

A PRIOR'S MANSION AT MICHELMERSH

by EDWARD ROBERTS

INTRODUCTION

Michelmersh lies a few miles north of Romsey beside the river Test. It has long been known that the Manor Farm there contains medieval stonework (Suckling 1914, xxiv) but recent restoration has revealed a fourteenth-century solar range virtually intact and the fragmentary remains of two other medieval buildings. These surviving structures were only part of a mansion, or large country residence, belonging to the priory of St Swithun, the cathedral priory of Winchester.

The chief documentary sources for a study of the scale and nature of this mansion are fourteen manorial *compotus* rolls dating from 1248 to 1326 in Winchester Cathedral Library (Drew 1943, 86) and two early fifteenth-century *compotus* rolls in the Hampshire Record Office (HRO 5M50/2691–2).

PRIORY ESTATES IN HAMPSHIRE

By the late Middle Ages, St Swithun's was a long-established and wealthy priory holding about thirty manors, of which a few were scattered widely across several southern counties but most were concentrated in Wiltshire and Hampshire (Drew 1947b, 20–2; Greatrex 1978, xx–xxi). Some, probably the majority, of these manors were centred upon nothing grander than a home farm, offering no more in living accommodation than a hall and chamber (but not a *camera domini* – see below). At others, the home farm stood alongside the prior's country mansion. Such mansions, sometimes called 'monastic granges', differed little in plan from the seignorial residences of wealthy laymen, and were used as staging posts and country retreats by the priors and their favoured friends and officials (Platt 1969,

12–20). Indeed, the St Swithun's *compotus* rolls show that the prior lived as a great feudal lord with a retinue of officials and servants. He paid frequent visits to his several country houses in Hampshire, sometimes for extended periods during which there was much feasting and possibly some hunting too, for many of the houses had associated deer parks (Fig 1; Kitchin 1892, 33–4; Greatrex 1973 ii, xxxiii, lxiii; Drew 1939, 1943 and 1945 *passim*).

As a general rule, it seems that the prior's mansions had a *camera domini* or private chamber for the prior, additional rooms for his household or visitors, a chapel and a gatehouse. Often they were built of stone or, in the case of Silkstead, of brick (Drew 1939, 99). Michelmersh fulfilled all these criteria, as we shall see, but elsewhere the evidence is less complete and it is possible that the mansions shown in figure 1 were not all of equal status. Crondall was stone-built, had a *camera domini* and separate accommodation for visiting monks (WCL *com* 1379, 1399, 1451, 1465). At Hurstbourne Priors there were, besides the *camera domini*, a gate-house and a stable for the lord prior's horses (WCL *com* 1270, 1312). At Wootton St Lawrence, sometimes known as Manydown, there was 'a house of considerable pretensions' with a lord's chamber, a *camera armigerorum* (or squires' chamber), a chapel, and a park and gardens (Kitchen 1895, 4–5; WCL *com* 1346, 1378, 1395, 1398), and at Silkstead and Chilbolton there were, besides lord's chambers, chapels and rooms for other officials (Drew 1945, i 42; Drew 1947a, iii 37–8). Even senior priory officials had their country mansions. The hordarian had one at Woolstone, Berks. (Greatrex 1989, 9), and the almoner had his mansion at Hinton Ampner with a dovecote, a stone-walled garden, a chamber with a chimney made of stone, a hall, a chapel and a parlour. In 1496, one or both of

