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# TWO DATED MONASTIC BUILDINGS AT TITCHFIELD

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## ABSTRACT

*The buildings of the inner precinct at Titchfield Abbey have been subject to scholarly study for more than a century. However, recent dendrochronological surveys have focused attention on two buildings of the outer precinct. One of these is the abbey's great barn whose original timbers have been ascribed a felling date of 1408/9. Given the great size of the barn and the elaboration of its carpentry, it is clear that the Abbey was able and willing to spend a good deal of money during what has been described as a time of economic stringency for landlords. Later alterations to the barn in 1560–2 are associated with the work of the second earl of Southampton.*

*The second building, now converted to a cottage, almost certainly belonged to the Abbey but its original function is less certain. Although it is small, it is none-the-less a building of some quality. Ascribed a felling date of 1447/8, it was already called a school by* c. *1540. It could thus be a rare survival of a monastic school, although other possibilities are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

Titchfield Abbey stands some 800 metres north of the small town of Titchfield in south Hampshire (Fig. 1). The abbey was founded in 1232 by Peter des Roches, bishop of Winchester, for Premonstratensian canons. The Premonstratensians, or white canons, were 'canons regular' living a common life under monastic vows. They were not, however, as determinedly withdrawn from the world as the Cistercians, and they were to some extent involved with the wider community outside the precinct walls (Minns 1898, 317–8; Platt 1984, 32, 59; Colvin 1951). How far this involvement might have extended to providing a small grammar school for local boys is discussed below.

Although the history of the abbey was largely uneventful, it was often disturbed by disputes with its tenants (Graham and Rigold 1976, 3; Watts 1983). It refused to pay taxes to the mother house at Prémontré in France. On account of this resistance, it was not reckoned as an alien priory and escaped penal taxation during the Hundred Years War. Consequently, it was better able to finance the building works discussed below (Graham and Rigold 1976, 4).

At the Dissolution in 1537, the abbey and its lands were acquired by Thomas Wriothesley, later earl of Southampton, who converted the claustral range into a fine country residence known as 'Place House'. So it remained until 1781 when the house was dismantled and made uninhabitable (Hope 1906, 231–43; Hare 1999, 17–20; Minns 1898, 331).

Minns (1898), Cox (1903) and Hope (1906) wrote seminal studies on the history and architecture of the abbey. These studies have been supplemented by more recent contributions (Green and Green 1949; Kennedy 1970; Hare 1999). All these works focus on the claustral range of the inner precinct, as does the standard work on Premonstratensian architecture in England (Crawford 1923). Indeed, with few exceptions (e.g, Gilyard-Beer 1958), little had been written at a national level about the buildings of the outer courts of monastic precincts until the 1970s (Coppack 1990, 109–28). However, in recent years, the fishponds of the outer precinct at Titchfield have been studied (Currie 1985; 1986) and there are brief sections on the abbey barn in a general survey of vernacular architecture in England (Mercer 1975, 164) and in a local history

(Watts 1982, 42). Although the architectural importance of the barn has long been appreciated, it is only within the last decade that Place House Cottage has been identified as a building that was almost certainly part of the abbey complex, and whose quality sets it apart from other small houses in the area (Lewis 1995).

## THE ABBEY BARN

The abbey barn at Titchfield stands about 100 m south-west of Place House (Figs 1 & 2). It was thus in a typical position in one of the abbey's outer courts (Aston 1993, 89). There can be little doubt that it is the finest surviving medieval barn in the county, not only for its near complete state of preservation but also for its sheer size and for the elaboration of its magnificent roof. It extends to approximately 48 m (156 ft.) in length and is approximately 12.6 m (41 ft.) wide and 10.5 m (34 ft.) high. The walls, standing on a flint-stone plinth, were timber-framed and clad with weatherboards. Some of this original wall-framing survives at the northern end of the building. The original timbers of the walls and roof have recently been ascribed a felling date of the winter 1408/9 (Miles and Worthington 1998, 119).

The barn is composed of eight bays. Each bay is defined by two major trusses between which is a minor truss (Figs 3 & 4). The major trusses have passing braces from the aisle posts across the aisle ties to the arcade posts. There are arch braces from the arcade posts to the tie beams and, above this level, side purlins are clasped between the principal and under rafters, the latter reaching as far as a collar. Each collar carries a king strut to a yoke with longitudinal braces to a ridge beam running over the yoke. The minor trusses comprise cruck-like timbers that are not only jointed into the aisle posts but also into the aisle rafters and stub tie beams. Above tie beam level, the minor and major trusses are identical (Fig. 4). There are two large porches on the east elevation (Fig. 3).

