



11 Stryd y Castell, Conwy

Recording of Features on the Front and SE Elevations

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Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd

EAS Client Report 2014/04

**Recording of Features on the Front and SE Elevations of 11 Castle Street
Conwy and an Assessment of the Potential for the Survival of Wall
Paintings**

Commissioned by

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Registered in England No 286978

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Introduction

Summary

The removal of the thick render on the front and south eastern elevations of 11 Stryd y Castell revealed a number of features which have previously been unrecorded. These include a series of deliberately shaped blocks within the structure of both the house itself and the later bays added to the front of the house. These bays also included a re-used timber as a lintel, over one of the windows. Features were also revealed suggesting the front door may have been wider in the past. An assessment of the potential for the survival of wall paintings within the building did not suggest significant risk.

Location (Figure 1)

No. 11 Stryd y Castell/the Black Lion is situated on the east side of Castle Street in the town and community of Conwy, in the Borough of Aberconwy (formerly the parish of Conwy in Caernarvonshire), at SH 7824 7759 (Figure 1).

Archaeological Background

11 Stryd y Castell is a distinctive building within the centre of Conwy. The house is listed as Grade II* (Listed Building Ref. 3256) and is both within the Castles and Town Walls of Edward I in Gwynedd World Heritage Site, and the Conwy Conservation Area. Previously, a standing building survey and desktop study was commissioned by Miss A.E.M. Jones and carried out in 2009 by Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd and Govannon Consultancy (Gwyn, *et al* 2009). This revealed a more complex history to the building than had been previously described particularly showing that although the building was assumed to originate in, or about, AD 1589, based on the date plaque above the front door, 11 Stryd y Castell incorporated an earlier timber phase of construction. This was dated to AD 1441/1442 by a series of dendrochronological samples commissioned by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (Miles and Bridge 2010). The later use of the house included its conversion to a public house in the eighteenth century (The Black Lion). It is referred to here as 11 Street y Castell, although it has also been known as the Black Lion and Brickdall House.

In 2012 the excavation of two trenches was also commissioned (Brooks 2012). One of these was within the back garden of the property and recorded a series of yard deposits together with two buildings running along the sides of the garden. The second trench was within the nineteenth century kitchen extension and was adjacent to the well. This recorded a complex history of both yard and floor levels including a series of probable hearths and rammed clay floors

Between September and November 2013 works were undertaken by The Natural Building Centre/Scharer Conservation to remove the thick cementous render on the front and eastern elevations of the main range, before re-pointing and coating the elevations with a thick lime wash. This gave an opportunity to inspect the fabric of the house and to record the features revealed by the removal of the render.

Concern had been expressed by Peter Welford, the Chairman of Conwy Council's Conservation Advisory Panel, that there was the potential for the survival of late Medieval or

early Post Medieval wall paintings within the house. An inspection was therefore made to assess the possibility of survival.

Methodology

Several visits were made during the course of the works to inspect and record any feature or anomalies revealed. These were recorded both photographically and with measured drawings. Photographs were taken with a Nikon D80 digital SLR camera at a resolution of 10.2 Mp. The photographs were shot in raw (Nikon .NEF) format and then converted to jpeg (.JPG) format for illustration and manipulation. The drawings were made through direct measurement.

The plaster within the building was inspected to assess the potential for the survival of possible wall paintings taking into consideration the age of the walls, the condition of the plaster and any exposed sections which give an indication of potential layering within the plasterwork.

Results

South Eastern Gable

At the western end of south eastern gable a series of three, yellow, sandstone blocks were located (Plate 1). These are distinctive in their lithology and one of the blocks appears to have deliberate shaping on its lower surface (Figure 2.1, Plate 2). This block is 0.78 x 0.22 m in size, with a clear zigzag profile on its lower surface. Although it was not possible to inspect the lower surface it is likely to have been part of a chevron moulding and therefore to be possibly of Romanesque style. The original source for this block, in particular, and the other blocks of a similar lithology is uncertain, however there are a few blocks of a similar lithology built into St Mary's Church, Conwy. This was originally the church of Aberconwy Abbey which was founded in AD 1186, but moved to Maenan in AD 1283 to make way for the English town (Haslam *et al* 2009, 318-319). The extent of the monastery buildings is little understood, however it is possible that the block built in to the gable end of 11 Stryd y Castell was originally part of the monastery complex.

Prior to the construction of the current Blue Bell public house in AD 1935 (Gwyn *et al* 2009, 8) there were three public houses adjacent to each other with the Black Lion (11 Stryd y Castell) being separated from the George and Dragon by the Blue Bell. These were three of six public houses in Castle Street alone (Welsh Coast Pioneer, 27 February 1903). It is clear that the previous version of the Blue Bell was attached to the south eastern gable wall of 11 Stryd y Castell, with a series of socket holes for floor joists (Plate 3 and 4) being found in the gable end. These were relatively high on the elevation at approximately 5.9 m above the ground level and therefore probably mark the level of the attics within the Blue Bell. Curiously no sign of a lower floor level was noted. Similarly there was no sign of a fireplace or flues in this gable end. It has been suggested that the blocked fireplaces inside 11 Stryd y Castell on this gable wall were a late development within the house and were patched into the flues for the old Blue Bell (A.E. M. Jones *pers comm.*). This, however, has proved to be a myth.

Bays

The two full bays on the front elevation and the dormer bay over the front door have been shown to be later additions to the building (Gwyn *et al* 2009, 26) possibly associated with the eighteenth century remodelling. This disparity between the bays and main structure of the house was confirmed with the removal of the render which showed the straight joints in the stonework between these features. (Plate 5).