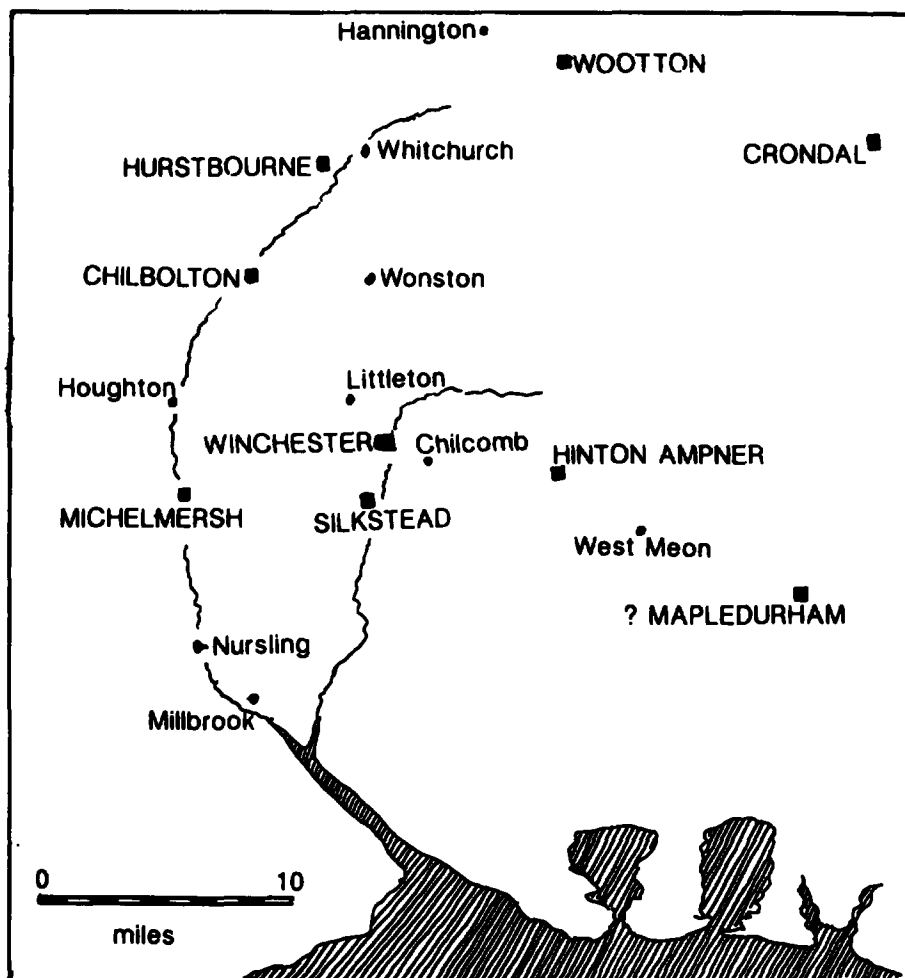


Fig 1. Some country residences or mansions of St Swithun's Priory in Hampshire. Mansions are in capitals. Manors where there was apparently only a home farm are in lower case. (Manorial estates based on Greatrex 1978, xx-xxi).

the latter were floored with paving-tiles at some expense (WCL *com* 1371, 1377, 1496).

Sadly, there are few surviving buildings to match the wealth of evidence supplied by the documents. Perhaps the most important remains of a house of the prior of St Swithun's are at Winchester. Here, in the Cathedral close, is a thirteenth-century porch giving access to a fifteenth-century, first-floor hall with a magnificent roof (Crook 1987, 127-133). However, of the prior's country retreats, there is little now to be seen. Only traces remain of

his manor houses at Manydown (Kitchen 1895, 4-5, 179; VCH Hants iv, 239-240) or at Silkstead, pulled down early in the last century (Drew 1939, 99, 130; Turnbull 1986), or of his probable mansion at Mapledurham near Petersfield (VCH Hants iii, 85-6; Yates 1976, 15, 20-21). His manor house at Chilbolton has been swept away (VCH Hants iii, 403), and the same fate has befallen his mansions at Hurstbourne Priors (Greatrex 1978, 191; VCH iv, 288) and at Crondall (Butterfield 1948, 17, 24). Against this sorry background of destruction

and decay, Michelmersh Manor Farm assumes a special importance. For, incomplete though the remains are, nowhere else will we find buildings which offer a clearer impression of the former appearance of the prior's country houses in Hampshire.

THE PRIOR'S MANSION AT MICHELMERSH: THE DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The manor of Michelmersh had belonged to St Swithun's Priory since before the Conquest (VCH Hants iii, 424) and, situated on an ancient route from Winchester into Wiltshire, it admirably suited the prior as a staging post on his way to the priory's western manors. Moreover, being within easy riding distance of Winchester along a good road, it became a favoured resort for members of the monastery – as the *compotus* rolls amply testify (Drew 1943, 5, 51–2). Records of a manor house there begin with the *compotus* roll of 1248, and subsequent rolls record a typical country residence of a feudal dignitary. The courtyard area was bounded by west and east gatehouses, one of which was rebuilt in 1270 with a first-floor chamber and slated roof (Drew 1943, 112, 137, 191). There was a chapel and a hall called 'the lord's hall' in 1311, a name which may suggest a relatively grand structure. It was probably adjacent to the prior's private suite, although this is only implied by a somewhat obscure entry in the *compotus* roll of 1283 which seems to refer to a feature, possibly a chimney, at the east end of the chamber of the hall, *ad cap[u]d orientale cam[er]e aul[ar]e* (Drew 1943, 149, 176, 204; WCL *com* 1283). There were more chambers with private rooms or garderobes, both for the squires and for visiting monks (Drew 1943, 89–90, 149, 176, 246, 260). There were also a bailiff's chamber, a pantry and a butler's cellar (Drew 1943, 204, 231). This impressive complex was completed by a great garden with an apple orchard for cider-making, and a large home farm comprising great and small barns, stables, a granary, a cartshed, cattlesheds, pigsties, a dovecote and

a wellhouse (Drew 1943, 89–90, 112, 136, 149, 162, 189; HRO 5M50/2691–2).