The whole construction is highly unusual and innovative. In fact, so daring was the carpentry of the minor trusses that, at some stage, it has been deemed necessary to support all but one with a prop beneath the stub tie beams and arcade plates. On the other hand, the arrangement by which the side purlins are clasped between principal and under rafters was distinctly archaic by English standards although this configuration was not uncommon in French roofs until modern times (Roberts *et al.* 1996, 66). Another unusual feature of the roof is the high-level collar carrying a king strut with longitudinal braces to a ridge beam. This feature is repeated at God's House Tower in Southampton, another roof of *c.* 1400, but with this exception, the carpentry of the barn is quite unlike anything known in contemporary vernacular architecture in Hampshire.

The timbers of the two porches have been ascribed a felling date-range of 1560–62 (Miles and Worthington 1998, 19), implying that they were reconstructed in the time of the second earl of Southampton, whose father Thomas Wriothesley had acquired the abbey at the Dissolution. It is likely that most of the timber-framed external walls were replaced with stone at about this time, for there would have been an abundance of building stone available after the Dissolution and subsequent destruction of monastic buildings.

What was the intended function of the barn when it was planned and built in, or shortly after, 1409? The term 'barn' is sometimes loosely applied to any agricultural building but this structure, with its two porches serving unloading and storage bays, was a barn in a more specific sense. Its primary function was clearly the storage and processing of corn (Lake 1989, 32). Given its great size and proximity to the abbey, it is probable that this was mainly the corn grown on the abbey's extensive manorial demesnes, perhaps supplemented by tithe corn from the abbey's rectories at Titchfield, Lomer and Corhampton (VCH Hants ii, 186). However, tithe barns should, in general, be distinguished from manorial barns (Dyer 1997, 23) and, although the barn at Titchfield has sometimes been called a tithe barn (Mercer 1975, 164), this is something of a misnomer (Aston 1993, 111).

The barn must have represented a very significant investment by the abbey whose clear annual value in 1535 was assessed as £249 16*s* 1*d.* (VCH Hants ii, 185). Although we have no building ac-

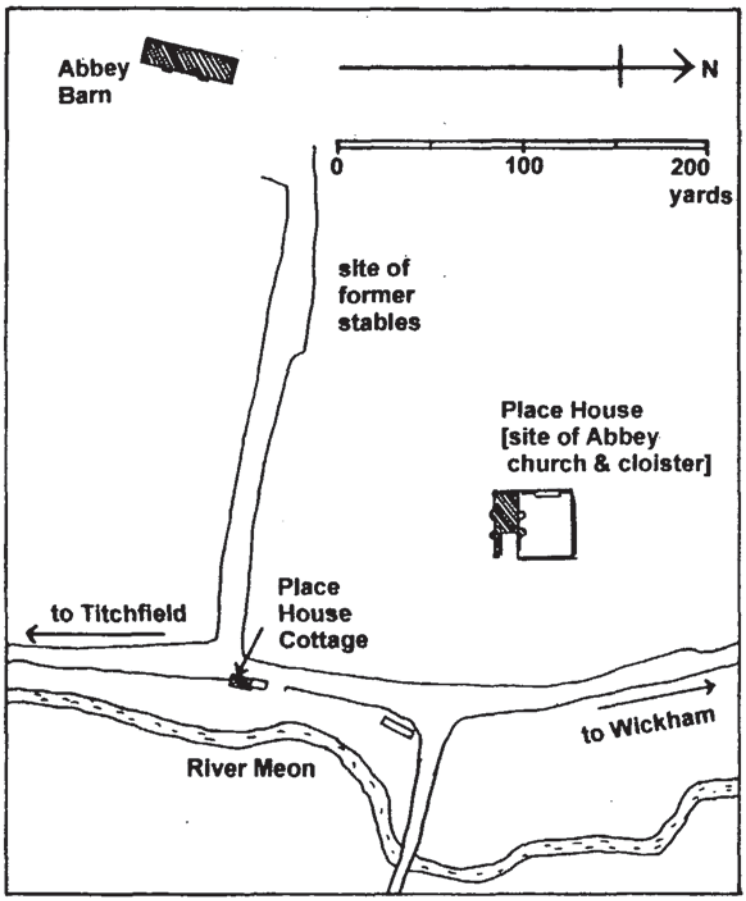


Fig. 1 Site plan showing the position of the Abbey barn and Place House Cottage, Titchfield