An unexpected feature revealed by the removal of the render were a series of small windows in the sides of the bays (Plates 6 – 15, Figures 3 and 4). Four of these were in the northern bay and two on the northern side of the southern bay. They consisted of narrow openings, typically only 80 mm wide and 260 mm high which run diagonally through the side walls of the bays. These “squint like” windows were lined with up to three layers of lime plaster and had sheets of glass set approximately 200 mm back from the outer face of the wall (Plates 11 – 14, Figure 3). Whilst on the ground floor it is not possible to determine the blockings on the inside of the bay, the blocked opening are visible on the first floor of the northern bay (Plates 15 and 16).

On the northern face of the northern bay, between the two “squint windows”, the end of a timber was exposed (Figure 4, Plate 17). This was at a height of 1.79 m above the street level and would appear to relate to a similar timber exposed in the front face of the building (Plate 18). It is possible that these sockets were originally linked. The function of this timber is unknown, however it may have supported a sign which would have been angled so that it could be seen from the cross roads between Castle Street and High Street. If so this must pre-date the AD 1885 photograph of the property.

Both the dormer, over the front door, and the southern bay included re-used shaped masonry blocks within their structure (Figures 2.2 - 2.5, Plates 19 - 23). The majority of these would appear to have chamfered edges and would therefore have functioned as the reveal for either a window or door. The lower “squint window” in the northern face of the southern bay, in particular (Plate 21) uses two of these blocks in order to form the opening. Only one of the blocks, in the dormer above the front door, (Figure 2.5, Plate 23) appears to have a more complex, ovolo moulding. It is likely that there are other blocks incorporated into the structure of the bays as a number of squared blocks were incorporated into the structures. These shaped and possibly shaped blocks are all of a similar lithology, suggesting that they may have come from a single source.

It was necessary to replace one of the lintels over the upper window of the southern bay. This proved to be a re-used timber with a series of sockets and dowel holes on one surface (Figure 5, Plate 24). The mortise holes and dowel holes in this timber would suggest that it was originally one of the rails from a partition. There is a distinct lack of wear on the surfaces of the timber, thereby suggesting that this was part of the top rail of a plank and muntin partition. Assuming that this timber was originally from the house itself, it is likely that it formed part of the cross passage within the original hall house. It is noted that the southern side of the cross passage has been replaced with an eighteenth century, brick, wall, giving an opportunity to free up this timber for re-use.

The exposed end of the purlins seen in the gable ends of the bays (Plates 26 and 27) would suggest that, at least, the bays were always intended to be rendered. The exposed ends of timbers, such as these, would be an opportunity for rot, and therefore it is likely that these

surfaces were sealed with some sort of coating. A similar pattern can be seen with the wooden lintels to the windows which were not painted or otherwise sealed.

Area of Front Door

Evidence for the modification of the building were revealed around the area of the front door (Plates 28 – 30, Figure 6). A second, higher, wooden lintel was revealed together with a vertical joint in the stonework to the south. The interpretation of these features is not entirely clear. It would seem likely that the original front door was much wider, and slightly taller, suggesting a wider cross passage within the building. However the vertical joint follows the line of the southern side of the dormer, over the front door, allowing the possibility that this feature is a function of the construction of the dormer above the door. There is no correspondent joint recorded on the northern side of the door, but the door itself occupies this side of the opening.

To the south of the vertical joint (Plate 29), there is a disturbance within the stonework which is suggestive of a blocked opening. Whilst not entirely clear the stonework would appear to show an opening approximately 0.50 m square, defined by a stone lintel and cill. If so this opening would appear to have been cut by the vertical joint possibly suggesting the vertical joint is most likely related to the construction of the dormer.

There was also the end of a timber exposed in the front elevation adjacent to the southern bay (Plate 30). This does not appear to relate any known structure within the building as it does not correspond with the location of any of the trusses or any of the ceiling beams within the house. It was a substantial timber, 0.20 x 0.17 m in size. Two interpretations are possible for this timber. Firstly that it was a strut projecting from the building to support an inn sign, however the photographic evidence back to 1885 suggest that there was no hanging sign outside the inn. Secondly the timber is the end of a ceiling beam within Room 2 for a previous ceiling, presumably before the staircase was added to the room and the composite and plaster ceiling beam added (Gwyn *et al* 2009, 18).

The restoration work allowed for a closer inspection of the date plaque on the front of the house (Plate 31). This is carved on a relatively thin slab (Plate 32) which has then been plastered and painted. There is some damage to the lower surface (Plate 33) where the slab has been modified to allow the insertion of the porch to the front of the house.

Assessment of the Potential for the Survival Wall Paintings

Concern has been expressed by Peter Welford, the Chairman of Conwy Council's Conservation Advisory Panel, that there may be the potential for the survival of wall paintings within 11 Stryd y Castell. A visual assessment of the surviving plasterwork was therefore made. The previous attempt at the restoration of the property, by a previous owner, has removed much of the plasterwork within the building, particularly on the first floor, thereby restricting the potential for the survival of Medieval and early Post Medieval wall paintings.

On the ground floor it is clear that the property has had a major re-organisation in the eighteenth century and later modifications have removed some of the original rear wall to the property with the addition of the "New Kitchen", probably in the nineteenth century. Within Room 1 (Figure 7, Plates 34, 35) the plasterwork can be traced from the eighteenth century, partition, around the bay (which is assumed to be of a similar date) and across the front of the

chimney breast. The earliest this plaster could be, in order to cover these features, is eighteenth century.

The plaster has largely been removed from the northern side of the chimney breast (Plate 36), however, the edge of the plaster running along the western side of the hall can be seen which suggests a single thick basal layer below a thin top coat. The style of the finish is similar to that on the other side of the hall (Plate 37) which is known to cover a brick wall of eighteenth century date.

