

TUDOR MERCHANT'S HOUSE, TENBY. PRN 8886

During renovation work in 1984 of the Tudor Merchant's House, Tenby, the opportunity arose for limited recording and survey work. Several problems were posed by the building as it stood; Were the positions of the doors original? Was the painted partition wall an original feature? When was the house constructed? What was the function of the tower like structure attached to the north east corner of the building? These and other questions have been answered with varying degrees of satisfaction.

In 1938, when the house first came under the ownership of the National Trust, an extensive renovation programme was initiated. Part of this work involved the removal of the majority of the 18th and 19th century floor levels and the insertion of a massive, 35cm thick, concrete raft floor. With the removal of this concrete floor in 1984 four trenches were dug through the surviving early floor levels. In addition a small rock cut cesspit was emptied of its fills, and the area at the base of the chimney was examined.

Two sections across the house, one longitudinal section and one through the cesspit are illustrated.

On the southern and southeastern sides the building was terraced into the hill slope, the walls resting on upstanding plinths of shale bedrock. No evidence of earlier structures was discovered during the excavations. The earliest floor consisted of upstanding blocks of bedrock infilled with crushed shale and mortar (16), over which was laid a thin skim of yellowy-brown mortar (15) sections 1, 2 and 3. This surface of this floor was even and compact, and may have been in use for several decades. No finds were recovered from this early floor layer.

Over the primary floor debris accumulated (12, 53) sections 1,2 and 3. Over the debris white mortar floors were laid piecemeal. Only at the west end of section 1 and the north end of section 3 do these floors survive in any form resembling completeness. Elsewhere the mortar has broken and become mixed with over and underlying layers. Layers 9 and 11, thick white mortar floors, terminate abruptly on two sides. They may have originally butted up to a thin partition wall or screen, perhaps a stair screen as the main floor joist above section is chamfered to provide extra headroom. These floors (9 and 11) are the only indication of early, though not original divisions in the ground floor of the house.

The centre length of section 1 shows several broken mortar floors (19,21 and 23) intermixed with disturbed occupation layers. A trample floor of earth and

ashes,(7) overlaid these floors. Over this trample floor and butting up to the south wall several white mortar floors interleaved with layers of coal dust survived,(2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8).

At the north end of sections 1 and 2 a brick built drain is shown. This drain enters the house through the blocked door shown on the plan, and is presumed to flow out of the house under the front door. The relationship of the drain to the surviving floor levels is uncertain as the bedrock is at a very high level. At the point where section 2 meets the brick drain an earlier drain was discovered. This early, perhaps original drain, is truncated by the brick drain. It would have flowed out under the wall. Its course within the house is unknown, although it is at a much higher level than the brick drain.

Section 2 includes the sleeper beam which supports the painted plaster wall. When the concrete floor was laid in 1938 the majority of the floors associated with the wall were removed leaving the sleeper beam on a pedestal of old floor layers (see section 2). The beam rests on a layer of coal dust below which was a mortar floor preceded by more coal dust,(63) then a layer of shelly mortar (60). It is possible that the wall was underpinned and floor surfaces laid under it. This process is unlikely to have been performed many times, as it would have had to have been to produce the numerous mortar floors shown underneath the wall on section 3. The timber partition wall was, in all probability, constructed relatively late in the building's history.

The area within the massive chimney was archaeologically investigated. It proved, however, to be disturbed by late 19th century activity. A door and a drain had been smashed through the back of the chimney wall destroying all traces of early features and floors. The hearth on the south side of the chimney was of late 19th century construction.

The cesspit beneath the garderobe tower was completely excavated. A drain,80, presumably the source of the brick drain,(28) comprised, with a slate slab floor,(79) the latest feature in the tower below the concrete floor. Pottery from the fill of the drain,(80 and 28), suggests that it was redundant by the middle of the 19th century.