counts for the Titchfield barn, a new barn built at Ivinghoe (Buckinghamshire) in 1309/10 cost £83 8s 0¼d, or about one third of the entire annual value of Titchfield abbey two centuries later (Titow 1969, 203–4). It is unlikely that the Ivinghoe barn was much longer than that at Titchfield, for they both had two porches for unloading bays and this would have limited the number of flanking storage bays. A similar barn of eight or nine bays and two porches was built at Overton (Hampshire) in 1496–8 and cost £47 5*s* 5*d*, not counting the cost of timber and some items taken from stock (Roberts 1996, 102–3). The timber alone at Ivinghoe cost £33 1*s* 3*d*, representing about 40% of the total cost (Titow 1969, 203–4). Assuming that timber accounted for a similar proportion at the Overton barn, it would have cost in excess of £78.

Thus the barn at Titchfield (felling date 1408/9) would have been extremely expensive to build. Yet it is noteworthy that the period between 1380 and 1420 has been represented as a time of special difficulty for landlords (Bean 1991, 580), and Titchfield abbey's outlying manor of Inkpen (Berkshire) suffered something of a crisis between about 1390 and 1425 (Watts 1999, 31). Despite

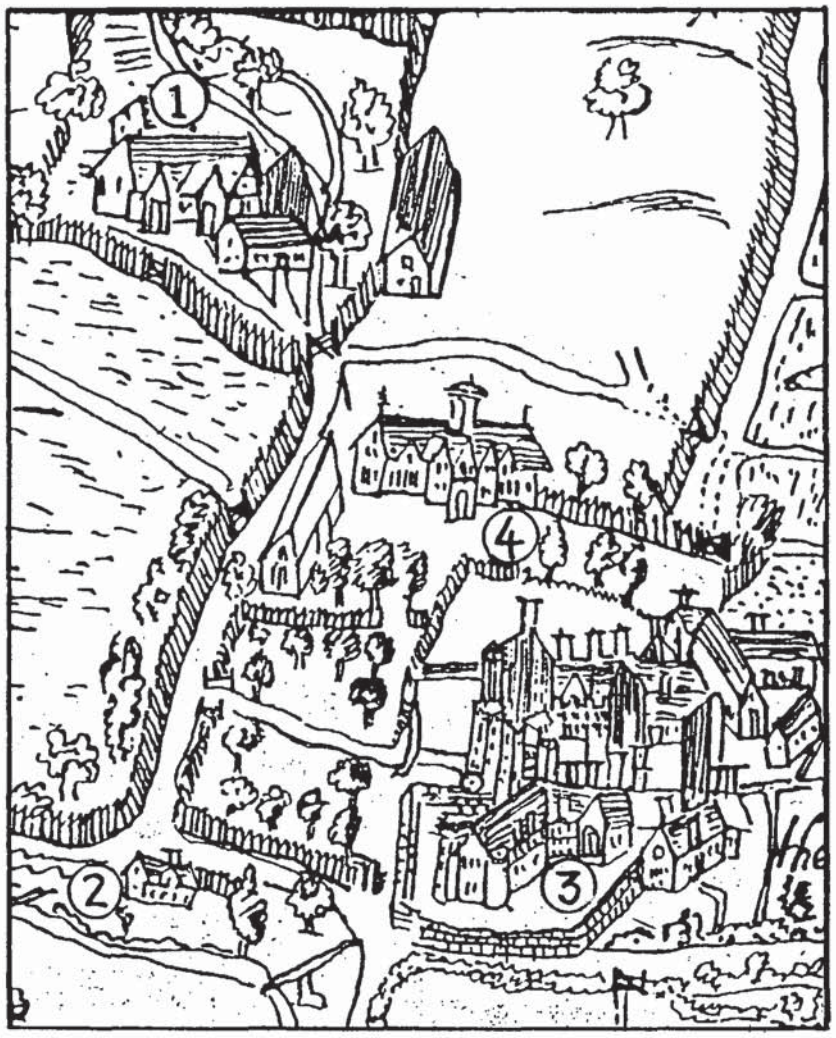


Fig. 2 Part of a map of Titchfield as it appeared on a map of 1605–10 (Minns 1906) (Numbers have been inserted for ease of identification) 1. The Abbey barn. 2. Place House Cottage. 3. Place House occupying the site of the Abbey church. 4. Stables – now demolished