There is no record of the construction of the mid fourteenth-century solar range which, with its spacious solar or great chamber and fine roof, typifies a nationwide improvement of monastic residences in the later middle ages (Fig 2; Platt 1984, 152–6). Clearly the wealth of the priory was such that, in spite of occasional setbacks and a long period of economic depression, the priors could be provided with a seignorial country retreat and a lifestyle to match (Watkin 1946, 90; Platt 1969, 94). It was a lifestyle which the prior still enjoyed when, in 1428, he stayed at Michelmersh on several occasions (HRO 5M50/2692).

In 1496, Tristram Fauntleroy was granted a lease of the lands and 'interior of the manor [house] . . . on the understanding that the chamber with its attached outbuildings which lies on the eastern side of the great hall will be reserved for the prior . . .' (Greatrex 1978, 188–9). This clause is significant. It shows, if the compass bearing is to be believed, that there was a lost suite of rooms for the prior at the east end of the hall as well as the great chamber in the solar range to the north (Fig 2). This view is supported by a reference to roofing the hall, chamber and chapel in 1307 which may suggest that they formed one block, whereas the surviving solar range is divided from the hall by a 'corridor' building or block B (WCL *com* 1307). Further support may come from the obscure entry of 1283 which seems to refer to a hall-chamber with a chimney (WCL *com* 1283; Drew 1943, 149), for the great chamber in the solar range could hardly be described as a hall-chamber standing as it does some way off from the hall, nor has any evidence of a chimney been found there. If indeed there were chambers for the prior both on the north and east sides of the hall, one might suggest that the great chamber in the surviving solar range was the prior's state apartment while the lost chamber with outbuildings to the east of the hall was his private suite. If so, it was the use of the latter that he chose to retain when the manor was leased,

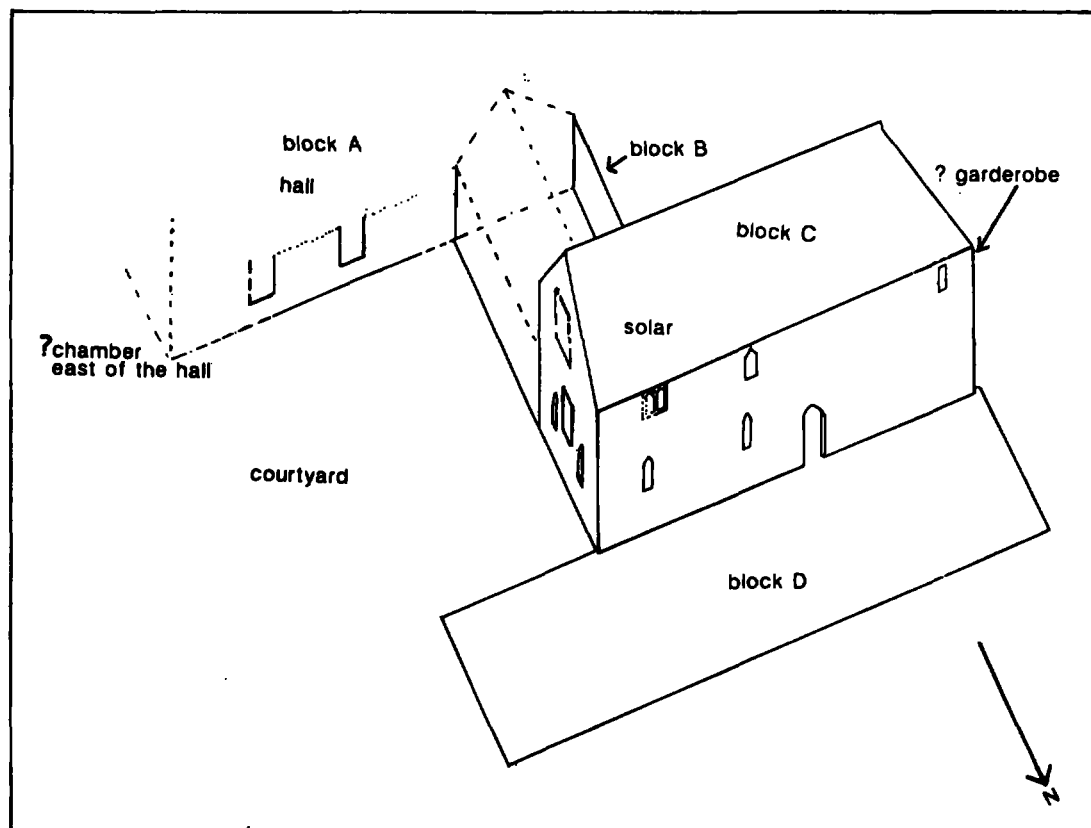


Fig 2. A reconstruction of part of Michelmersh Manor as it may have appeared c 1500. The site of the post-medieval farmhouse (block D) has also been marked.

leaving the solar range to Fauntleroy. Regardless of whether two separate chamber blocks were built at Michelmersh, the multiplication of living rooms on either side of the hall was certainly a not uncommon feature of seignorial establishments elsewhere (Evans 1949 113–4; Faulkner 1958, 170–3; Roberts, forthcoming).

