

Colchester Archaeological Group



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FLISPES, EASTHORPE: A RADITIONAL TIMBER-FRAMED BUILDING*Richard Shackle*

When I first saw Flispes it had not been lived in for at least 20 years. There were holes in the thatch and a general air of decay. The last use of the house had been as a children's play house and a hen roost. Since I recorded it, the house has been renovated and is now a comfortable modern home.

It is an inline house of five bays with an integral floor in the first four bays and one bay open to the roof. The first four bays follow the standard medieval plan of service bay, two bay hall and parlour bay. The purpose of the final bay is unknown but it was probably a kitchen or a workshop. It is important to note that the building is unjettied. It is built of oak, with close studding and tension braces. The original infill between the studs would have been wattle and daub. The roof was thatched.

The plan of the ground floor (Fig1), as originally built, was as follows. Starting at the north end, the first bay was the service area, next to the cross passage. There were three doors off the cross passage into the service area, one led into the buttery (wet stores such as milk), one led into the pantry (dry stores such as bread) and the final one opened outwards and gave access to the stairs. The next two bays were a floored hall with a cross passage at the north end. As far as I could tell, there was no partition between the cross passage and the hall. The east wall of the hall had the cross passage door in one bay and a hall window with diamond mullions in the other bay. The west wall had the cross passage door and a small window in one bay and a lateral chimney stack in the other. In the south wall there was a door through to the parlour and peg holes for a high end bench. The parlour was the same size as the service bay. It had one small window in the east wall and another in the west wall, so it would have been poorly lit. It would not have been as cosy as most parlours as it acted as a passage to the fifth bay of unknown purpose. The extra bay had one door to the parlour, one door through the rear elevation (west) and a door in north elevation on the upper floor. This presumably was accessed by a staircase and led to the room over the parlour. The room open to the roof had only one window, on the east side of the ground floor. The interior of the south wall had a series of mortices, vertical and horizontal, which must relate to either a kitchen or a craft workshop.

The upper floor consists of three rooms (Fig2). The one over the service bay, which is accessed by a staircase from the cross passage, is lit only by a small window in the rear elevation. A door led from this room into the large room over the hall. This room is lit by a small window in both the front and rear walls. It seems likely that there was a fireplace in this room but as the chimney has long gone we cannot be sure. This room has a door leading into the room over the parlour. This room has one window in the front wall and one in the rear, but in opposite corners. This room has a door in its southern wall, which presumably led via a staircase to the kitchen/workshop.

How did the house work? The two service rooms at the north end seem straight forward enough but could one of them have been a parlour? The hall still has its cross passage but it is floored over and has a chimney: probably a brick chimney but possibly a timber chimney. The high end has peg holes for a bench but people sitting on this bench would have been sitting at right angles to the fireplace. I suggest that the householder and his family sat on a detached bench facing the fireplace and that the high end bench was only installed in phase two when the internal stack was built. Note that there is a large hall window at the front but only a small window in the rear elevation. This is because in an open hall you usually two large windows to control the smoke, whereas if you have a chimney, smoke control is not necessary. The room beyond the hall is probably a parlour but it lacks the privacy such rooms usually have. The room at the southern end could have been a kitchen but the food would have to have been carried through the parlour to reach the hall. There could have been a detached kitchen to the rear of the back cross passage door. This would have given easier access to the hall and avoided the danger of a fire in the kitchen burning the whole house down, especially as it was thatched. The stairs leading down into this room from upstairs, could just have been a fire precaution to allow people an escape route if the way to the stairs by the cross passage was blocked. This all leads to the idea that the end room had some non-domestic use. The rooms on the upper floor all lack privacy, as they all either have a stair and a door into them or two doors one either end. The room over the hall was probably the most desirable as it was the largest and probably had a fireplace.

The front elevation (Fig3) has a sort of symmetry, if you exclude the southern bay (kitchen/workshop) you can see that there is a pair of windows top and bottom in the end bays. All the windows have unglazed diamond mullion windows suggesting that the house was built before 1570 when glass got cheap enough for

ordinary people or that it was low status and the owners could not afford or want glass. Note the small extra window in the hall window bay, this was inserted later to give more light to the hall. There is an erecting notch on the post next to this window. This notch indicates that the post was pushed up at some stage, perhaps to repair the ground sill. You can see a halved and bridled scarf joint in the top plate over the extra bay, showing that the extra bay always was part of the building.

