



# AN UNUSUAL FIFTEENTH-CENTURY BUILDING WITH A SPECIAL FIRST-FLOOR ‘MEETING ROOM’ – 15 KNIGHTRIDER STREET, MAIDSTONE

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*On behalf of Archaeology South-East, University College, London, the authors carried out an initial assessment of this building in 2002. This revealed its potential significance as a structure built to serve a specialized function, and correctly indicated the potential for further discoveries during stripping-out in advance of repair and conversion. Even so, the complexity of the historical alterations could not have been envisaged. The building has proved to be an example of a little known, and poorly understood, group of structures built to serve as meeting places for groups of individuals, whether they be officials, members of a religious or trade fraternity, or members of the public wishing to gather for a feast or other special occasion.*

*The account which follows describes the location of the building and summarizes the in-depth phase-by-phase archaeological interpretative survey undertaken in 2002 and revised in 2003.<sup>1</sup>*

## Location and Setting

The building is situated on the southern side of Knightrider Street (**Figs 1 and 2**), from which it is set back, the space between it and the street being occupied (until World War II when the site was bombed) by a timber-framed building known as *The Foresters Arms* (no. 13). Map evidence indicates *The Foresters Arms* to have been a rectangular structure aligned parallel with the street, with a street facade of approximately 22m (72ft) and a width of c.8m (26ft 3ins).<sup>2</sup> The building is shown in a photograph of the 1920s as a long, continuously-jettied structure with a plastered first floor. It may have incorporated a pair of crosswings, for the end parts of the main elevation were capped by gabled roofs turned at right angles to the street. Between these was the main range, the roof of which was roofed parallel to the street. A large brick axial chimney is visible at the western end of the main range, against the western ‘crosswing’.<sup>3</sup> The details shown in the photograph suggest 13 Knightrider Street dated from the sixteenth century or earlier.

The earliest relevant map is dated 1738 and shows the building at 13 Knightrider Street as very similar in appearance to the 1920s photograph. Unfortunately, the subject of the map is the property immediately to the west, and therefore only sketch details are shown regarding the buildings here under discussion. This must explain why 15 Knightrider Street (which stands immediately to the rear of no. 13) is not