Below the drain was discovered a rock cut cesspit 1.4m deep, 1.4m long and the full width of the garderobe 1.2m. The upper half of the pit had been back-filled with rubble; roofing slate, stone, tile, pottery, mortar, etc. Pottery extracted from this backfill,(84) suggests it was deposited in the early to middle 18th century.

Sealed by the backfill of the pit was a thick organic layer,(85) The very base of the pit was covered in a thin layer of sand(86). Cesspits were

regularly cleaned out. There are numerous references in Medieval and later documents of payments to a "gong farmer" for cleaning out cesspits. At the end of its useful life the cesspit was not cleaned but backfilled. Samples of the deposit, (85) may reveal dietary habits and disease of the inhabitants of the house in the early 18th century.

It seems probable that the drain, (80) is in the position of an earlier drain which would have allowed excess liquid to escape from the garderobe tower. Whether an original drain would have followed the same course as the brick drain (28) is unknown.

The main use of the cesspit would have been from the first floor, where the position of the seat can be seen. On the ground floor the cesspit may have been open, or at least separated from the main room by a door. The purity of the organic deposit, (85) suggests the pit was used only for toilet facilities and not as a general rubbish dump.

The room formed at the front of the house by the insertion of the timber partition wall had no provision for a hearth or chimney. It may have served as a shop or workroom.

Some general observations were made on the house during the excavation work. First the blocked door through which the brick drain makes its entrance. Externally the door has a large stone lintel and jambs. It was probably the original rear entrance to the building.

In 1867 Barnwell states that the tudor Merchant's House and what is now the Plantagenet Restaurant had interconnecting doors and were divided into numerous tenements. These doors, now blocked, can be seen inside the Merchant's House. It is tempting to suggest that the division of the house into tenements, the construction of the brick drain, the blocking of the original door and the building of the timber and painted plaster wall were contemporary, that is late 18th or early 19th century.

On the first floor of the Merchant's House there exists a blocked door of dressed stone with a pointed arched head. The cottage, No.1 Quay Street, is built against the wall in which the door is situated. In 1867 Barnwell states the cottage on the south side of the Merchant's House was uncomfortable close and equally old. The blocked door originally would have led out onto an external stone flight of stairs. This method of access to the first floor was not uncommon in Tenby. Many external steps survived into the early 19th century. Charles Norris sketched and described several buildings with external stairs in 1812. In particular his etching described as "Ancient Cottage adjoining White's House" depicts an external stone stair leading up to the first

floor. He also states "the entrance to many houses was by a narrow flight of steps with a low gothic porch above" and goes on "Every cottage so constructed must have been a little fortification".

On the south east side of Quay Street a house, now Harbour Maisonette, exhibits two blocked doors in its external wall, one on the ground floor and the other at first floor level. Access to the upper door could have only been possible via external steps.

In the Medieval Period the large domestic buildings of South Pembrokeshire were dominated by the first floor hall. They varied in size from the enormous hall at the Bishop's Palace, St. Davids, down to a tiny example at Carswell, near Tenby. They invariably contain stone vaulted floors, and their purpose was primarily defensive. The presence always indicates the upper stratum of the social hierarchy.

In Tenby, the 16th and 17th century buildings, later described by Norris appear to be first floor halls. They were built by merchants and wealthy tradesmen at a time when the design had gone out of fashion for the upper classes. Stone vaulting would have been unnecessary in a walled town. Living on the first floor would not only have been a sign of status but would have elevated the inhabitants above what must have been the squalid conditions of the narrow Tenby streets.