economic difficulties, however, great lords in Hampshire continued to invest in buildings. Winchester College built barns at Downton (Wiltshire) in 1409/10 and at Durrington (Wiltshire) in 1411–13 (pers. comm. John Hare) and, in 1409–10, the bishop of Winchester paid for a new barn to be erected at Morton (Buckinghamshire) (Page 1999, 149).

## PLACE HOUSE COTTAGE

Place House Cottage stands to the east of Place House and near a lane that may mark the site of the original abbey gate (Figs 1 & 2). It is a multi-period structure but, at its core, is a timber-framed building of high quality that has been ascribed a tree-ring date of 1447/8 (Miles and Worthington

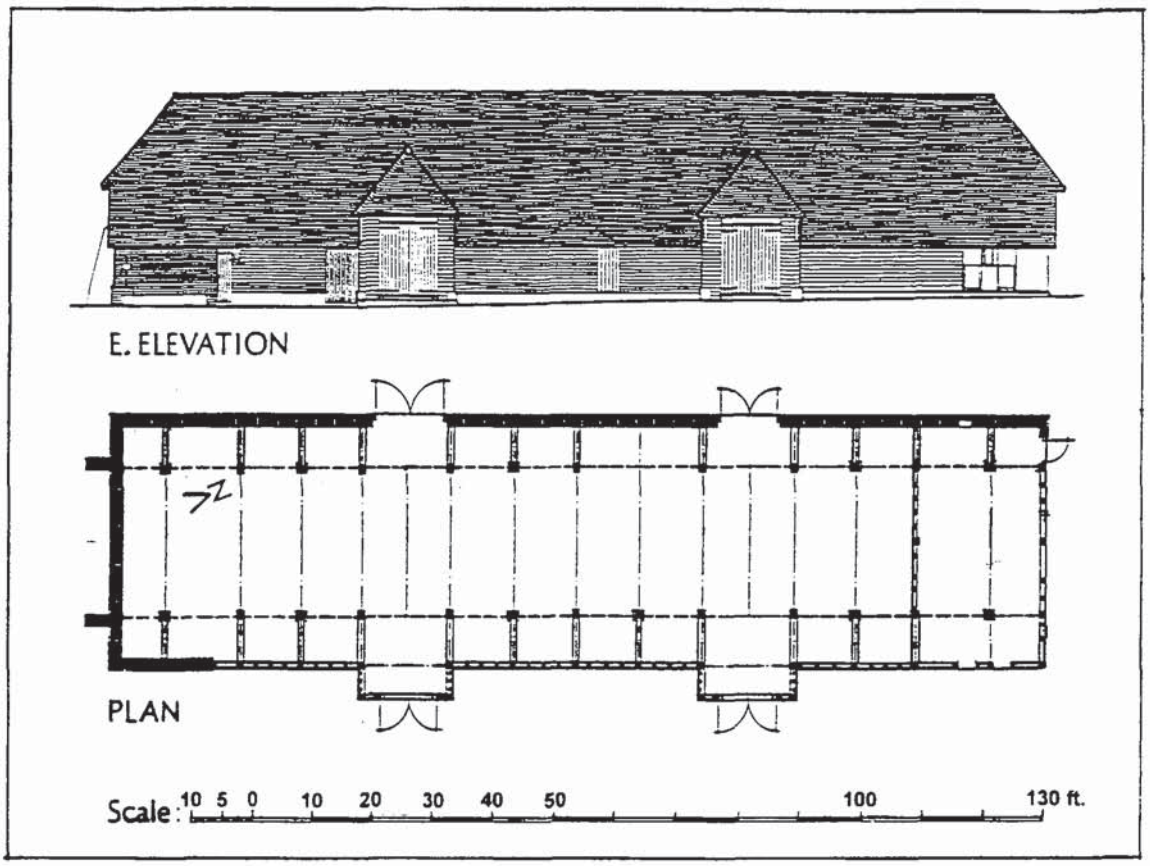


Fig. 3 East elevation and plan of the Abbey barn, Titchfield (drawing by John Reynolds)

*in press*). This building was constructed in two bays that are, at present, sandwiched between later buildings to both the north and south (Fig. 5). To the south is another framed building of two bays, which lacks close studs and moulded beams and is of only moderate quality. Its queen-strut roof and curved wind braces suggest a building date-range of 1460–1540. The building to the north of the core structure is built of brick and may date to the eighteenth century. It contains a fine late-medieval fireplace that was probably salvaged from the abbey after the Dissolution.

