

ELIZABETHAN RIDING STABLES AT CHAWTON AND THEIR CONTEXT

By EDWARD ROBERTS and PAT GROVER

ABSTRACT

From the reign of Elizabeth I until the nineteenth century, country house stables (sometimes called riding or domestic stables) were built for show. They were a highly important part of a great aristocratic establishment, and horses were often better housed than lesser servants. The best materials and quality craftsmanship were lavished on the external appearance of the stable block so that it would complement and enhance the architecture of the great house. Internal fittings, too, were often impressive. These riding stables of the great house must be clearly distinguished from lowly, farmyard stables.

This paper focuses on the stables at Chawton House; the best-preserved (and perhaps only) Elizabethan riding stables in Hampshire. Unfortunately, early stable blocks have a poor survival rate, suffering radical remodelling or demolition as fashions change. The earl of Southampton's great stables at Titchfield, demolished in the late eighteenth century, had fortunately been carefully recorded a few decades earlier. Interior fittings have fared even worse than external structure, but consideration is given to the fittings in the stables at Wherwell Priory and Cams Hall, Fareham. Finally, a brief note is made of an early building at Chawton which, although not a stable block, seems none the less to be associated with hunting or hawking.

ELIZABETHAN RIDING STABLES

The late-medieval great house was essentially a courtyard building, its architectural interest being focused within rather than without its courtyards (Summerson 1953, 13). Stables for the riding-horses of the lord and his associates were generally situated within a stable court that also contained storage buildings for fodder and accommodation for grooms (Le Patourel 1991, 883). Although

late-medieval stables have rarely survived, it is probable that there was no great incentive to give them architectural distinction, confined as they were within an outer courtyard and thus visually separated from the core domestic buildings. This separation of stables and brewhouse in an outer court, from hall and chapel in an inner, 'chamber' court is well illustrated in the late fourteenth-century plan of Winchester College (Harvey 1965).

From the mid-sixteenth century, however, a revolutionary plan began to be developed in which there was no courtyard at all. The great house became outward-looking, displaying its chief architectural features – and incidentally its owner's wealth and status – to external view (Summerson 1953, 33). This fundamental change in house-design affected not only the grand, inner courtyards but also the outer, service courts where, in the late middle ages (as we have seen), were to be found stables, brewhouses and other service buildings. With the decline of courtyards and the development of the outward-looking plan, all these service buildings were repositioned at a distance from the great house and out of view. All that is, except the stables (Henderson 1994, 27). These were placed near the front of the house, forming an integral part of its architectural composition (Barley 1967, 704–5). In this position, they are conspicuous in numerous early portraits of the country house, often resembling miniature country houses in their own right (Harris 1979, fig. 41; 1995, 33, 49).

Thus the great houses of Elizabethan and Jacobean England commonly had stable blocks which were meant to be seen and admired by visiting dignitaries and which were intended to complement and enhance the prospect of the

house. As objects of display, these stables were often made with walls of stone or brick, an expense beyond what most men could afford for their houses at that time, and way beyond what was considered necessary for the ordinary farmyard stables. The latter, built to a utilitarian design and with workaday materials of timber and thatch, were tucked out of sight in the farmyard and were intended for the cart and plough horses. The stable blocks of great houses, in contrast, housed the fine, riding horses that a gentleman would wish to show off to his friends (Barley 1967, 704–5; Powell 1991, 11).

Indeed, it was the fine riding horses, the Rolls-Royces of their day, which account for the fact that stables were selected for architectural prominence from among the other service buildings. Such horses had always been an essential need as well as a status symbol for the aristocracy but, in the Tudor period, there were fresh incentives for taking seriously their breeding, keeping and stabling. Henry VIII's prodigal military campaigns caused such an acute shortage of fine riding horses that he resorted to legislation in an attempt to redress the situation. In a series of statutes, the export of horses was prohibited and the nobility and gentry were exhorted to keep a certain number of riding horses in accordance with their status and ability. These statutes were revived throughout the century whenever there was a danger of war (Loch 1986, 139–141; Thirsk 1984, 378, 386–7; Dent *et al.* 1962, 139–41). Moreover, at the Dissolution, Henry had broken up some of the best centres of selective horse-breeding in the country. As Thomas Cromwell was informed at the time, 'For surely the breed of Jervaulx [Abbey] for horses was the tried breed in the North, the stallions and mares well sorted. I think in no realm should be found the likes to them' (Thirsk 1984, 386; Prior 1935, 3). However, the king himself took active steps to repair the loss. Not only did Henry keep horses for breeding at his palaces of Eltham and Hampton Court but, as he took over monastic lands, some sites were selected for more royal studs. In addition, monastic lands were leased to royal officials, not merely as favours, but on the understanding that they would also keep and provide horses for the king's service (Prior 1935, 3; Thirsk 1984, 385).

In times of peace, horse-keeping for recreation increased in popularity, and the new ideals of the Renaissance, spreading from the courts of Europe, brought to England a more humane and scientific regime of equestrian exercises (Loch 1986, 77–90; Thirsk 1984, 388–93; Grover 1991, *passim*). This led to a new building-type – the riding school; a type to be clearly distinguished from the stable block (Rodwell, 1991). A good, early example of each type may be seen at Corsham Court, Wiltshire (Pevsner 1975, 194).

CHAWTON HOUSE STABLES

A Brief History

The stables at Chawton House are the best-preserved Elizabethan stables in Hampshire. They were built by John Knight in 1593. The sixteenth century had seen the rise of the Knight family of Chawton: having been lessees of Chawton manor since 1524, they acquired the lordship in 1578 when it was bought by Nicholas Knight (VCH Hants iii, 497). However, Nicholas died in 1583 and it was his son John who was the principal builder of the manor house as it now stands (Leigh *et al.* 1911, 77). There is no sure evidence as to when John Knight began this work but an ancient iron fire-back in the great hall, bearing the inscription *J.K. 1588*, suggests that the core of the building was completed by that date, and the parlour was certainly built by 1597 when it is mentioned in accounts (Leigh *et al.* 1911, 79, 82). The date of the fine riding stables, which so enhance the prospect of the manor house from the road, is much more secure. Above the central door is a diaper pattern of knapped flint and ashlar – perhaps an attempt to represent the Knight family crest (VCH Hants ii, 498 & 500). Set within this pattern, and let into the stone in lead, are the initials and date *I.1593 K*. This doubtless refers to the construction of the stables in 1593 by John Knight. If further evidence were needed, a recent tree-ring survey has shown that tie beams in roof of the stables were felled in the winter of 1592/93; ready for building work in 1593 (Miles *et al.* 1996; HRO Top. 64/118).

