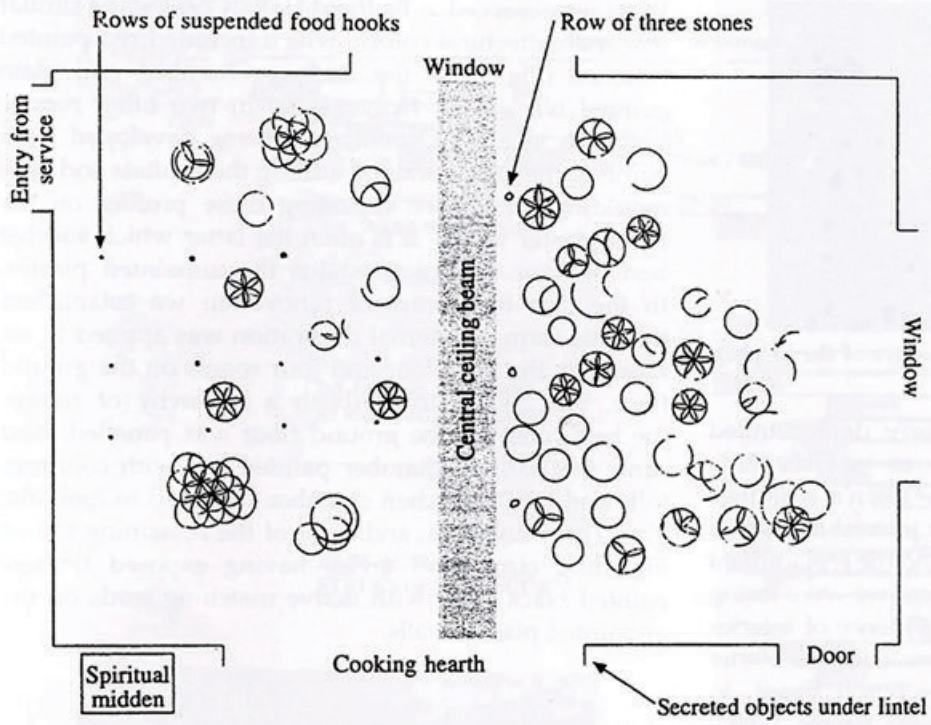



**Fig. 3: Painted plaster ceiling with inscribed circular patterns to protect food and activities within the kitchen. The three rows of holes were herbs and food were suspended on hooks. On the opposite side of the main ceiling beam is a row of three large holes containing stones pushed into the wet plaster and covered over, probably representing the Trinity symbol of protection. Many of the circular patterns are deliberately unfinished.**

there is the extraordinary ceiling that Thomas Dunston commissioned to ward off malevolent spirits and protect the food suspended from one half of the plaster ceiling on three rows of hooks (Fig. 3).

**Further evidence for Thomas Dunston's involvement at Bedfield Hall**

Apart from references to Thomas Dunston in manorial records for Bedfield and Worlingworth, the latter being the family's original parish where Dunston inherited land and other houses, the main evidence for his occupation came from two documents and his personal mark. The latter is his branded initials in the centre of the kitchen mantle beam (Fig. 4). The use of these identity marks can be found in Central and East Suffolk on doors, screens, ceiling joists, and mantle beams. Doors being moveable objects, these might conceivably be marked to establish an owner's property in case they were removed illegally. On the chimney lintel it could denote proud ownership or it may be that the close identification of the head of a household and occupant, linking his family name to apotropaic marks, that would ensure a shield of protection to those who lived in this space.

The first document refers to him as a tenant of the Hall. *'Bedfield…1761... This Dunstan was Tenant at Bedfield Hall for about 20 years and then moved back to Worlingworth Hall for the same space after which he returned to Bedfield again and brought some hay back which he carried from that farm if you will believe that story. The people will tell you that once he mowed grass at Worlingworth with the devil for a wager and put up iron spikes in the swath where his antagonist was to work'* (Ref. 4). The last document available is his will of 1657. Apart from showing the extent of his personal wealth in possessions and his five houses, the will indicates that he was probably sleeping in the Kitchen Chamber, rather than the Parlour Chamber, when he died, a choice of room that would gain extra warmth from the Kitchen below.