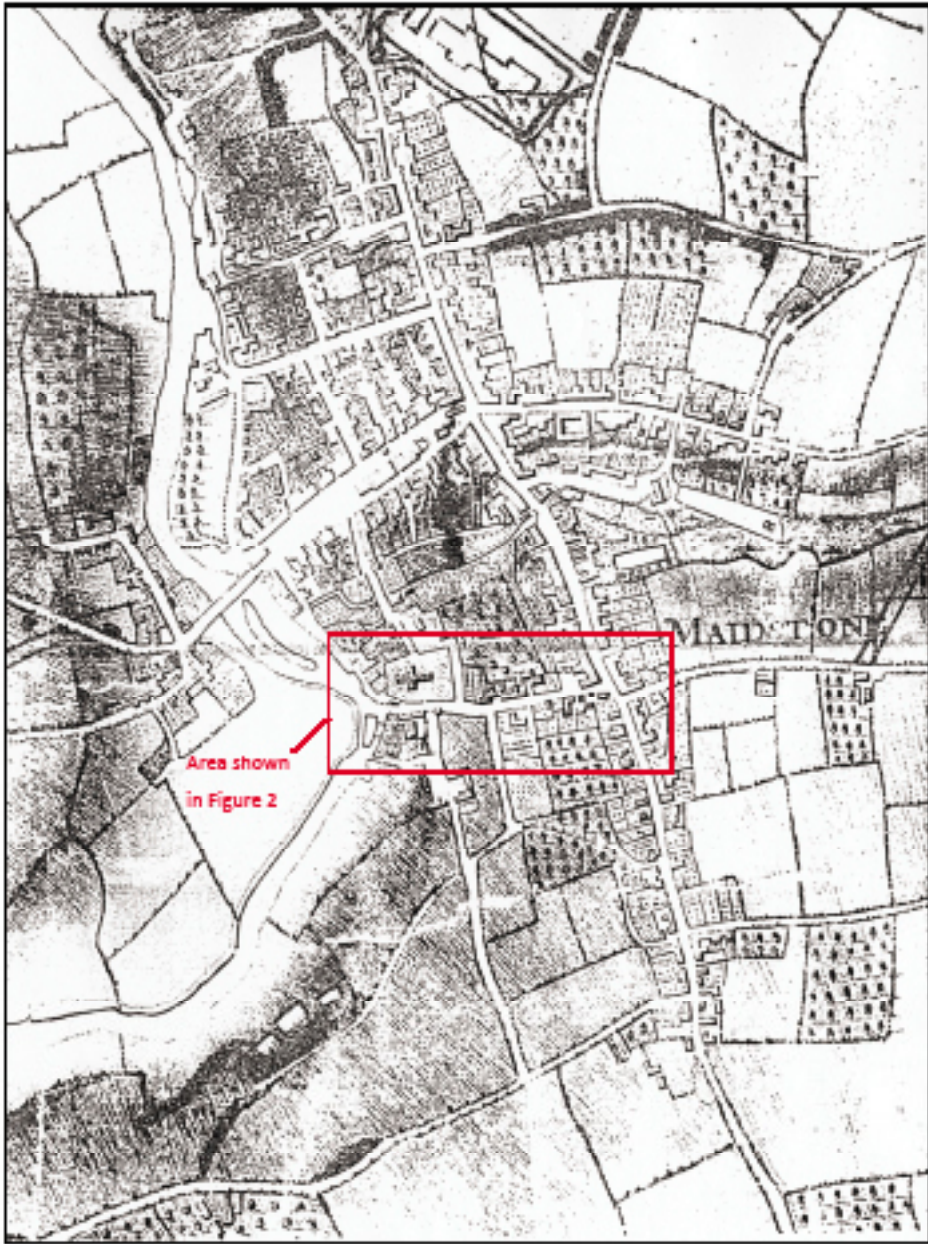


Fig. 1 Field drawing of Maidstone for Ordnance Survey map (c.1805); area marked shown at larger scale in Fig. 2.

shown, though both buildings certainly existed by that date.<sup>4</sup> A Parliamentary Survey of Maidstone Manor compiled in 1650 likewise includes the property immediately to the west of 13/15 Knightrider Street. Its eastern abutment indicates that at that time nos 13 and 15 Knightrider Street formed part of a much larger tenement.<sup>5</sup>

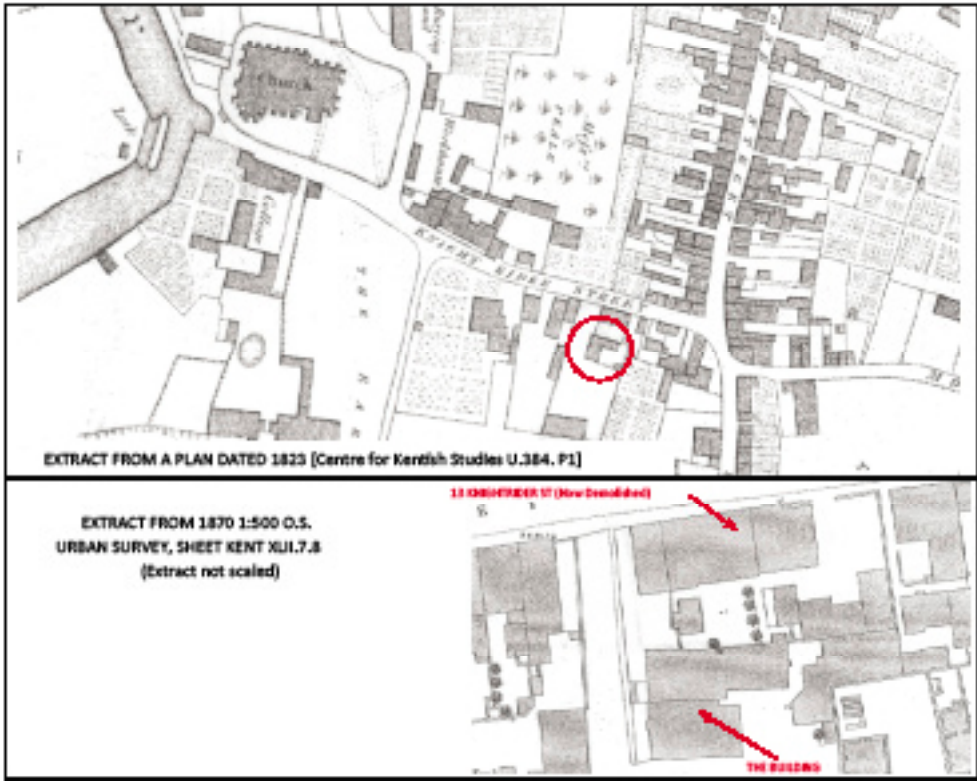


Fig. 2 Nineteenth-century plans showing location and layout of site.

The important point illustrated by the above historical summary is that until at least the early 18th century (and probably until *c.*1800) both nos 13 and 15 Knightrider Street formed part of one property, with no. 15 effectively built within the back yard of no. 13 – this despite a very low density of buildings within this peripheral part of the town. This suggests that 15 Knightrider Street originally fulfilled a function associated with that of the main house built against Knightrider Street. Such an interpretation is entirely consistent with the architectural evidence presented below, for the structure does not conform to the layout of a house and was built to suit a specialized use.