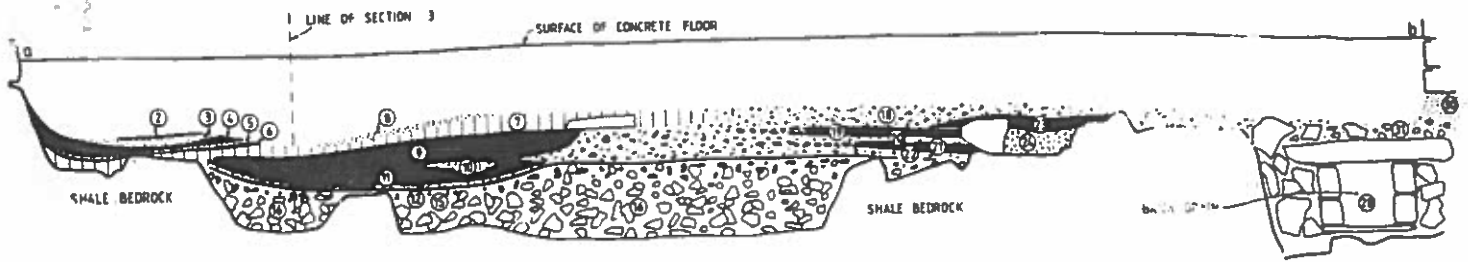
There may originally have been no internal communication between the ground and first floor. The large ground floor may have served as kitchen, warehouse and shop.

An external butt joint on the Merchant's House indicates that the garderobe tower is an addition to the main structure.

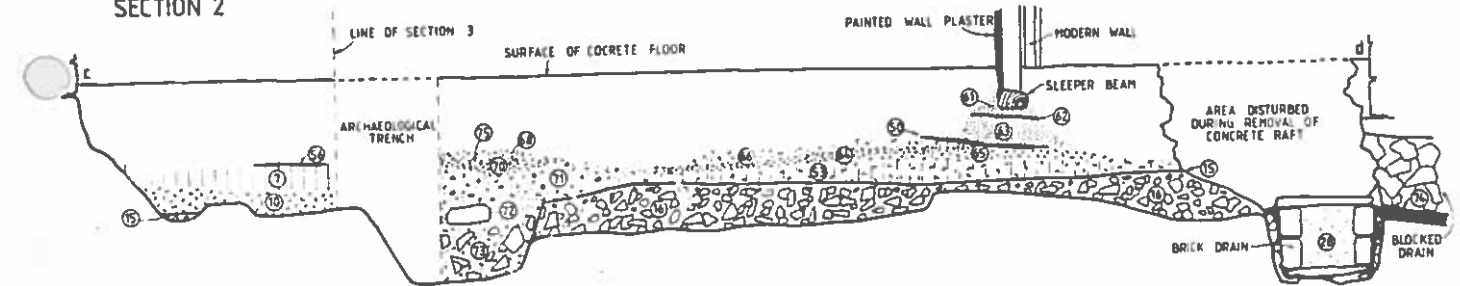
The Plantagenet Restaurant appears to be a similar design to the Tudor Merchant's House but masked behind a later facade and changes in street level. If the steps in Quay Street were removed and the slope restored to its original angle to allow vehicular passage the door to the Plantagenet Restaurant would be some 2m above street level, and access would be via steps. A rear door in the restaurant would also have led out onto a flight of steps into a small yard.

To the rear of the Plantagenet Restaurant stands another early building of three storeys. It is now the kitchen of the Pam Pam Restaurant. It is of a similar size and design to the Plantagenet Restaurant and Tudor Merchant's House.