**Thomas Dunston's choice of new styled interior decoration**

From the decade of his birth in the 1570s until the 1630s wall paintings were usually found in only one of a vernacular house's best rooms, although there are exceptions to this rule. Apart from fictive panelling painted over the studwork and infill, the more elaborate patterns favoured imitation tapestries or stained cloths. By the early 17th century these designs were being reconsidered and clearly were thought to be over fussy by some households, who developed a taste for a simpler style.

**Fig. 4: The branded initials TD in the centre of the kitchen mantle beam.**

This change in taste was most clearly demonstrated to me in one of the principal houses in Debenham while I was making a survey of the town's buildings through the 1970s. I took a particular interest in interior decoration, but due to sand blasting, and the replacement of wall panels to treat beetle infestation, we were losing a great deal of it. For photographic evidence of interior decoration remaining in the town I persuaded the owner of the Ancient House, No 1 Gracechurch Street, to allow the removal of several hardboard panels, which obscured decorations made in the early 1600s (Ref. 5). Subsequently I arranged for these to be cleaned and stabilised and it became clear that an earlier phase of inter-linked quatrefoils had been whitewashed over in favour of a green painted scheme of linked columns (Fig. 5) - a simplified form of decoration to suit evolving taste.

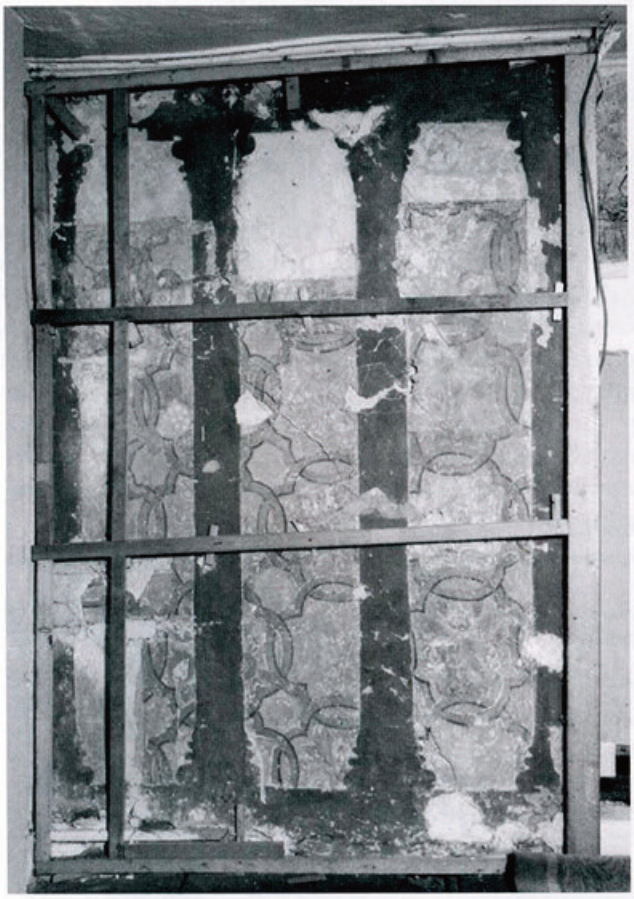


**Fig. 5: Painted green fictive columns superimposed on an earlier wall painting at No 1 Gracechurch Street, Debenham.**

What we observed at Bedfield Hall in 1982 was a similar use of architectural colour, which included red painted columns (Fig. 6) in the Parlour Chamber, and plain painted black/grey fictive studs in two other rooms. Both this and the Debenham scheme developed from painting the studwork and adding the capitals and base mouldings, and then repeating these profiles on the plain plaster walls. It is often the latter which survive best because the colour stains the unpainted plaster. In the first two years of renovation we established that this form of internal decoration was applied to six rooms on the first floor and four rooms on the ground floor. This began to establish a hierarchy of rooms; the best room on the ground floor was panelled, next came the parlour chamber painted red with columns, followed by the kitchen chamber - painted to look like black/grey columns, and most of the remaining rooms including circulation areas, having exposed timbers painted black/grey with fictive matching studs on the unpainted plaster walls.