#### THE BUILDING

No. 15 Knightrider Street was first inspected by the authors in June 2002 with a view to assessing its age, form, and subsequent development up to the present day. At that time the building was standing unused and was in poor repair (**Plates I and II**). Most of the windows were boarded up and many of the rooms, particularly those on the ground floor, contained large quantities of rubbish, making access difficult. Little historic fabric was visible below roof level, the vast majority being masked by nineteenth-century plaster coverings. The data as available in 2002

PLATE I



Exterior from the south showing the Phase-2 main range with added ranges to left and right.

PLATE II



South-eastern corner of Phase-3 kitchen range with remains of later added range on right.

suggested a very complex sequence of development, with the earliest parts dating from the medieval period.

Later in 2002 Maidstone Borough Council granted planning approval to English Churches Housing Group for the redevelopment of the site, including refurbishment of 15 Knightrider Street as the northern wing of the new building to be constructed to its south. The approval included a condition that an archaeological watching brief be maintained during the refurbishment of no. 15. Most of the later coverings were stripped from the frame during the period March-October 2003, allowing good details to be recorded. In addition, in October 2003 limited below-ground archaeology was carried out in the north-western corner of the building in association with the provision of a new concrete ground-floor slab. The additional building recording was undertaken by the authors; the below-ground archaeology in the north-western corner of the site by Simon Knight. The results of the watching brief within the building markedly augmented the already known details regarding the physical form of the structure and modified the sequence of development as suggested in the original assessment. During this same general period below-ground archaeological excavation was undertaken to the rear of the building, within the footprint of the new build.<sup>6</sup>

The revised interpretative survey (2003)

This work identified up to eight distinct phases in the development of no. 15, the first four of which – covering the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – are described in detail below (**Fig. 3**).

*Phase 1* (pre-late fifteenth century)

The earliest remains upon the site indicate a rectangular structure aligned north-south, measuring approximately 13.50 by 5.05m (c.44ft 6ins x 16ft 7ins) overall, its northern end wall being slightly canted, the reason for which is not now apparent (**Fig. 4**, *ground floor plan*, and **Fig. 5**). On the ground floor all four walls were of shallow-founded Ragstone, dug approximately 150mm into the surviving (probably truncated) disturbed natural. Only the lowest course remained, and even this was patchy: it was laid dry and showed signs of a mortar bed on its upper face. On average these walls measured 550-600mm thick, thereby reducing the long, narrow internal space to about 12.35 by c.3.85m (40ft 6ins x 12ft 8ins). The stone walls supported massive first-floor joists, fifteen and a half of which survive *in situ*. They span the full width of the structure in one length and are lodged into position, being laid over a timber plate set flush with the internal face of the Ragstone walls. One joist incorporated brackets beneath its ends, rising from the internal face of the masonry ground-floor walls: the short length of the mortices suggest that in section the braces were either square, or almost so. The purposeful location of this feature, approximately half way along the building, and the absence of any other mortices in the soffits of the extant joists, is surely significant; it suggests a single room occupied the entire ground-floor.

As the joists were not intended to be built into a stone wall, this eliminates the possibility that the stone walls extended into the first-floor storey. They stop short of the external edge of the building by about 150mm (6ins), so there must always



Fig. 3 Plans as existing in 2003 showing sequence of development of site.

