

Structural Ceilings of the Early Tudor House

A guest who awakens for the first time in a strange house and after gazing at the ceiling above his head, gets up in search of a step-ladder, and having armed himself with a saw and a chopper proceeds to hack down a portion of the ceiling, incurs a risk. He may not be a frequent visitor to the same house: indeed, he may never be invited again.

The house which I see in retrospect across many years was part of an old manor, wherein I perceived that structural beams existed because the plaster covering them was breathing and revealed their outline. Elsewhere in the same house I had observed heavy wall-plates with Tudor sections partly exposed.

If an old house has been of some architectural importance, it is certain that its main timbers exhibit primitive carving, or at least good moulded sections. I will illustrate the features to which I refer, and others dating from the first half of the Sixteenth Century, as I have received some letters from readers of this magazine requesting information on this subject. Here is a paragraph from one of them:

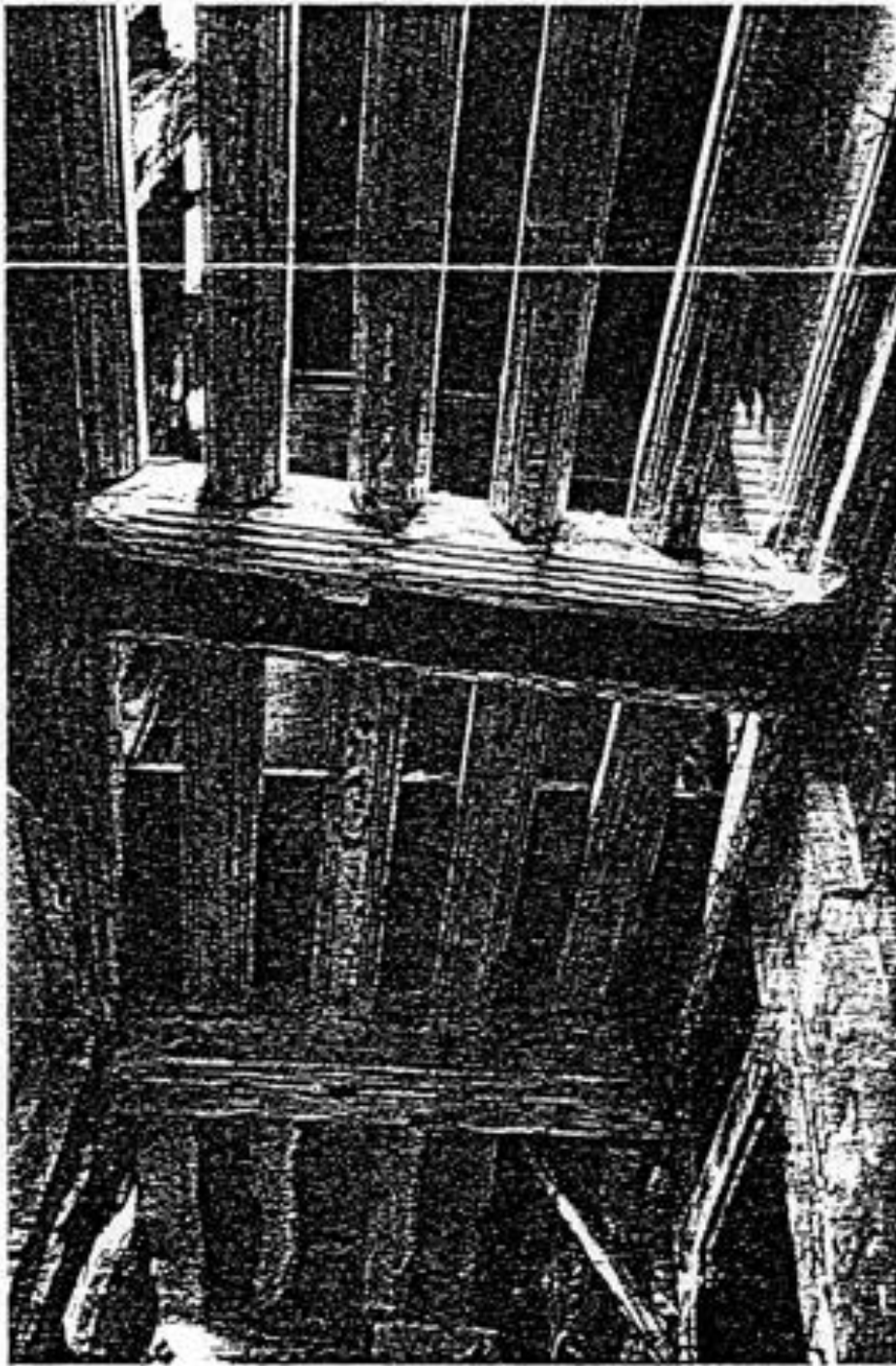
'I have read both your articles on linenfold panelling in THE CONNOISSEUR. We have some very lovely old linenfold which is carved in places, but could you tell me what sort of a ceiling does one put'

To answer was not easy. I am always pleased to help, but, frankly, if a ceiling is to be installed merely for decorative purposes it will be very much better if it is not 'put' at all.

Many people have inherited or acquired specimens of ancient woodwork domestic in purpose, often from demolished houses, and desire to re-erect them appropriately but they are unaware of the difficulty of the work. Not only does the work demand technical knowledge, but, first of all, other factors - which are far more important - have to be determined. For instance, I strongly object to the introduction of early woodwork into any house of which the fabric is of a later date, as no matter how skilfully the work be carried out the effect cannot be other than anachronistic.

It is obvious that, in the present period of wholesale reconstruction and dismemberment of ruined dwellings, the intelligent reincorporation of structural features spared by me and unobliterated by enemy action deserves the most tactical encouragement. Be it remembered that entire localities are now being swept away in the wake of modern development and planning. The preservation of ancient craftsmanship, such as the ceilings here illustrated, panelling, staircases—even a fine chimney-piece—is of national importance. Unless one fosters the possessive instinct inherent in all collectors, many such possessions must perish.

However, the purpose of this article is plainly informative. Therefore, as it is not my aim to stress the difficulty of re-erecting woodwork divorced from its original setting, I hereby point out that before one installs an early ceiling above contemporary panelling it is essential that its new home is of earlier date or at least of the same period. Old rooms were small and often low in height. Panelling in them generally extended to the ceiling, often it linked up ornamentally with the ceiling beams. When resurrected, one frequently sees the gap in height—between the ceiling and panelled walls—occupied by a frieze, generally in plaster, which, bisecting the room horizontally, reduces the ocular impression of its height and is historically inappropriate. But there is no reason why the possessor of an old timbered dwelling desirous of enlarging it, should not make new additions which are necessary by the incorporation of contemporary woodwork, provided the work be done unostentatiously and that old beams, etc., are used as a constructional necessity—not as decorative adornment—i.e. doing the work for which they were originally produced.



