

Remains of a timber-framed building at Howards Farm, Eccleston, St Helens

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In August 1985 the then Archaeological Survey of Merseyside was advised by the tenants of Howards Farm, Eccleston, Mr and Mrs Stockley, that a section of timber-framing had been uncovered during renovations at the farmhouse (grid reference SJ 4767 9582, Figure 28). The poor condition of the timber necessitated its removal, but the surviving portion was able to be recorded in advance of destruction.

The farmhouse from the front (i.e. south) presents the appearance of a mid 18th-century two-storey brick structure, with a brick string course and dressed sandstone quoins and plinth. The house is shown on the 1840 Tithe Award map for Eccleston (PRO DRL 1/24), as a simple rectangular structure standing beside the road in its own garden. The map indicates that the small extension now visible at the rear was added after 1840 (Figure 29). Examination of the structure during the course of the extensive rebuilding, however, reveals that the history of the house is more complex. The

removal of both part of the northern rear wall and the entire west gable wall due to severe structural problems revealed that the rear wall was constructed of small sandstone blocks, virtually without foundations and of an earlier phase than the brick portion. Within this stone structure a section of timber-framing had been uncovered west of the staircase, on the northern side of the building (Figure 30).

Before its destruction the majority of the visible surviving framing, which was restricted to the first floor section, was photographed and drawn. The uneven plaster surface of the interior wall on the eastern side of the same staircase strongly suggested that this too was of timber-framed construction but this could not be confirmed.

The surviving timber framing consisted of a box-framed construction with a horizontal tie beam, a substantial principal rafter, and probable queen-post roof structure, although the details of the last point were not clearly visible and could not be accurately measured (Figure 31). The box-framing had been sawn in half when the brick front part of the house was extended, and a new vertical post inserted to support the queen post after the removal of one side of its

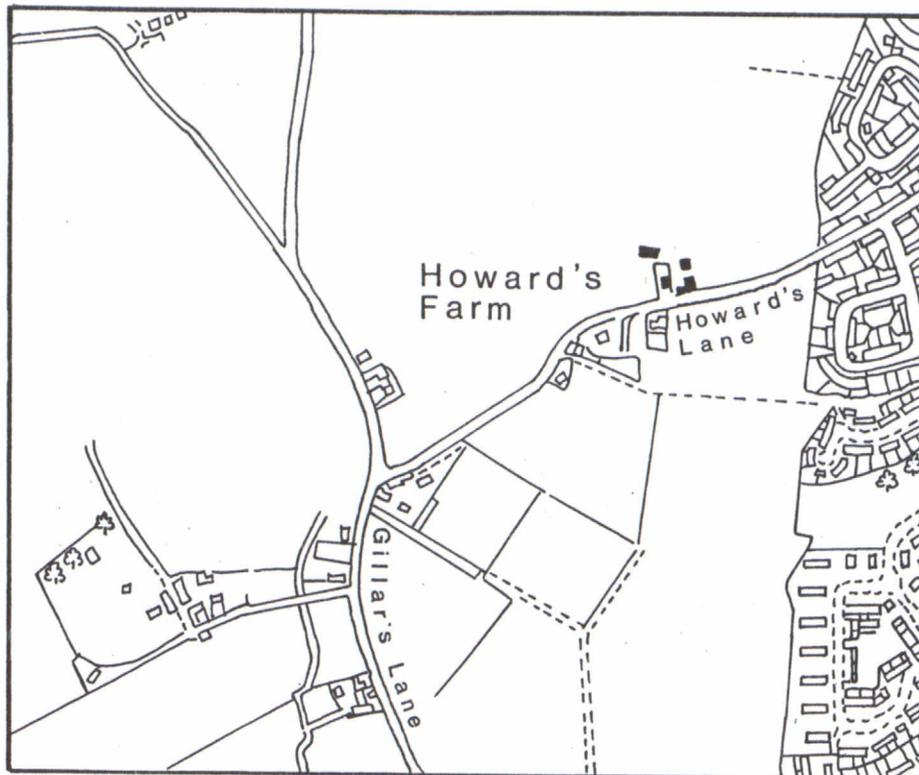


Figure 28: Location of Howards Farm.

supporting frame. The infill of the panels consisted of split staves, including a number of reused short pieces of an earlier frame, slotted into grooves cut into the upper and lower faces of the horizontal members. This had then been covered with daub and later with horse-hair plaster.

The date of the brick section can be established from a datestone bearing the inscription 'John Rigby 1732', which was originally set in the brick western gable wall, and this provides some evidence for the date of the earlier section. The brick component of the house had clearly been added onto the existing sandstone structure, which itself incorporated the timber framed portion, requiring the timber frame to be sawn in half. It is possible that the sandstone rear wall was itself added as a cladding to an original timber-framed structure, but the junction between the stone walling and the timber frame was not accessible, and therefore the exact relationship between the two elements must remain conjectural.