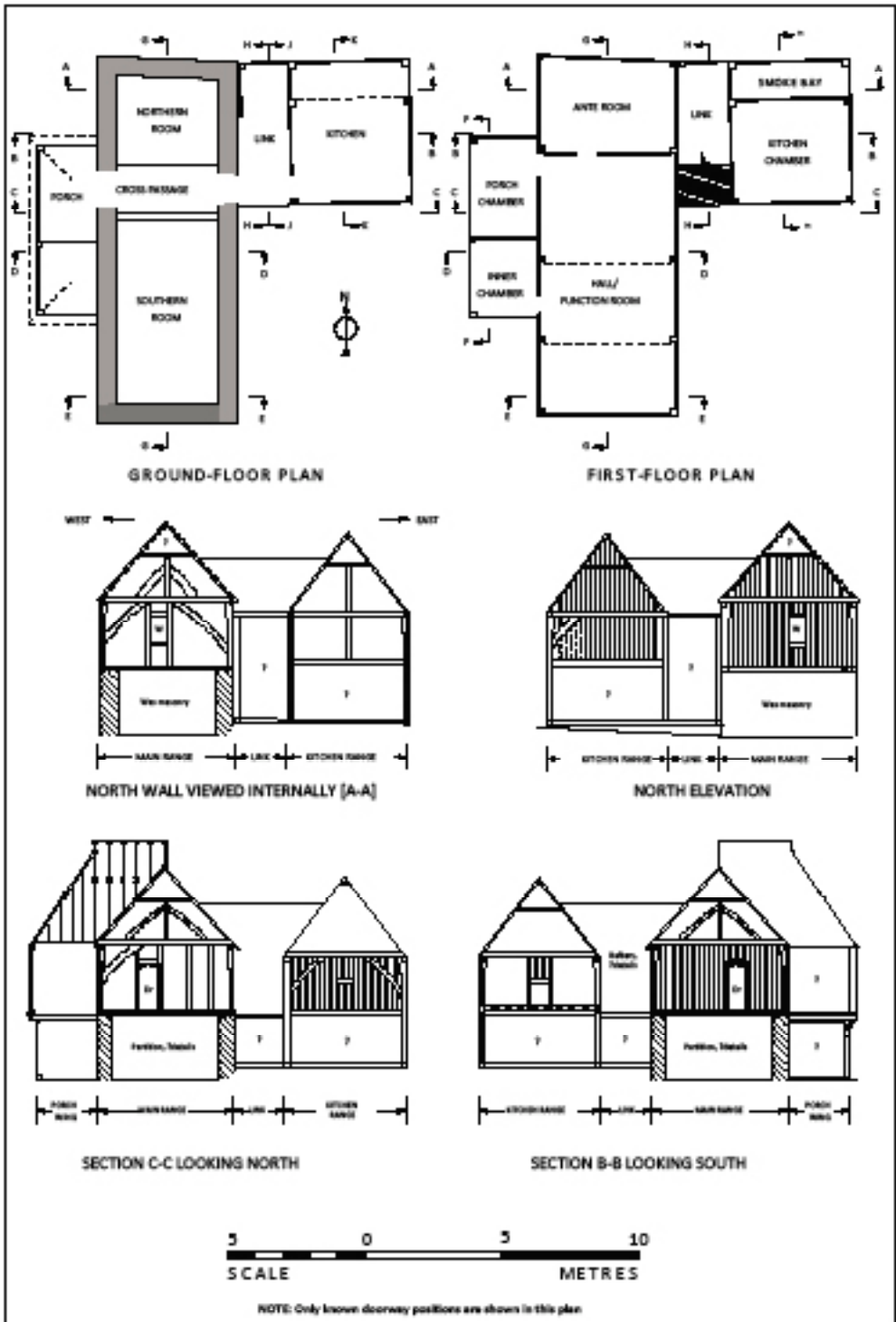


Fig. 4 The building as during *Phase 3* (see also Fig. 5).