After the suppression of St Swithun's priory, Michelmersh manor was granted to Sir William Sidney whose chief residence was at Penshurst Kent. The grant refers to '*the hall, parlor, and the chambers, with botery, pantre, and kechyn of the inner mancon [which] had bene reserved for the lorde for his repayre*' (Wilkinson 1867, 4; Suckling 1914, xxvi; Nicolson 1978, 28). In 1606, Michelmersh passed to Sir Thomas

Stewkley of Hinton Ampner in east Hampshire whose descendants held the manor until recently (Wilkinson 1867, 6; VCH Hants iii, 425; Dutton 1968, 38). Thus, for several centuries, Michelmersh was an outlying estate. Although the members of the Stewkley family were occasionally resident there in the mid seventeenth century (Suckling 1914, xxvii), they generally resided at some distance and had little incentive to tear down and rebuild the old mansion which, on the evidence of the present appearance of the great hall, may simply have been allowed to decay gently. In the eighteenth century a new farmhouse was built with a fine staddle barn (Doughty 1988, 12). Fortunately, the medieval solar range was preserved as a service wing behind the

farmhouse and the small 'corridor' building (block B on Figs 2 and 4) was converted into a back kitchen or brewhouse when its floor joists were removed to accommodate a chimney (*pers comm* Mr F J Green). The medieval east elevation of these buildings was drawn by Buckler in 1822 (Fig 3), but many original interior features remained obscured when Pevsner viewed the house (Pevsner 1967, 335). These were exposed in the early 1980s through a sensitive restoration by Mr Keith Bennett, architect, for Mr and Mrs J Harvey.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE BUILDINGS

The Manor Farmhouse is composed of four linked structures or blocks (Fig 4). Of these,

blocks A, B and C are medieval and have external walls of flint rubble with ashlar quoins. Block D is mainly brick-built and post-medieval.

Block A: the hall

Only a fragment of the north wall of this block survives. It has two wide windows whose sills are about six feet above the original ground level. The window jambs rise a further four ft six ins, but the window arches and the upper wall are destroyed. The shape and placement of these windows strongly suggest that this block was a ground-floor hall; but when was it constructed? The broad double chamfers of the jambs could indicate a thirteenth-century

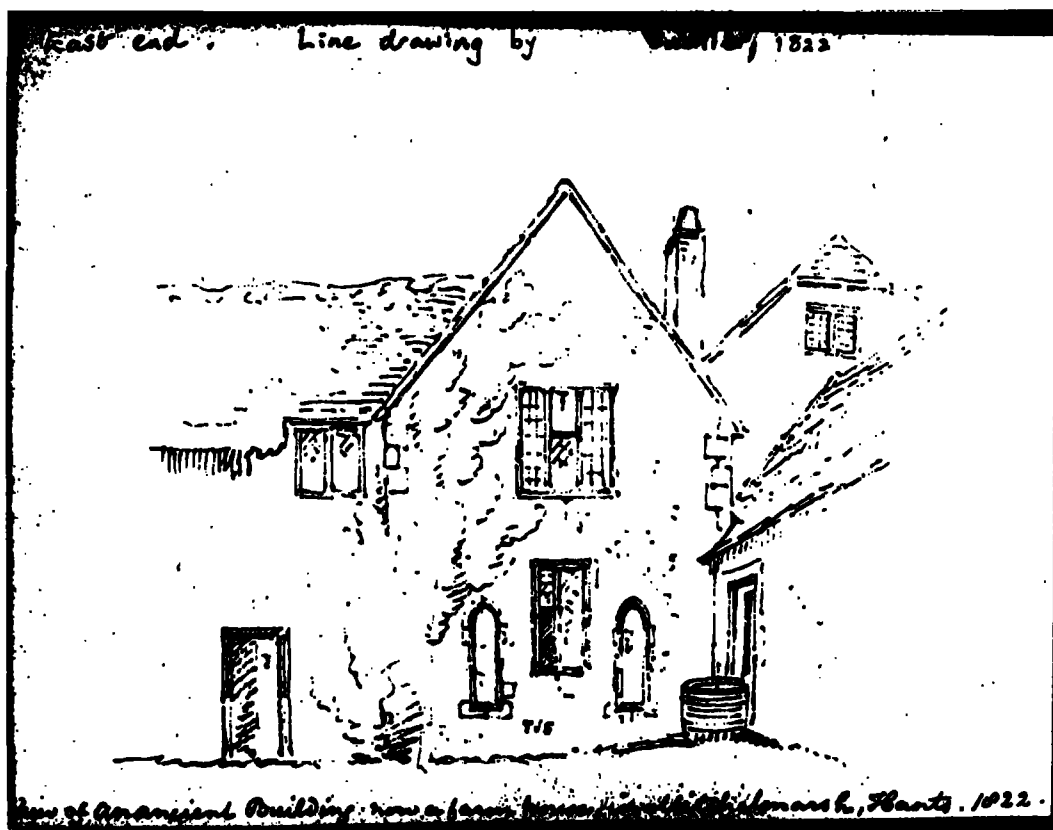


Fig 3. A drawing of the Manor Farm by J Buckler in 1822, showing the east end of the solar (centre) and parts of block B (left) and of block D (right). (By permission of the British Library: BL Add Mss 36363.)