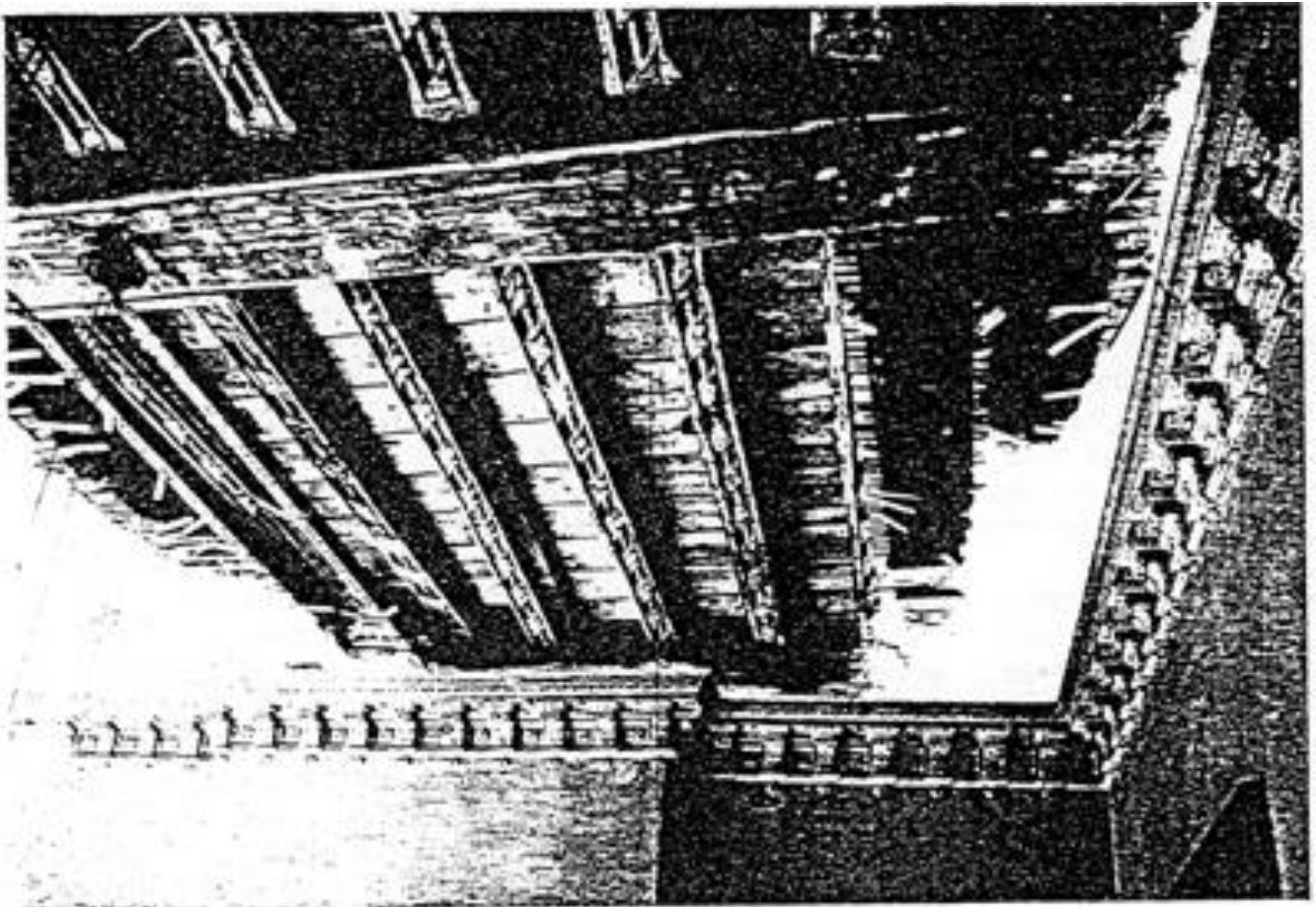
No. 1.—MAIN STRUCTURAL BEAMS IN A TUDOR HOUSE DURING DEMOLITION

Photograph No.1 depicts the somewhat elementary, though essentially logical, timber construction of an old house, showing exposed beams supported by solid baulks of upright timbers. A section of the framework is visible, exposing the floorboarding and—at the lower extremity of the photograph—the method of rendering a thin layer of plaster between the ceiling beams is revealed.

Although this woodwork may appear fit only for a bonfire, it is in excellent preservation. It is as hard as metal, and far better as building material than ever before. When its many coats of pigment have been washed away its colour will be found to be grey and very pleasing, while both the colour and the figure of the oak will be more durable than those of any timber procurable to-day. Furthermore, it has a quality imparted by four centuries and—apart from the hard texture of the timber itself—which has shrunk in width so much that to drive a modern nail into it is almost a problem—the sections of the beams were worked by a man's hand and therefore more desirable than the deadly accuracy of sections which have been run off a machine and produced in quantity according to

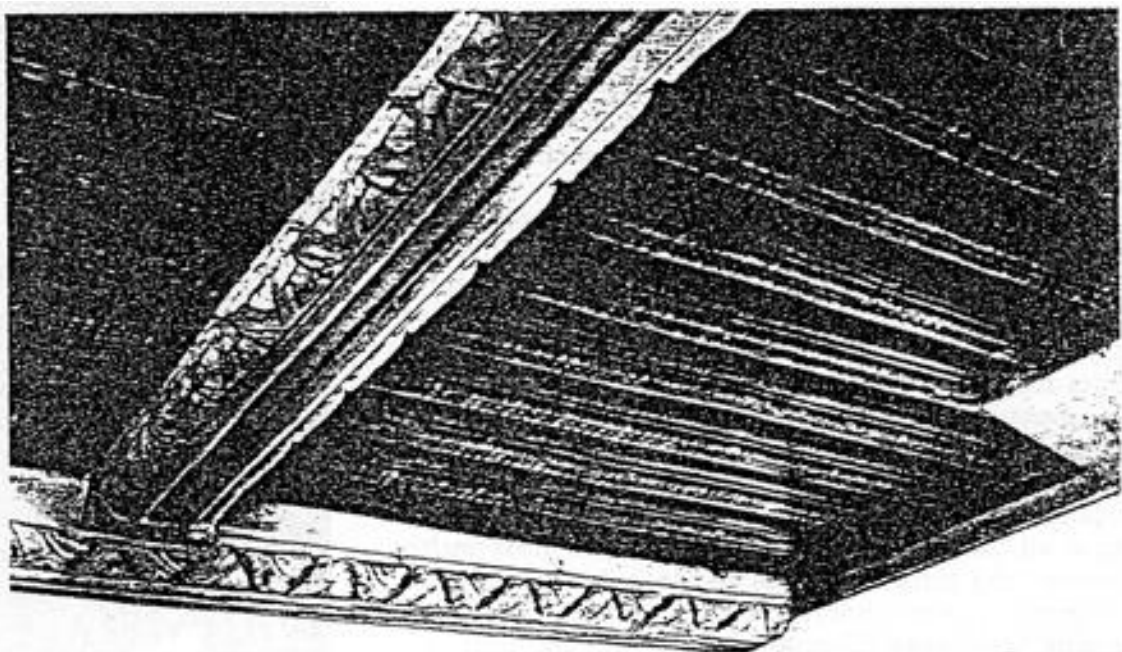
specification.

Few old houses remain as they were originally erected. Doubtless it was the introduction of plaster in its many ornamental manifestations during the Elizabethan era that started the distaste for exposed beams which was increasingly apparent throughout the Seventeenth Century. The practice of covering ceiling beams with plaster continued far into the Nineteenth Century, though now, paradoxically, the owner of an old house hastens to expose them again if they should be discovered.



No. II.—PLASTER BEING REMOVED FROM A TUDOR CEILING. THE CARVING ON THE MASTER BEAM HAS BEEN CUT AWAY AT SOME TIME TO FORM A LEVEL SURFACE. THE LATERAL BEAMS STILL HAVE THEIR ORNAMENT

Photograph No. ii shows the process of removing plaster covering a Tudor ceiling. The lateral beams, decorated with Tudor leaf ornamentation, are well preserved, new joists having been inserted between them in preference to the common device of tacking laths directly on to the beams themselves. But, unfortunately, the central beam has been badly mutilated, the whole of its carved lower surface having been hacked away. In a case like this the only wise procedure is to re-carve this beam with appropriate ornament conforming in character with what is extant. Incidentally, this woodwork was revealed by the removal of floorboarding above it during an electrical installation a few years ago.