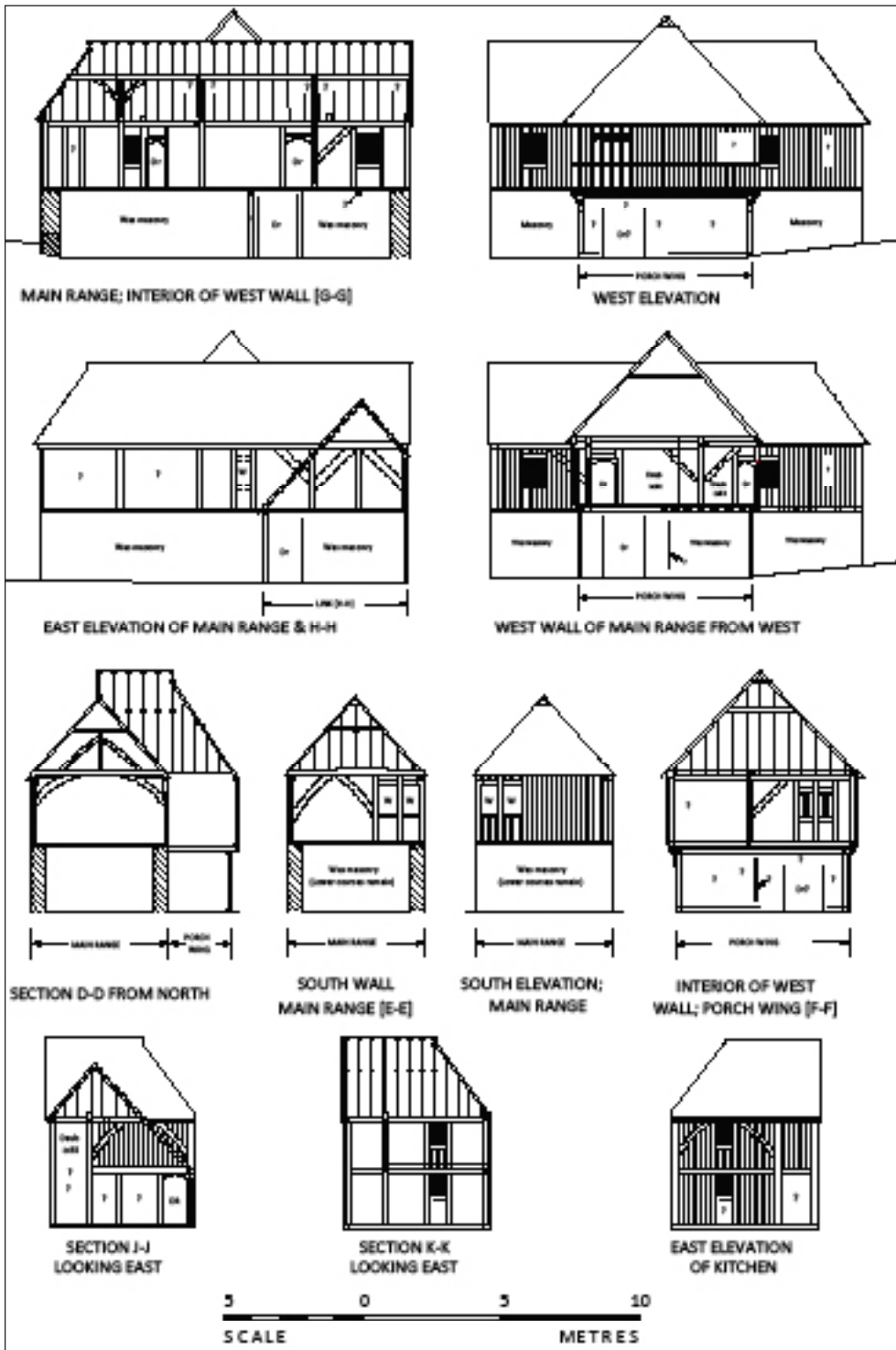


Fig. 5 The building as during *Phase 3* (see also Fig. 4).

have been a timber-framed upper storey supported by the masonry walls. This upper storey was rebuilt during *Phase 2*. The date of the *Phase-1* structure remains unknown, but pre-dated the late fifteenth century (and could have been as early as the thirteenth century).

### *Phase 2* (late fifteenth century)

During the second half of the fifteenth century the upper storey of the *Phase-1* range was removed and replaced by a new, lofty, four-bay timber-framed structure incorporating two rooms – a single-bay northern ante-chamber and a three-bay first-floor hall/function room (Fig. 4, *first-floor plan*). Both were open to the roof, the hall/function room being crossed by two arch-braced open trusses incorporating gently cambered tiebeams.

In addition to the rebuilt upper storey of the main range, a stubby, two-storeyed porch-like wing was added to the west, providing primary access from the exterior (Fig. 4, *ground-/first-floor plans*). Unlike the main range, with its *Phase-1* stone-walled lower storey, the porch-like structure was entirely timber framed, incorporated a jetty at all three external walls, and seems to have had ceilings within its two first-floor chambers from the outset. Although the point cannot be proven beyond doubt, it seems likely that the porch wing was divided into two rooms on each storey. At ground-floor level the porch led to a wide passage extending through the main range. Within the passage the plain, relatively rough existing *Phase-1* joists were removed and replaced by a ceiling incorporating stop-chamfered joists. Unlike the retained *Phase-1* joists elsewhere in the range, the ends of the *Phase-2* joists have pegged mortice-and-tenon joints to the soleplate of the timber frame above. The northernmost of the extant *Phase-2* joists doubled as the headbeam to the cross passage's northern wall.

The eastern of the main range's first-floor walls was of large-panel design, but all other external walls, both within the main range and porch were close-studded – a feature used locally to display wealth/status. This variation in wall design indicates that the main range's east elevation was considered to be the secondary (or rear) elevation of the complex and was not intended to be viewed by visitors. In addition to its showy close studding, the walls of the porch wing were originally elaborated with a moulded string course at mid-storey height, as well as having a moulded fascia at the jetties, masking the ends of the joists (Fig. 6). The windows in this part had moulded surrounds and arched heads to their lights, whereas elsewhere the windows were square headed. Even so, they were better finished than the average window of the period in that they did not incorporate closely-spaced diamond-section mullions, but were instead divided into two lights by a centrally-placed moulded mullion.