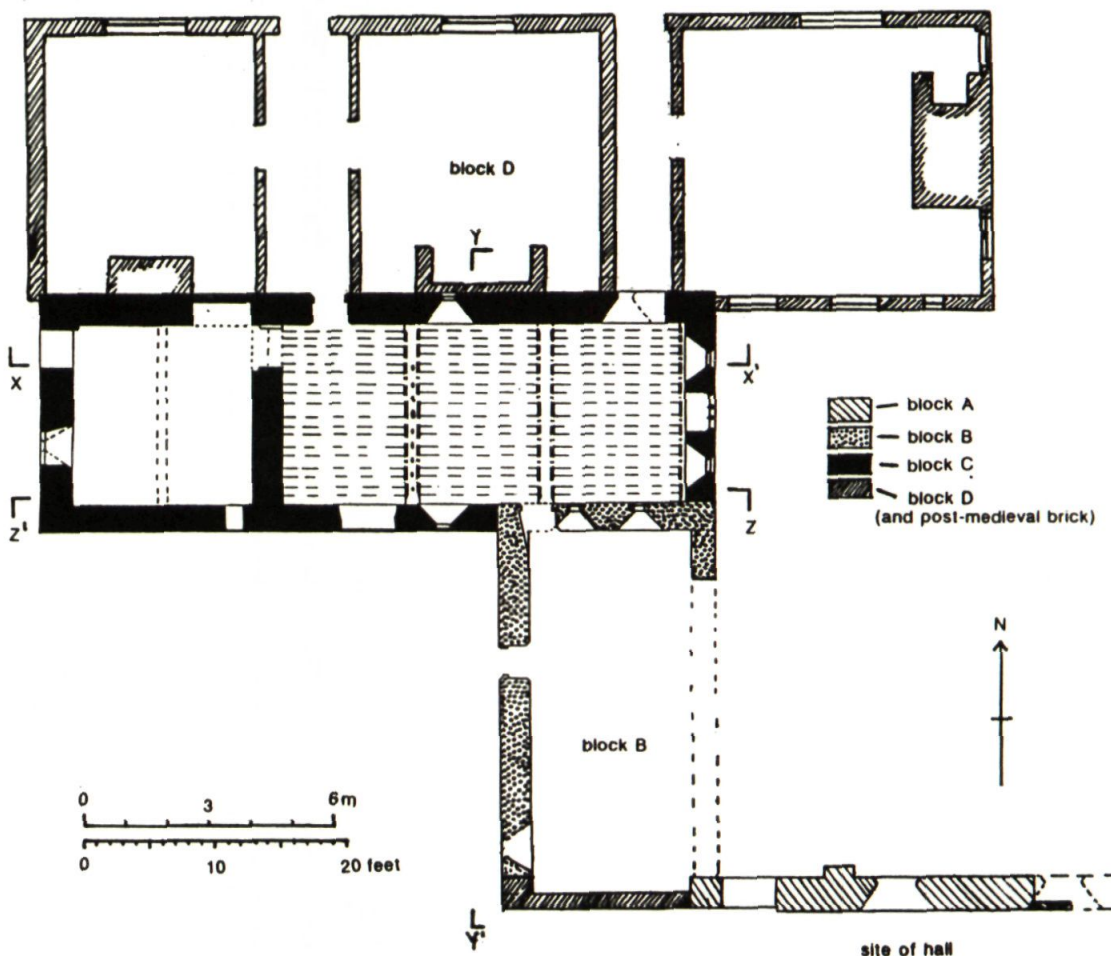


Fig 4. A plan of the Manor Farm, Michelmersh.

date (*pers comm* Mr R Hubbock). This suggestion is supported by the evidence of excavations which showed that the footings of the east wall of block B (which was built *c* 1300) are built up to – and thus post-date – block A (TVAT 714; *pers comm* Mr F J Green).

Block B

This block was until recently in a dilapidated state but the west and north walls remain substantially intact. The surviving windows in both these walls show that they were originally external (Fig 4).

