Devon's Heritage of Medieval Houses and Farms: an Overview

By Nat Alcock

When I first started looking at houses in Devon, very little had been put into print about them. Even so, researchers were becoming aware of the remarkable number of medieval houses in the county. One feature in particular has helped us to identify them – the presence of smoke-blackening on the roof timbers, and indeed often on thatch that has survived from the medieval period (*Illus – John Thorp's map*). Since then, our knowledge has been built up through fieldwork and also through the use of tree-ring dating. The latter has given us specific dates – often precise to the year – replacing such vague statements as 'late medieval'.

We can pick Townsend in Stockland village, East Devon (*Illus*), as a classic example of a medieval Devon house. Its plan is typical– three rooms and a cross-passage, an inner room as a sleeping chamber, a central living room (always called the 'hall'), and a third room for service and storage – certainly later used for barrels of cyder. Its oak roof timbers are blackened with the smoke and soot from the hearth in the hall, and two of the roof's principal rafters have given tree-ring dates of c. 1260 (though the main roof was reconstructed in about 1400).

An important distinction must be made between houses like Townsend – surviving in great numbers, mainly in east, central and north Devon – and the alternative form, the Dartmoor longhouse, in which the end room, across the passage, was the *shippon*, giving winter shelter to the farm cattle, especially the plough oxen and the milking heifers. More about longhouses below.

Typically, medieval Devon houses are built of 'cob', clay and sand, with some straw for a binder. This can survive from as early as the houses themselves as long as it is protected from damp getting into the tops of the walls – preferably also with stone footings, though some cob houses have the walls built directly on the ground. The roofs are thatch and, because of the Devon tradition of re-thatching by just replacing the outermost layers, the original medieval inner thatch itself very often survives intact, blackened with smoke, but preserving extraordinary snapshots of medieval flora – not only the straw but also all the weeds that grew among the corn in the Devon fields.

The characteristic medieval roof structures use *Jointed crucks* (or sometimes *True* or *Raised crucks*) (*illus*). In *True crucks*, pairs of timbers rise from near the ground to the roof apex in a continuous sweep (higher up the walls in *Raised crucks*; in *Jointed crucks*, the same shape is achieved but using two pieces of timber joined at the elbow. This makes the choice of timber for the roof truss much less critical, and it also allows for more elegantly-shaped roof trusses. Another advantage of the *Jointed cruck* is that the timbers follow the line of the wall and roof slope, rather than cutting across the upper part of the house inside the walls. Upper rooms can therefore be as high as is wished and, indeed, a few medieval Devon houses have remarkably high rooms.

Within the house, the characteristic Devon partition is that known as *stud-and-panel* (sometimes called plank-and-muntin), consisting of a series of thicker vertical posts grooved along the sides, interspersed with planks (the panels), set into the grooves. In the earliest houses (without any first-floor rooms), the partitions reached only to just above head height, and the roof was open from end to end. We also know from surviving examples that these screens were often painted with colourful patterns

and images, as, for example, at Marker's Cottage, Broadclyst (which can be visited – *National Trust*). When upper rooms came to be inserted, this was almost always in stages: firstly the *Solar* over the inner room (a second sleeping room) and next the room over the service. The addition of a chimney replacing the original open hearth in the hall might well precede by some time the insertion of the last upper floor, that over the hall. Windows in cob houses were normally of wood and rarely survive, though sometimes blocked-up ones have been rediscovered, and they can be surprisingly decorative, with moulded surrounds and cusped tracery.

We can put together a composite image of what a typical medieval Devon house might look like (*Illus*), with a three-room plan, thatched roof, jointed crucks and single-storey screens. The nature of the furniture used is hardly known, but the evidence suggests that it would have been plainly constructed in wood, though very possibly with decorative cushions and fabrics.

The other distinctive type of medieval Devon house is the *Dartmoor longhouse*. This shares many of the features of the east and north Devon houses, in particular the three-room and cross-passage plan, but the room across the passage isn't for service. Instead it is a *Shippon* for keeping cattle in. The *Shippon* originally had a central drain, often with stones marking out mangers along the side walls, and holding tethering posts, and it might also have an original hayloft over it. A characteristic example is Sanders, Lettaford, in North Bovey parish (*Illus*), notable as having its shippon still intact; so does Higher Uppacott in Widecombe-in-the-Moor parish, which can be visited [*Dartmoor National Park Authority*].