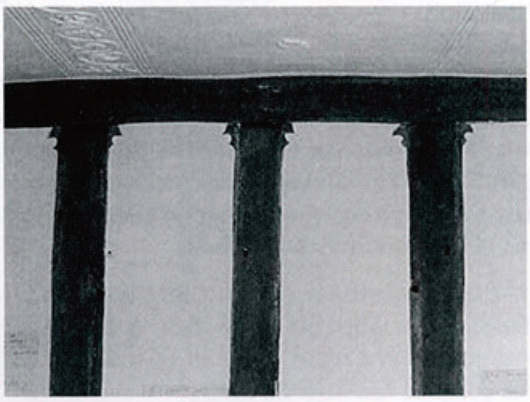


**Fig. 6: Red Painted studs turned into columns in the Parlour Chamber.**

This pattern of decorating a large number of rooms in a house, albeit in a simpler way, was a radical departure in vernacular houses in this part of Eastern England. Plain painted schemes had been used to embellish the timbers of earlier houses during the late medieval period and throughout the 16$^{th}$ century. This was most usually done in red or yellow ochre, and although these two colours continued in use throughout the 17$^{th}$ century, the radical departure around 1600 was the extensive use of plain black/grey paint schemes. Of the nine surviving painted rooms and circulation areas at Bedfield Hall, eight were decorated using black/grey pigment. Once this was recognised as a new departure for room decoration it was easy to check with paint scrapes in other houses nearby to see that Bedfield Hall was not alone in decorating its rooms in this way (Ref.6). The precise dating for these schemes was problematic, although it was clear to see Thomas Dunston's preferred taste during his occupation at Bedfield (Ref.7).

The question we wanted resolved, with Martin Bridge's help, was when exactly did Dunston commission these interior decorations. The rooms painted out in the West wing were demonstrably original to the structure, whereas those in the East wing seemed to be