It is now a single-storey structure, and was probably built as such. This is suggested partly by the even height from original ground level (about eight ft six ins) of its surviving walls, but mainly by the way in which its north wall was raised when block C was added (see below). The shape and modest size of block B suggest that it could have served as a corridor or pentice leading from the hall to the prior's private apartment – similar to the arrangement at Charing Palace, Kent (Kipps 1933, 78). It might also have led – through its west door – to another building now demolished (Figs 4 and 5). This door is similar in shape,

moulding and rolled stops to the mid fourteenth-century doorway in the north wall of block C (Figs 5 and 6). Otherwise, block B has few datable features. The small, rectangular windows in its north wall are clearly integral and coeval with the original walling (Fig 7). They have large ashlar quoins and are not comparable to local twelfth-century work, for example at Bishop's Waltham, but could well be of late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century date (*pers comm* Dr J N Hare). This suggests the earliest possible building date for block B and a terminal date is provided by block C, a mid fourteenth-century building which was grafted on to the north wall of block B.

As block C is of two storeys, it was deemed necessary to raise an upper storey upon block B, and to provide access between the two blocks at first-floor level by means of a doorway through a timber-framed partition (Fig 7). Block B was further modified when a round-headed doorway was driven through its north wall, piercing the corner of the building at an awkward angle which necessitated the blocking of an original window (Fig 4). This doorway fails to match any features in block C. Although it could have been an external door before block C was built, it more probably post-dates it. On this view, direct access between blocks B and C was at first only possible at first-floor level.

Block C: a solar range

This large and remarkably well-preserved, fourteenth-century structure is an important example of a residential building in a wealthy monastic manor house. Except for where it abuts block B, its walls (on the evidence of the window-splays) were originally all external and it was thus virtually a detached building.

The first floor contained two rooms. The larger room is a spacious apartment with a roof constructed of curved timbers which could originally have been boarded to create a barrel vault. At the west end is a much smaller room with a roof constructed of straight timbers. The partition between the two rooms, which has been removed, is indicated by this change

in roof design and by stave-holes in the soffit of the collar above a sawn-off tie beam (Fig 6). There are two apparently original windows on this floor: a simple, rectangular light in the smaller room and finely made ogee-headed window in the larger (Plate 3). An early sixteenth-century window – of which one light survives – was inserted at the east end of the north wall (Fig 6), and several post-medieval openings have been made.

It seems fairly clear that the first-floor chamber of block C was a room of very high status, probably reserved for the use of the prior himself. Its great size (38 ft 9 ins × 14 ft 4 ins internally) and finely-carpentered roof can scarcely lead to any other conclusion. It could not have been intended as an open hall for, apart from the lack of any smoke-blackening on the roof, the first-floor walls are offset to receive a floor (Fig 5). Nor is it likely to have been a lodging range for visitors, as there is no sign of internal divisions except the partition which divided off the small chamber at the west end. The humbler quality of the roof and window in this chamber strongly suggest a garderobe or closet leading from the great chamber.

On the ground floor are three rooms of unequal size. At the west end is a small room which still has only one small window. It is now a cellar or pantry and was possibly built as such, although it could have contained the garderobe chute. A thick masonry wall separates it from a central room which, with its outside door, may – in part – have functioned as a screens passage, for it was separated from an eastern chamber by a wooden screen. This screen, although now demolished, is evidenced by stave-holes in the cross-beam or bressumer and by remains revealed by excavations below the nineteenth-century floor surface (TVAT 738; *pers comm* Mr F J Green). The eastern chamber was not only the largest room on the ground floor, but also has the remains of no less than four original, single-light windows (besides the two redundant ones 'inherited' from block B). Moreover, on the arch of both the north and south-facing windows are traces of a vine-scroll decoration in red paint which is



Plate 1. A general view of Michelmersh Manor Farm from the south-east. The ruinous inner wall of the hall (left) almost obscures the low roof of block B. The white-washed east wall of the solar range is right-centre, with part of block D far right (photo: Mr J. Harvey).



Plate 2. The roof at the west end of the solar range. The timbers here are plain and straight as it was thought unnecessary to create an expensive barrel vault over the probable garderobe (photo: Mr J. Harvey).



Plate 3. The refined Decorated window in the north wall of the solar range.

consistent with a mid fourteenth-century date (*pers comm* Mr R Hubbock) and the joists are rebated to receive a boarded ceiling – an unusual and luxurious feature. This was clearly intended as a high-status chamber. Was it part of the prior's private suite? If so, the floor joists do not allow space for internal stairs to connect it to the probable prior's chamber above. (Although external stairs, for which there is no evidence, cannot be ruled out). Was it thus perhaps a steward's or guest's chamber? Certainly, this arrangement of a small storeroom and larger living room below the lord's solar is found in great houses of this period (Faulkner 1958, 160–3), and there were servants chambers below the prior's

chamber at Silkstead near Winchester (Drew 1939, 73).

About 1500, a tall, three-light window – the trefoil heads have recently been rediscovered – was inserted in the east wall to give more light to the lower chamber (Fig 5); an improvement possibly related to Fauntleroy's leasing of the manor.