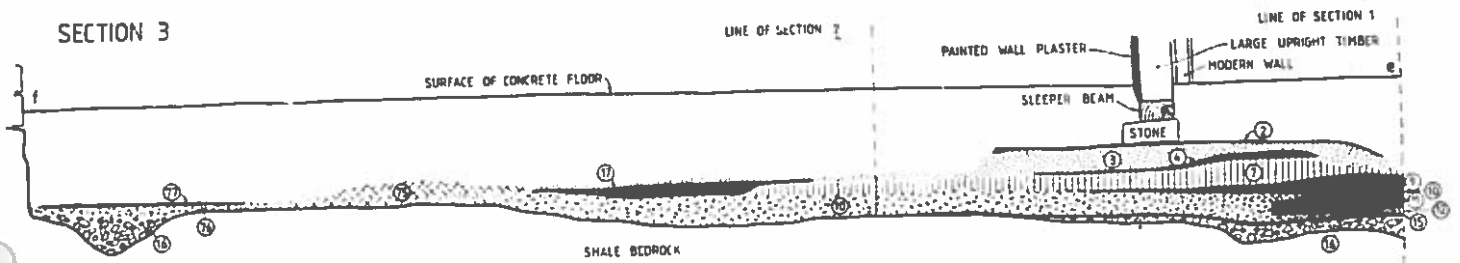
SECTION 1



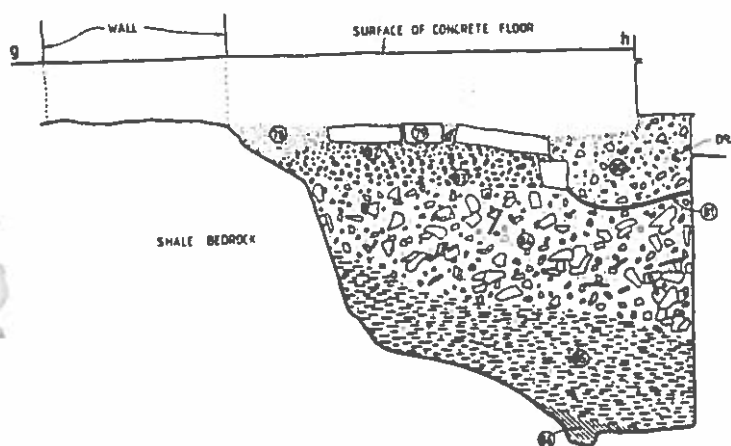
SECTION 2



SECTION 3