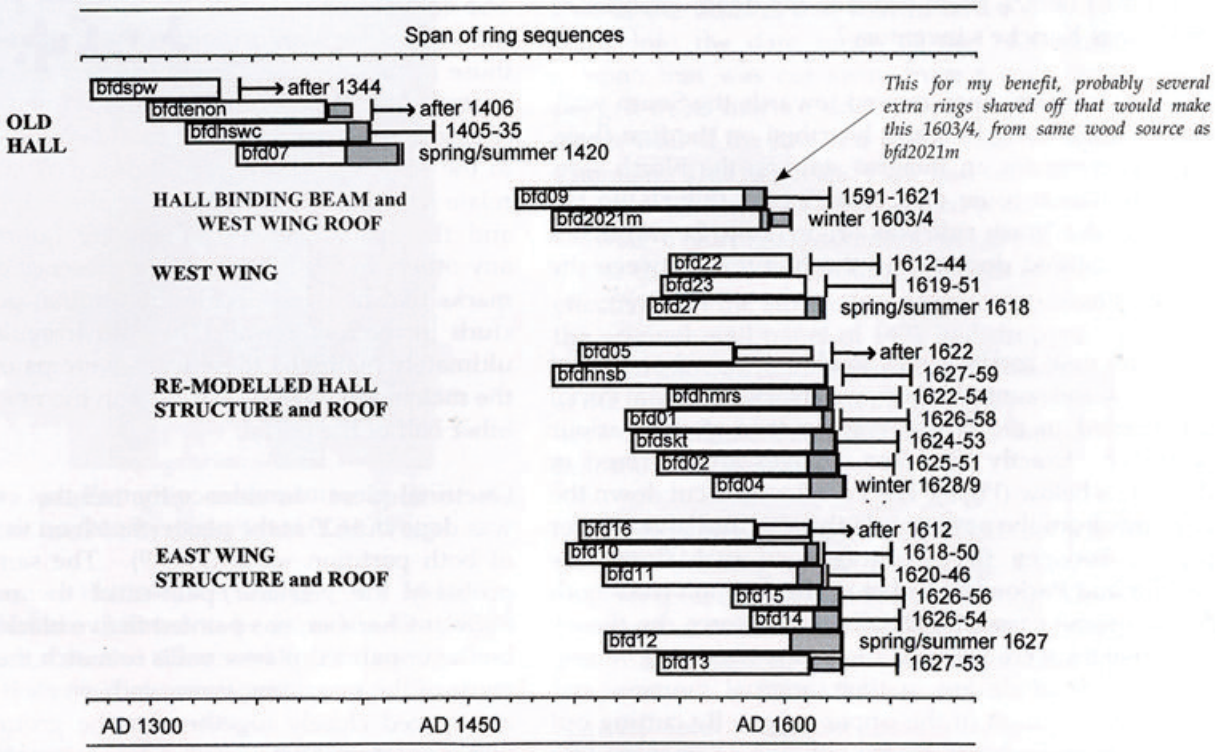



**Fig. 7: Bar chart showing the relative positions of overlap of the samples dated, showing their sapwood complements (greyed areas) and their derived likely felling dates. Narrow bars represent the number of rings in separate cut sections of sapwood.**

contemporary with the two enriched plaster ceilings that stylistically seemed to be circa 1630. We had observed major changes to the arrangement of studwork in some internal walls of the Parlour, Parlour Chamber and the two Northern rooms behind these, as well as the shifted position of the present chimney stack more towards the South wall (Fig. 1C).

From the evidence of these re-planned rooms and with reading the room discrepancy in the two Keriche wills and inventory, we considered the original framing of the East wing might be before 1600. We guessed that when Thomas Dunston first occupied the house, perhaps as a tenant, he may have lived with the unpainted walls of the east wing and upgraded these with the changes including the ornamental plaster ceilings when he took possession, perhaps around 1630. This reasoning was quickly shown to be wrong.

**Findings**

The outcome of Martin's dendrochronological research was successful and surprising for the East wing timbers were cut in the Summer of 1628 and the frame of the West wing, which included his initials branded into the chimney beam, in 1618. One could therefore assume that work was completed in both cases by 1629 and 1619 respectively.

Did Thomas Dunston therefore direct the radical replanning of the Parlour end of the house as the frame was going up, and as he was remodelling the Hall including its roof? Perhaps he had originally planned to continue using the former chimney in its earlier position and so the carpenter had made the new frame to work around this. The former access from the Hall Chamber to the Parlour Chamber was through what was to become the closet (compare Figs. 1B & 1C). Could this

larger area be 'the room between the doors' mentioned in Thomas Keriche's inventory?

With the new chimney moved towards the South wall, probably allowing for extra hearth(s) on the first floor, this left room for an integral stair on the North side. The circulation route on the 1629 plan (Fig. 1C)to the room on the North side was originally to be through a centrally placed doorway in the partition between the two rooms.

Now the new corridor was made on the other side of the stack this central door was blocked and a Portal constructed in the North West corner of the Parlour Chamber. Exactly the same changes are mirrored in the rooms below (Fig.8). The Portal would cut down the draughts from the new stair to the attic and give greater privacy between the two rooms on each floor. The Parlour and Parlour Chamber north partition walls both contain some carpentry details that enforce the theory that changes were made as the frame was being raised. Most of the studs are in their original mortices and pegged in position in the upper room. By cutting out two studs and a brace on the left side an opening was made to accommodate the corner Portal. The head of the central door entrance was removed and another stud was inserted vertically to fill the gap. This is morticed top and bottom and pegged in place, which could only have been done during assembly (Fig. 8).