No evidence has been found for an original chimney stack in spite of the fact that much of the original structure of the solar range survives. This includes most of the walling, the timber roof, the first-floor timber partition to block B, the floor joists and cross-beams, the north ground-floor doorway and several windows. In particular, attention should be drawn to the ogee-headed window on the first floor (Plate 3) for which there is a close parallel, dated 1349, at Merton College, Oxford (Parker 1840 ii, 102) and the barrel-vaulted roof which is of a type described by Hewett as a 'sans-purlin roof with semi-circular archivolt'. Its soffit forms an arch composed of four compassed timbers tenoned into rafters and collars. He assigns this roof-type to the Decorated Period, ending approximately in the mid fourteenth century (Hewett 1982, 13). Had it been later, a sans-purlins roof would have been obsolescent whereas, had it been earlier, halved rather than tenoned joints would be expected (Hewett 1980, 109–110). Thus the evidence points consistently to a mid fourteenth-century date for the solar range.

Block D

The medieval solar range owes its survival to a prudent eighteenth-century conversion. A new brick house (block D) was built with a through-passage leading directly to the north door of the solar range, which was then demoted to a service wing (Fig 4).

Medieval stonework

From the surviving structures, we may deduce that the medieval residential buildings were mainly stone-built. Blocks B and C both have a mixture of Binsted and Quarr stone dressings.

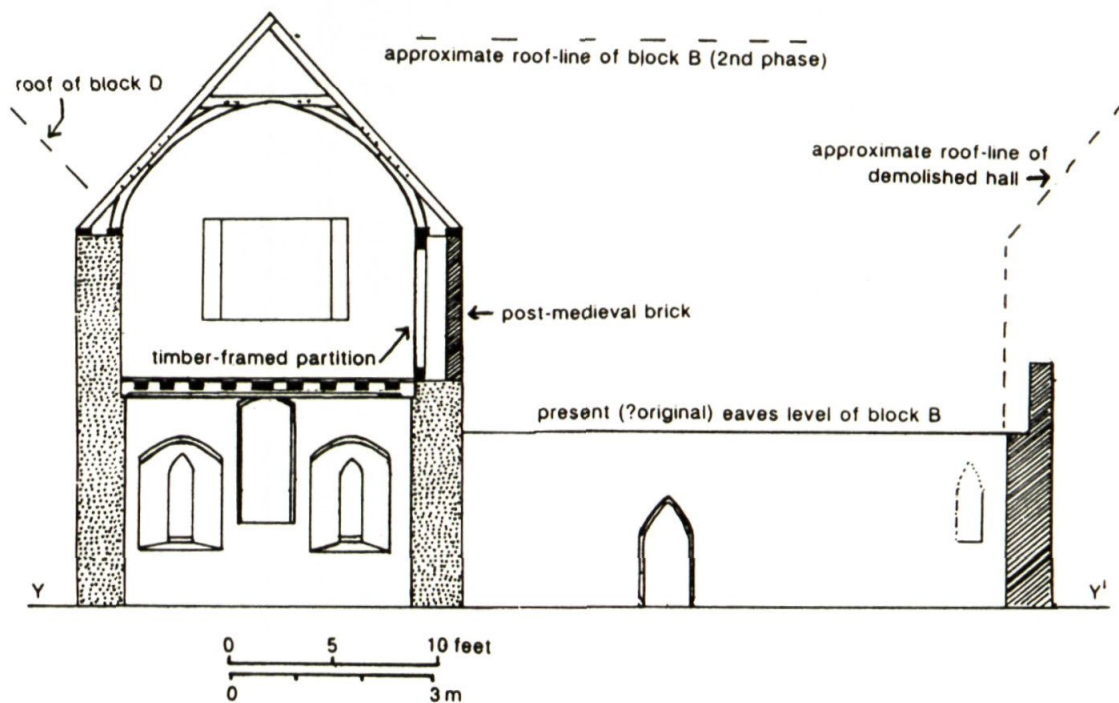


Fig 5. A cross section through block C, showing the west elevation of block B. Note the timber partition which separated blocks B and C at first-floor level. (In section, brick walling is cross-hatched and stone is stippled.)