Three internal first-floor doorways survive in varying degrees of completeness. All originally had moulded jambs of two orders – a plainly-chamfered external order which returned across the head of the opening, and a hollow-chamfered inner order which extended around the leading edge of an arched head. The arched head was formed from a separate timber, morticed into the jambs. Of significance is that the principal moulded face of the off-centred doorway in the partition dividing the hall/function room from the ante-room faces into the latter, indicating either that this was the more important of the two chambers, or that the hall/function room was designed to be entered from this direction. In addition, this partition also

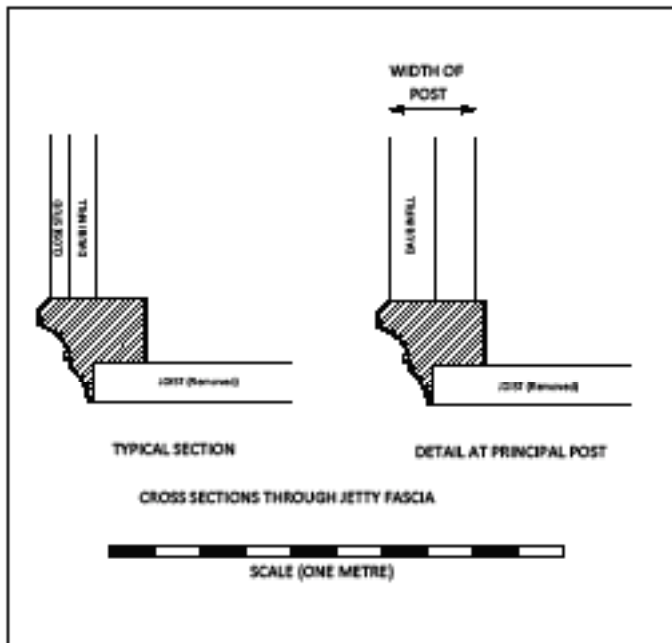


Fig. 6 Details of jetty running round three sides of porch.

shows its close studding within the ante-chamber, rather than within the function room (Fig. 4, *sections B-B and C-C*). Frustratingly, the position of the *Phase-2* staircase(s) leading up to the first floor is not known.

The roofs of both ranges were of typical construction for the medieval period – crownpost within the main range and simple paired-rafter-and-collar over the porch wing. Within the main range the two upper rooms were initially open to the roof, which was hipped to the south and gabled to the north. Even so, the crownposts above the hall/function room’s open trusses were not of moulded type, but instead incorporated braces rising from the tiebeam. As already noted, the two chambers within the porch wing probably incorporated ceilings from the outset.

### *Phase 3* (closing decades of the fifteenth century)

Based upon the constructional details, it seems likely that it was very soon after completion of the *Phase-2* works that a range was built approximately 2m (6ft 6ins) to the east of the *Phase-2* complex (Fig. 4, *plans*). The two structures were from the outset joined by a link, but this link has since been rebuilt. Like the *Phase-2* main range, the new range is aligned north-south and has a gable to the north and a hip to the south. It measures 5.70 x 4.40m (18ft 8ins x 14ft 5ins), is framed in two bays, and incorporates a single room on each storey, though on the first floor the northern end was originally divided off to form a smoke bay serving a hearth within the room below. This latter point is evidenced by soot encrustation on the remains of the daub infill and on the roof timbers within this bay. Thus the northern end of the ground-floor room was open to the roof.

Being positioned ‘behind’ (that is, to the east of) the specialized building containing the function room, and being connected to it by a covered link, the *Phase-3* structure (with its hearth located within the smoke bay) is typical of a kitchen range – a type of building now known to have been common prior to the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> This structure would undoubtedly have served both the inn/alehouse fronting Knightrider Street and the function room within the specialized *Phase-2* building. The first-floor space within the kitchen could have been used either as a cook’s chamber or for storage. To this end, it is possible – even likely – that the range was rebuilt upon the site of an earlier kitchen, for the *Phase-2 and -3* works have every appearance of representing a progressive scheme of improvements to an existing and ageing complex.

The means of access to the upper chamber within the new building remains in doubt. Certainly no staircase rose through the first-floor joisting and there appears not to have been a first-floor doorway in either the north, south, east, or west walls. The only option appears to have been a ladder rising within the smoke bay, giving access through a doorway in the partition between the smoke bay and the upper chamber – the details in this area were not exposed during the building works.

On its northern side the since-rebuilt link was of two storeys, whereas on the south the link’s roof extended down to the level of the first-floor joisting. The single-storeyed part formed an eastward continuation of the cross-passage in the *Phase-2* range and aligned with a doorway leading into the ‘kitchen’ giving, in effect, an undercover link between the two structures – a logical arrangement. The fact that the northern part of the link was two-storeys in height suggests it may have incorporated a staircase rising to the first-floor of the *Phase-2* range.