An early eighteenth-century painting of Chawton House (painted by Mellichamp in c. 1740) shows the stable block placed on one flank of the forecourt, framing the visitor's first view of the house (Fig. 1); a view which is essentially the same today. The stable block is a symmetrical, U-shaped building with the main ridge running east-west and two equal wings projecting to the south. In Mellichamp's picture, the south elevation (Fig. 2) is shown with two narrow, ground-floor windows on each projecting gable. A chimney at the east end, presumably to heat a stableman's room, is also visible in this picture but it may not have been an original feature, although the *Chimney in Stable* was already in existence by 1707 (HRO 39M89/H19).

In the 1830s alterations were made to the stables, although the account books rarely specify the exact nature of the work (HRO 39M89/H11 and Top 64/118). However, it was probably during this period that the narrow windows in the south elevation were partly blocked and converted to larger windows. Otherwise, this elevation remains unaltered today.

In 1981–82, the stable block was converted to a dwelling house which involved the blocking of ventilation slits and enlargement of windows in the west and north elevations, the rebuilding of the chimney at the east end and the building of a new chimney at the west end (Figs. 2 & 3). Internally, the nineteenth-century stalls were removed, one transverse beam was moved to accommodate a new staircase, and necessary partitions were inserted. The appearance of the stables prior to conversion was recorded in a valuable series of photographs and in architect's drawings (HRO 7M91/681; HRO Top. 64/118). An examination of these records, and of the surviving structure of the stable block, permits the reconstruction of its original form and appearance with a fair degree of confidence (for a more detailed discussion, see HRO Top 64/1/8).

The Original Form of the Stables

The stable walls are made from irregular flints and random malmstone blocks. As revealed in photographs taken in 1979 (HRO 7M91/681), the west elevation remained intact with ventilation slits on

the ground floor and small windows above, while the north elevation facing the farmyard – although somewhat altered (Fig. 3) – had ventilation slits on both floors and two (possibly original) loading doors at first-floor level. The east elevation, when first built, probably resembled the west end, but it has since been considerably altered. Window dressings and quoins on the side elevations, and on the north elevation facing the farmyard, are in brick. This farmyard elevation has a moulded brick course only at plinth level, whereas the west and east elevations also have a moulded brick course at storey height.

As a mark of its superior status, the showy south front has dressings and quoins in malmstone, and moulded brick courses at plinth, storey and also at eaves level. In spite of minor repairs, the first-floor and attic windows in this elevation are essentially original, with original internal splays. At ground-floor level, the central doorway – with its Tudor arch and hood mould – is also original. The fenestration at this level has, however, been much altered. Nevertheless, windows C and E (Fig. 2) are intact, although blocked. One jamb from each of windows A, G and H also survives. Window B is indicated by disturbed walling, but windows D and F have been entirely destroyed by the insertion of larger windows and their former existence can only be inferred from indirect evidence (HRO Top 64/1/8).

The plan of the stables (as they were in 1980) underlines their external symmetry while revealing interesting asymmetry within the walls (Fig. 4; HRO Top 64/118). On the ground floor, the west wing and central area comprised two large spaces in which approximately fifteen horses could be stabled. These spaces were open and unpartitioned (until 1980) on the evidence of the heavy, transverse ceiling beams whose soffits bear no mortices for framing (Fig. 4). But the room then called 'the snug' was clearly separated from the rest of the ground floor by a thick, original wall. Presumably the snug had always been a tack room, or small chamber for the head stableman. The fireplace, although referred to in 1707 (see above), may not have been original for it does not appear to be respected by the moulded brick plinth that runs around the building. Thus, although the stack has been drawn on the plan, it has not been