The rear elevation (Fig4) has a similar symmetry to the front. If you exclude the extra bay you can see that the outer bays are mirror images of each other. The high end bay of the hall is completely unframed, showing that there was a lateral chimney stack. As the upper floor is also completely unframed it suggests that there was a large fireplace in the room over the hall. We cannot tell whether it was timber or brick. The door into the kitchen/workshop has a very plain door head, as did the cross passage doors, but they no longer survive.

We will now consider the individual trusses, starting with K/L (Fig5) at the north end of the service bay. There are peg holes in the lower studs, several of which line up horizontally, suggesting shelves in service rooms. Outside of the north east post you can see four small vertical mortices. These suggest that a small fence was attached to the building at this point. The roof had been lost from this truss but it undoubtedly would have been very similar to the other roof truss. Truss I/J (Fig6) had lost some of its lower timbers but these can easily be reconstructed using the empty pegged mortices. There were two service doors which opened inwards and a stair door to the east which opened outwards. On the upper floor there was a door connecting the room over the service bay to the room over the hall. The lack of framing above this and all the other internal trusses except one added to the lack of privacy that the inhabitants suffered. Truss G/H (Fig7) is the central truss of the hall. There are no braces on either floor to triangulate the building. The queen strut roof with windbraces is probably decorative to make the main room over the hall look more impressive. Truss E/F (Fig8) separates the hall from the parlour. There are two narrow plain doorways one above the other. The peg holes for the high end bench can be seen in the lower studs. Truss C/D (fig 9) separates the house proper from the kitchen/ workshop. There are two very plain doorways one on each floor, the upper one presumably had a staircase up to it. Note that the roof above the tie beam is fully framed, suggesting that there was a need to keep smoke or smell from going into the house from the kitchen/ workshop.

Truss A/B (Fig 10 internal view) is very complex. There are many mortices in the mid plates, both facing outwards and down through the middle of the mid plates. The chamfers on the mid plates seem to stop about a foot short, on either side of the central post. What these features represent is hard to say, but they could be something to do with cooking, brewing or weaving. The bridging joist seen in cross section half way up the central post is for a later inserted floor. The truss is fully framed right up to the apex.

The only major change to the building was the demolition of the lateral chimney stack. The empty bay in the west wall, on both floors, was filled with rough timbers, wedged in. A large new brick chimney stack (Fig 11) was built backing on to the cross passage. This made the cross passage at this point very narrow with barely enough room to get to the service room doors. It may be that a new door was made in truss I/J, just inside the west door. The studs were missing from this part of the wall. This would have enabled people to go past the chimney straight into the service area, where there may not have been a dividing wall between the two rooms. The cooking may have been done at this new fireplace, allowing the old kitchen (?) to be floored over to create more space. The siting of the new chimney would allow the householder to sit on his bench at the high end and face the fire, even though it would be about 15 foot away. Another change was the construction of a new screen against the flank of the stairs in the service room. This screen was made up of vertical boards, painted white with at least two horizontal battens.

We get all the discoverable documentary history from the book by A.R. West called "A history of Easthorpe, Essex". Flispes was a detached part of the manor of Bockingham Hall, comprising six acres. During the 14th and 15th centuries Flispes was occupied by the Flisp family. There is a will of Richard Flisp who died in 1419. Late in the 15th century the Flisps were replaced by the Ardleigh family. By 1576 Peter Spilman was in occupation, followed by William Eatney who died in 1592. The Eatneys kept the farm until the death of William's wife in 1611, when it passed to Anthony Ashe.

What is the dating of the house and its later internal brick chimney? The halved and bridled scarf joints of the top plates finish about 1600. The clasp purlin roof comes to Essex either in 1500 or 1550 depending on which authority you consult. Queen strut roofs with vertical struts come in about 1550. Diamond mullion windows in main rooms finish about 1600. Taking all this into account, the most likely date is somewhere between 1550 and 1600. The new brick chimney is likely to be 1650 or later as that is when brick becomes cheap enough for ordinary householders to afford. If we look at the documentary evidence the most likely time of construction

for our building is either 1576 for Peter Spilman or circa 1590 for William Eatney.