Longhouses have a very distinctive distribution in Devon (*Illus*),-concentrated in the parishes on and fringing Dartmoor (though absent, of course, from the uninhabited central moor). They were probably also common on Exmoor, although fewer early houses survive there. Some scattered examples have also been discovered further afield, some of them recognised from documentary evidence, when houses are described as having 'house and shippon under one roof'. The specific Dartmoor farming economy involved small-scale mixed farming around the farmhouse, coupled with pasturing of cattle from elsewhere in Devon (*transhumance*), and it was this economy for which the longhouses proved to be ideal, providing shelter during the harsh winters for the farm's own cattle. The scattered longhouses must have shared farming practices with their counterparts on Dartmoor, rather than with their immediate neighbours who needed different accommodation in their houses.

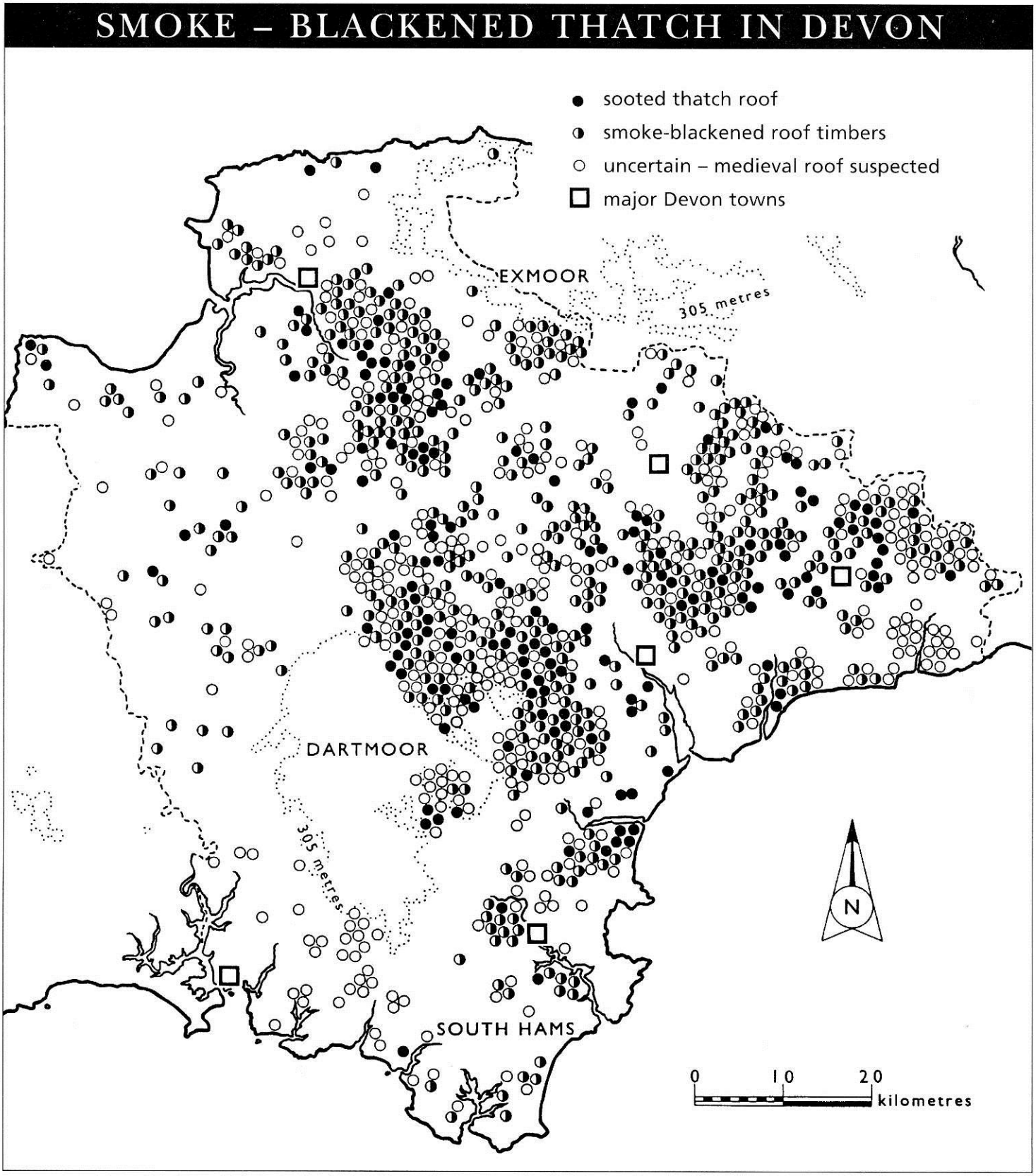
Many of the longhouses show just the same features as the other Devon houses, such as smoke-blackened roofs, that identify them as medieval, and some too have been tree-ring dated to the medieval period. One indeed, Higher Tor in Widecombe parish, we suspect to be of 13th-century date, since the house plan can be virtually superimposed on those of that date excavated at Houndtor.