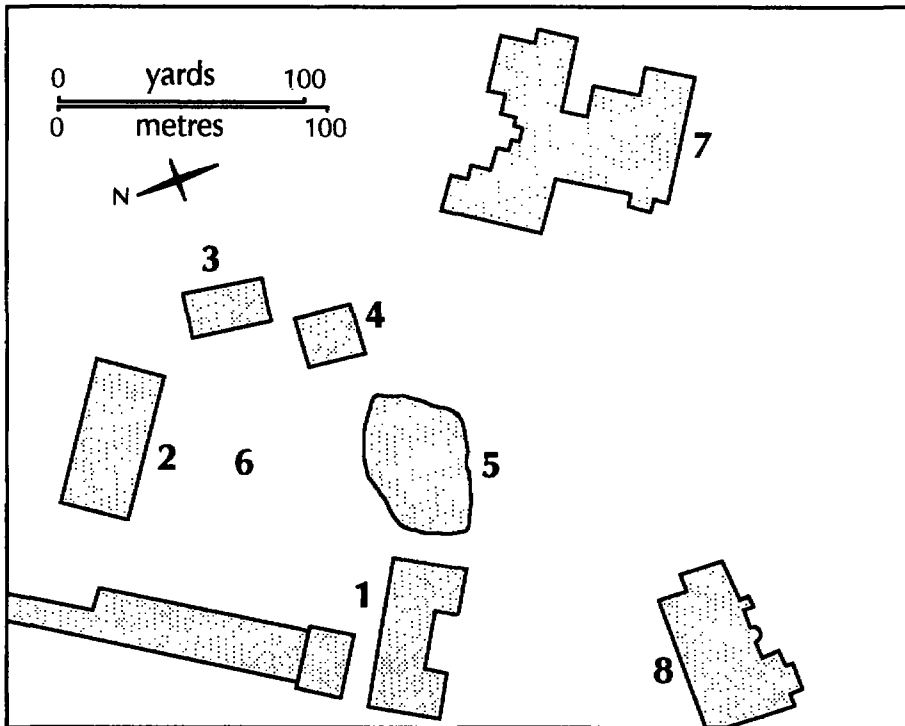
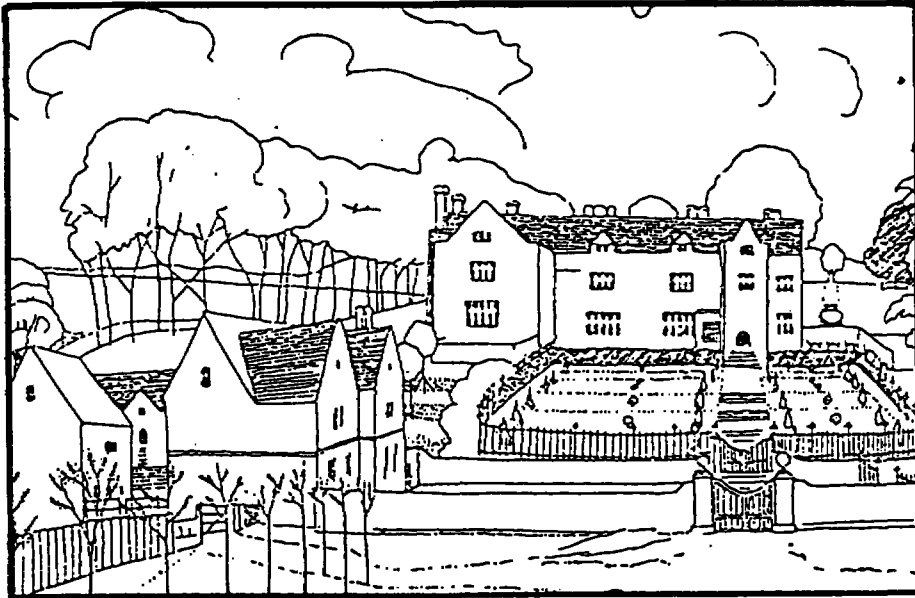


Fig 1. (above) A sketch of Chawton House after Mellichamp, c. 1740. The great house is in the background and left of centre is the stable block with its two projecting wings. The falconry mews or kennels peeps out from behind the stables and the farm building on the extreme left. (below) A plan of the Chawton House complex: 1, the stables; 2, barn; 3, dovecote; 4, kennels or falconry; 5, pond; 6, farmyard; 7, the manor house; 8, church.

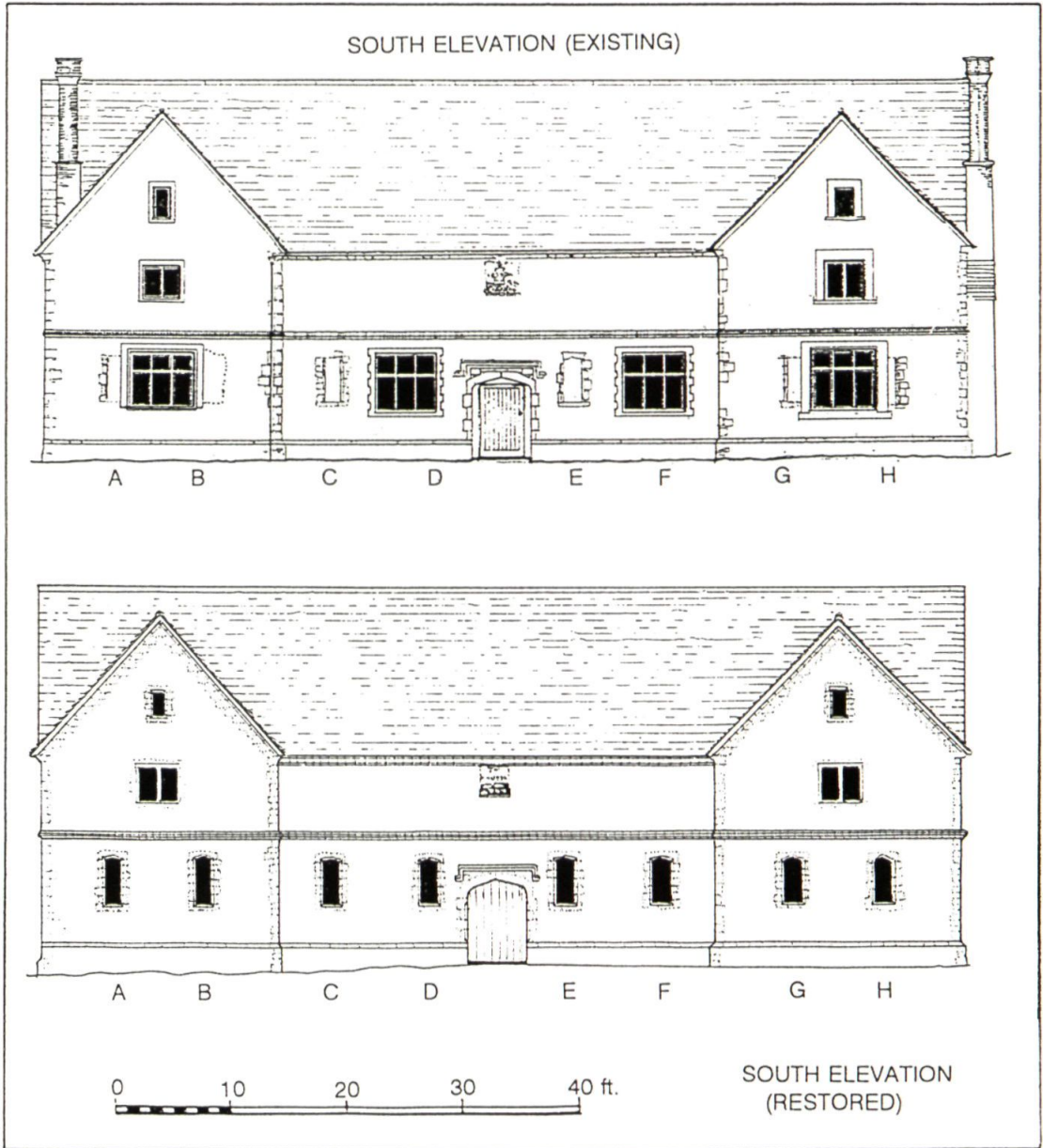


Fig 2. The show front of the Elizabethan stables at Chawton House. Their present state (above) holds sufficient clues for their original appearance (below) to be reconstructed with some confidence.

included in the reconstruction of the south elevation (Fig. 2).