Within Room 2 (Figure 7) the surviving plaster has a pink, cementous base coat (Plate 38) and can therefore be of Medieval or Early Post Medieval date. Also where the edge of the plaster is exposed it can be seen to be a single base coat with a thin top coat (Plate 39).

The other rooms on the ground floor consist of the “New Kitchen” which is probably a nineteenth century extension and Room 3 which was heavily modified in the eighteenth century. No plaster survives in the Service Wing (Plate 40)

On the first floor most of the plaster attached to the stone walls has already been removed, however there are a series of wattle and daub partitions which are of late Medieval or Early Post Medieval date. Below Truss 1 (Figure 7, Plates 41 - 42) there is a wattle and daub partition which has a paper surface, however where this is peeling (Plate 43) the surface would appear to be smoke blackened in places and no signs of any paintwork has been observed. The rear of this partition (Plate 44) is highly damaged so that little of the surface survives. Above the level of the ceiling, there is also the remains of a wattle and daub partition between the peak of the truss and the collar (Plate 45). There is no sign of any painting on this surface. Below Truss 2, there is a partition between the peak of the truss and the collar (Plate 46). At the moment this is painted white, however its original finish is unknown.

The northern side of the main chimney breast (between Rooms 4 and 7) would appear to retain a plaster surface (Plate 47) which may be earlier than other surfaces. No sign of paintwork was observed, however inspection of this surface is difficult. Room 7 has the remains of a wattle and daub partition, adjacent to the door (Plate 48). This, however, has lost its top surface. There is also an area of plaster survival to the south of the fireplace within Room 7 (Plate 49). This surface runs behind the stonework of the dormer in this room, however no signs of any paintwork survives. The eastern side of Room 7 would appear to be a plank partition (Plate 50) which is heavily covered by layers of wall paper, under which the surface is unknown.

Under the peak and above the collar of Truss 3, there is a wattle and daub partition (Plates 51 and 52). This has only one finished surface to the west (Plate 51) which does not appear to have any painted surface.

Room 5 has all of its plaster removed. The only possible surface which may have been decorated is the rear of the partition between Rooms 7 and 5, however this is coated with several layers of wall paper.

Conclusions

The restoration of the front elevation and south eastern gable end has revealed a number of unexpected features. Of particular note are the “squint” type windows within the bays on the front elevation. These rather curious features would have allowed the front door and the entrance to the passage way to be monitored from both the ground and first floors of the house. They had deep set windows and were plaster lined showing the degree of care in their construction, however they would only give limited views onto the street. The set-back panes of glass would also have provided a potential area for the dumping of rubbish by passers-by. It is not known when these features were blocked, but it is possibly related to the end of the use of the building as an inn, when the monitoring of the entrances would no longer be important.

The other feature is the re-use of shaped stones within the building. The south eastern gable wall contains at least one block, but probably more, which can be demonstrated to have been carved. The lithology of this block is similar to that of some of the material used for the construction of St Mary’s Church, in particular there is a carved block in the southern porch of the church which appears to be of a similar lithology. The zigzag decoration on the base of this block may be part of a chevron moulding of Romanesque type. If so it is possible that this block may have been derived from one of the buildings associated with Aberconwy Abbey which was abandoned in 1283 when the monastery moved to Maenan (Haslam *et al* 2009, 318-319).

The carved blocks within the bays were incorporated into the house at a much later date, probably in the eighteenth century. They are largely fragments of the splayed reveals from either a window or door, although at least one of the blocks has a more complex surface. They appear to be of a single lithology, although this is different from that of the blocks in the gable end. The source of these blocks is unknown, they may be from whatever was on the front elevation before the bays were constructed, however, this seems unlikely. The use of at least one block with an ovolo moulding would suggest a much grander source. Once again one possible source is St Mary’s Church. “Brickdall House” was possibly the vicarage from the late sixteenth century until the eighteenth century (Gwyn *et al* 2009, 7) and therefore it is possible to speculate that one, or more, of the modifications to St Mary’s Church resulted in blocks which were re-cycled into the bays. The splays, in particular, were useful in defining the angle and size of the “squint windows”.

The recording of features and carved blocks not previously known within the building has some implications for any further works on the house. If any of the surviving plaster, within the house, is removed there is a potential that further features, or more detail of those features already recorded, may be discovered. This is particularly relevant to the area around the front door. The removal of the old electricity panel and any plaster within Room 2 may reveal further details which could aid in the interpretation of the vertical joint seen on the outer face. It is therefore recommended that time be allowed within the restoration programme for the archaeological inspection and recording of any features discovered. The removal of any plaster within the building may also locate further carved stones which should also be recorded as part of the restoration.

Whilst samples were taken from the plasterwork within the squint windows, these proved to be fairly typical high lime plasters, probably with locally sourced aggregates (N Scharer *pers. comm.*). No detailed analysis of these samples was undertaken, however, without a valid research question the added cost (approximately £400.00/sample) does not seem relevant as a

mitigation to the restoration works being undertaken. The current state of knowledge does not allow for relevant research questions to be formulated for this building, however, if the opportunity occurs to take further samples during the conservation works these could be made available for anyone undertaking research into the mortars and plasters of Conwy.

The assessment of the potential survival of wall painting within the house would suggest that this is highly unlikely. The only potential for survival are on the scraps of original plaster surfaces, largely associated with the wattle and daub partitions below the trusses. Where the surfaces of these could be inspected, they appear to be undecorated, however the potential for scraps of early decoration surviving cannot be wholly discounted, particularly within areas which are no longer visible, such as above the ceiling level in Room 4. This could be included within any watching brief on the conservation works within the house.