SECTION 4

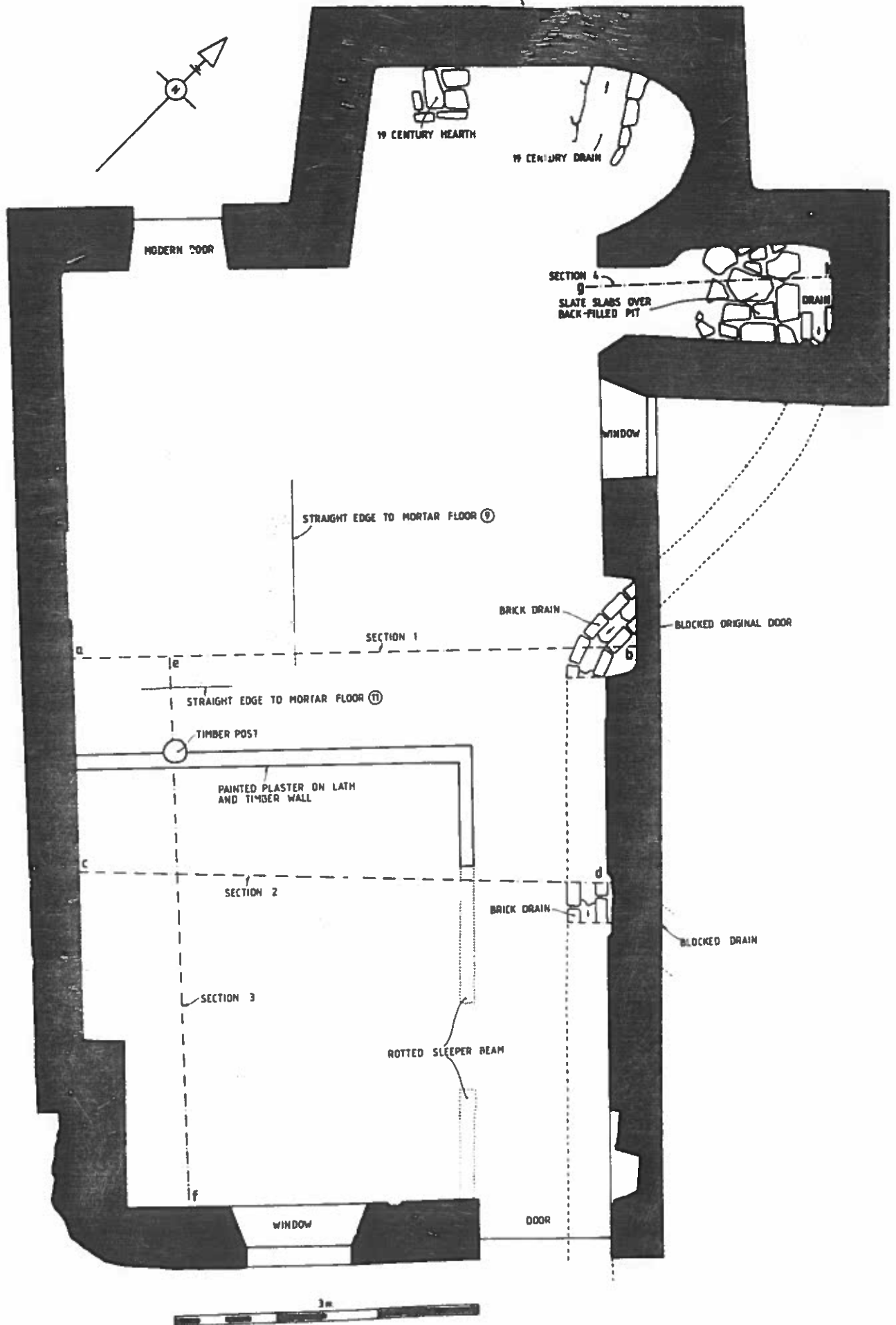


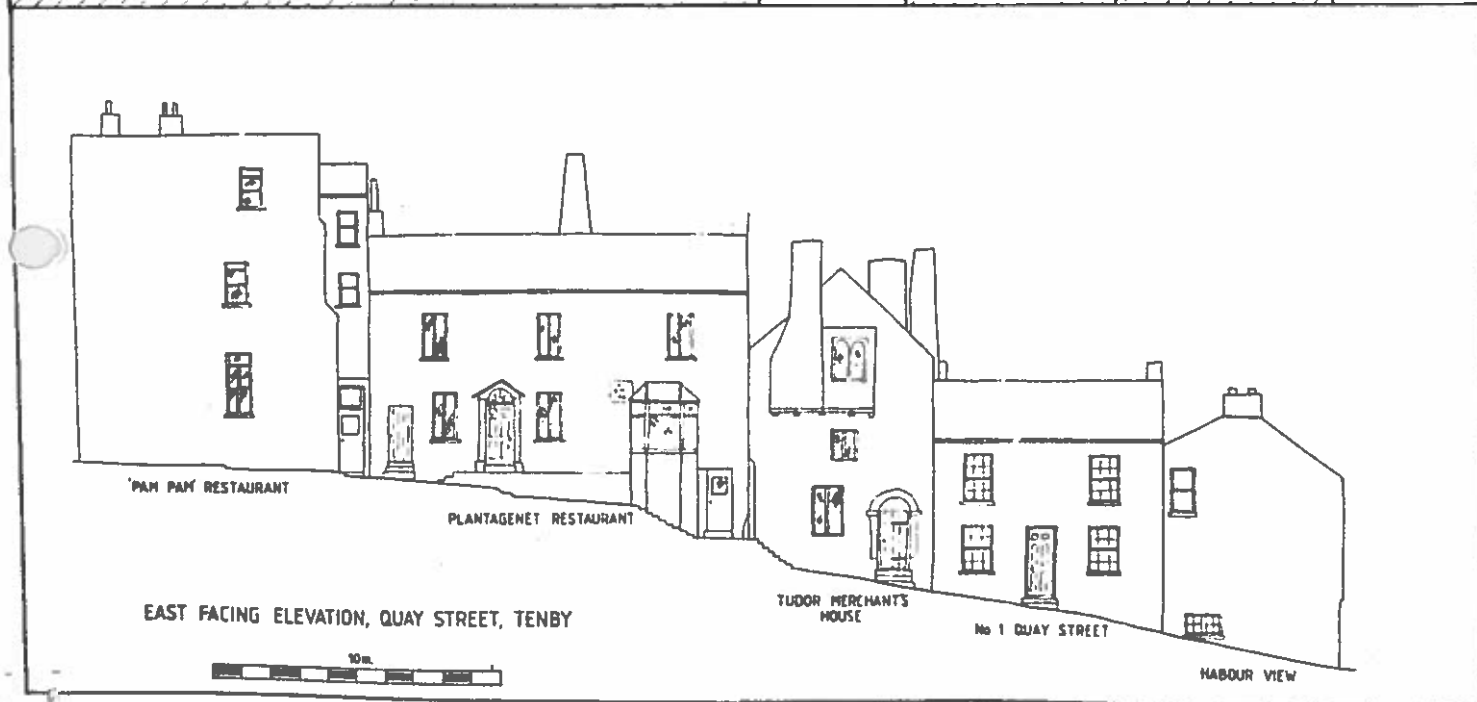
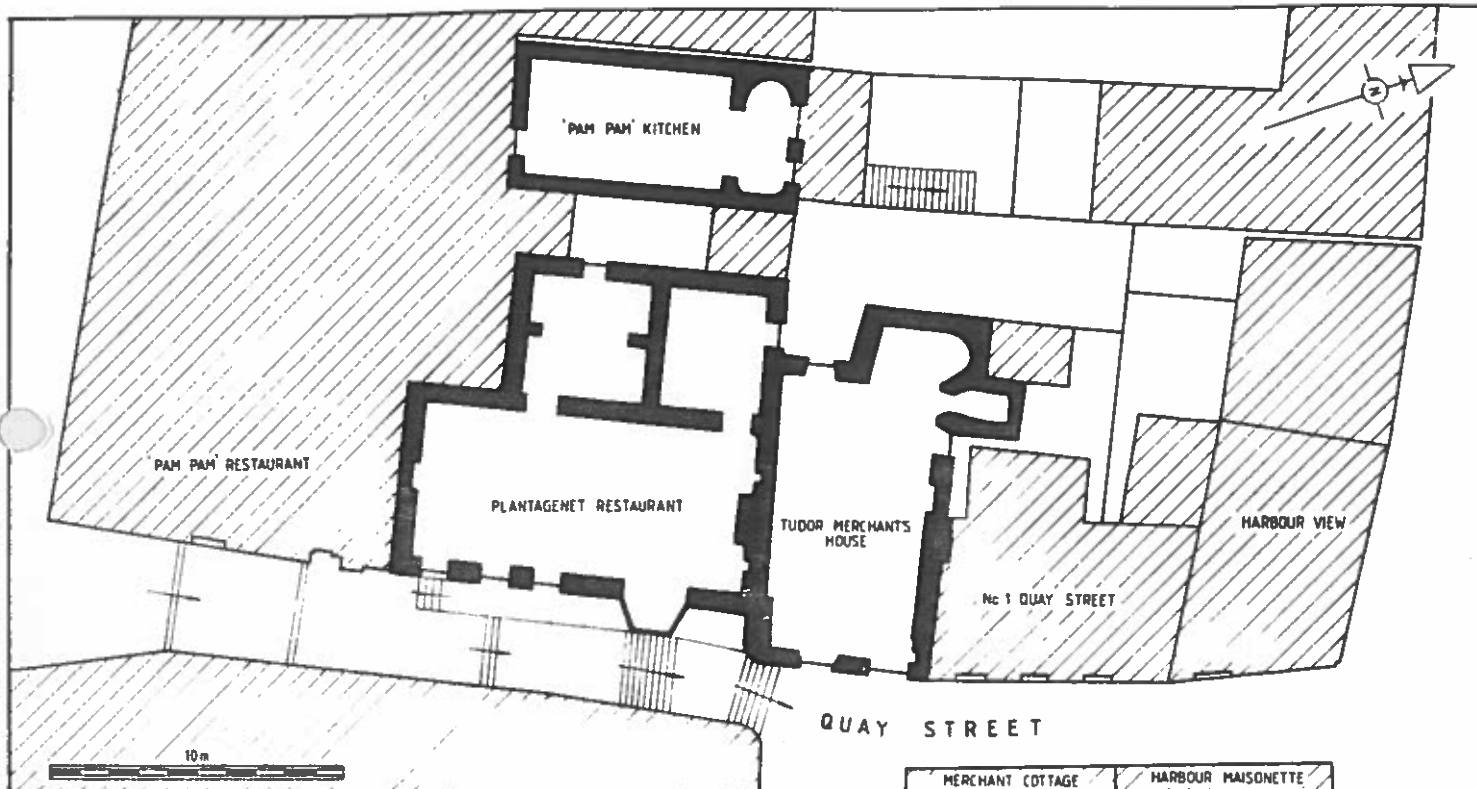
- MORTAR FLOOR
- MORTAR LIMPS
- COAL DUST
- CHARNED
- ASH
- CLAY FLOOR
- CLEAN SAND
- ORGANIC MATERIAL