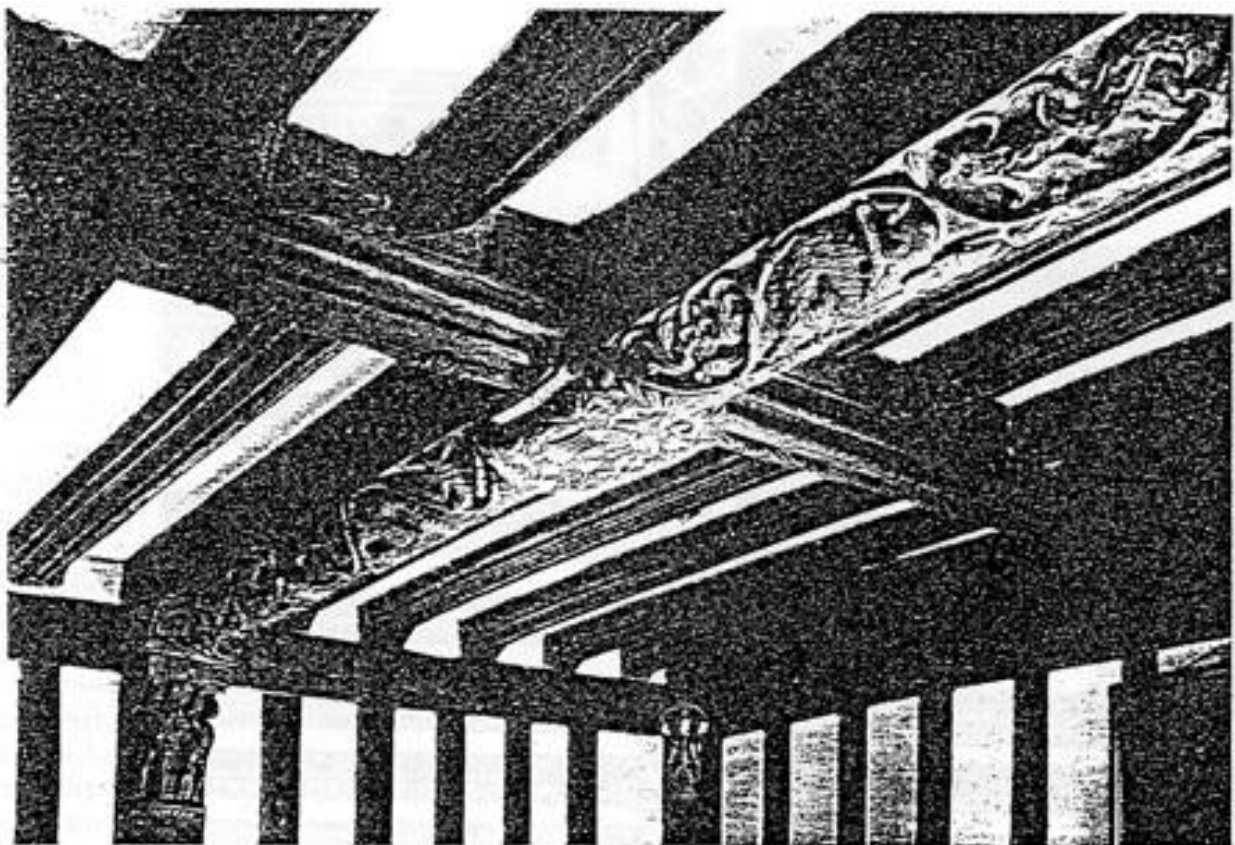


No. III.—HERE THE PLASTER HAS BEEN REMOVED FROM THE SURFACE OF THE LATERAL BEAMS. THE CENTRAL BEAM CROSSING THE CEILING AND THE WALL-PLATE HAVE NEVER BEEN PLASTERED OVER

Photograph No. iii was taken soon after the plaster had been removed from the smaller beams, the master beam in the centre and the wall-plate (which appear white in the photograph) having always been exposed. Here it will be seen that the laths had been nailed directly on to the side beams, a frequent impediment to restoration, as the tack holes have to be filled in after the ceiling has been washed and the whole brought to a uniform colour—by colour I do not imply the application of polish, varnish or stain of any kind, which would be a mistake. The timber should be brought back to its original dry appearance and left in its natural condition.. If blemishes or other indications of age exist, they should frankly left as they are found. One of the most repellent aspects of would-be reproductions of Tudor woodwork is due to modern saw-cut beams which have no structural *raison-d'etre*, but are attached to the surface of a plaster ceiling and invariably stained with dark pigment.

This mania for the automatic colouring of old woodwork almost black, even when it is original, is both curious and incomprehensible. Sixteenth-century oak was never dark. Timber was left a natural state and sometimes treated with linseed oil. Nothing is more restful in colour or convincing of antiquity than oak which has been left through the centuries to bleach out — especially when it is seen in combination with stonework, such as mullions or arches around windows. I have in mind, as a haphazard example, the solar apartments on the first floor at Stokesay Castle, not far from Shrewsbury (although there are many similar places), wherein there is agreeable affinity betwixt walls and woodwork, stone, faded plaster, and the old floorboards. In such places there is no deliberate striving or concentration on any particular feature or any obtrusive attempt to emphasize age. My experience has shown me that the owner of an old house is generally too eager to over-accentuate the characteristics of its period, which is unnecessary. Antiquity having been already established, there is no need for the introduction of non-descript objects merely because they look old; in fact, it is wiser to err in an opposite direction and stress the advance towards elements of greater refinement and especially of comfort.

Several of our fine open timber roofs were disfigured by stain in the Nineteenth Century (and one specimen recently), which process has reduced their appearance to that of a pitch-pine roof in a modern meeting-hall. It is conceivable that the ceiling in a tavern has been naturally and logically darkened by smoke, but never the entire roofing timbers of a great hall!