The first-floor plan was similar to that on the ground floor; large, unpartitioned loft spaces with

a separate room over the snug. The butt-purlin roof is fairly typical of larger buildings in sixteenth-century Hampshire. Because of the wide expanse of roof, the rafters are set in two tiers; the



Fig 3. The north elevation of the stables at Chawton House in 1979; much more workaday than the south elevation (Fig. 2) because it faces the farmyard. The large glazed windows, the door and blocked wagon entrance were probably inserted in the nineteenth century. The ventilation slits on both floors and (perhaps) the first-floor loading doors are original (HRO 7M91/681/16).

upper rafters are laid over the upper purlin and tenoned into the lower one while the lower rafters are tenoned at either end.

STABLE BLOCKS AND MANOR HOUSES

The Elizabethan stables at Chawton were called 'stables' throughout their recorded history until the time of the conversion of the building to a dwelling house in 1981–2, when they were relisted as a medieval manor house. They have since been called 'The Old Manor'. Setting aside the fact that its timbers have been tree-ring dated to 1592/93, a major problem with this reinterpretation of the building is that it is quite unlike a medieval manor house in plan, symmetry and decoration. Perhaps of more interest, however, is that the reinterpretation accurately reflects a twentieth-century percep-

tion of a stable block as a building that does not aspire to grandeur. However, many early, stable blocks at great houses were more grandiose than the stables at Chawton; and indeed more like the modern conception of a manor house. Indeed, so grand were the stables at Burley (Rutland), made for that wealthy courtier the Duke of Buckingham in *c.* 1625, that they were described as 'the noblest Building of this kind in England' (Barley 1967, 704). They must indeed have been magnificent to have outshone the surviving Jacobean stable block at Audley End (Essex) built for the Earl of Suffolk. Another splendid, early stable block belonging to a great courtier is illustrated in a picture-map of Place House, Titchfield drawn at some time between 1605 and 1610 (Fig. 5; Minns 1894–7, 330; Watts (ed.) 1982, 51). These stables, which may well have been built for the wealthy and extravagant third earl of Southampton shortly before the

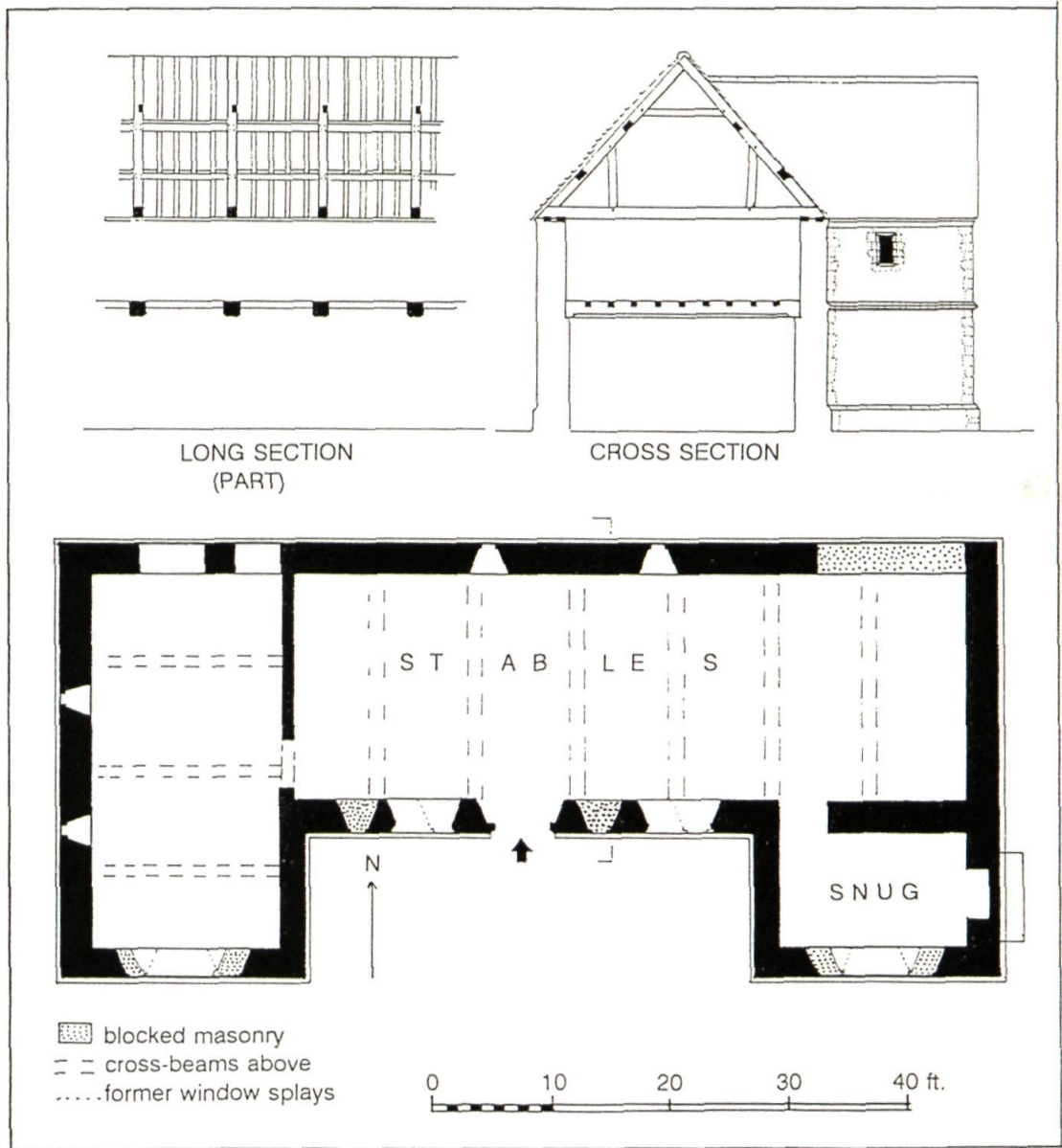


Fig 4. The stables at Chawton House; part long section, cross section and plan as they were before the conversion of 1981-82 (HRO Top 64/1/8).