One question remains unanswered after the identification of Devon's wealth of medieval houses: Why do they exist, and what supported them economically? This is particularly a concern, since analysis of medieval records, especially for the 1334 Lay Subsidy (tax payments) identify North Devon as being one of most poverty-stricken areas in the whole country. So, how could the farmers there build such good houses? We cannot answer this definitively, but research by the late Harold Fox has suggested an answer ('Taxation and Settlement in Medieval Devon', *Thirteenth-Century England X*, 2003, 167-185). He found that in, for example, the large parish of Sampford Courtenay, only 19

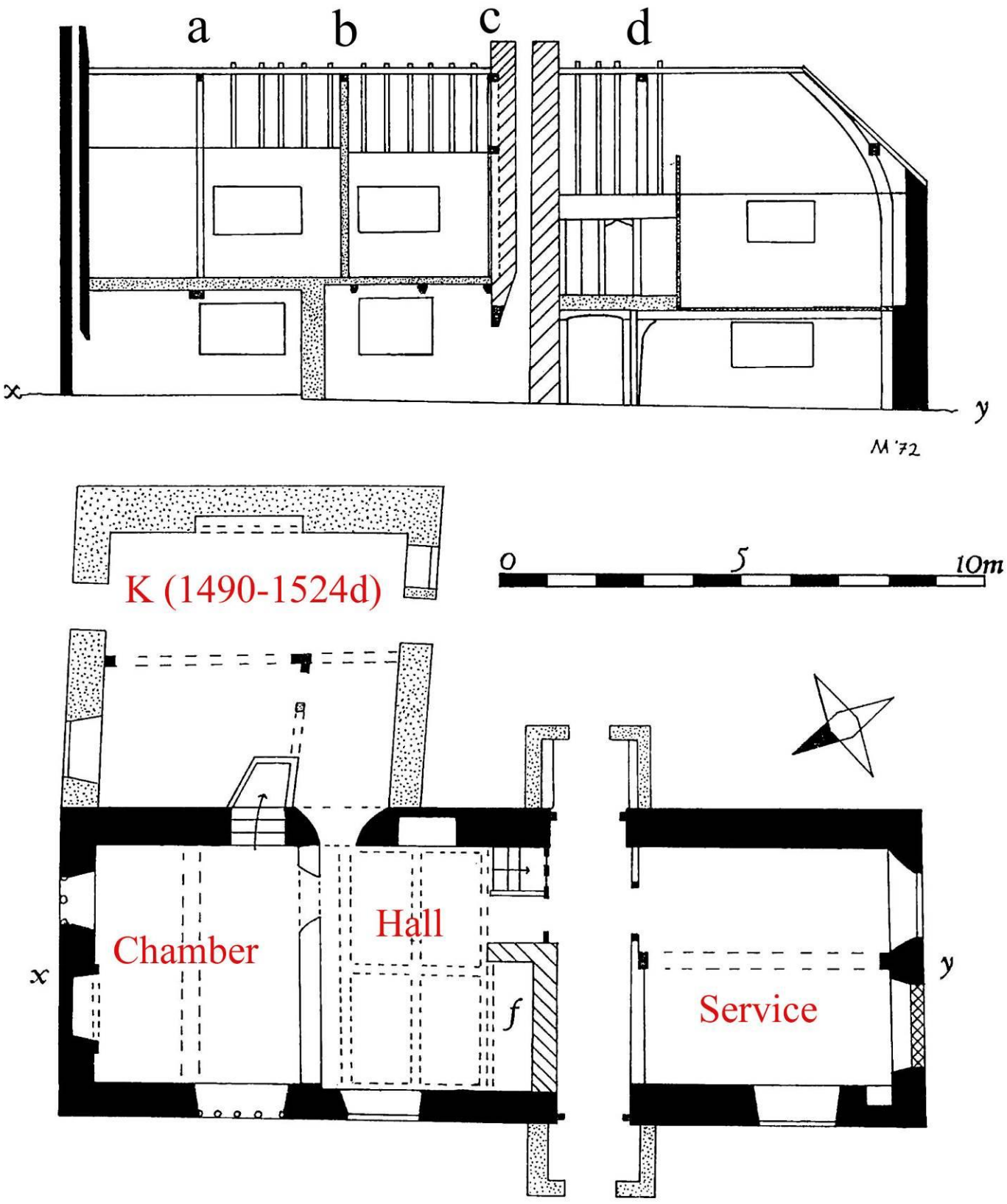
people were taxed – their names (derived from their farms) show the route travelled by the tax collectors, and reveal that 23 of the 34 medieval settlements in the parish were not visited by them. Furthermore, in the summer when the tax-men could travel, the main wealth of the medieval Devon farmers, their cattle, would have been entirely out of sight, pastured on the high moors. Thus, Fox suggested that this poverty was an illusion, and calculations indicated that the profits from these farms would have readily sufficient to pay for building the houses.

