

GREAT BRITAIN

Peter Smith

Tŷ-Mawr

Tŷ-Mawr standing in the parish of Castell Caereinion near Welshpool, Montgomeryshire was discovered in the course of my survey of Welsh vernacular architecture. This survey was later published by the Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments in Wales under the title *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* as a contribution to Architectural Heritage Year 1975. The authorities agreed that the house was of an architectural quality worthy of conservation and restoration, but were long undecided whether to restore *in situ* or to remove and re-erect in a museum.

Tŷ-Mawr has been dated by dendrochronology to 1460. It was built as a half-timbered aisled and base-cruck hall-house. The open hall, originally heated by an open hearth, stood between storeyed inner and outer units, a common enough form of house in late medieval Wales. It has, however, two surprising features. The first was the extensive use of aisled construction. The second surprise was that such ambitious craftsmanship should be incorporated in a "long-house", that is a house so arranged that cattle tethered alongside the passage partition would have been visible to those seated at the "High Table" in the hall.

The house had been "modernised" in the sixteenth century when a framed fireplace backing on the dais partition replaced the open hearth, and not long afterwards a chamber was inserted into the roof space above the hall. Later the original lateral walls were destroyed and replaced on a new alignment.

The restoration posed two groups of questions. The first was whether to remove and re-erect in a museum or restore *in situ*. Re-erection in a museum would have made it accessible to a

large number of visitors. At the same time it would have been possible to restore it exactly to its ancient appearance without any concessions to modernity, and therefore of great educational value. However, it would have meant robbing the landscape of an ancient historic feature and placing the house in an alien environment. It was also doubtful if some of the more fragile parts of the structure would have survived transportation.

Restoring *in situ* would have avoided some of these difficulties, but would have limited access, while occupation by a tenant-custodian would have called for some concessions to modern comforts and usage.

The second question was to what period in its history was the house to be restored – as it stood as completed in 1460, which after all was the main reason for restoring it at all, or should some of the later modifications be retained, and if so which.

The final decision, after many years of deliberation was to restore *in situ* with the necessary concessions to the comforts of a resident family, but conforming as closely as practicable to the house as it would have appeared after the remarkable fireplace had been inserted but before the floor had been built over the hall. The lateral walls were restored on the analogy of the still surviving end walls. While the open hall was restored in all its splendour the ancient byre was made into inhabitable living space.

The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors clearly approved the decision taken and the quality of work achieved when it nominated Tŷ-Mawr "Building of the Year" for the year 2000.