map was drawn, are clearly identical with *The Great Stables at Titchfield* illustrated in measured drawings made in 1737 (Fig. 6; HRO 5M53/1558-64). These show an immensely grand

building whose external length of 114 feet significantly surpassed the 80 feet of Chawton stables. Unfortunately, the Place House stables, with stall posts marking standings for up to twenty horses,

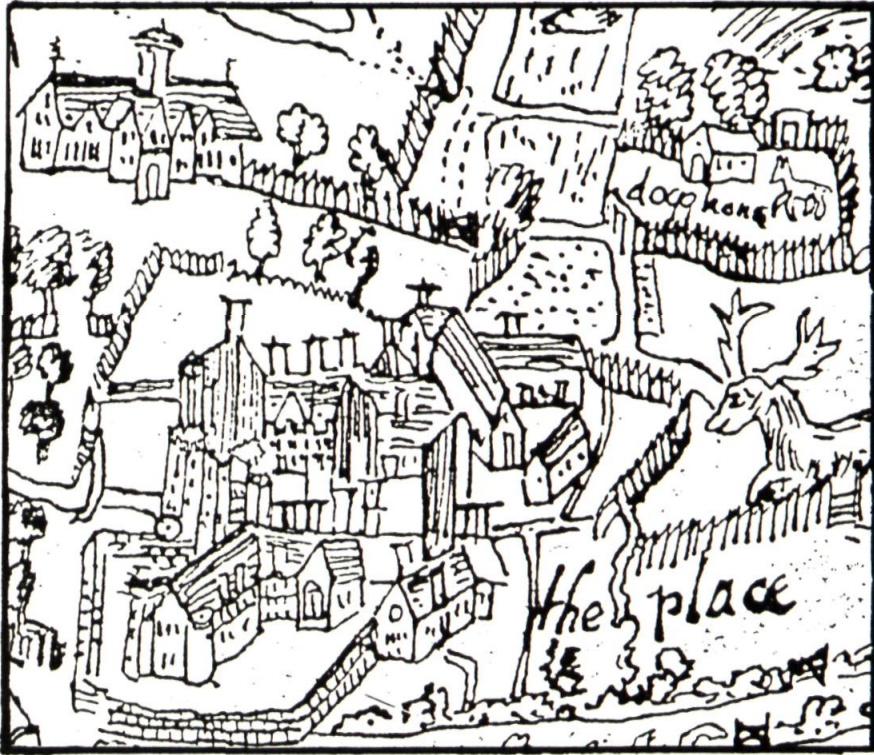


Fig 5. Place House, Titchfield as it appeared on a map of 1605-10 (Minns 1894-97). The great house is in the foreground, the stables are top left and the kennels, or *dogg hous*, top right.

were demolished in the late eighteenth century (VCH Hants iii, 223).

Apart from John Knight's stables at Chawton, few - if any - aristocratic stable blocks survive in Hampshire from the Elizabethan era. There is a much smaller block at Ludshott Manor (now called Woolmer Lodge) in Bramshott which is late Elizabethan or Jacobean in date (Pevsner 1967, 141). In spite of an aggressive modern conversion to a house, its original appearance is generally clear and it is interesting in having been built by a member of another branch of the Knight family (VCH Hants ii, 492). The fine stables at Moyles Court in Ellingham, also somewhat spoiled by conversion, may be dated on stylistic grounds to the period of the Commonwealth; that is, approximately the same date as Moyles Court house itself. Other country house stables in the county appear to be later.

STABLE FITTINGS

From early stable blocks elsewhere in England which still retain elements of their original internal plan and fittings, notably at Whitmore Hall (Staffs) and Peover Hall (Cheshire), we know that the entrance gave onto a passageway running the length of the block. This passageway was bounded by a decorated timber arcade, each arch of which would be tied facing a manger on the rear wall (Grover 1991, *passim*). A design for a stable by Leonardo da Vinci shows no physical divisions between stalls (Gibbs-Smith *et al.* 1978, 99). This may well have been the normal arrangement at the time and one which seems to be illustrated in the eighteenth-century plan of the stables at Place House, Titchfield (Fig. 6). Alternatively, swinging timber bails could be hung between the