Acknowledgements

This recording was commissioned by Miss A.E.M. Jones whose unstinting support is gratefully acknowledged. The works were carried out by Scharer Conservation and the support of Ned Scharer and his team allowed the efficient recording of the archaeological features. The project was monitored for the Gwynedd Archaeological Planning Service by Ashley Batten and Jenny Emmett

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Plate 1: Re-used blocks incorporated within the SE Gable



Plate 2: Shaped block in the SE Gable



Plate 3: Sockets for joists in the SE Gable



Plate 4: Detail of joist sockets



Plate 5: Relationship between the northern bay and the main house

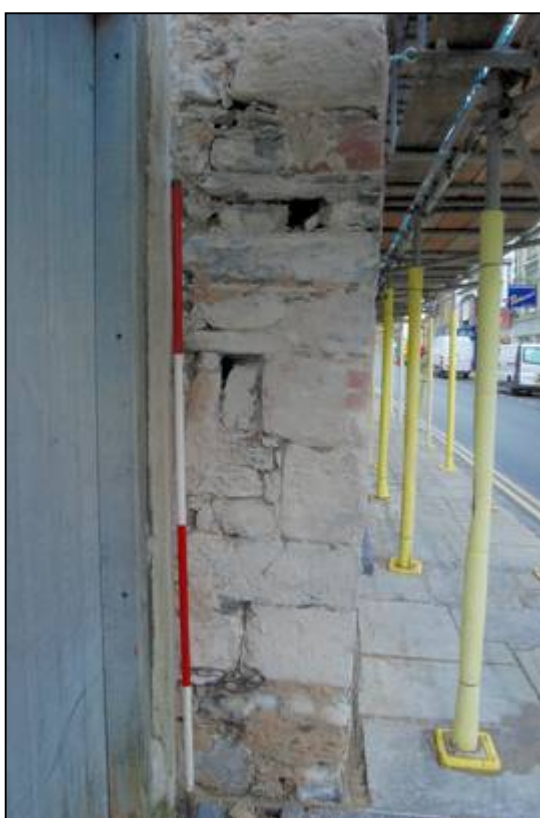


Plate 6: Blocked "squint window" in the ground floor, northern face of the northern bay



Plate 7: “Squint window” in the ground floor, southern face of the northern bay



Plate 8: “Squint window” in the ground floor of the northern face of the southern bay



Plate 9: “Squint window” in the first floor, northern face of the northern bay



Plate 10: “Squint window” in the first floor, southern face of the northern bay.



Plate 11: Detail of the “squint window” on the ground floor, northern face of the northern bay



Plate 12: Detail of the “squint window” on the ground floor, southern face of the northern bay



Plate 13: Detail of the “squint window” on the first floor level, northern face of the northern bay



Plate 14: Detail of the “squint window” on the first floor, southern face of the southern bay



Plate 15: Internal blocking of the “squint window” on the first floor of the southern side of the northern bay



Plate 16: Internal blocking of the “squint window” on the first floor of the northern side of the northern bay



Plate 17: Socket in the northern face of the northern bay



Plate 18: Timber sockets in and near the northern face of the northern bay



Plate 19: Shaped blocks in the northern face of the southern bay



Plate 20: Shaped blocks in the southern face of the southern bay



Plate 21: Shaped blocks forming the lower “squint window”, northern face of the southern bay



Plate 22: Shaped block in the dormer above the front door



Plate 23: Shaped block in the dormer above the front door



Plate 24: Re-used timber rail



Plate 25: Detail of mortise holes and dowel hole in the re-used rail.