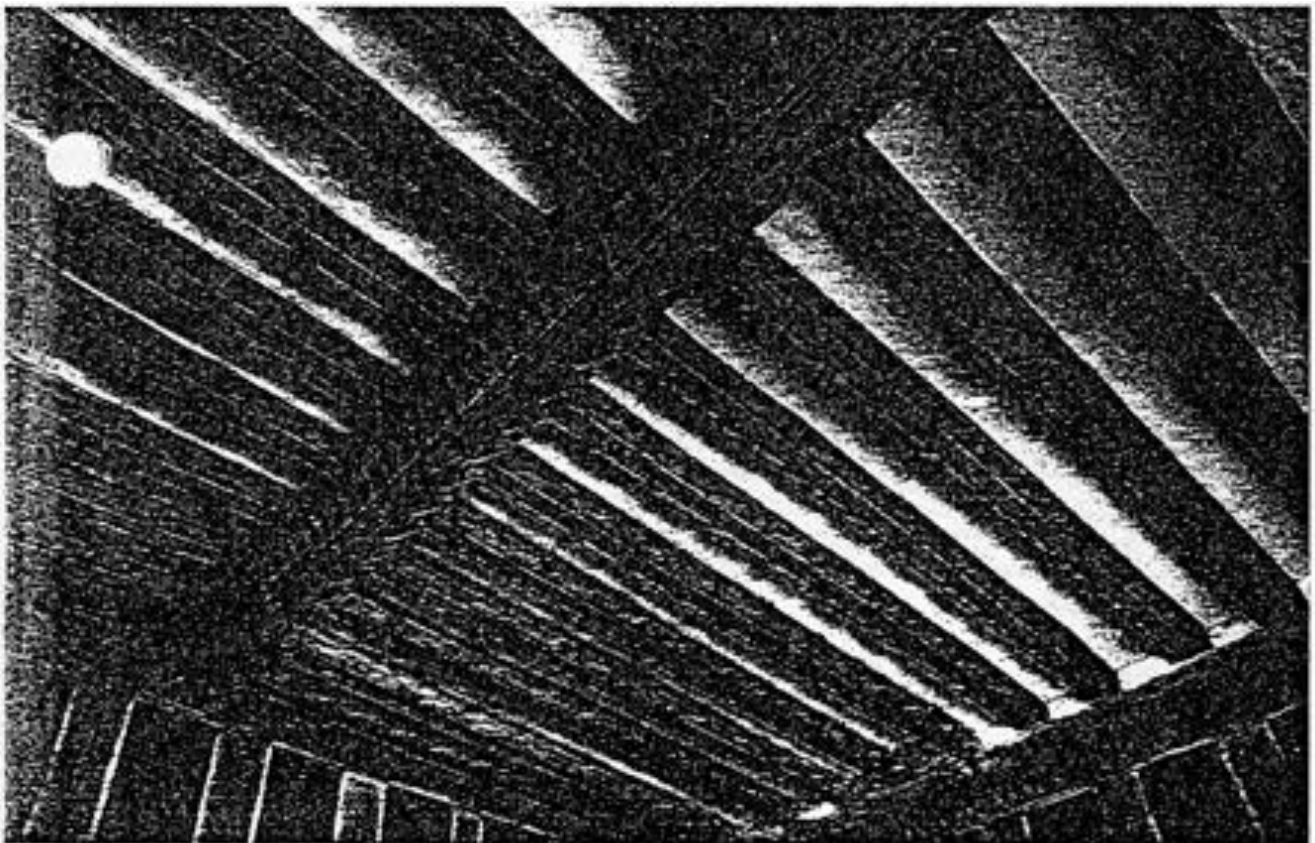


No. IV.—MASSIVE TIMBER BEAMS IN THE EAST ROOM AT THE MARQUIS OF GRANBY INN, COLCHESTER, ESSEX

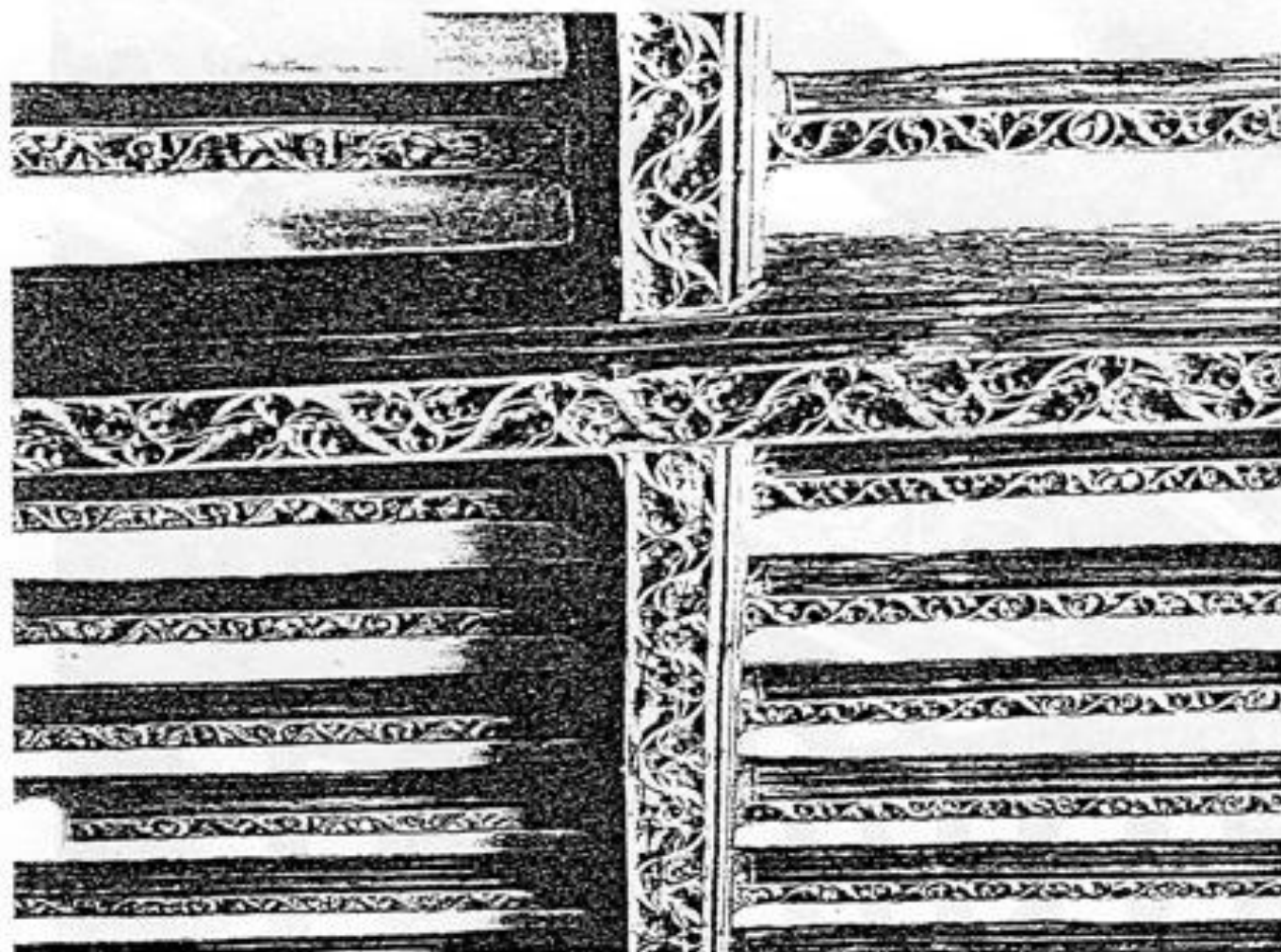
A. notable feature of the timber house is the *massiveness* of the beams which were used. Look at those which span even a small room such as the Marquess of Granby Inn, near Colchester (photograph No. iv). How many tourists, I wonder, have observed the great thickness of the structural beams at the Musée de Cluny in Paris, which rest on stone corbels? Their length is also exceptional. In England, where large scantling was not always available, the average beam is not so long as those employed abroad; but the main horizontal timbers were always of considerable thickness to support the weight of the building above them. These were placed in positions where the main external walls were best able to support the downward strain, e.g. generally between windows, arches or other openings. Smaller beams were then inserted to prevent sagging. Additional strength to carry dead weight was at times provided by trusses or stone corbels which, is all that is required. There is no outward thrust from timber used horizontally.

At an earlier age the use of such heavy beams was unnecessary. In the Thirteenth Century, dwellings consisted of but one storey above the ground floor. In the early years of the Fourteenth we find mention of houses in London of several storeys with cellars beneath them. These dwellings—strange as such an arrangement may appear to us to-day—were divided up into sections as the freehold property of numerous individuals who gained access to their quarters by means of an external staircase, roofed with tiles or stone.

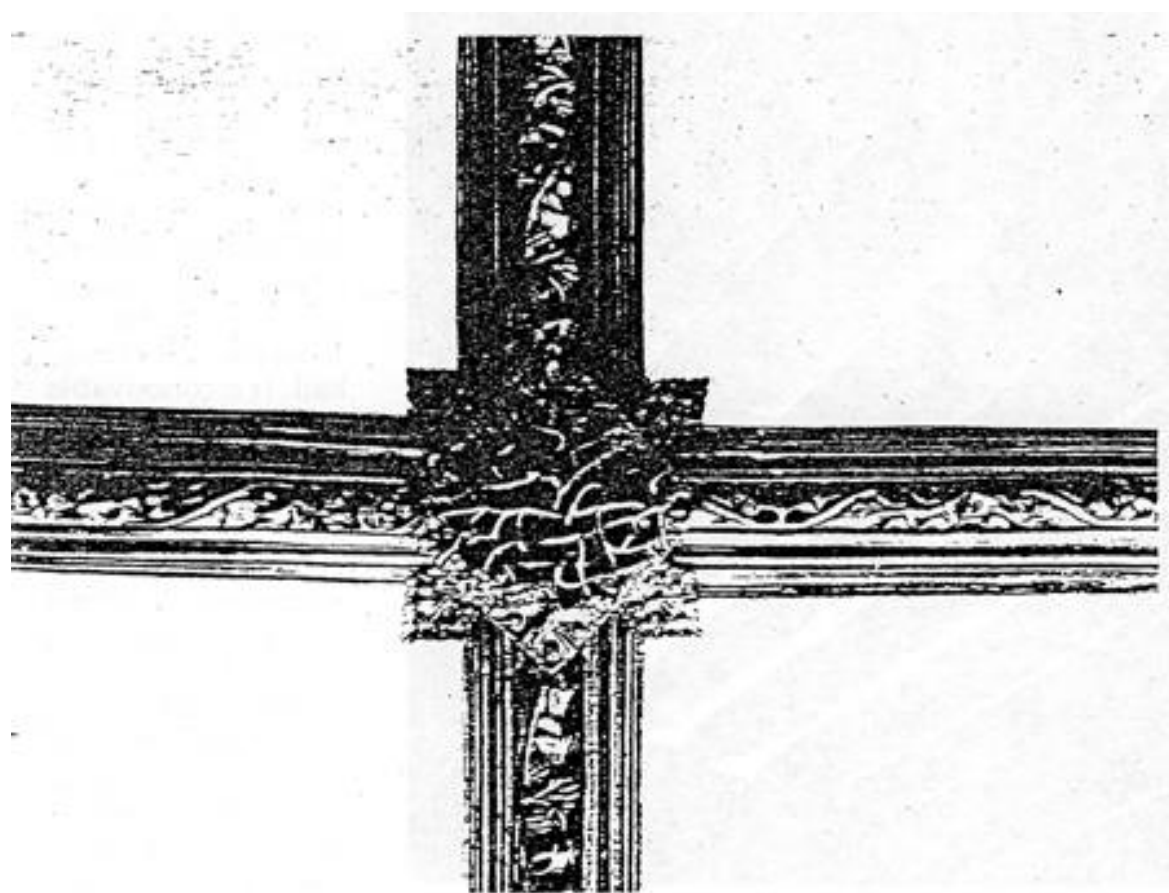
Even throughout the Fifteenth Century the domestic dwelling was far from ornate. Ceiling timbers were left unadorned, although the age was essentially one when the woodworker had improved his status and was no longer subordinate to the mason. But output then was concentrated upon ecclesiastical work of every description. The roof of a great hall in the Sixteenth Century was unadorned compared with the lavish ornamentation in a church or private chapel—such as Wolsey's Chapel, for instance, at Hampton Court, which is ablaze with bosses and great pendants of cherubs blowing trumpets, and the arms, badges and mottoes of the King, etc., all profusely gilded and painted.