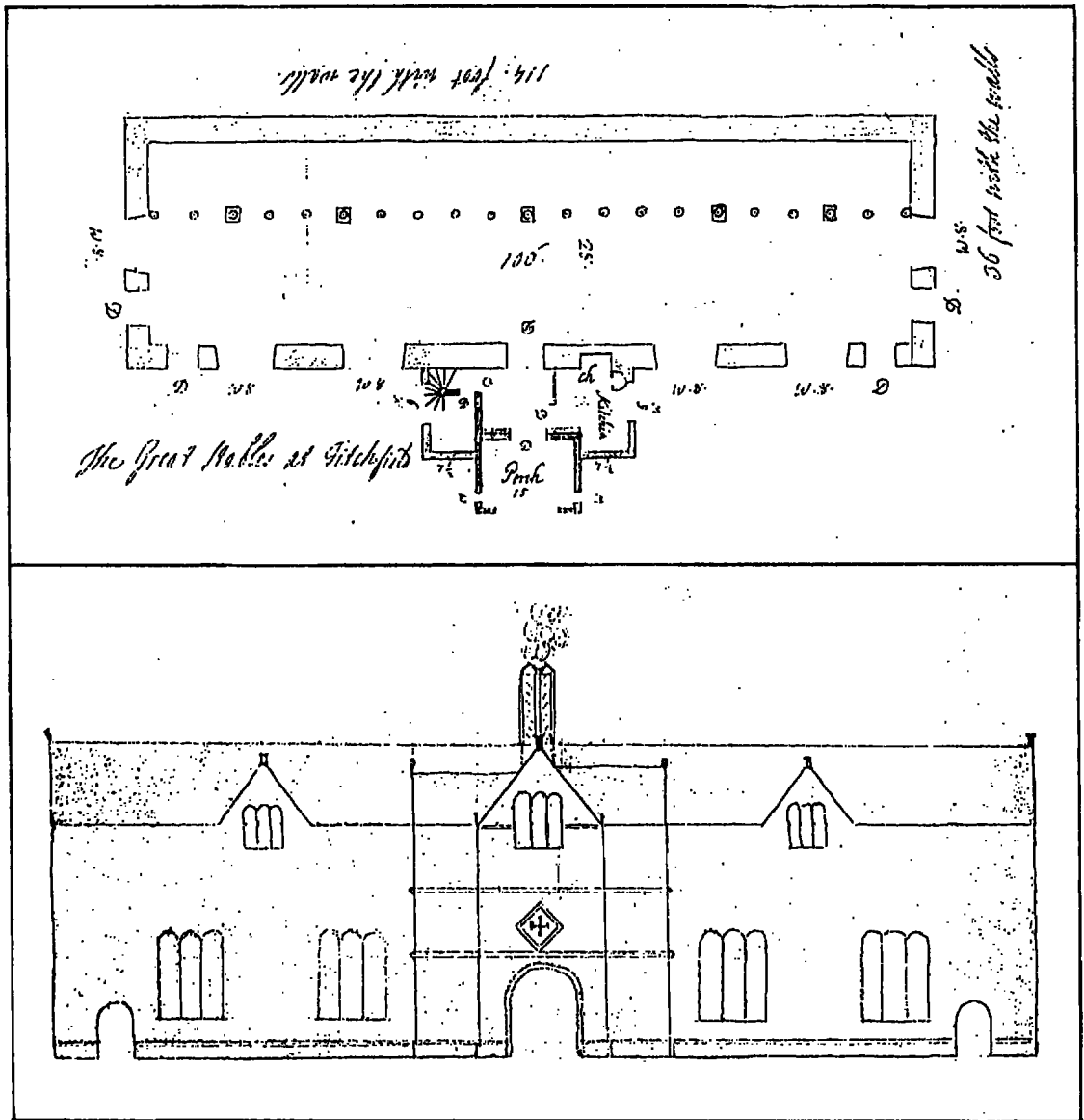


Fig 6. *The Great Stables at Titchfield* as drawn in 1737 (HRO 5M53/1558-64). (above) Plan: showing an arcade of columns running the full length of the building. Stall divisions were apparently flimsy or non-existent and are not shown. (below) Front elevation - compare with Fig. 5 - showing a striking resemblance to a gentleman's house.

manger and the stall posts, as they still are in the seventeenth-century stables at Dunster Castle (Somerset).

This simple division between stalls was still

used in livery stables and by the army as late as the nineteenth century, but it was not suitable for the more temperamental type of light horse being bred on country estates for hunting and racing by the

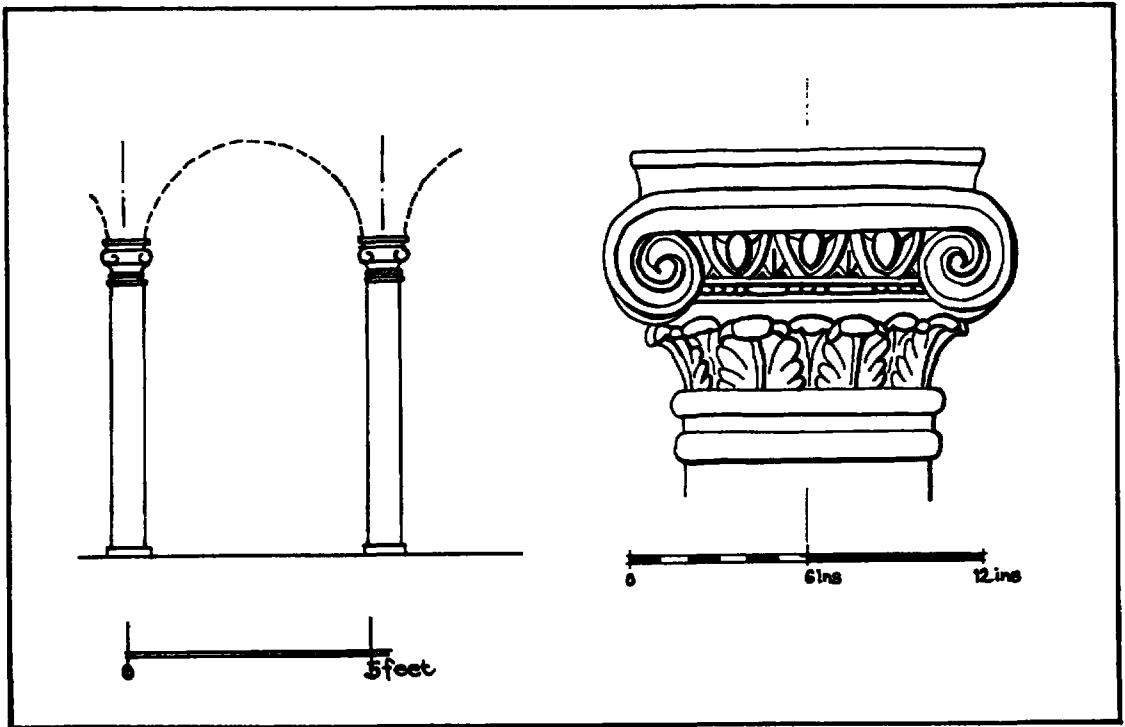


Fig 7. Stable fittings at Cams Hall, Fareham. In the illustration the arches have been reconstructed on the assumption that the existing columns were originally spaced at 5 feet 4 inches centre-to-centre. (This is the approximate spacing of columns shown in the plan of the stables at Titchfield – see Fig. 6).

eighteenth century. Such a horse required solid divisions, secured to the floor between each stall in the arrangement which we recognise as common today (Grover 1991, *passim*). This change inevitably resulted in the removal and loss of the earlier, simpler form of stable fittings which rarely survive. Further loss results from centuries of robust wear and from the conversion of stables to dwelling houses when early internal fittings can be misunderstood and discarded. It is thus not surprising that few examples of early internal fittings survive in Hampshire. Of the two examples known to the present authors (Cams Hall near Fareham and Wherwell Priory), neither can be ascribed a precise date, and both are in a much-mutilated state.