In dating the timber-framing, the question of the phasing is important. The rear wall, constructed of roughly coursed small undressed blocks of sandstone, is found in an urban context at Prescott nearby in buildings of probable 17th-century date. If it is correct to see this sandstone wall as a later cladding of the original timber-framed structure, then the timber framing may represent a still earlier phase, possibly placing the original construction in the 16th or early 17th-century.

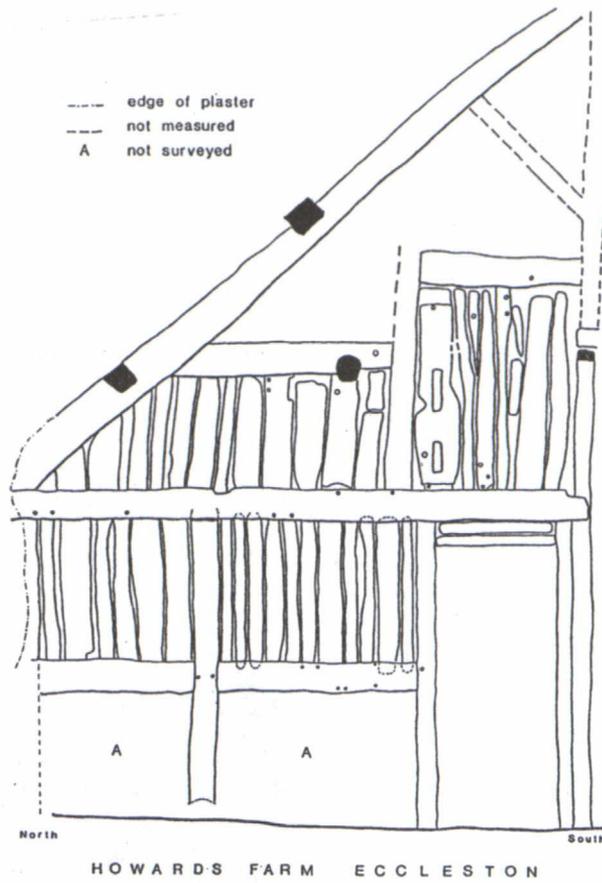
Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Mr and Mrs Stockley for informing the Archaeological Survey of the initial find and subsequently for kindly allowing permission to make a detailed record of the timber framing.

The SMR File reference is 4795-24.



Figure 29: North elevation.



2 m



Figure 30: The timber framing west of the staircase on the northern side of the building.

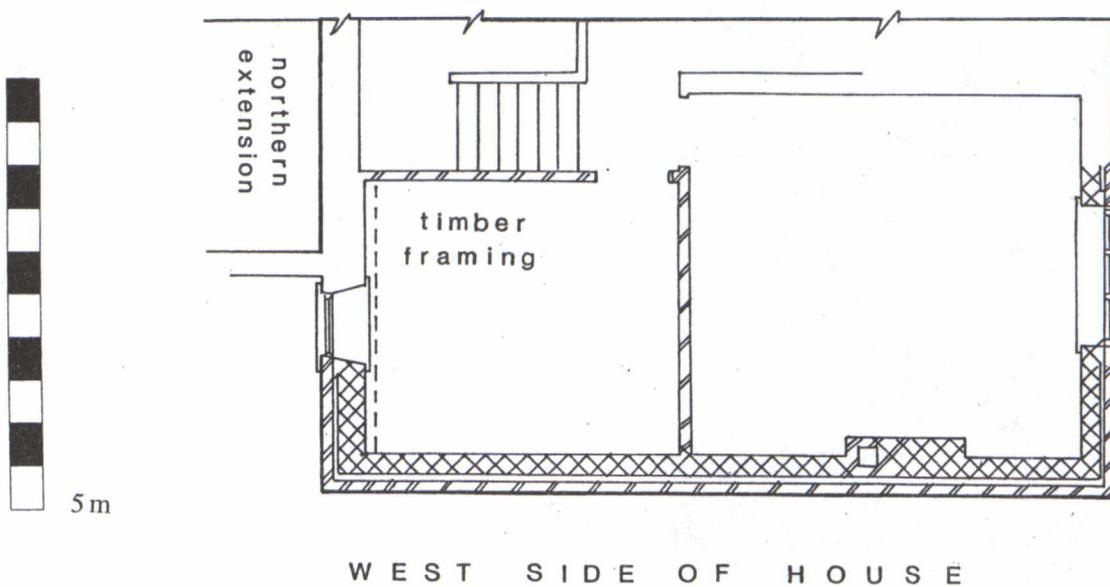


Figure 31: Plan of the 18th-century and earlier house showing the location of the timber framing.