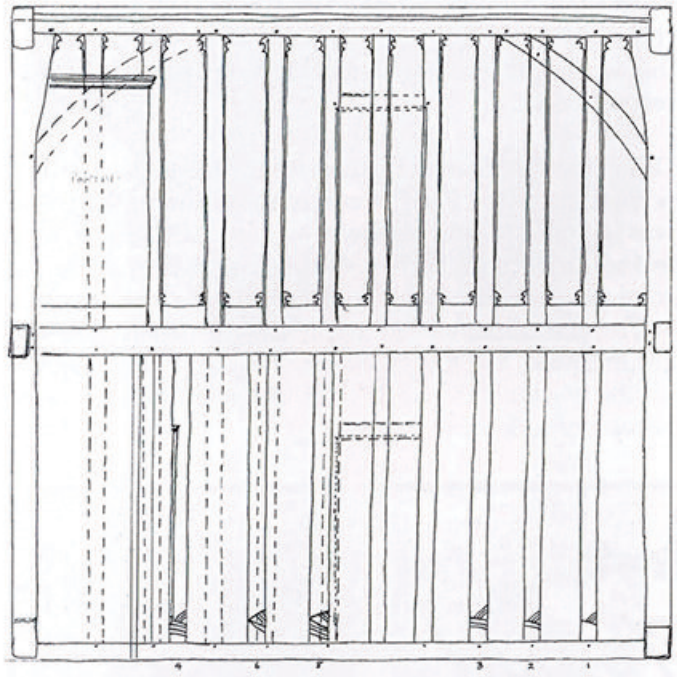


**Fig. 8: North walls of Parlour and Parlour Chambers - the dotted lines represent the original positions of timbers. The scribed numbers representing Numbers 5, 7, and 9 are missing from the wall. No. 5 , the left hand jamb of the central door frame together with the head were used to construct the door frame in 1629 leading into the room in the South West corner of the Parlour**

The corresponding studs to the right of the doorway immediately below are all in their allotted places but those of the left side are not. In fact the jambs for the central door have both been shifted and the one that should have been on the right side is now three studs to the left. The position of the moved studs does not relate to the pegged mortices of the original positions and the spaces between them are quite different to any others in the Parlour. Note presence of carpenter's marks that helps to decide the original position of the studs in the lower wall. The stud irregularity did not ultimately matter as these walls were panelled. Part of the matching panelling survives in the next room as the other half of the portal.

One final piece of evidence that all this changed work was done in 1629 is the plaster finish on the reverse side of both partition walls (Fig. 9). The same decorator, probably the plasterer/painter of the red columned Parlour Chamber, has painted fictive black/grey 'studs' on the unpainted plaster walls to match the real painted studs of the remaining three walls on each floor. These are spaced closely together for the ground floor and wider apart upstairs.

That the paintwork of three of the four rooms in the East wing now turns out to be contemporary to the build date seems, on reflection, much more likely. Because the comparative Kitchen Wing rooms were painted to his scheme ten years earlier, it would have been distinctly odd for him to have lived so long without decoration in a more prestigious set of rooms.

Another feature to discuss for dating is the cruciform chimney, which rises above the roof of the intersection of the old Hall and added East wing. The classically influenced form of this stack is not exactly similar to others in this part of Suffolk as far as I am aware. This type is more common in Kent and Sussex. The elongation in the cross-section plan (Fig. 10) turns this from a regular cruciform to one which has wide shafts on each of the four sides. It is similar to one shown in Nathaniel Lloyd's book on brickwork at Beech House, Salehurst, Sussex.

Like many of Suffolk's stacks the Bedfield chimney has an indented date panel but, with rare exceptions, most of these dates, formed in plaster within the recess, have eroded. There are chimneys with pilasters, sometimes two to the principal sides, which fall within the second half of the 17$^{th}$ century as found at Boundary Farm, Framsden, built around 1660-70. This type is similar to others from the late 17$^{th}$ and early 18$^{th}$ centuries in Massachusetts. Co-existing with these are those with long recessed panels, like the Scole Inn, but these come from the second half of the 17$^{th}$ century.

Everything about the internal position and form would fit comfortably with the 1629/30 date but the external form, although much bolder than those mentioned above, would be very advanced for this date. It is

**Fig. 9: Fictive painted grey studs at the back of the partitions of the two North rooms in the East Wing**

similar in form to chimneys at the Queen's House in Greenwich that are claimed to be from the late 1620's but, if they are, can this advanced form have reached one building in Suffolk shortly after?