The stable block at Cams Hall is a long, two-storied building in brick, probably built in the late eighteenth century. Inside are wooden columns,

with very competently executed classical composite capitals, which are clearly of an earlier date than the stables and possibly Jacobean (Fig. 7). They have been placed at the end of later stall-dividers and composed into an arcade with later, two-centred arches in the manner of Regency 'Gothick'. Although the possibility that the columns and capitals were originally domestic cannot be ruled out, they are sufficiently similar to those in the early sixteenth-century arcades in the stables at Whitmore Hall and Peover Hall to suggest that they, too, may have come originally from a stable arcade. Altered, painted and worn as these columns are, it is difficult to make out any mortices or dowel holes that might assist in their interpretation. However, the very absence of signs of attachment is significant, as is the fact that each column has a 'blind' side, where the acanthus decoration is roughed out but left uncarved. For, as we have

seen, early stall posts had no solid partitions requiring joints, whilst the 'blind' side of the capital would face away from the passageway and towards the horse.

These columns may have come from earlier stables on the Cams Hall site. However, in the late eighteenth century, it was said of Place House, Titchfield that 'a great part of this mansion has fallen down, or been taken down, but the entrance gateway, with the hall and several other rooms, are still standing and at times occupied by the owner; there likewise remain some very handsome stables' (Grose *nd ii*, 226). In the late nineteenth century, it was said that 'Mr Delmé bought Cams Hall in 1781 and dismantled Place House, removing some of the materials for the enlargement of his house' (Minns 1894–97, 331), and a little later it was claimed that 'Cams Hall was built in 1781 by John Delmé of materials taken from Place House, Titchfield, and contains some woodwork brought thence and now in the stables' (VCH Hants *iii*, 211, 214). While statements made one hundred years after the event must be treated with due caution, they offer a plausible explanation for the existence of early stall posts at Cams Hall.

At Wherwell Priory, a large, domestic building of the monastic period contains a row of thirteen stall posts which originally were part of an arcade (Fig. 8). These posts have ogee mouldings typical of seventeenth-century carpentry, and this may well indicate the date at which the building was converted into stables. There are mortices in each post for timbers to form an arcade, and a further mortice for a simple rail – or possibly a peg on which to hang a swinging bail.

AN EARLY FALCONRY OR KENNELS AT CHAWTON

Near the Elizabethan stables at Chawton there stands a small, two-storeyed building which is just visible in the Mellichamp painting of *c.*1740 (Fig. 1). Like the stables, it had a butt-purlin roof, now partly destroyed; and its flint walling with a moulded brick plinth, brick quoins, and decorative brick window dressings also closely resemble the same features at the stables (Fig. 9). These

similarities, and the fact that its original timbers have been ascribed a tree-ring date 1573–1617 (Miles & Haddon-Rees 1996), imply that this small building was almost certainly erected by John Knight within a decade or so of the construction of the stable block in 1593. Although only twenty by twenty-five feet in area, it has architectural pretensions and is clearly not a merely utilitarian or farmyard building. On the other hand, it does not seem to have been intended for occupation by aristocrats (for example as a garden or banqueting house) for it lies between the house and the farmyard and well away from the garden (Fig. 1). Furthermore, its ground-floor windows are mere ventilation slits and, although the first-floor windows imply occupation at this level, they are too small to suggest even temporary occupation by gentlemen.

It seems, then, to have the decorative qualities of a building that was meant to be viewed by aristocrats but only occupied by their servants. Its most likely function was as a kennel for hunting dogs or as a falconry mews; the animals occupying the lower floor with the hunt servants above. In either case, as a building connected with aristocratic hunting, it has relevance to a consideration of early stables. (Although it has recently been converted to a dwelling and renamed 'The Dovecote' it has neither nesting ledges nor signs of a potence and, in any case, a genuine dovecote of *c.* 1600 stands only a few yards away).

Surviving examples of Elizabethan or Jacobean kennels or falconry mews are few and even then their identification is often uncertain. Both seem to have been small, two-storeyed structures with architectural pretension, and it is not clear how they may be distinguished from each other. A small, decorative two-storeyed structure built at Midlney Manor (Somerset) in *c.* 1600 has been called an Elizabethan falconry mews (Hussey 1934), although this attribution has been questioned (Fletcher 1934). A similar structure, dated 1678, at Hedenham Hall (Norfolk) has been tentatively described as kennels (NMR report). The evidence of contemporary illustrations is similarly problematic for both mews and kennels seem to have been decorative two-storeyed buildings resembling small follies (Bise *nd*, 42; Cummins 1988, 202, pls.15,36,37.). Internal arrangements, where they