The kitchen structure is sturdily framed and incorporates close studding within all its external walls. Unlike within the *Phase-2* part (where the braces triangulating the frame pass to the rear of the close studding) here the braces interrupt the close studding (Plate II): even so, as in the main range the close studs were intended to be visible in the external face of the wall only. The only *Phase-3* doorway which is evidenced was on the ground floor at the extreme southern end of the ‘kitchen’ range’s western wall. As with the *Phase-2* doorways, the opening was originally fitted with an arched head. A chamfer is evidenced running around the surround, with a second order of chamfering extending up the principal post and, originally, around the lower leading edge of the arched head. Square mortices in the soffits of the main timbers show that the range’s windows were each divided into three unglazed lights by mullions which were either moulded or chamfered. A vertical (rather than a horizontal) sliding shutter was fitted to the first-floor window in the east wall. The first floor is supported by very heavy, neatly-cut medieval joists aligned north-south along the axis of the building, being lodged over the crossbeam in the southern wall and jointed into the crossbeam which divides the floored part of the range from the northern smoke bay. This chamfered crossbeam has beneath its ends two small curved brackets. The roof makes use of simple paired-rafter-and-collar construction, absent of crownposts.

#### *Phase 4* (mid sixteenth century)

Only two recognizable alterations are attributable to *Phase 4*. To judge from their architectural style, these were most likely carried out during the second, or perhaps

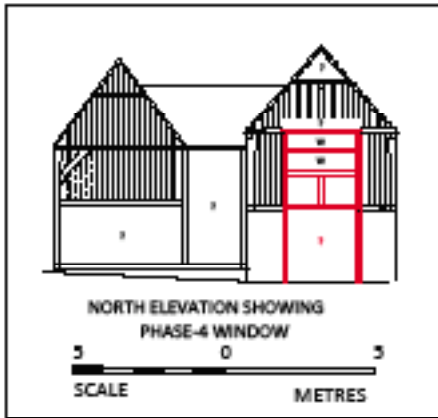


Fig. 7 North elevation showing *Phase-4* window.

the third quarter of the sixteenth century, though not necessarily contemporaneous with each other. The modifications involved providing a new, centrally-placed projecting window in the northern end wall of the northern chamber and inserting ceilings into the two first-floor rooms of the main range. Serving the function of an attic floor, the new ceilings are of central-girder construction and have closely spaced chamfered joists with neat, stepped-and-hollowed stops.

The projecting window represents the principal *Phase-4* modification and is a good indicator of the high status of the ante room (Fig. 7). Now removed, it measured 2.20m (7ft 3ins) wide by 1.30m (4ft 3ins) tall and replaced the much smaller *Phase-2* off-centred window, requiring some modification to the adjacent infill framing. In order to mask the redundant mortices in the soffit of the tiebeam immediately above the window opening, a 15mm thick plank was nailed to the soffit. The new jambs of the window are neatly chamfered both inside and out. Externally, the chamfers on the leading edges are neatly stopped for a transom positioned just over half way up the opening, the position of which is evidenced by pegged mortices in the external face of the jambs. It is not known how the top of the window was weathered. Although the walls flanking the window are close studded, the space beneath the window's inner cill comprises two large panels divided by a pegged-in stud. One of the daub panels survived at the time of inspection. Significantly, the external face of the panel was inset from the exterior of the frame, indicating that it was not intended to be an external wall face. This is consistent with the mortice evidence, which indicates that the projecting window took the form of a bay extending down to ground level (Fig. 7), rather than an oriel supported by jointed-in brackets. It is worth noting that when the projecting window was finally removed and replaced by a flush opening in the late seventeenth century, the close studding of this wall was still exposed externally. Because of this, a plaster skim coat was applied to the infill beneath the window cill and false studs – two per panel – were painted onto the external face using grey paint.

It is perhaps worth some brief speculation at this point about the reasons for the significant upgrading of this north-facing window which merely looked out onto the rear of the front building and was largely hidden from view from the street. It would have been fully visible to anyone entering the site to visit no. 15, and more welcoming, emphasizing the importance of the ante room. Both the window and

the inserted ceilings appear to underline the continuing popularity of whatever social function(s) were carried out in the spacious upper-floor accommodation.

The pair of first-floor *Phase-2* windows in the western wall of the porch wing, together with the single first-floor window in the western wall of the *Phase-2* main range have been blocked by nailing-in close studding and applying traditional thick daub. Although there is no proof that this occurred during *Phase 4*, the added studs are noticeably weathered, indicating that the wall framing remained exposed for some time after the windows were blocked. In addition to some windows being blocked, it seems likely that the remaining fenestration was upgraded at the same period. What is certain is that no windows were retained in the west wall of the first-floor hall/function room (Fig. 5, *south elevation, main range*).

### *Later phases*

Further modifications were made during the mid/late seventeenth century (*Phase 5*), late seventeenth century (*Phase 6*), late eighteenth or very early nineteenth century (*Phase 7*), and between 1823 and 1843 (*Phase 8*), with other alterations subsequently. Details of these latter Phases may be found at: <https://kentarchaeology.org.uk/publications/archaeological-reports/15-knightrider-street-maidstone>.