**The Earlier House**

I will return to questions about other work carried out by Dunstan in the 17th century, but first I would like to consider the surviving early part of the house. The late medieval plan form is standard: a Hall open to the roof with a service end that probably had two rooms below and a stair leading off the cross passage to access the service chamber above. There was a contemporary Parlour with Chamber above that almost certainly continued in line with the Hall (Figs. 1A & 1B). Like other surviving parlours this would have been thought too small once a stack was introduced at the high end of the Hall. Frequently these project into the parlour leaving an uncomfortable squared-off U-shape. In this house nothing of this earlier Parlour survives once the new East wing is built around 1629/30.

The cross-matching dates for three timbers along the south side of the Hall and Service Chamber established an earlier 15th century date for construction with one particular storey post giving a precise felling date in the summer of 1420 (Fig. 1A). This was slightly earlier than I had expected, having carried a mid-15th century date in mind over the last 25 years. Although quite a lot of studwork has been built into the South and North walls, some storey posts and top plates seem to be in their original positions giving a relatively tall and wide building. It is this arrangement, together with the form of two scarf joints with one other observation that made a mid-15th century date seem reasonable. This last observation which puzzled me was the re-use of some blackened roof timbers in less important parts of the house during the 17th century rebuild. I would have expected some of these to have had a thicker crust of smoke blackening from the open fire, coating the surfaces, particularly on the many rafters that were re-cut and used as collars to support the 17th century plaster ceilings in the attics.

One of the timbers that Martin tested (Fig. 1A), which fitted into the date range of the 1420 timbers, was a tenon that was cut away from a stud but was still pegged in its mortice under the top plate dividing the upper wall at the low end of the Hall from the Service Chamber. This tenon and plate had been hidden behind an early 19th century cover board and, when exposed, showed a surprising amount of smoke encrustation under the tenon and around the back of the wall plate effectively in the smoke-free Service Chamber. Clearly the original wall panel of 1421 had dropped, leaving a gap that allowed smoke to escape. Considering this was at the low end, away from the fire, the roof timbers must have accumulated considerable encrustation over the first 100 – 130 years within the Hall.

My conclusion was that when the Hall roof was renewed with the building of the East wing, a carpenter must have scraped these down before re-using. On reflection this seemed improbable as many were instantly re-cut and hidden behind plaster or under floorboards. A telephone call to John McCann gave a much more likely answer, John suggested these were scraped when the Hall Chamber was first made. We have the evidence contained in Robert Keriche's will of 1555 that there were items in the Hall Chamber; and iron dogs were referred to for the Hall hearth. Although the Hall Chamber was probably used for lumber in the mid-16th century it was desirable to clean up the roof and wall timbers in situ.

**Fig. 10: 17thC brick chimney stack**

**Two phases for remodelling the Hall - 1605 and 1629**

Although the lower half of the Hall walls is obscured behind 19th century plaster, the mid-rail on the South wall was accessible for coring and fitted a date range of other timbers associated with the 1629/30 re-modelling of the Hall and roof.

*(continued page 16)*

There was another timber within the re-modelled Hall that I was keen to date because this would tell me when the Hall ceiling was re-inserted. It was clear that the form of the chamfered joists did not belong to the mid-16th century when Robert Keriche lived here. The main bridging joist bearing on the chimney did not provide a date but eventually the main binding beam, that runs above and parallel to the mantle beam, did confirm a date that I had a hunch about.