Illustrations:

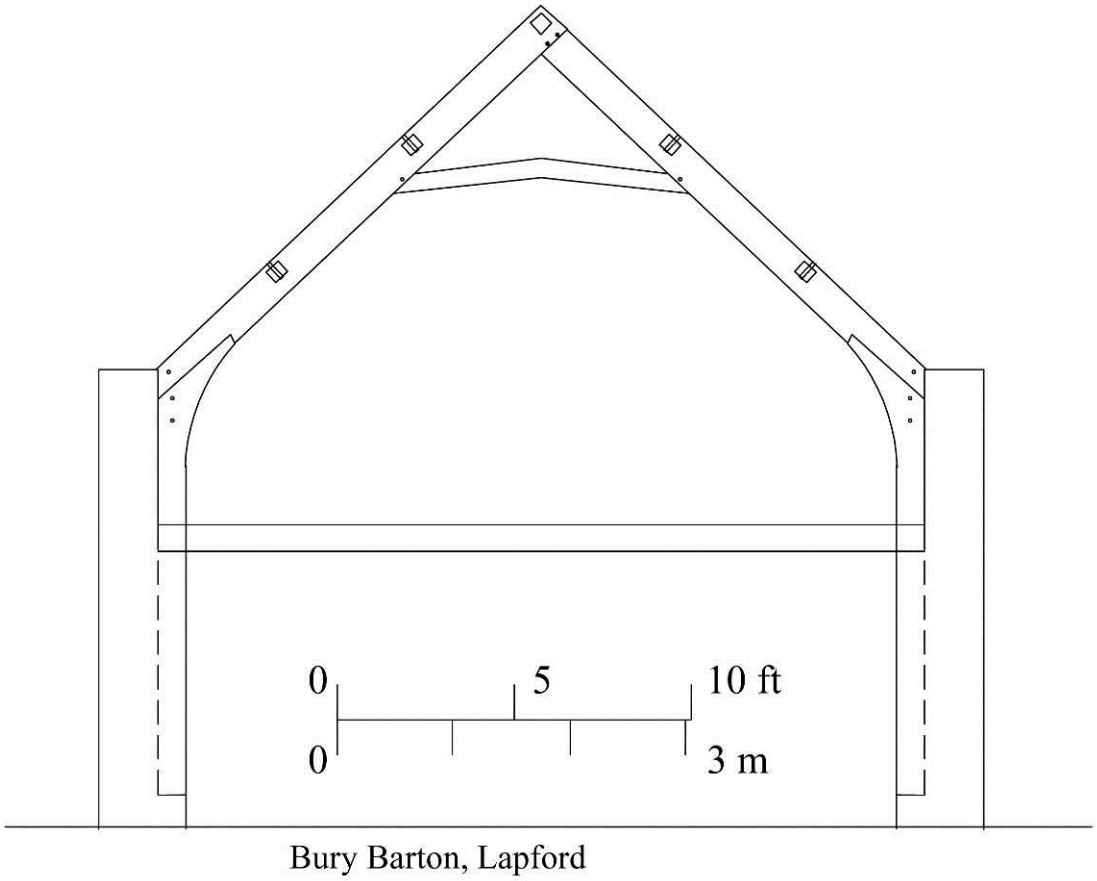
1. Map of smoke-blackened timbers and thatch (drawing by John Thorp).
2. Plan & long-section of Townsend
3. (a) Jointed cruck truss in the barn at Bury Barton, Lapford; (b) Jointed and true cruck blades at Chimsworthy, Bratton Clovelly (drawing by John Thorp.
4. Typical medieval Devon house (drawing by Cary Carson)
5. (a) View (b) plan and long-section of Sanders, Lettaford
6. Longhouse distribution map