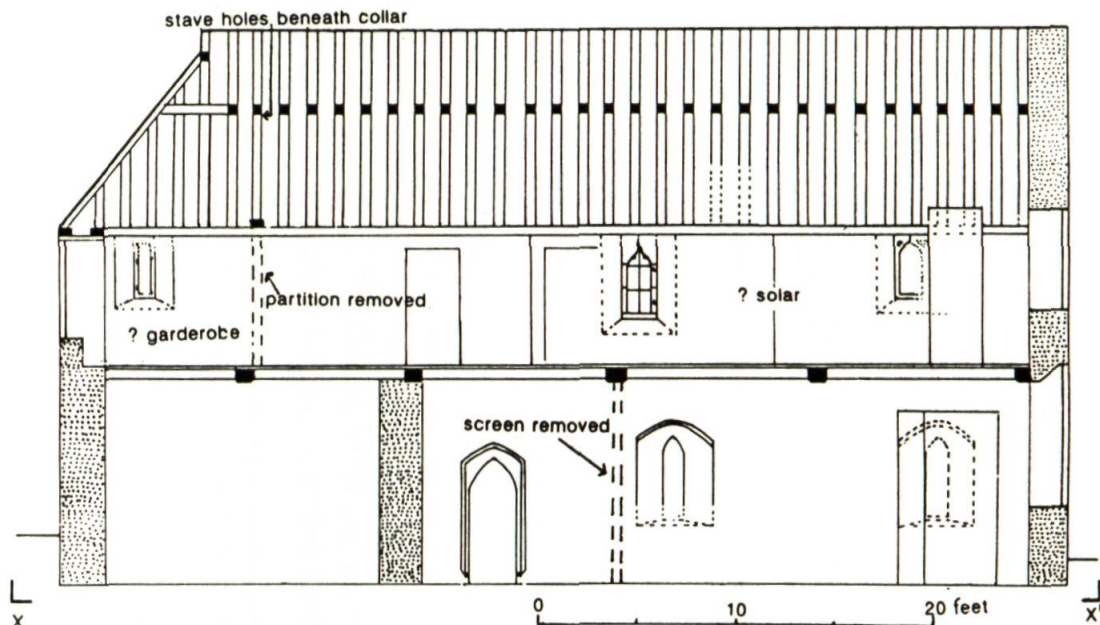


Fig 6. Long section of the solar range.

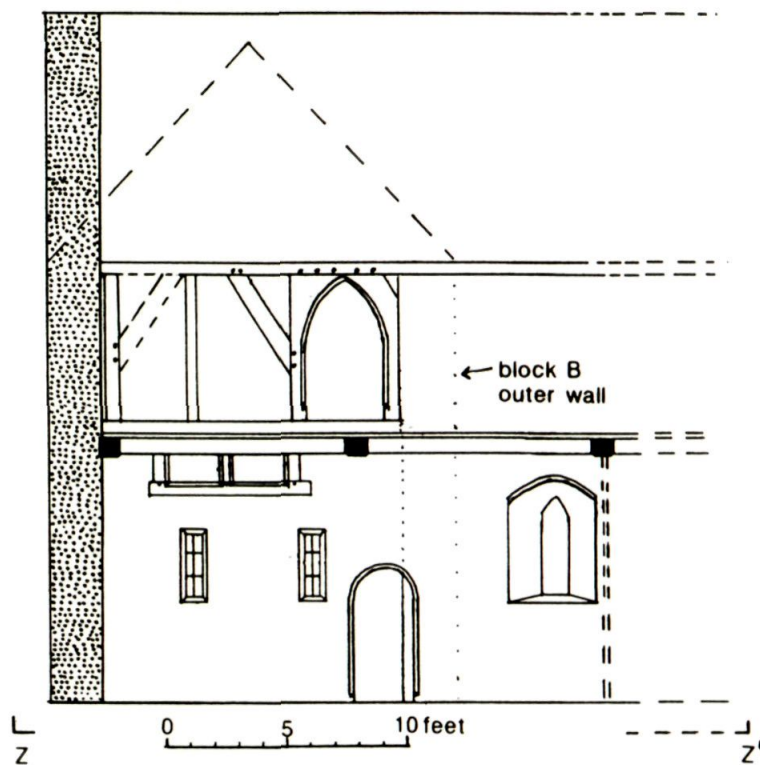


Fig 7. Part of the internal south wall of the solar range, showing (at ground floor level) the small rectangular windows which were originally external to block B. The round-headed door below and the arched door above gave access between block B and the solar range.

The north wall of block A (the hall) contains Caen and Binsted stone, with Bath stone dressings – probably from Westwood – to the window openings. There is also some Bath stone – possibly also from Westwood – re-used in the west, brick wall of block D (*pers comm* Mr K Bennett). Unfortunately, the *compotus* rolls record little about the source of building stone, except for the carts sent from Michelmersh between 1324 and 1326 to collect stone from the priory's manor at Westwood near Bath (Drew 1943, 50, 246, 261). However, this event cannot be clearly related to any of the present structures.

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REFERENCES

Abbreviations

BL = British Library.

HRO = Hampshire Record Office.

WCL = Winchester Cathedral Library.

(Note: the manorial *compotus* rolls of St Swithun's Priory run from Michaelmas to Michaelmas and thus span two consecutive years. I give the date of the final year so that 1248 refers to 1247/48. The rolls at WCL lack a call number at present: thus I have simply given as a reference the word 'com' followed by the relevant date).

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