TUDOR MERCHANT'S HOUSE, TENBY

BLOCKED 19 CENTURY DOOR





FINDS FROM THE TUDOR MERCHANT'S HOUSE

Approximately 60 sherds of pottery were recovered during excavations of which 30% comprised 17th century North Devon Ware. No pottery earlier than the late 16th century was identified.

North Devon pottery is found in towns throughout Devon, South Wales, Southern Ireland and early colonial settlements of North America. At the height of the industry in the 17th century vast quantities of pots were manufactured and exported from North Devon. Production continued up to the 19th century.

The chief type of pots, of North Devon type, from the excavations were coarse jars and bowls. One sherd of the finer sgraffito ware was discovered.

Pottery sherds from two vessels have been tentatively identified as continental imports. A sherd of late 16th century Beauvais ware (Northern France) and several sherds of late 16th or early 17th century Spanish "red micacious ware".

Other pottery consists of various sherds of 18th and 19th century coarse wares, some perhaps of local manufacture, plus some fragments of finer glazed vessels.

Two fragments of green glazed ridge tile were recovered from the backfill of the cesspit.

The layers of coal dust in the floor levels are interesting. Coal had been mined in the Tenby and Saundersfoot area since the 14th century. The industry terminated in the 1920's. In the 17th century boats importing pottery from North Devon took back coal from Tenby to fire the kilns! The thick layers of coal dust in the upper floor layers in the house suggest it was used to store coal before the timber wall was inserted.