Plate 26: Exposed purlin in the gable of the southern bay



Plate 27: Exposed purlin in the gable of the southern bay



Plate 28: Area to the north of the front door



Plate 29: Area to the south of the front door



Plate 30: Exposed timber to the south of the front door



Plate 31: The date plaque



Plate 32: Top of the date plaque



Plate 33: Relationship between the date plaque and the porch



Plate 34: Plaster in Room 1, looking west



Plate 35: Plasterwork in Room 1, looking south



Plate 36: The northern side of the chimney breast



Plate 37: The hall



Plate 38: Plasterwork in the western corner of Room 2



Plate 39: Detail of the section of the plaster in Room 2



Plate 40: The Service Wing



Plate 41: The wattle and daub partition below Truss 1



Plate 42: The wattle and daub partition below Truss 1



Plate 43: Detail of the surface of the wattle and daub partition below Truss 1



Plate 44: Rear of wattle and daub partition below Truss 1



Plate 45: Partition in the roof space, below Truss 1



Plate 46: Truss 2



Plate 47: Plaster on the northern side of the chimney



Plate 48: Wattle and daub partition in Room 7



Plate 49: Plaster behind the stonework for the dormer in Room 7



Plate 50: Partition between Rooms 7 and 5



Plate 51: Partition below Truss 3

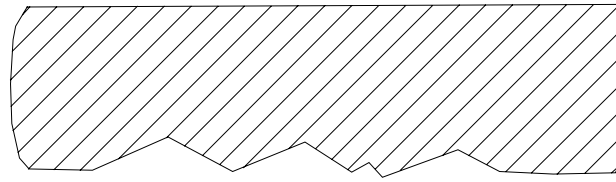


Plate 52: Rear of partition below Truss 3



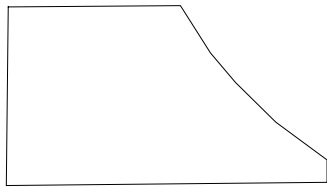
11 Stryd y Castell

Figure 1: Location
Scale 1:25,000

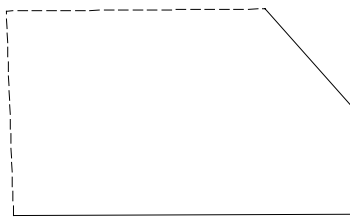


Gable End

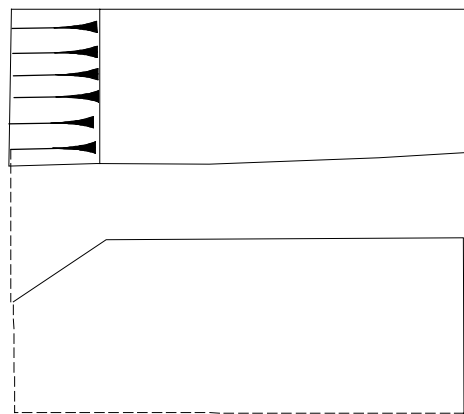
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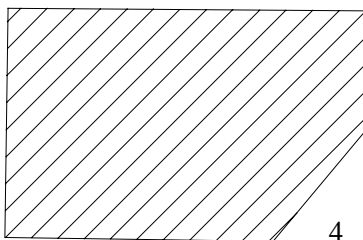


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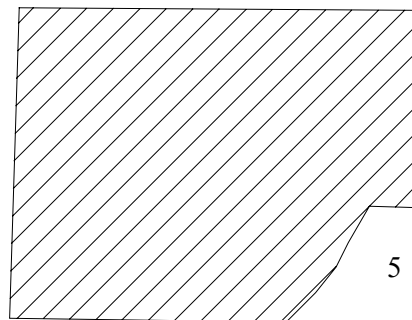