Flispes is a fascinating transitional building half way between the old medieval house with its open hall and the new fully floored houses with internal brick chimney stacks, such as the lobby entrance houses with their central stacks. It is surprising to find a house of this date and size with thatch. In this part of Essex most of the surviving houses of this date are tiled with thatch confined to farm buildings. We think of Easthorpe as being a rural village but this house is in fact only about 150 metres from the old London to Colchester Road, so the activity in the extra bay may be related to access to a good main road. I should like to thank Dave Stenning for his help and advice in the preparation of this article and for the illustrations and photographs of the model he made of Flispes.

References

West, A.R A history of Easthorpe, Essex, 1989

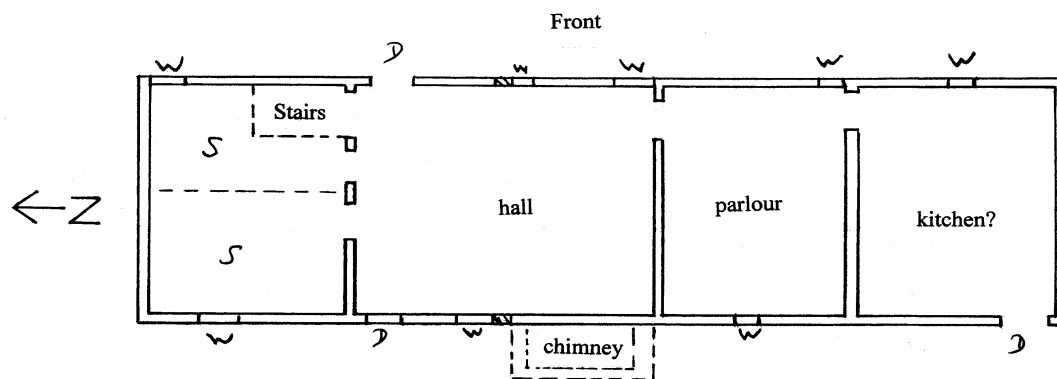