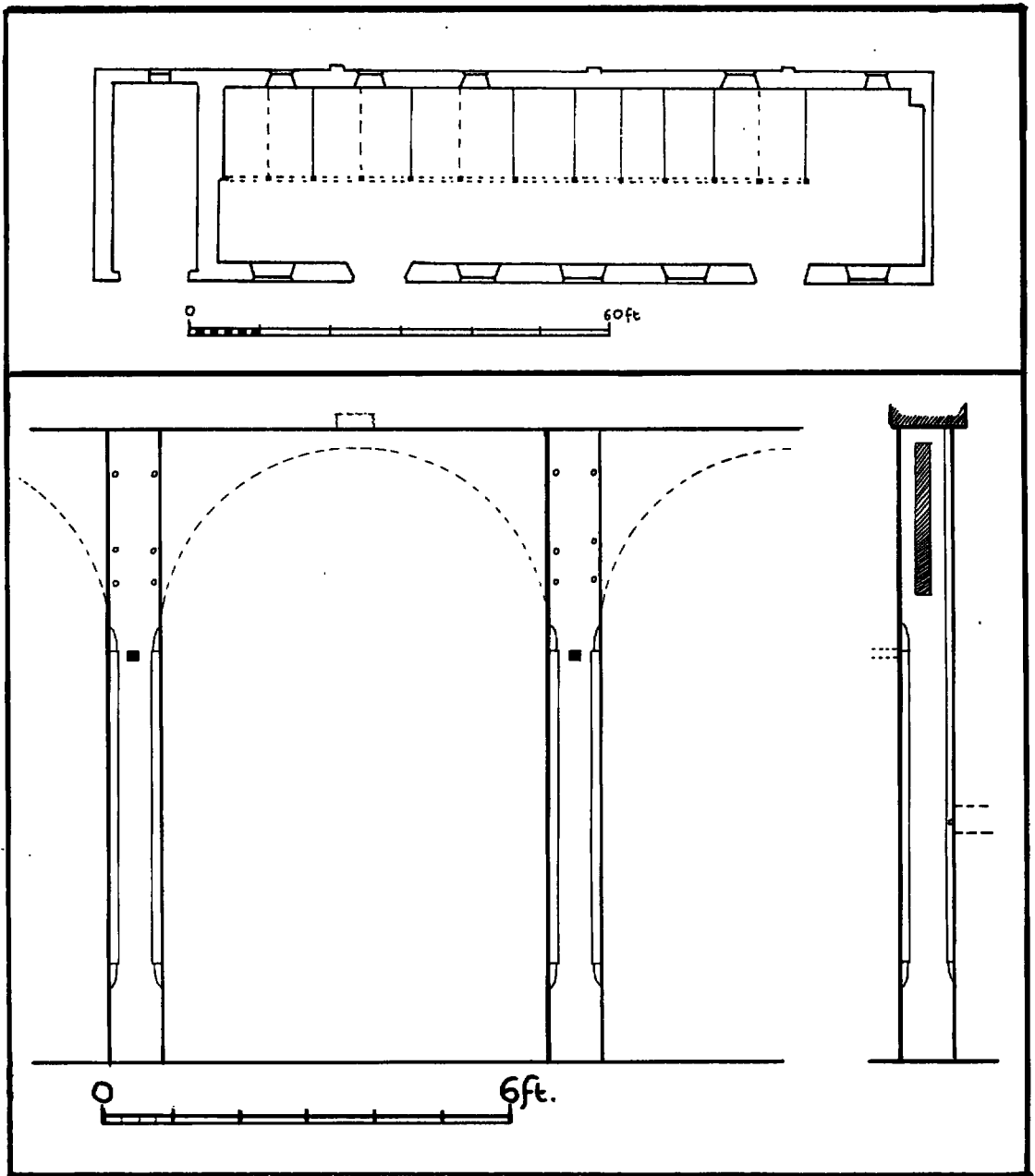


Fig 8. Early stable fittings at Wherwell Priory. (above) Plan: thirteen surviving stall posts are shown as solid squares and the suggested original arcade between them as a double broken line. Suggested original stall divisions are shown as a single broken line and, where these have been replaced by modern loose boxes, as a continuous line. (below left) A front view of two posts indicating with a dotted line the probable appearance of the missing arcade. The small black squares represent a void mortice for a peg, perhaps for hanging a bridle. (below right) Side view of a post with a long mortice (shaded) for an arcade spandrel. On the left was a small peg, perhaps for a bridle, and on the right was a stouter rail for a stall partition.



Fig 9. The north elevation of the kennels or falconry at Chawton House. The use of decorative brickwork is similar to that on the Elizabethan stables and dendrochronology suggests a similar date for this building (see text). On the three elevations still intact, there are only ventilation slits at ground-floor level but in both north and south gables are windows affording more light to a first-floor room. This room is too cramped for a gentleman's use but may have been lodgings for a kennel man or falconer.

survive, might be more diagnostic but as they do not in the Chawton example, it remains an interesting and rare structure whose precise, original function is uncertain.

It is hoped that this article may serve to encourage others to discover other early examples of stables and stable fittings, or perhaps ancillary sporting buildings such as hunt kennels and falconries. It is also to be hoped that with greater understanding will come a desire to conserve what little evidence remains.

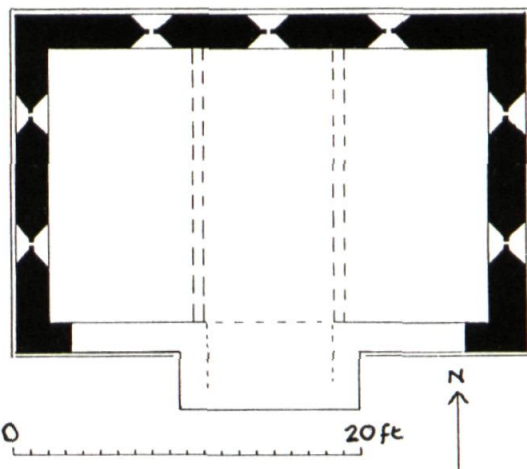


Fig 10. Plan of the c. 1600 falconry or kennels at Chawton House (after a survey by Adam Knight). The floor joists (felling date between 1573–1617) rest on transverse beams (felling date 1772–74) which are dotted on plan and which may have been renewed when the west front was taken out. This west front (unshaded on plan) has recently been restored to resemble the Mellichamp painting of c. 1740.

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Authors: Edward Roberts, King Alfred's College, Winchester, Hants SO22 4NR; Pat Grover, 183 Romsey Road, Winchester, Hants SO22 5PQ.

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