Weathering on the southern gable end of the core building shows that it was originally free standing in this direction. The survival of minimal framing at the north end may suggest that it was built against an earlier building. The timber frame rests on a plinth partly composed of good, ashlar stones (see end note). The two-bay, core structure was originally an open hall, the present floor being an insertion of *c.* 1600 (Lewis 1995). However, it does not resemble the typical open hall in a medieval house. Its width – a mere 4.5 m (14′ 9″) – is less than that of most domestic halls of the period and yet it is a building of fine quality. The central truss (Fig. 5) is richly moulded and the east wall, facing away from the road, has expensive close studs infilled with (apparently original) herringbone brickwork – a costly and innovative feature in 1447/8 (Fig. 6). A domestic open hall of this

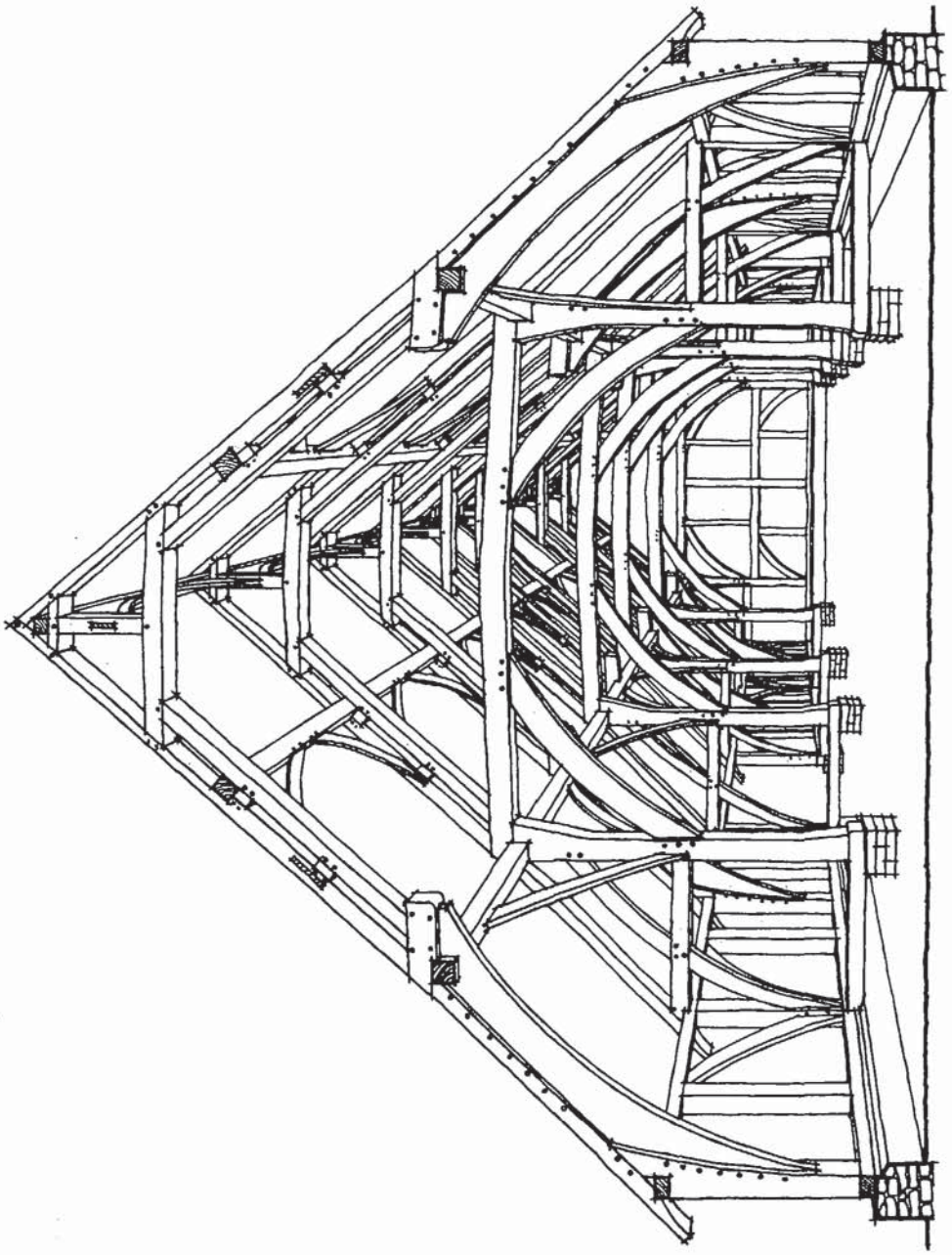

Fig. 4 Reconstruction of the original interior of the Abbey barn, Titchfield (drawing by Jonathan Snowdon)

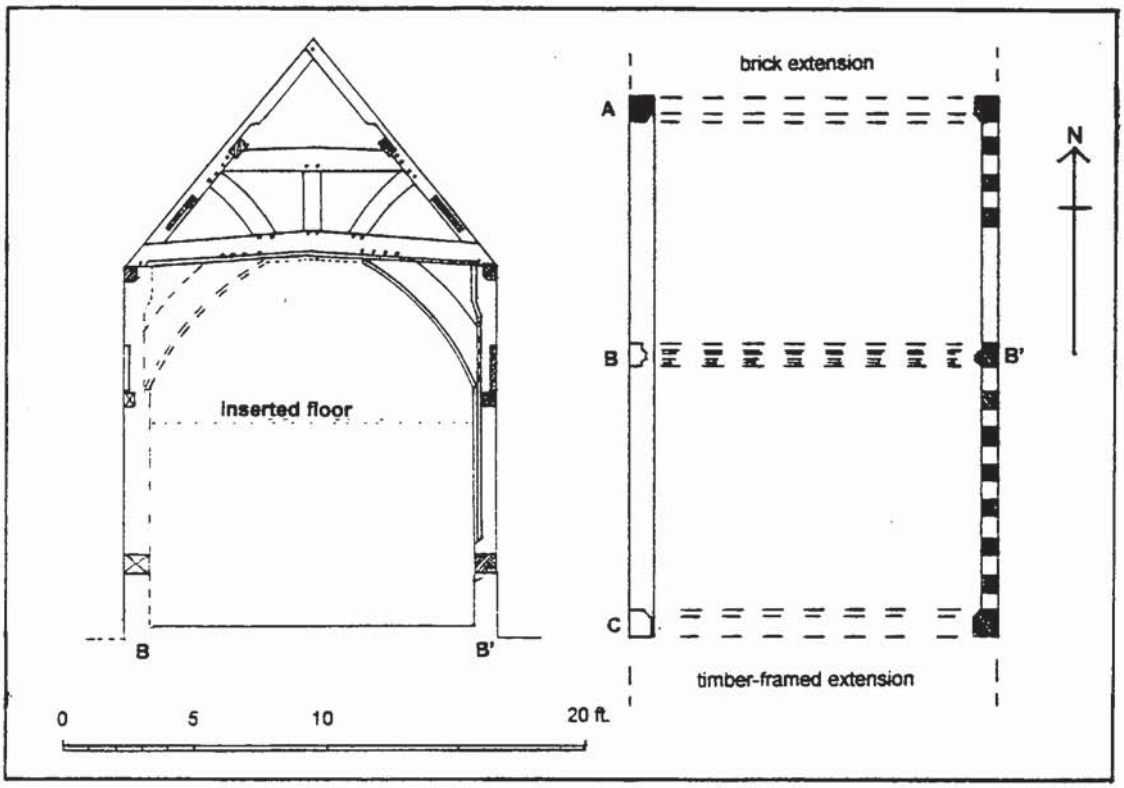


Fig. 5 Plan and cross section of Place House Cottage, Titchfield. (The timber framing of the west wall has been largely replaced by brickwork. The cross frames at A and C are only fragmentary below tie-beam level.)

quality would, almost invariably, have been flanked by end bays whereas, to the south at least, this was not the case here. Moreover, the roof is unsooted, so presumably it was never heated with an open fire, as a hall in a domestic building would generally have been at this time. Finally, its position at a distance from the town and near or within the abbey precinct strongly implies that this was no ordinary house but a conventual building.