Tŷ-Mawr, the exterior

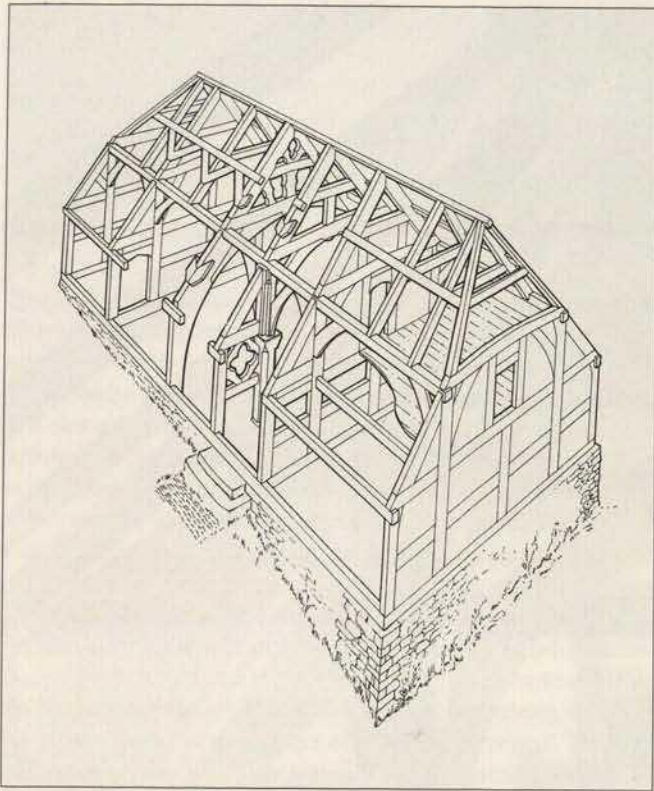




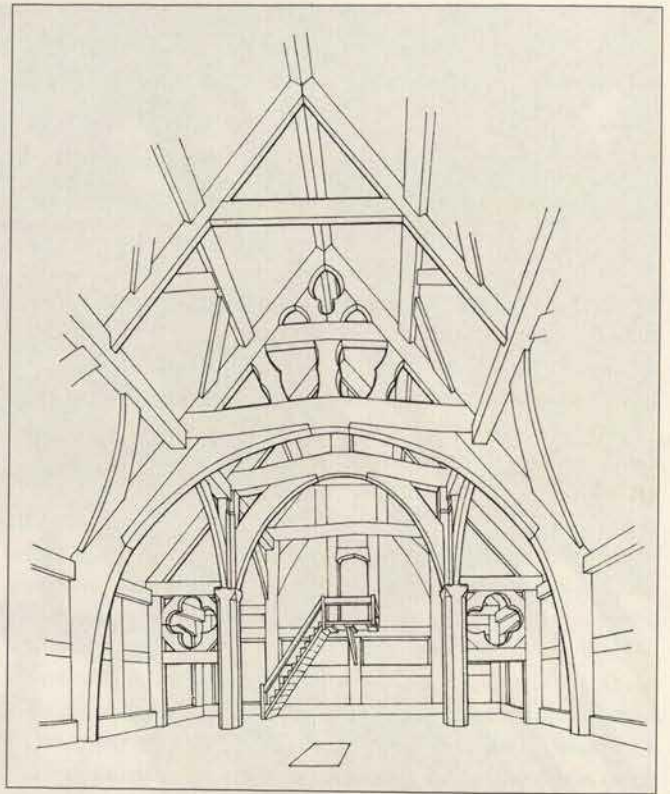
Tŷ-Mawr, the hall

The interior of the hall is a masterpiece of traditional Welsh architecture. The high, vaulted ceiling is supported by a complex network of dark wooden beams and trusses, which are intricately carved and joined. The floor is paved with large, irregular stone tiles, which add to the rustic and historic atmosphere of the room. In the foreground, there is a patterned sofa on the left and a wooden dining table with chairs on the right. A staircase with a simple wooden railing leads to an upper level in the background. The walls are made of stone or plaster, with some decorative elements like a circular opening in the wall. The overall atmosphere is rustic and historic.

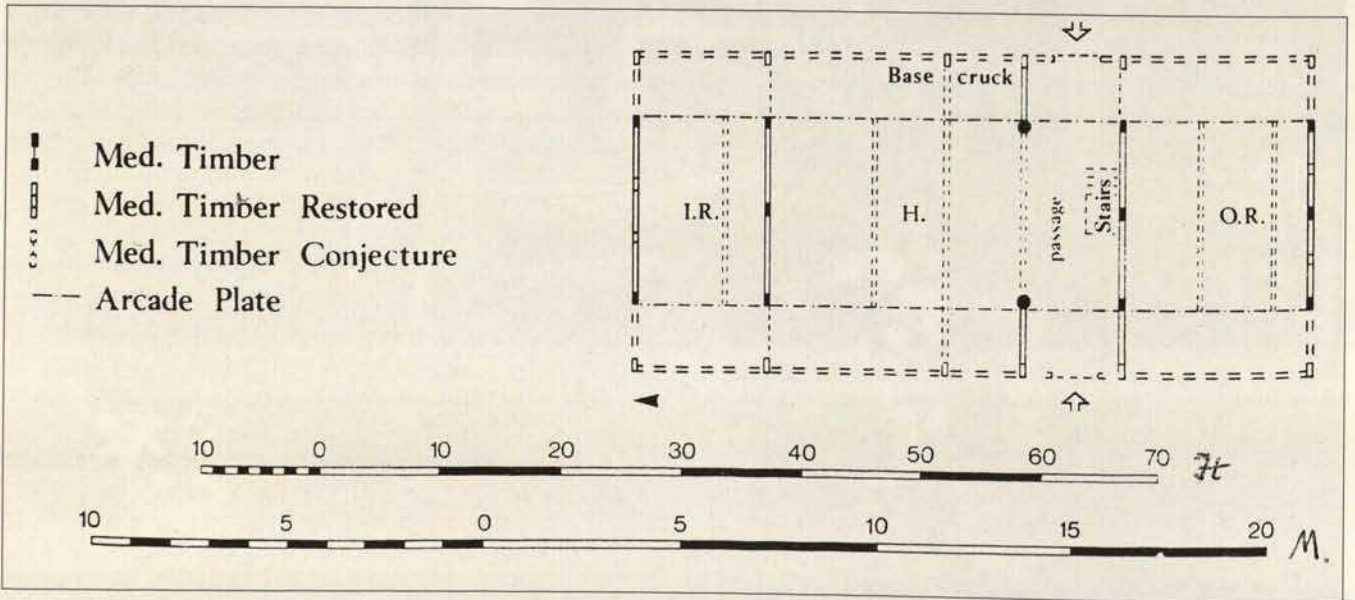
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Cutaway drawing of Tŷ-Mawr, showing the mixed aisled and base-crucc construction



Drawing of the hall



Drawing illustrating the age of the timber