No. V. CEILING BEAMS FROM EAST ANGLIA - ONE OF THE MOST CHARACTERISTIC CEILINGS OF ITS PERIOD EXTANT

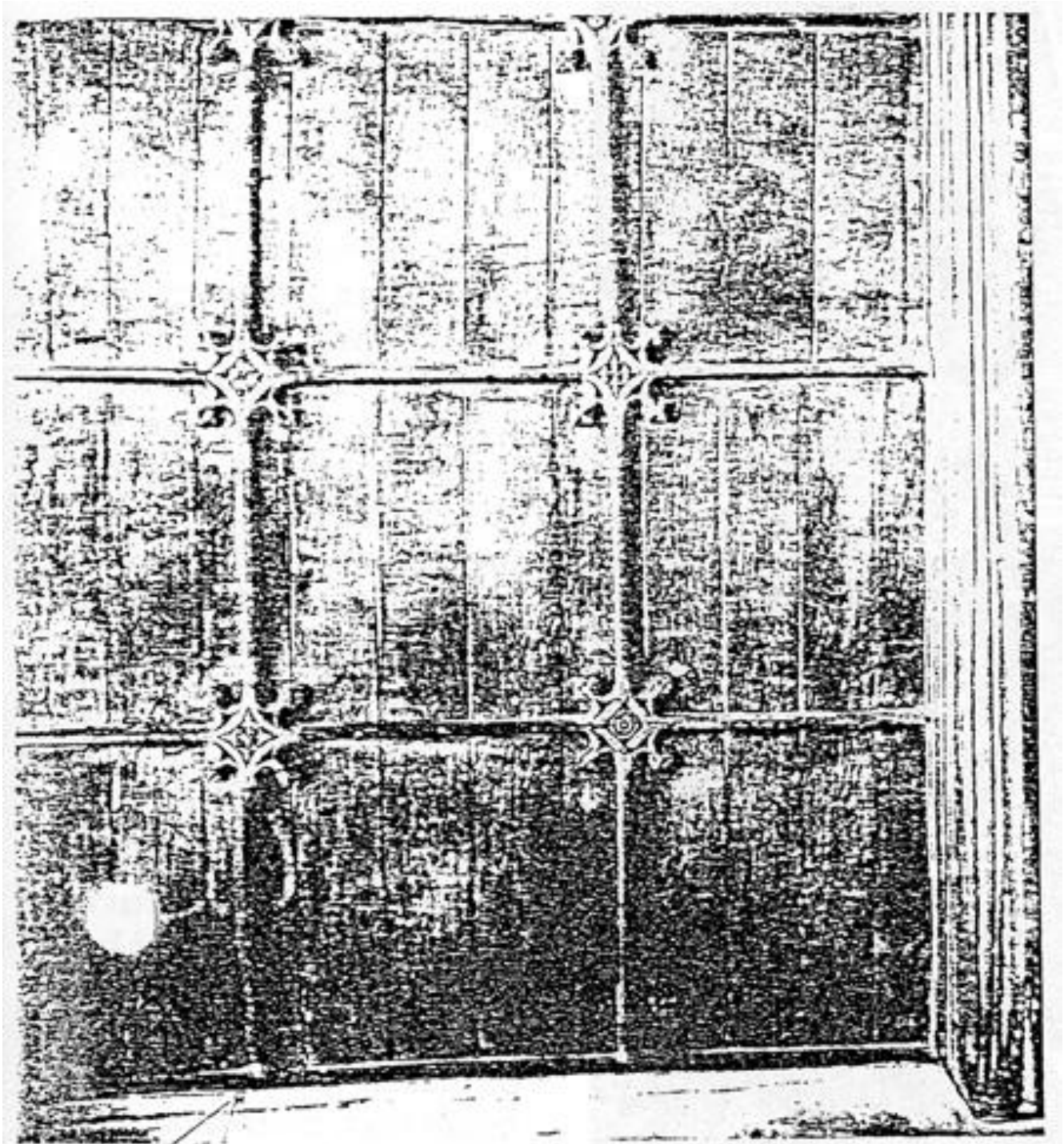


No. VI.—DETAIL OF CEILING BEAMS CARVED WITH GOTHIC TRACERY FROM PAYCOCKE'S HOUSE, ESSEX

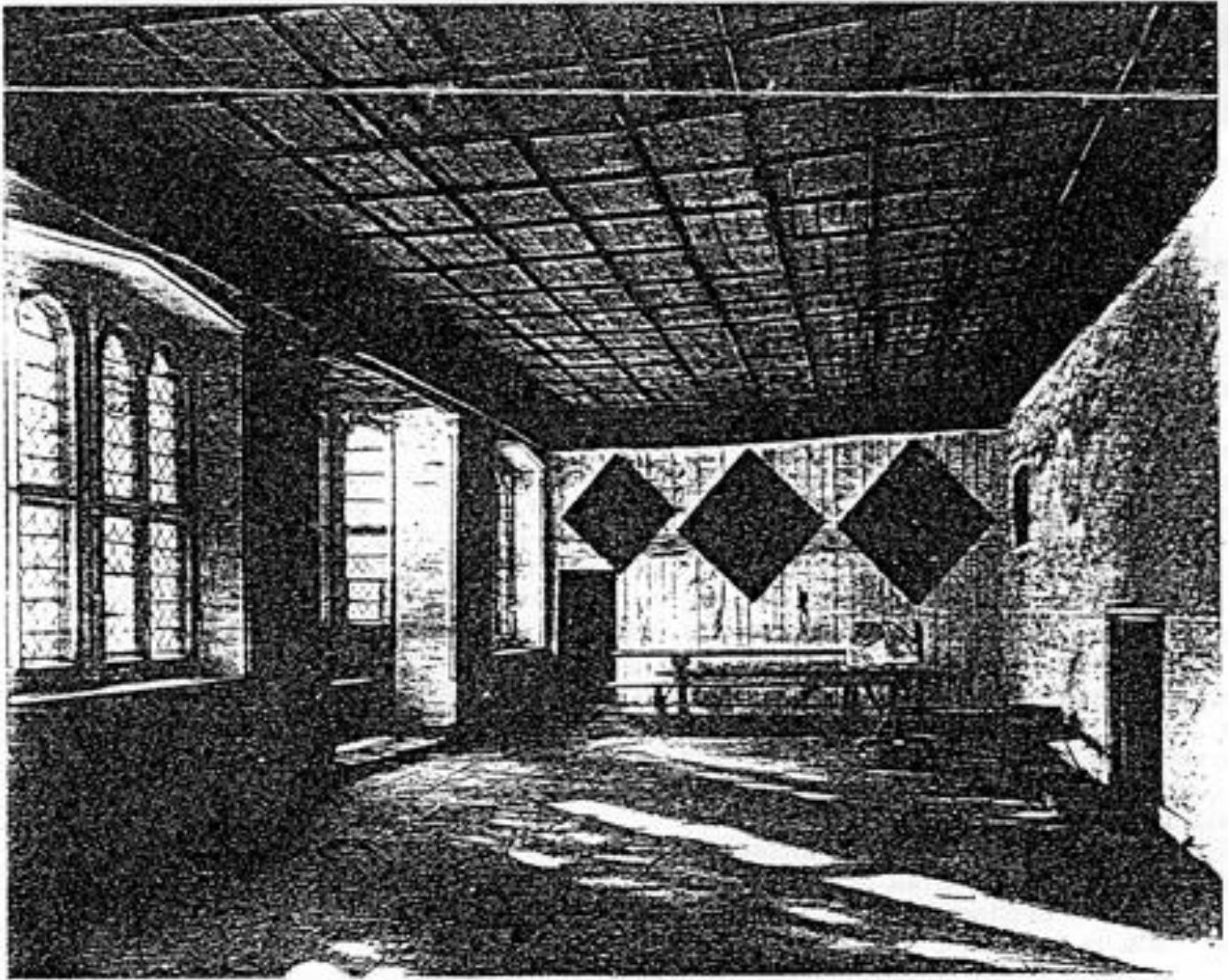


No. VII.—CARVED BOSS AT INTERSECTION OF BEAMS : GODOLPHIN HOUSE, CORNWALL : EARLY XVI C.