Figure1: Flispes, Easthorpe, plan of ground floor

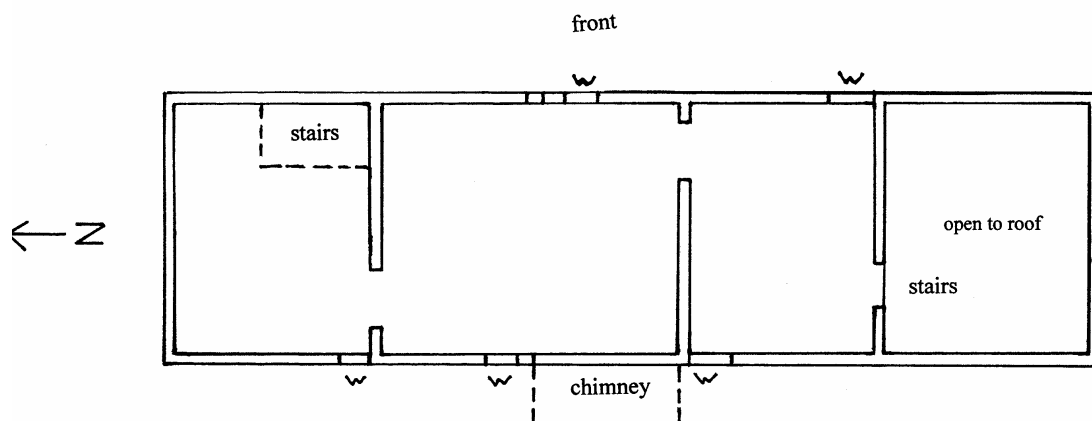


Figure2 : Flispes, easthorpe, plan of upper floor

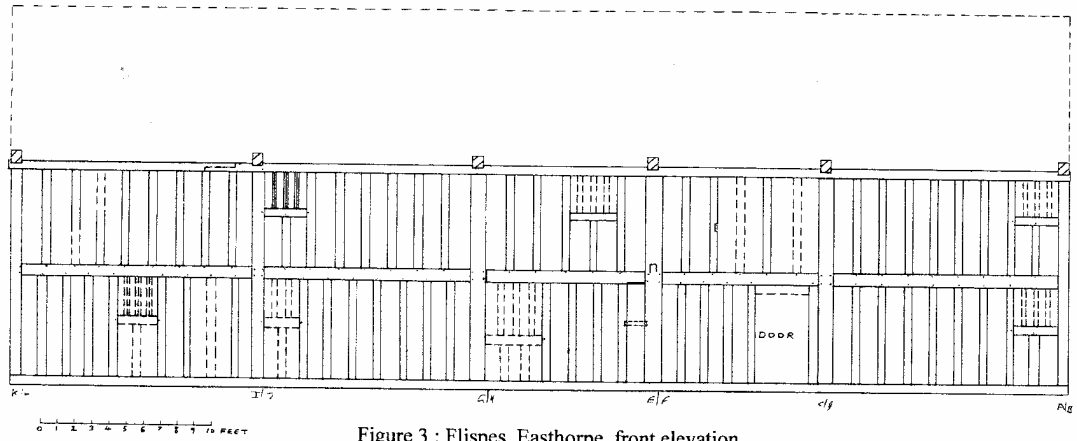


Figure 3 : Flispes, Easthorpe, front elevation

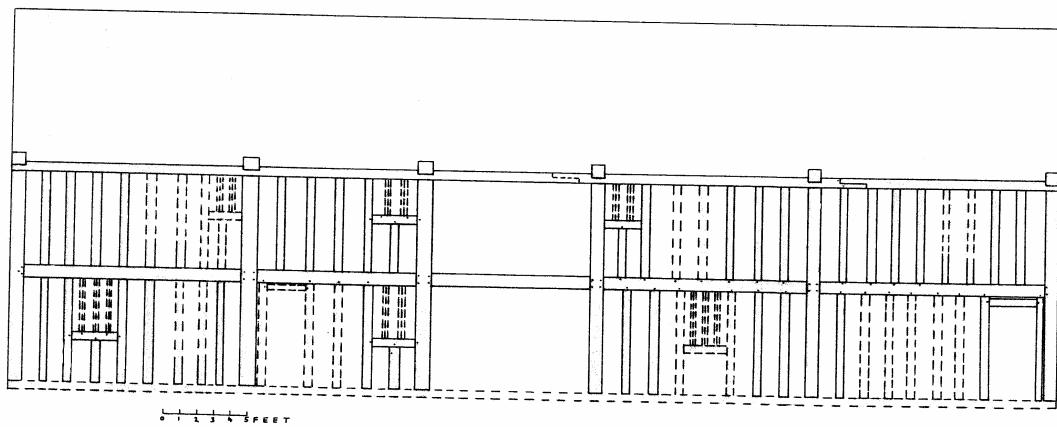


Figure 4: Flispes, Easthorpe, rear elevation

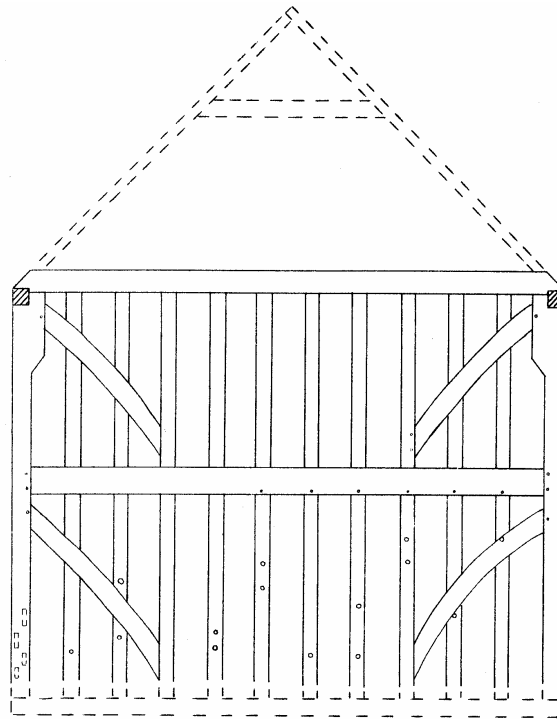


Figure 5: Flispes, Eastthorpe, truss K/L

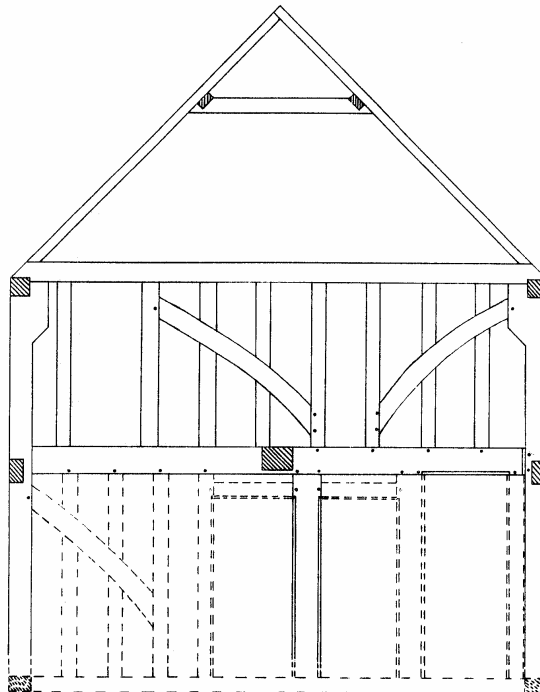