## DISCUSSION

Knightrider Street was on the edge of the medieval town (perhaps just outside) which was centred on the Market Square and had two Court Halls, one of which was on the site of the current Town Hall. Even so, Knightrider Street was an important access route linking the main north-south road through Maidstone to the Church, College and the precincts of the Archbishop's Palace. As such, it attracted high status dwellings from medieval times through to the seventeenth century (*pers. comm.* Paul Oldham). An example of the street's high-status architecture was the former Old Vicarage (demolished in 1964) which stood on the same side as the building here under discussion.<sup>8</sup>

Based upon analogy with the layouts of similar buildings elsewhere, the complex was almost certainly intended for entertaining groups of people and from the outset appears to have functioned in association with the alehouse/inn which formerly fronted onto Knightrider Street and behind which the complex was sited. It was not uncommon for principal inns to incorporate facilities of this type, though few extant examples have been identified. What cannot be told without documentary evidence is whether this example was intended to serve a single function – paid for by a specific fraternity – or whether it acted as a general function room let out by the alehouse/inn as required. Bearing in mind Paul Oldham's comments (see above), the second of the two suggested uses seems the more likely.

This type of structure, incorporating a first-floor hall or function room, has been little published. The only vaguely comparable material relating to Kent being H.S. Cowper's, 'Two Headcorn Cloth Halls' (1915), and S.E. Rigold's, 'Two Types of Court Hall' (1968).<sup>9</sup> No published examples are known for Sussex. However, the grey literature does include at least three Sussex examples: a specialized meeting building (once thought to be a detached kitchen, and initially published as such)

standing at the rear of a house called *Comphurst* in Wartling;<sup>10</sup> the Court Hall at Winchelsea;<sup>11</sup> and the building now known as ‘Parsonage Barn’, Eastbourne.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the layout of the Eastbourne example is in many ways very similar to Knightrider Street, being of four bays with a three-bay timber-framed first-floor hall/function room with an associated ante room, all set above ground-floor walls of stone. However, Eastbourne lacks the porch and an associated kitchen range.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the full report see <https://kentarchaeology.org.uk/publications/archaeological-reports/15-knightrider-street-maidstone>.

<sup>2</sup> Ordnance Survey 5ft to 1 mile 1870 Urban Survey, Sheet XLII.7.8 – see Drawing no. 1657/1.

<sup>3</sup> Hales, I., 1982, *Old Maidstone's Public Houses*.

<sup>4</sup> Centre for Kentish Studies [now KH&LC] TR 1638/3.

<sup>5</sup> Then owned by a Mr Flud (Centre for Kentish Studies Local Studies Map 7/270A).

<sup>6</sup> For details of which, see <https://www.kentarchaeology.org.uk/publications/archaeological-reports/archaeological-investigations-15-knightrider-st-maidstone-kent>.

<sup>7</sup> David Martin, Barbara Martin and Christopher Whittick, *Rural Medieval and Transitional Housing in the Eastern High Weald, 1250-c.1570*, Domtom publishing (2017), 99-102. See also David and Barbara Martin, ‘Detached Kitchens in Eastern Sussex; A re-assessment of the evidence’, *Vernacular Architecture* (hereafter VA) 28 (1997), 85-91; Pat Ryan, ‘The Buildings of Rural Ingatestone, Essex, 1556-1601: ‘Great Rebuilding’ or ‘Housing Revolution’?’, *VA*, 31 (2000), 11-25; Bob Meeson, ‘Detached Kitchens or Service Blocks’, *VA*, 31, 73-75; John Walker ‘Detached Kitchens – A comment and an Essex example’, *VA*, 31, 75-77; David and Barbara Martin, ‘Detached Kitchens or Adjoining Houses? – a response’, *VA*, 32 (2001), 20-33; Richard Suggett, ‘The Unit System Revisited: dual domestic planning and the developmental cycle of the family’, *VA*, 38 (2007), 19-34; Sarah Pearson ‘The Provision of Services in Medieval Houses in Kent’, *VA*, 43 (2012), 28-47, especially 37; David Martin, Barbara Martin and Christopher Whittick, *Neither Town nor Country: Villages in the Eastern High Weald, 1250-1750, Part 2, The Houses Described*, Domtom publishing (2016), 195-199.

<sup>8</sup> See E.W. Parkin, 1965, ‘The Vanishing Houses of Kent: The Old Vicarage [Knightrider Street], Maidstone’, *Archaeologia Cantiana*, LXXX, 205-14.

<sup>9</sup> *Archaeologia Cantiana*, xxxi (1915) 124-30; *Archaeologia Cantiana*, LXXXIII (1968), 1-22.

<sup>10</sup> East Sussex Record Office (*hereafter* ESRO) HBR 1/979, revision 4.

<sup>11</sup> ESRO HBR 1/1362.

<sup>12</sup> ESRO HBR 1/1286.