It is, however, a highly unusual building and it is only possible to speculate on what might have been its original function. A map of 1753 shows two buildings in the vicinity of Place House Cottage (HRO 21M52/1), between the road leading north from Titchfield and the river Meon. One is called 'Dog Kennel House' and appears to occupy the site of the present Fisherman's Rest Inn, which is a post-medieval building. The other is called 'School House' and is situated directly opposite a road leading to the abbey barn, precisely the position occupied by Place House Cottage (Figs 1 & 2).

An estate map of 1605–10 marks only one building between the river Meon and the road leading past Place House (Fig. 2; Minns 1898, 330). Dendrochronology has shown that this must be the present Place House Cottage. It is also highly probable that Place House Cottage is the building that Leland saw in early 1542 when he visited Place House and noted "the grammar school close to the river bank" (Chandler 1993, xi; 207). Only a few years elapsed between Thomas Wriothesley's acquisition of the abbey's property

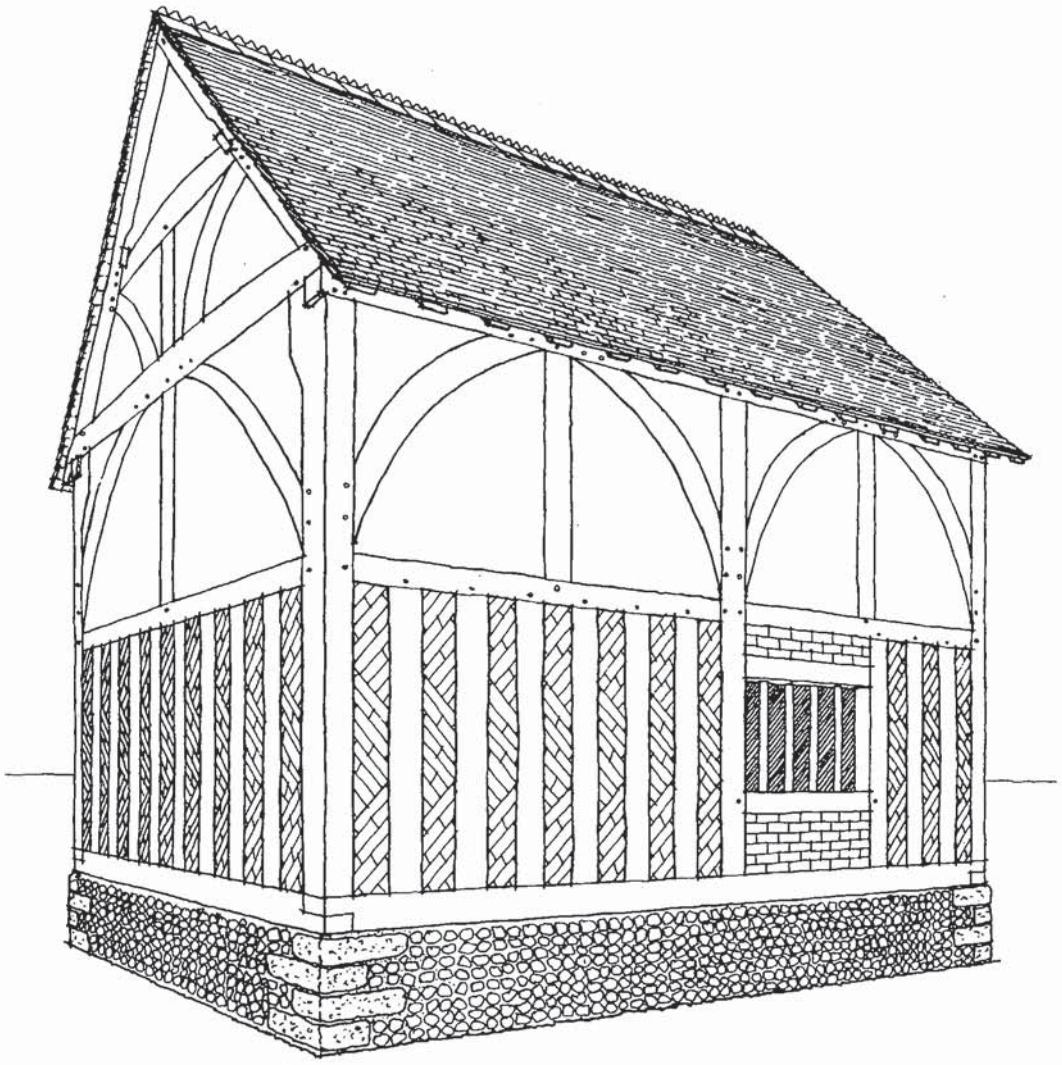

Fig. 6 Reconstruction of the original appearance of Place House Cottage from the south-east. (drawing by Jonathan Snowdon). The east elevation is still largely intact, although the form of the window head is uncertain. The south gable end survives from the tie beam upwards. Below this level, its form is conjectural but probably matched the surviving east elevation

in December 1537 and Leland's journey to Titchfield in 1542. During that relatively brief period Wriothesley, apart from his heavy involvement in affairs of state, set in train the conversion of the abbey's claustral range into Place House, his great country residence. His local agents pleaded with him, apparently to scant avail, to visit Titchfield in order to direct this work (Hope 1906; Hare 1999, 19). Given this unwillingness or inability to attend to the construction of his own house, it may be wondered whether he had time to concern himself with the creation of a small grammar school in or near the outer precinct of the former abbey. If he

did not, then it follows that the grammar school pre-existed the Dissolution of the abbey and that Place House Cottage is a rare survival of a monastic schoolroom. Unfortunately, there is no documentary evidence to show how the building was used before the Dissolution. But it can, at least, be said that its position and form is consistent with the view that it was an almonry school.

Titchfield Abbey was clearly a centre of learning, for a catalogue of the abbey library drawn up in the year 1400 lists 1000 distinct works bound into 224 volumes (Colvin 1951, 317–8; Cope 1916, 14). Moreover, recent research has shown that monastic grammar schools were commoner than has previously been thought and that the achievements of monks and regular canons as purveyors of education has been unjustly minimised and belittled (Bowers 1999, 177–80). Apart from the instruction given by the master of novices in the content and complexities of the daily liturgy, at least thirty monasteries (and probably many more whose records have been lost) provided a grammar school. The monastic grammar school, in the charge of a qualified secular schoolmaster, was conducted within the almonry premises normally sited on the edge of the precinct (Bowers 1999, 177–80).