Figure 6: Flispes, Eastthorpe, truss I/J

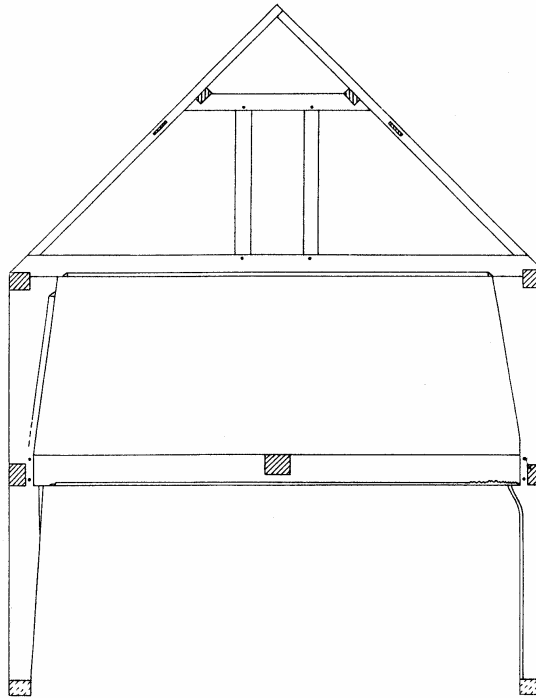


Figure 7: Flispes, Eastthorpe, truss G/H

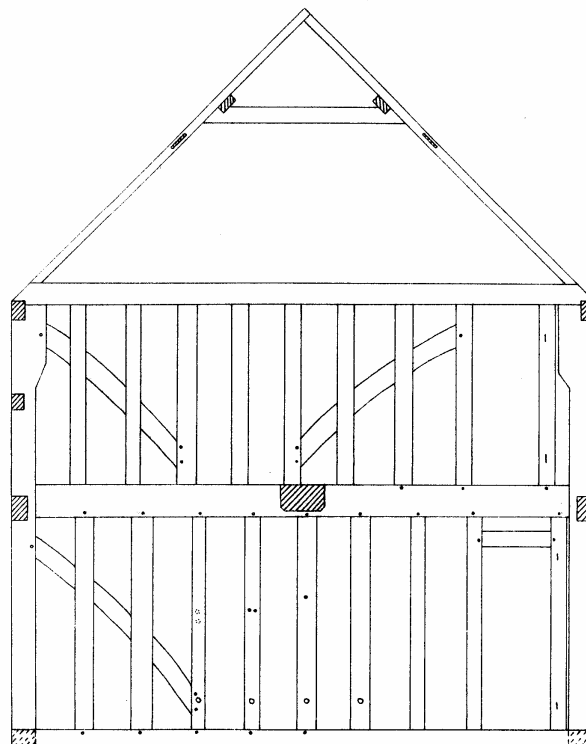


Figure 8 : Flispes, Eastthorpe, truss E/F

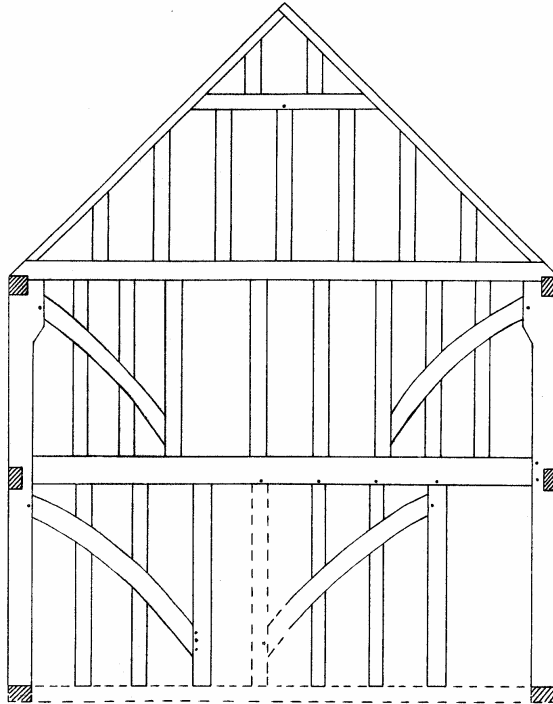


Figure 9 : Flispes, Eastthorpe, truss C/D

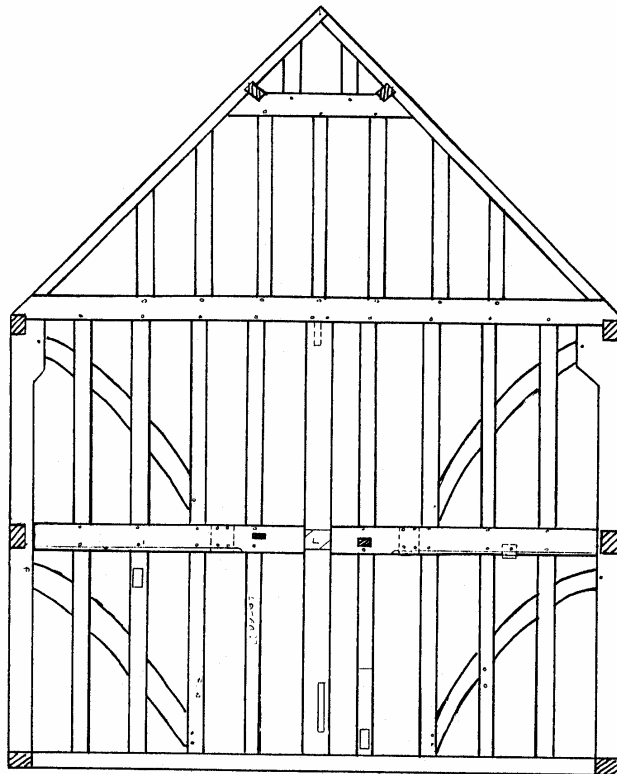


Figure 10 : Flispes, Eastthorpe, truss A/B

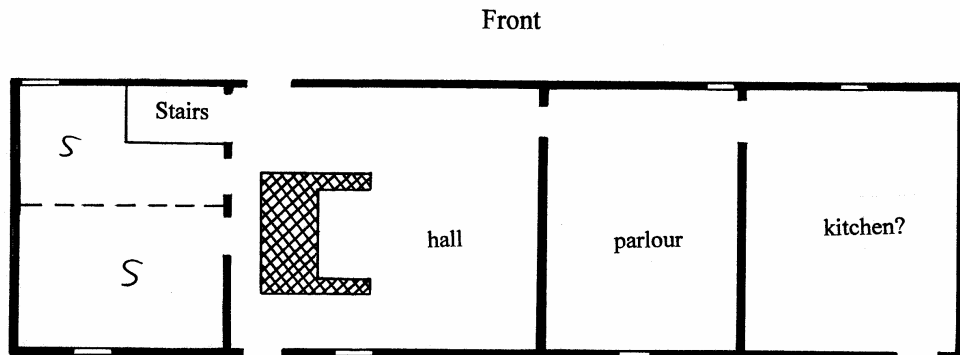
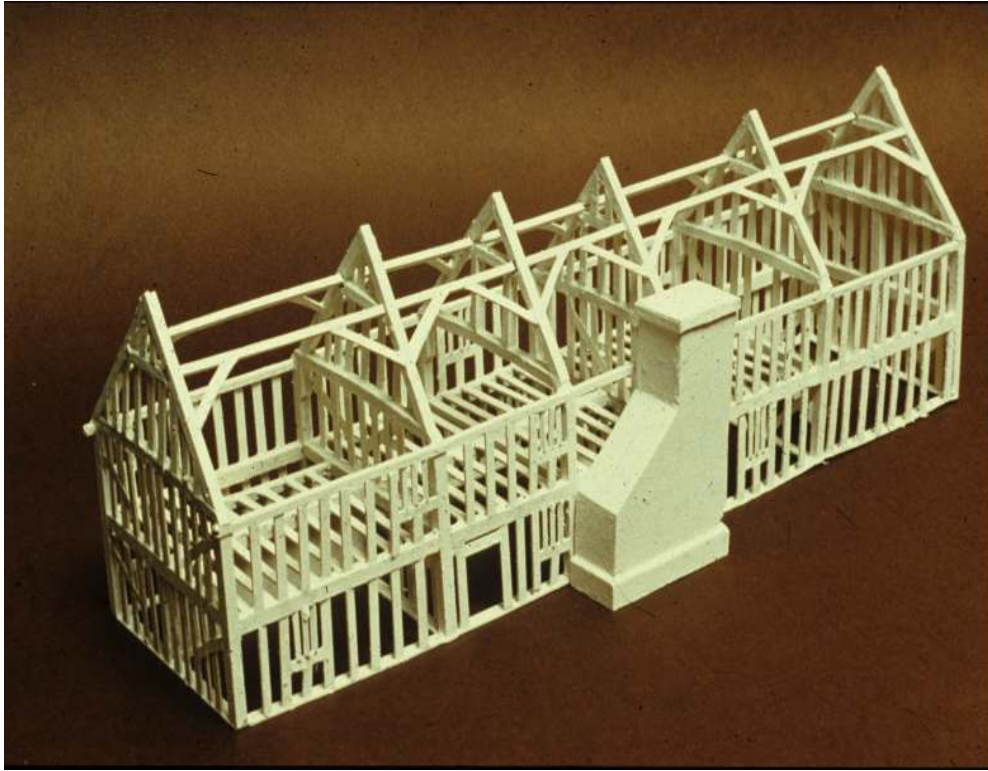