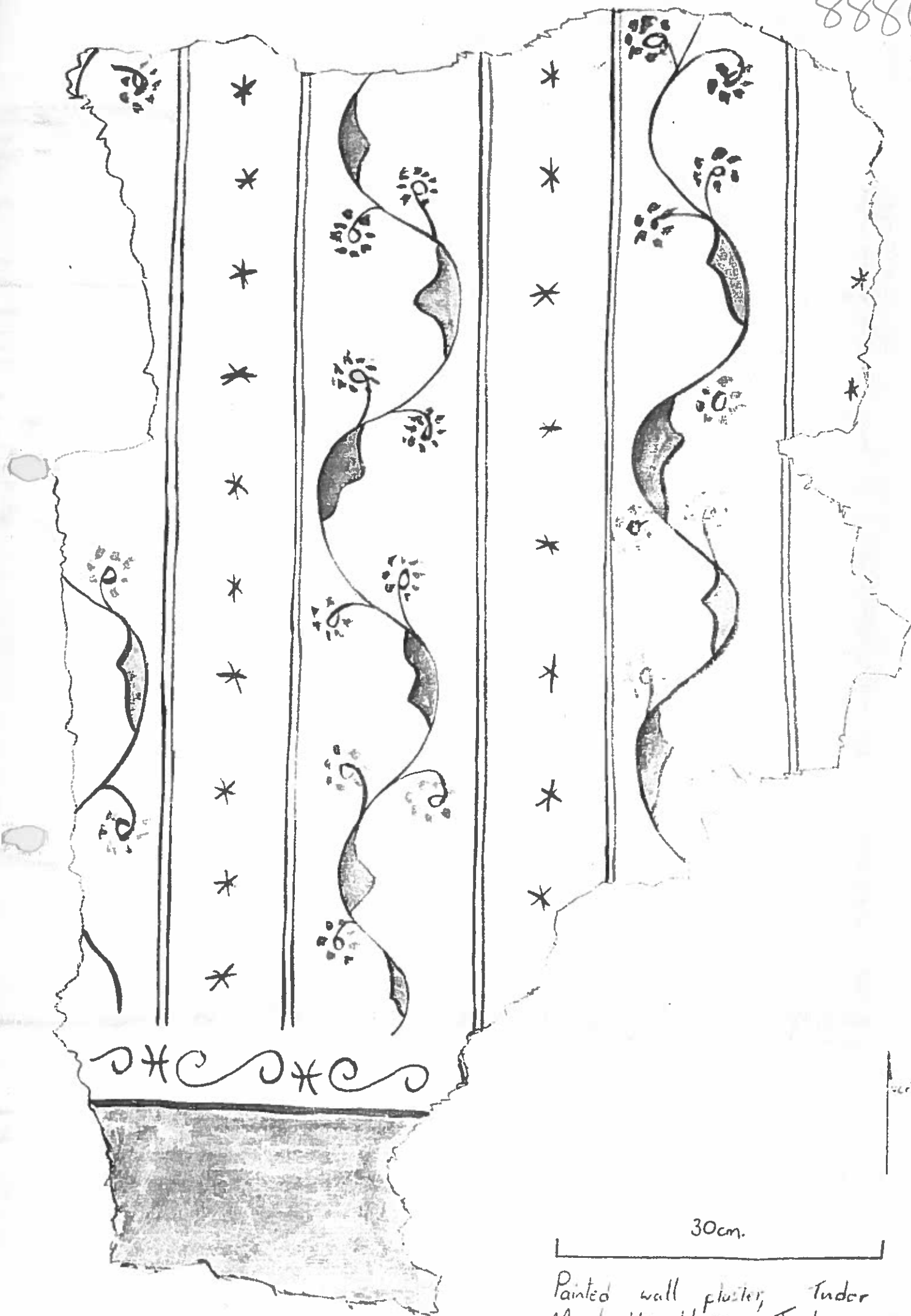
The lack of pottery or other finds from the earliest floor layer renders any dating of the construction of the building impossible. (only 5% of the floors were excavated so the potential exists for future work. The remaining 95% of floors remain untouched below the cement floor laid in 1984). However, the presence of one late 16th century sherd and the large quantities of 17th century pottery overlying the primary floor casts doubt on the date of 1500 widely accepted for the construction of the house. No firm date can be assigned to the erection of the painted plaster wall.

Allowing for the presence of late 17th century pottery over the earliest floor, and the subsequent build up of floors prior to the erection of the wall, a late 18th century date, at the earliest, is suggested.

Ken Murphy April '84

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30cm.

Painted wall plaster, Tudor
Merchant's House, Tenby