Place House Cottage is shown in the earliest known map of the area situated at an entrance to the Place House complex (Minns 1906, 203; Fig. 2). This would have been a suitable place for the almonry; for it appears to have been both at the edge of the abbey's precinct and also beside the road leading past the abbey where the almoner could best discharge his duty of feeding the poor (Gilyard-Beer 1958, 36; Cook 1961, 17). Moreover, the core building at Place House Cottage is consistent in form with known medieval school rooms which were generally halls, either floored or open to the roof (Seaborne 1971, 4–7). Thus structure and position of Place House Cottage are consistent with the view that it was a grammar school before the Dissolution as it seems to have been afterwards. However, there are other possibilities. For example, there were normally buildings associated with receiving and accommodating guests within the outer precinct.

Finally, Henry VI was married to Margaret of Anjou at Titchfield Abbey in April 1445 (Davis 1993, 43) and it is tempting to speculate on a possible connection between this event and the construction of the core building at Place House Cottage in, or shortly after, 1447. In 1447, in recognition of the courtesy shown to him by the abbot and convent at the time of his wedding, the king granted the abbey various liberties and immunities. These included the profit of all fines from the abbey's possessions that would formerly have belonged to the king; exemption from purveyance by the king's servants; and the grant of a fair in the town of Titchfield for four days a year. (*Cal. Ch. R.* 1427–1516, 81–2; *Cal. Pat. R.* 1485–94, 231). Could it be that this grant prompted a building campaign, or that the influx of visitors at the time of the wedding reminded the canons of the need to provide accommodation for guests? Or could it be that Henry's gratitude and his well-known interest in educational foundations led to the setting up of a monastic school? We shall probably never know.

## NOTE

If the ashlar stones that underpin Place House Cottage were robbed from the abbey ruins after the Dissolution, it could perhaps be argued that the building itself was moved and re-assembled at the same time (Lewis 1995). However, the stones could well have formed part of the original plinth, or even have been inserted as secondary underpinning, and the framing shows no signs of re-assembly. Consequently, it is suggested here that the building is in its original position.

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