3

Southern Bay



4



5

Above Door

Figure 2: Re-used Blocks
Scale 1:10

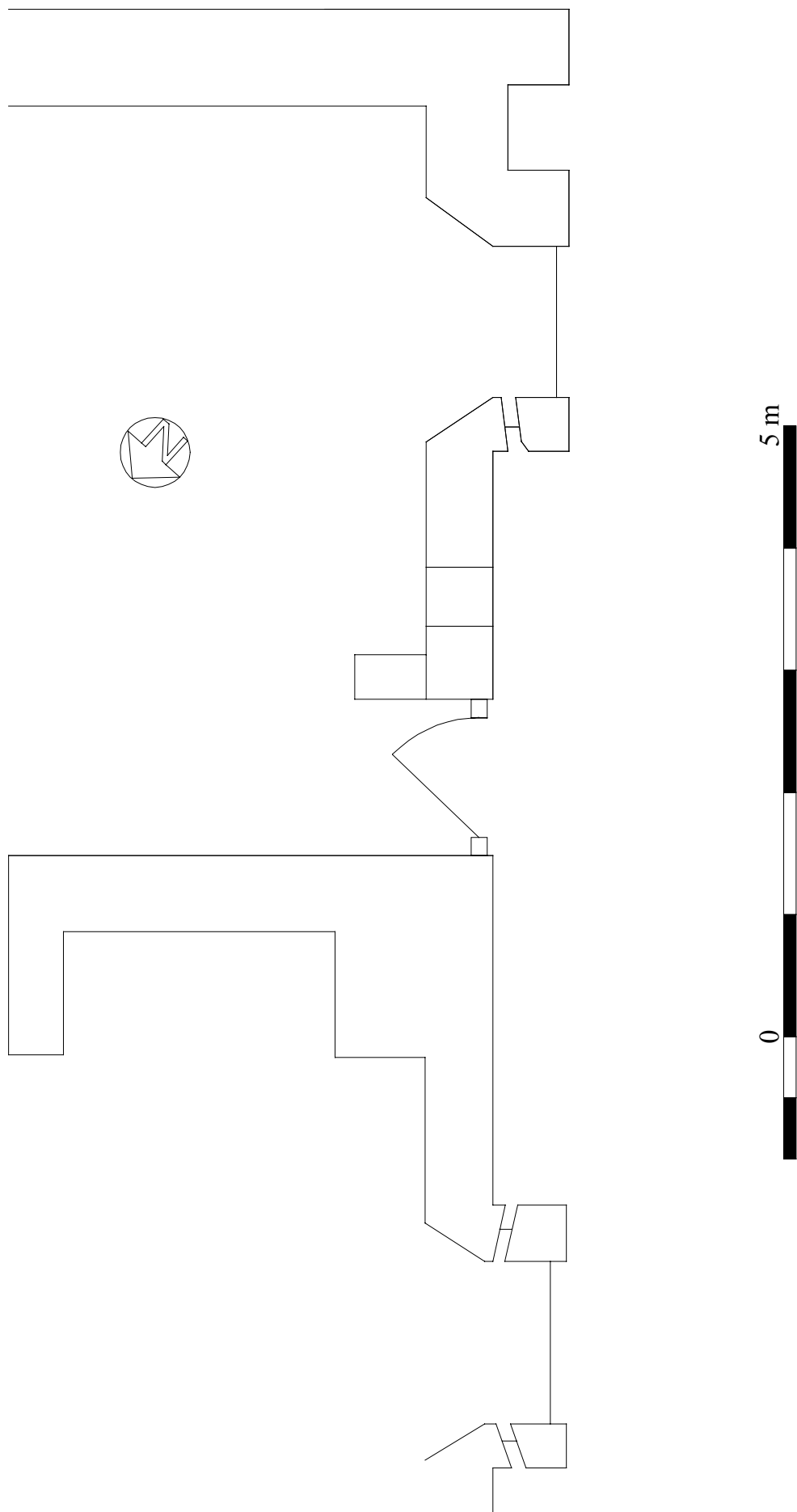


Figure 3: Location of the Ground Floor "Squint Windows"
Scale 1:50