Little change occurred during the whole of the period of Henry VIII in the method of constructing a timbered ceiling or the disposition of the beams, though ornamentation varies greatly according to locality. We see in photograph No. v a ceiling from East Anglia—a very fine specimen indeed, which has never been painted or plastered over. It is carved with conventional twisted foliage with a serrated edge, and slightly canted upwards towards the central beam. One's first impression would place it among many similar ceilings fairly late in date. But compared, for instance, with the Paycocke ceiling, photograph No. vi, which is carved with flowing Gothic tracery by a craftsman of no mean order, and seems to be the older work, its date actually is earlier. Even so, the Paycocke ceiling is as good of its kind as any late Gothic carving. The finish and refinement displayed in its cutting are far in advance of much contemporary work, which often suggests the haphazard efforts of an apprentice. Allied in character is the ceiling produced many miles away at Godolphin House in Cornwall, the technique of which is in some ways of even more advanced craftsmanship - photograph No. vii).



56. VIII.—FLAT CEILING OF BOARDED TYPE WITH DECORATIVE RIBS
EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CRAFTSMANSHIP FROM EAST ANGLIA



No. IX.—BISHOP RUSSELL'S HALL AT LYDDINGTON BEDE : GEOMETRICAL COFFERS FORMED BY MOULDED RIBS ENCLOSED BY CARVED TRACERY AND PENDENT CLIPPING : PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT EXTANT : COPYRIGHT OF COUNTRY LIFE

Costs of production being higher, there are fewer Tudor ceilings of this design than those with open beams. Another ceiling, more elaborate, is the well-known specimen in Bishop Russell's Hall, No. ix, at Lyddington Bede, which conforms in character with several of the same type seen in our East Anglian churches, e.g. Framlingham in Suffolk, etc. It is probably the most important specimen extant of these flat boarded ceilings, while the room it covers could be quite outstanding in many ways if suitable objects were introduced into it. The wide margin of coved fan-vaulting with carved bands of open tracery acts as an ornamental cornice to the walls and forms a frame for the ceiling, reducing its size, which reminds one of a hammer-beam roof, the object of which was to reduce the area of thrust.

Hundreds of these fine timber ceilings have perished by fire; and it is impossible to compute the loss of ecclesiastical woodwork in our churches. It is easy to understand that once a fire started in any building largely composed of timber—and many churches were vaulted in timber to imitate stone—the chances of its survival were slight, especially if it were situated in an isolated locality, when modern fire-fighting appliances were unknown.

Even in recent years, when London was burning our losses were dire and catastrophic. Much perished unavoidably, but what justly excites one's ire and indignation is the fact that a large proportion of historical woodwork—not to mention priceless portable possessions—could have been saved by the exercise of only moderate foresight and intelligence! All the well-known carving and panelling of St. Lawrence Jewry, for instance, could have been unscrewed from its backing and taken to safety in a few hours!

As to the construction of the timber house, I am of the opinion that, despite an abundance of material and in an age when the weekly wage-bill for labour was a relatively small item on contracting costs, a building

which incorporated several finely-moulded ceilings, etc., must have taken a considerable time to erect. Materials would, if possible, be purchased locally, which meant that timber, for instance, would have to be felled, sawn up and—being green—would take time to dry out. If a church was to be built, wealthy families owning land near by would present standing timbers from their estates as and when it was required. Probably half would be procured from such a source, the residue collected elsewhere, or, as often as not, imported from abroad. Thus the cost of transportation exceeded that of labour, unless the site of the building in question was beside a river or canal on which materials could be floated to it.

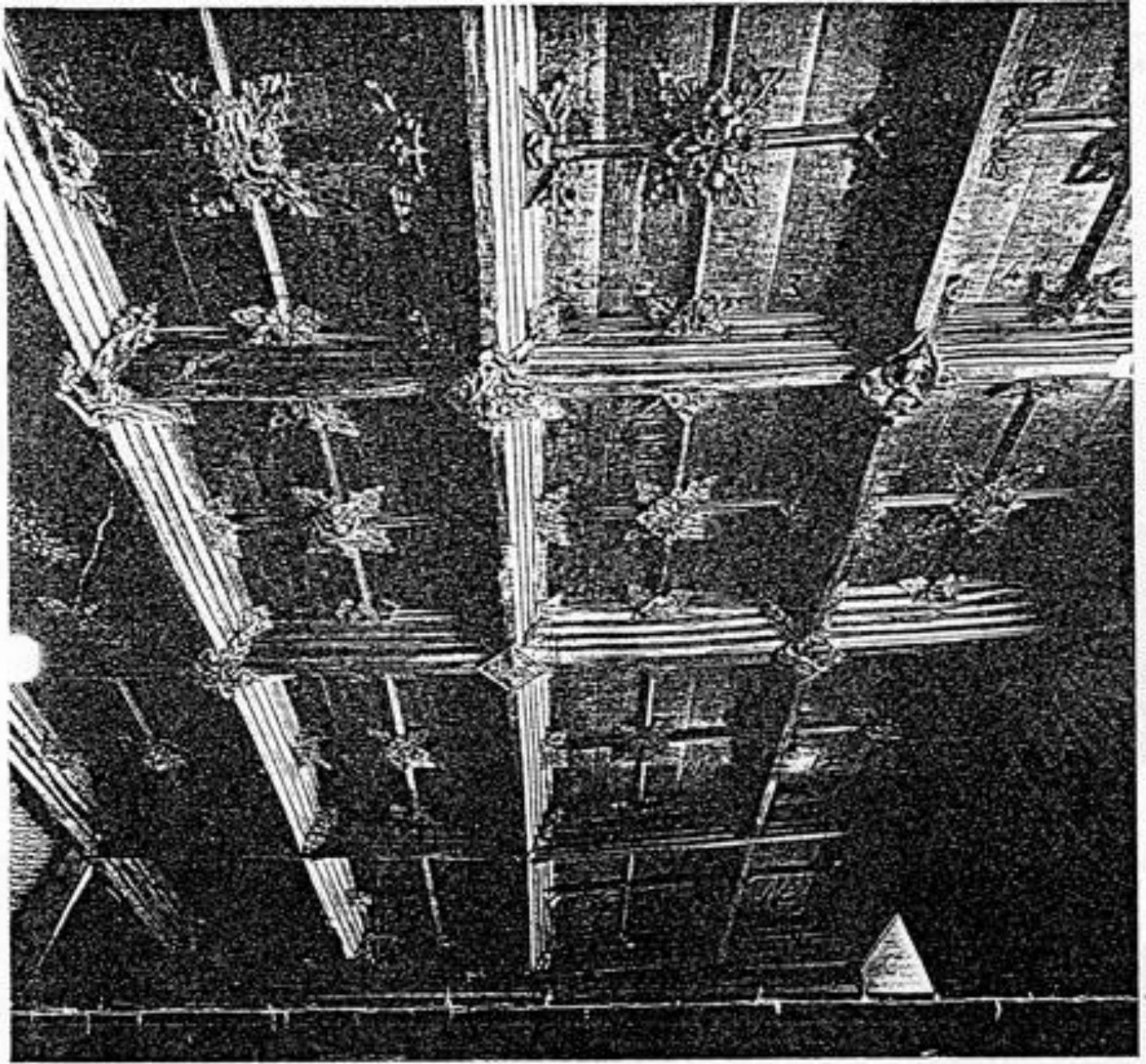
There is little doubt that a considerable amount of wet timber was employed in all parts of England; but as a rule its use was confined to features never intended to be seen—such as the ceiling joists which have now been exposed in so many old houses, which twist and bend in curious lines due to the use of unseasoned wood. I regret that so much woodwork of this nature, which was purely structural in purpose, has been exposed in recent years. It is generally unsightly, and conveys an erroneous impression of an architectural period the character of which was essentially symmetrical and Orderly. But whether a church or a manor, a new building for any purpose excited widespread interest. If a church, the interest would not be confined to one county. Advice would be sought from many authorities, especially pilgrims who had travelled abroad; while decorative embellishments would be copied from or based upon existing prototypes or taken from pattern-books then in circulation. Nevertheless, local traditions and styles were influential everywhere, due to the inspiration and skill of the creative artist untrammelled by rule or regulation, and stimulated by the desire to surpass the efforts of others, competition between guilds and various centres of production being intense both in England and abroad.