When Martin first cored the back of this binding beam he obtained a date for the boundary between the heartwood and sapwood. Although the sapwood was complete at the testing point, it was very friable due to former beetle infestation, and broke up in the core (Fig. 7 bfd09). The heartwood/sapwood boundary date was 1585 and this was exactly the same as one of the heartwood/sapwood boundary dates for a pair of principal rafters that formed a truss in the centre of the roof above the 1619/20 West wing (Fig. 7 bfd2021) . This truss provided a felling date of 1603/4, which was far too early for stock-piled timber to be used in 1619/20. Fig 1B shows a possible solution: was this truss the only surviving component from a detached building of 1605 that became incorporated into the west wing 15 years later? One of the bay posts supporting this truss provided the felling date for this wing (spring/summer 1618 bfd27). If there was a contemporary frame for this 1605 truss all evidence was removed in the 19th century when it was renewed . Whatever building work was going on here in 1605, I wondered if the Hall binding beam could be of the same date. This would indicate a new Hall ceiling, perhaps with a re-modelled chimney, being made before Thomas Dunston came to the Hall and was some 25 years older than the re-modelling of the front wall.

Martin suggested that the friable timber could be brushed over several times with a weak solution of PVA glue. This is reasonably transparent and soaks into all the worm channels allowing another chance to test the sapwood and secure a firm date. By extracting a small wedge of sapwood with a few rings of the heartwood, the number of additional rings can be counted and cross-matched to the original core. This provided Martin with the date of 1591 but it became clear that not only did it match the cores from the 1603/4 truss but the outer edges had lost some years of sapwood in squaring the corner angle.

Another clue that indicated the Hall binding beam and associated ceiling was earlier than either of the later builds carried out for Thomas Dunston, was found above the hearth. Two vertical channels were cut into the binding beam that originally housed a pair of spit rack brackets. This is usually a feature only found associated with the main cooking hearth. The new Kitchen of 1619/20 also had a similar pair of trenches and as it was unlikely that both hearths would be used for cooking at the same time, one can assume that cooking had continued within the hall until it was built.

The first of the 17th century improvements to the Hall in 1605 were practical and clearly associated with a more efficient chimney. The second rebuilding of the south wall in 1629 was more aesthetic and there is evidence for the provision of clerestories either side of the central window, which echo those still in place at the front of the adjoining parlour block. By 1629/30 the South front elevation was complete with its fenestration and probably stayed that way until about 1830, when the ogee-shaped windows gave a new uniformity to the whole (Fig. 11). The elevation on the North has several of the original 17th century windows and to the East a complete set, including oriels with clerestories and another flat window (Fig. 12). It is this side which gives some idea how the front looked before the early 19th century facelift.

**Fig. 11: Bedfield Hall, South side**

**Fig. 12: Bedfield Hall, East side**

During the 1629/30 rebuild all the medieval roof timbers were replaced by a similar roof to the East wing. In the first half of the 16th century some of the manorial court records show that the tenants of the Hall, the Nicoll family who sub-let to Robert Keriche in 1528, were continually being fined for not keeping their roof in good repair. The weather exposure, observed on a number of re-used rafters elsewhere in the construction, demonstrated why it was necessary for Thomas Dunston to replace this roof, as part of his wholesale rebuilding of the Hall and East Wing.

## Conclusion

Martin's results challenged long held ideas of the Hall's architectural development. He made me look closer at the building. It is perhaps understandable that due to my own specialism I had concentrated on the decorated walls, ceilings, and fireplaces , and that its these aspects of the Hall which have been highlighted . Having been pushed to closely re-examine the underlying structure to justify long held beliefs I found new conclusions that tied up many loose ends. That said, I still regard the interpretation of the house as a work in progress.


## Acknowledgements

Christine and I would like to thank many people who have provided valuable help particularly with documents over the last 25 years: Peter Northeast, David Dymond, Norman Scarfe, Joanna Martin, Edward Martin, John Ridgard, Stephen Podd, Pat Murrell, and descendants of the Hall's inhabitants from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, who have visited with papers and photographs.

The others I wish to thank are architectural historians and friends, who have acted as sounding boards, and been very generous with their suggestions: John McCann, Philip Aitkens, John Walker, Brenda and Elphin Watkin, and particularly the late Adrian Gibson who encouraged me to ask Martin Bridge to get involved.

Many thanks to Martin and his colleague Dan Miles for allowing me to press them to re-examine and test the data which resulted in a successful conclusion.

Finally thanks to Ian McKechnie for reworking the illustrative plans of the house, and to him and Pam Walker for typing and editing the text.

***Tim Easton***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