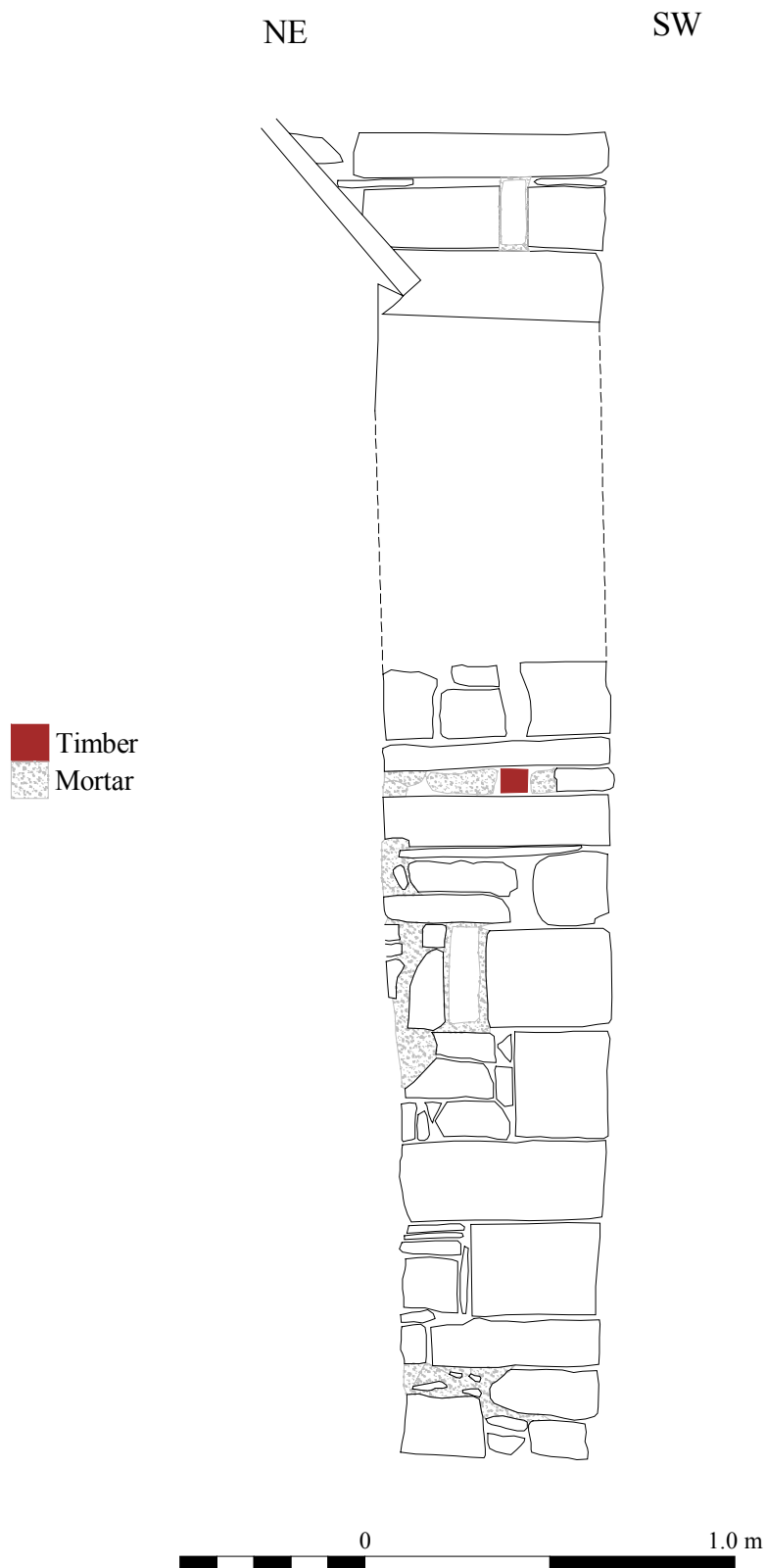


Figure 4: "Squint Windows" in the Northern Face of the Northern Bay
Scale 1:20

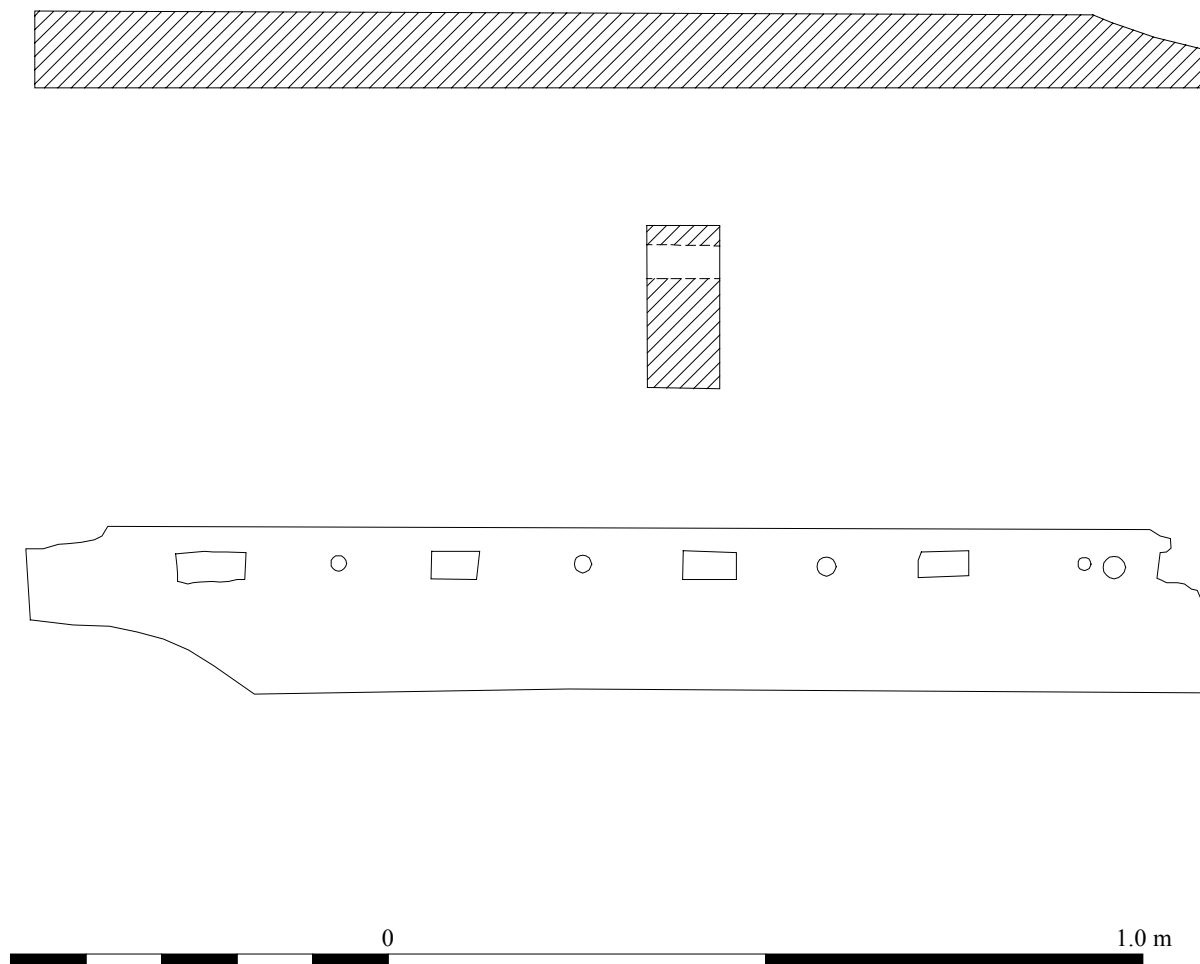


Figure 5: Lintel
Scale 1:10