Whether we regard the Sixteenth Century as 'the good old days,' or deem many aspects of it to be bad, as they certainly were, one fact is certain: a craftsman had an interest in life, his work must have been a joy and a pleasure; he never knew the soul-deadening monotony endured by the modern makers of 'mass-produced' articles.

Furthermore, a workman was rarely long out of employment and could concentrate for a great part of his life on one specific subject and master its technique. Not only was the carver proficient in the technique of his craft, he was also a person endowed with imagination and much Classical and theological lore.

The carver to-day might pale perhaps if his union were to expect him to know the feats, functions and emblems of the saints and to presuppose his ability to portray and individualize the angelic hierarchy, to personify by his art the virtues and vices, to produce images, birds, beasts, reptiles, fishes, mermaids and other mythological beings, including fiends and their infernal relations—not to mention architectural ornament and the rules of heraldry, etc. Even if he were appropriately erudite and apt in copying and following explicit directions, the modern carver in the absence of training would lack the imagination and spontaneity of his early predecessors, because we have quite certainly retrogressed on the plane of creative art.

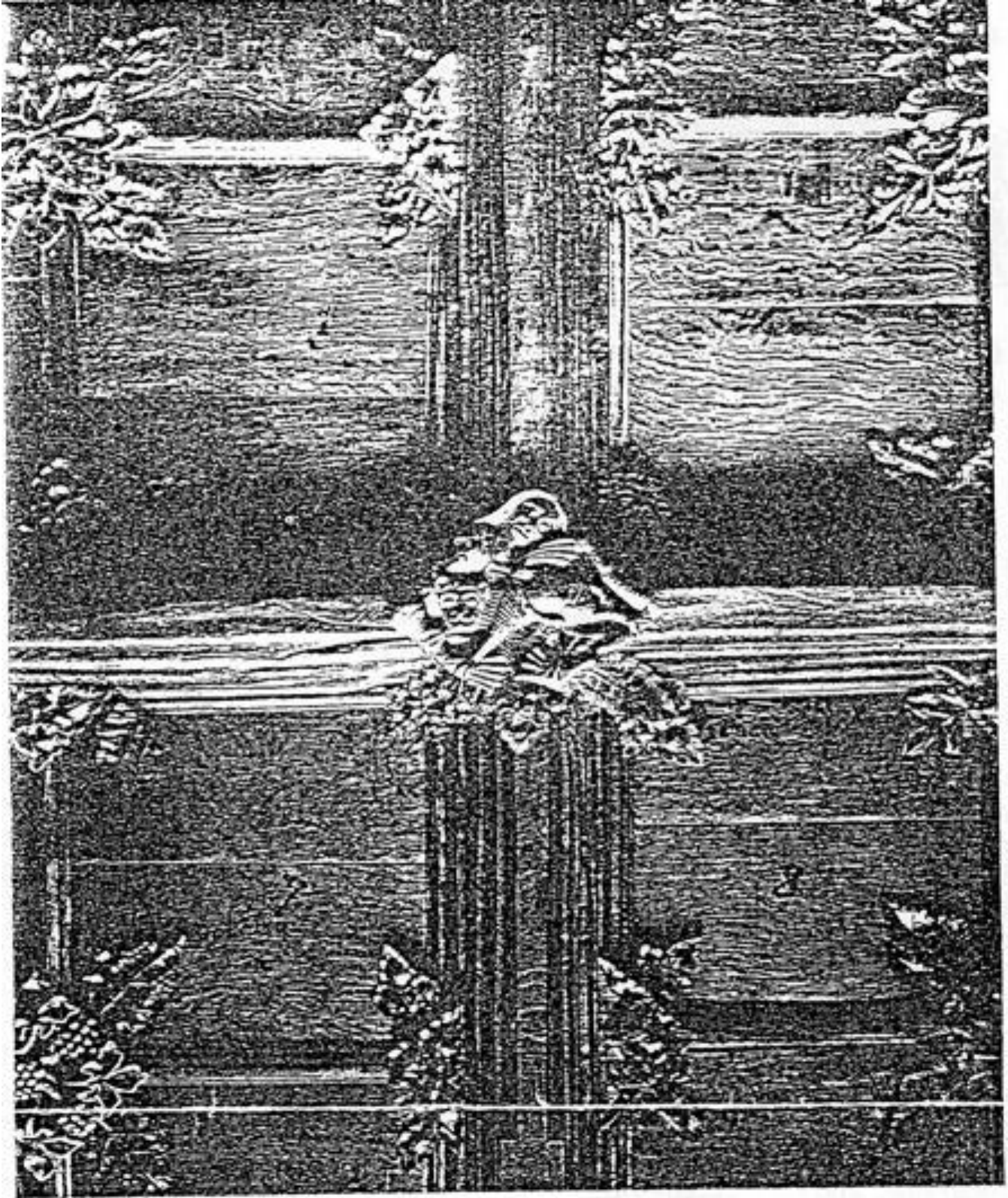
I wrote the word 'imagination' a moment or so ago in order to emphasise that ornament had to be invented as production progressed in order to fill in spaces calling for embellishment, of which the design was generally left to the discretion of the carver, many noticable examples can be traced to the hand of an actual craftsman. It is far from an easy matter to design decorative surface ornaments to fill in a certain space, especially to maintain proper scale if it has to be carved high above the ground or on a ceiling. I feel certain that angels holding shields or emblems were so frequently used to fill in a spandrel panel on account of its awkward shape, especially the spandrels on either side of a high-pointed arch, which generally give the designer a head-ache. Wings are such decorative features and ??? of drawing. They can be either long or short. They can fall downwards to force a vertical line or point horizontally like a sign-post.



No. X.-CEILING AT BRIDGWATER, DIVIDED INTO COFFERS BY HEAVY BEAMS WITH DEEPLY MOULDED SECTIONS ; 20 x 16 FT.



I may have used up too much space too discuss these general topics—though they are all essentially connected with the same subject—but now I would like to add a few comments upon a very important specimen of woodwork which, of its kind, is a triumph of the carpenter's craft in combination with carving of a very high order (No. x).