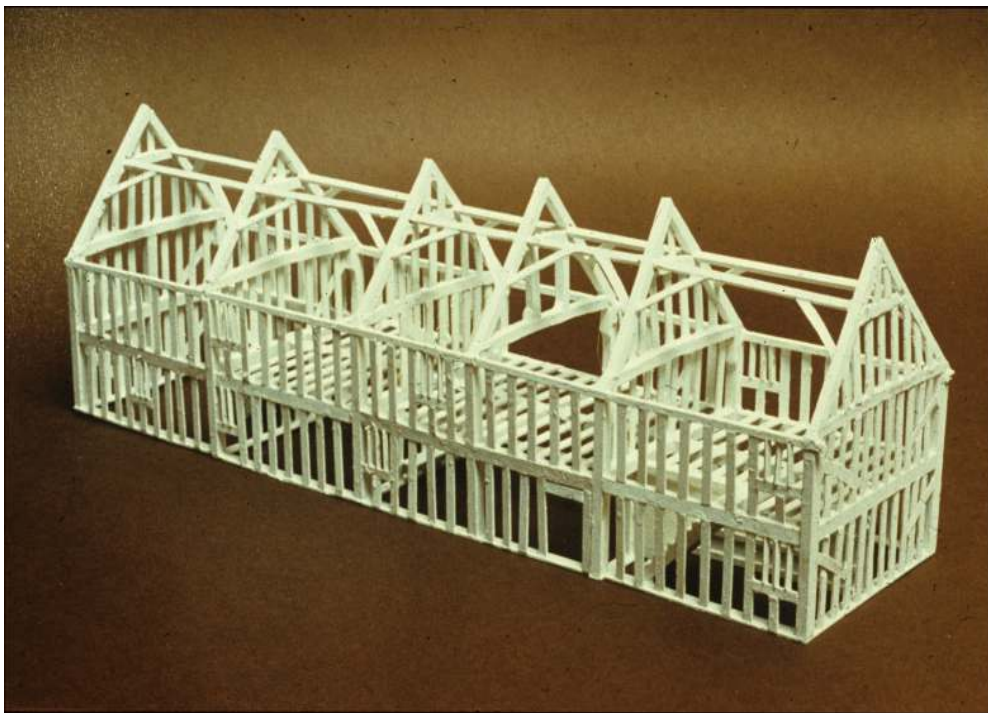
Figure 11 : Flispes, Eastthorpe, plan of phase 2



Flispes, Eastthorpe, after renovation, with bay window replacing chimney stack.



Flispes, Easthorpe: Model - View to South-East



Flispes, Easthorpe: Model - View to South-West