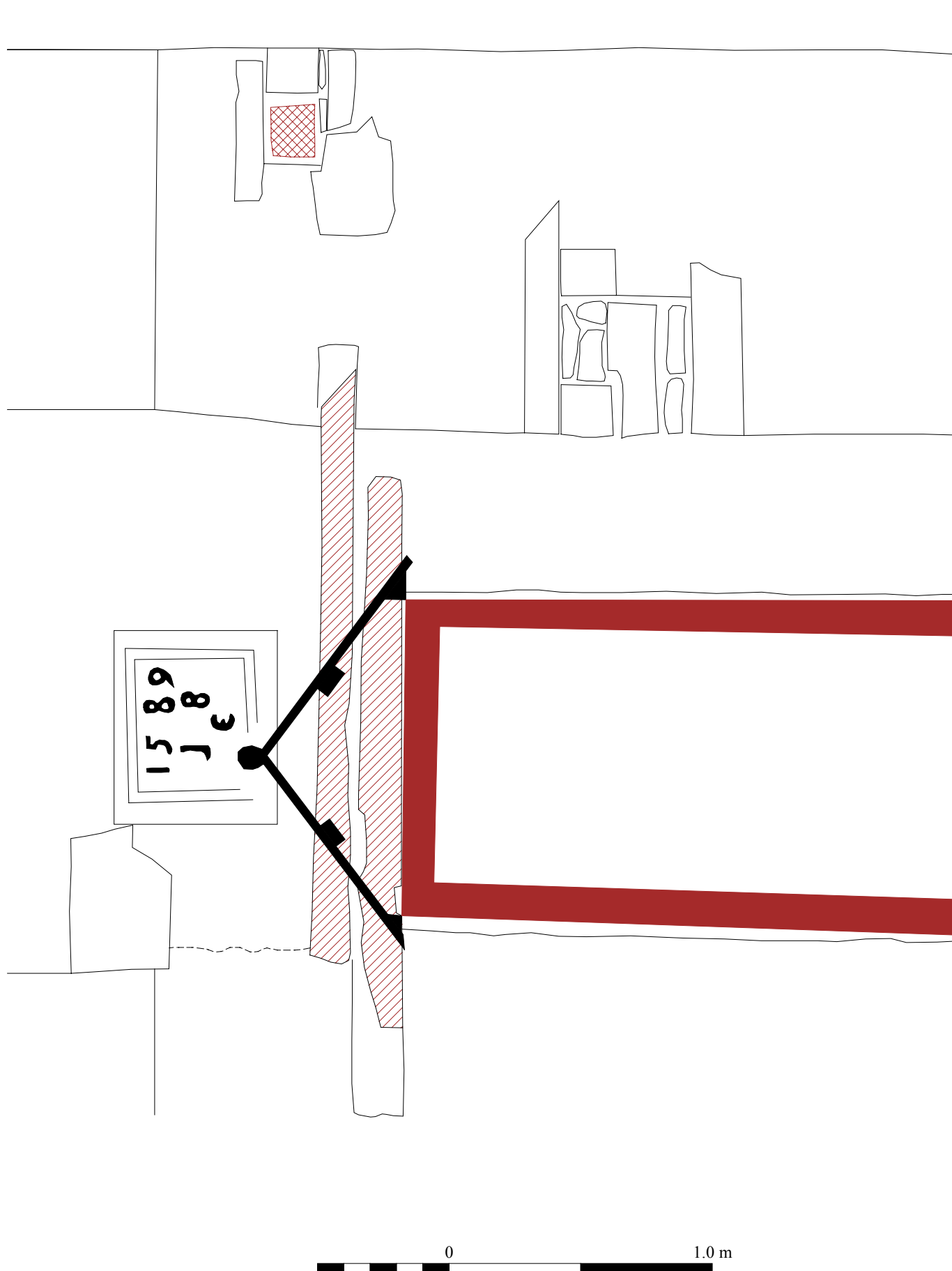


Figure 6: Area around the Front Door
Scale 1:20

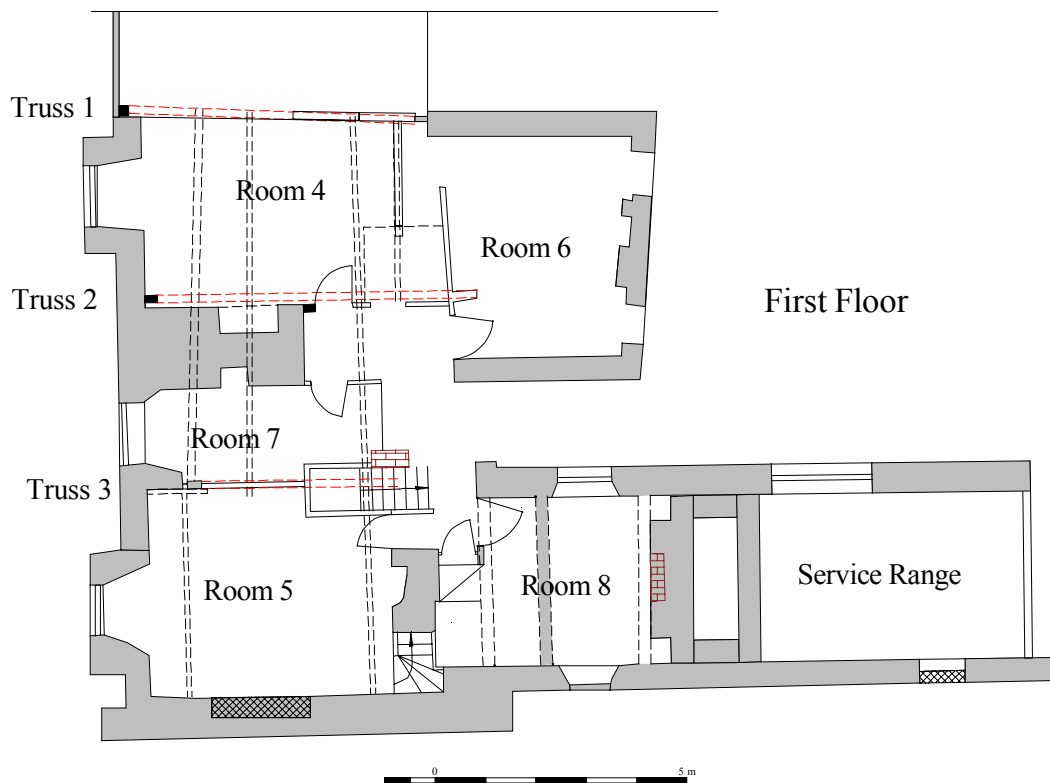
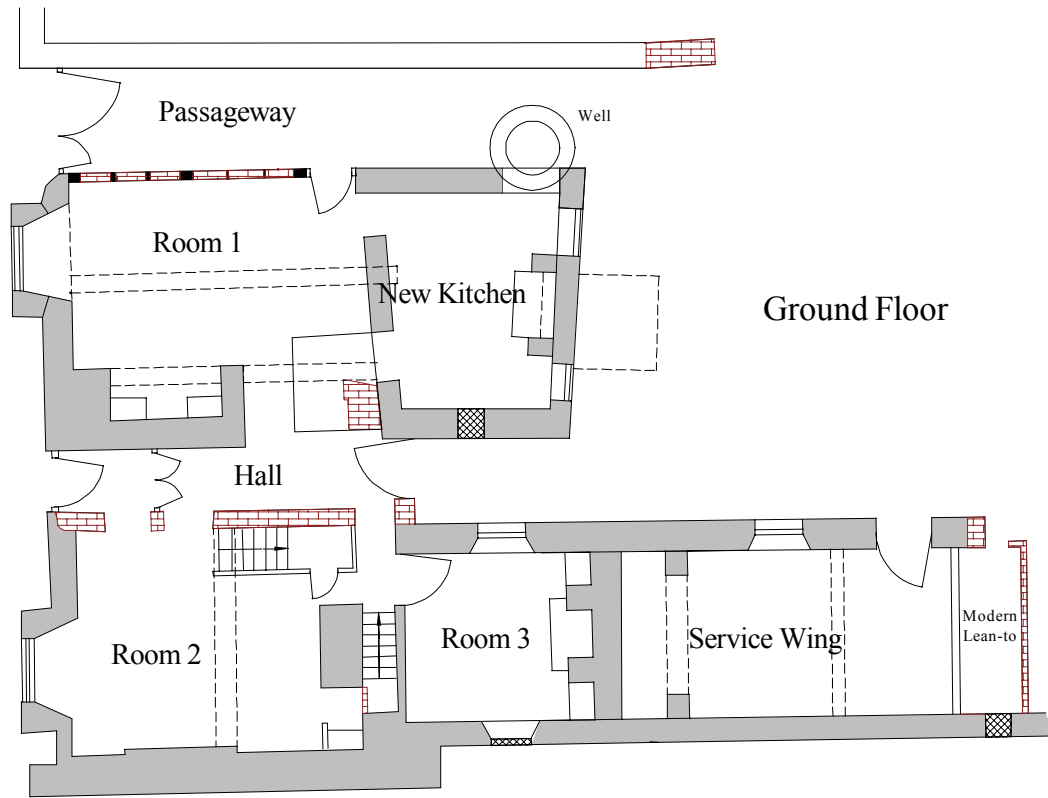


Figure 7: Location of the Rooms
Scale 1:150