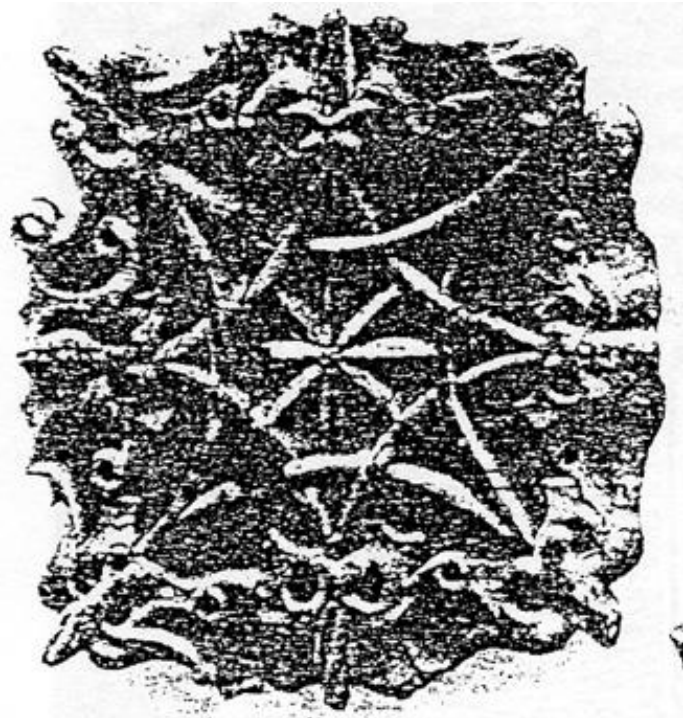


No. XI.—PART OF THE BRIDGWATER CEILING : FINELY CARVED DETAIL OF BOSS & VINE LEAVES

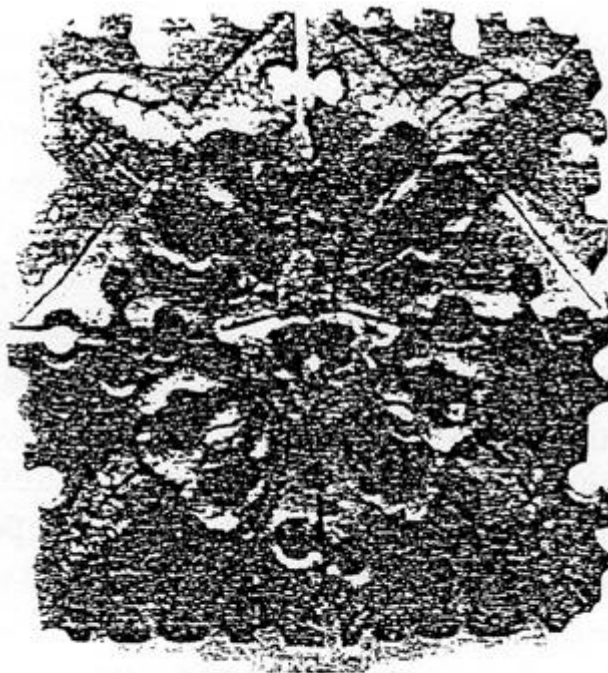
Obviously, this remarkable ceiling, situated in a domestic dwelling at Bridgewater, is alien to its position, though probably not to its locality. As far as my knowledge goes it has no counterpart in any building other than a church; but it shows complete affinity—in both design and execution—with many well-known examples over the choirs of rural churches, which are carved, as in this one, with foliage, heraldry and numerous sacred subjects. When a ceiling of this kind is seen so near co the floor in a small apartment it

suggests a 'close up' of a church ceiling which has been removed from its setting and is discordantly out of place.

However, being ignorant of its history, I must not be dogmatic. I merely direct the reader's attention to the depth of the panels formed by the intersection of the beams, the size of the bosses on the moulded ribs which form the coders, and the large scale and vigour of the ornament generally. He will also observe that this ceiling is structurally detached from the fabric of the house itself, as the ambers which support it are comparatively modern and cut by a circular saw.



No. XII.—BOSS. ENGLISH : LATE XV CENT.



No. XIII.—BOSS. ENGLISH : LATE XV CENT.

In character it is unmistakably of Somerset, and I think it very probable that it was originally part of a neighbouring church now demolished. Witness to its ecclesiastical provenance seems clearly borne by the

carving on the bosses illustrating Bible subjects, e.g. *Peter and the Cock*, *The Swine and the Sea*, *The Cup of Grapes*, *The Angel and the Star*, while the central boss is cut with a rose under a crown. These designs intermingle with delicate olive and grape leaves and various fruits referred to in the Bible.

Since some of the other ceilings which have been under review are, in comparison, somewhat primitive in character it should be remembered that they are the structural timbers of the houses containing them and that the comparative coarseness of their ornamentation is essential in objects intended to be seen only at a distance. It would be unjust to disparage such carving by comparing it with the finer and more finished efforts of the contemporary cabinet-maker, especially as but little ceiling ornamentation of a domestic character had appeared in England when it was executed.

As there are several Gothic churches which suffered by enemy action now being restored, and others to follow, perhaps a word in conclusion upon restoration of woodwork which has been damaged (as distinct from preservation) may not be out of place. Apart from those in the city of London, the majority of churches destroyed dated from the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, the loss of which is not so great as that of a typical Victorian church now about a hundred years old; because apart from their pitch-pine embellishments and the horrors of sentimental stained glass. I have little doubt that in another hundred years they will be valued by English people. Many of them were designed on sound tradition: they are well built: and as the sky-line is one of the most important aspects of any city, a church spire of any period is helpful. The spire of St. Mary Abbots, for instance which is based upon the lines of the twelfth-century spire at Chartres, adds greatly to the surrounding vistas when seen from Kensington Gardens. Luckily it was only the roofing timbers of this church which were burnt, and these can easily be replaced. But when we come to the structural woodwork of a country church restoration calls for a very definite policy, even if more costly.

I have in mind a charming church in Kent which was shattered by blast and gutted by fire. So extensive was the damage that it was at first decided to construct an entirely new roof, the aspect of which would have had little affinity with the main fabric of stone which was undamaged. Wise counsel prevailed, however, and when all the fragments of ancient woodwork had been collected it was found that about two-thirds could be reused in their former positions. This is the only proper and intelligent procedure, which should be adhered to whenever possible. Many new sections have now been spliced on to old beams which were only half their former length, and in many cases new ceiling bosses will have to be carved. Of course, old brown oak is essential for this work, and is generally procurable, and on a recent visit it was heartening to see several woodworkers using an adze on great beams in order to produce a similar surface to the originals.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that essential structural restorations of this nature should remain as such, and that no attempt of any kind be made to distress chemically or to colour new work to falsify its appearance and simulate age. The use of a wire brush on modern carving, for instance, will reduce it to the level of a fake. Restored sections of carving should be visible and frankly admitted, in the manner of a museum exhibit only a portion of which is genuine.

In the same manner every fragment of ancient stone carving should be preserved. When Rheims was under fire at intervals I watched the care with which even a small piece of shattered stone was sorrowfully collected, carefully marked and put aside. Every part of it has now been replaced (after the greatest jig-saw puzzle in history) and Europe is under a deep debt of gratitude to all concerned for this manifestation of intelligence and skill.

I know that many officials of the Church are opposed to any of the elements of a museum being introduced into a church. To them I would point out that if a rural church is deprived of all vestiges of antiquity there is little left to commend it, either locally or to the casual wayfarer.

It is probably unnecessary to offer the advice that the same procedure be adopted in the restoration of any ancient building which has to be re-erected, whether civic or domestic. Local builders are known for their distaste for new work which incorporates old, due, generally, to lack of experience, as such work requires careful supervision, and is less costly than a 'nice new job.' In Surrey the roof of a great hall is now being re-erected in the manner I have indicated, and I predict that in twenty years or so, when the new woodwork has settled down, the next generation will be unaware of its introduction.

Throughout the ages, ceilings have always been regarded as features of considerable decorative importance. My work as a decorator has brought me in contact with architects and designers of many nationalities, all of whom would concentrate on the nature of a ceiling—whether domestic, theatrical or ceremonious in intention—and devote more time to its design than to any other feature. The dome or the vaults, of a church is or are always the most ornate part of the fabric they adorn. Our hammer-beam and arch-braced roofs are none the less remarkable for outstanding craftsmanship. From a palace to the ceiling in the boudoir of a cocotte in the Eighteenth Century the ceiling was always the crowning feature of a decorative scheme, the latter being adorned with refined ornament inset with paintings, etc.

One regrets that in modern work to-day there is nothing on a ceiling other than a bleakly bare area of space as expressionless as plaster and distemper can make it. It has to conform with our box-like dwellings, strictly utilitarian in purpose, and requires little mental exertion to produce. Nevertheless, this drift in fashion is unfortunate, as it affects the daily life of individuals and involves a decay of craftsmanship.