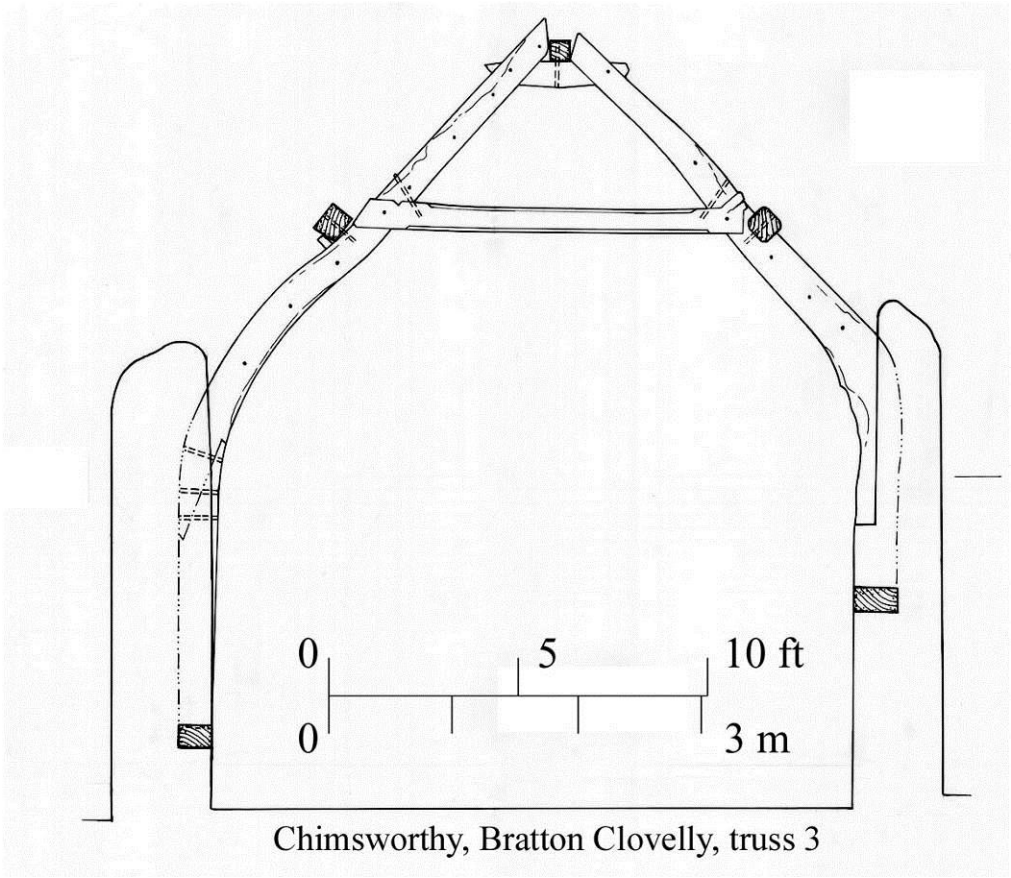
1. Map of smoke-blackened timbers and thatch:
   Devon Thatch by Jo Cox and John R.L. Thorp p.40



2. Plan & long-section of Townsend

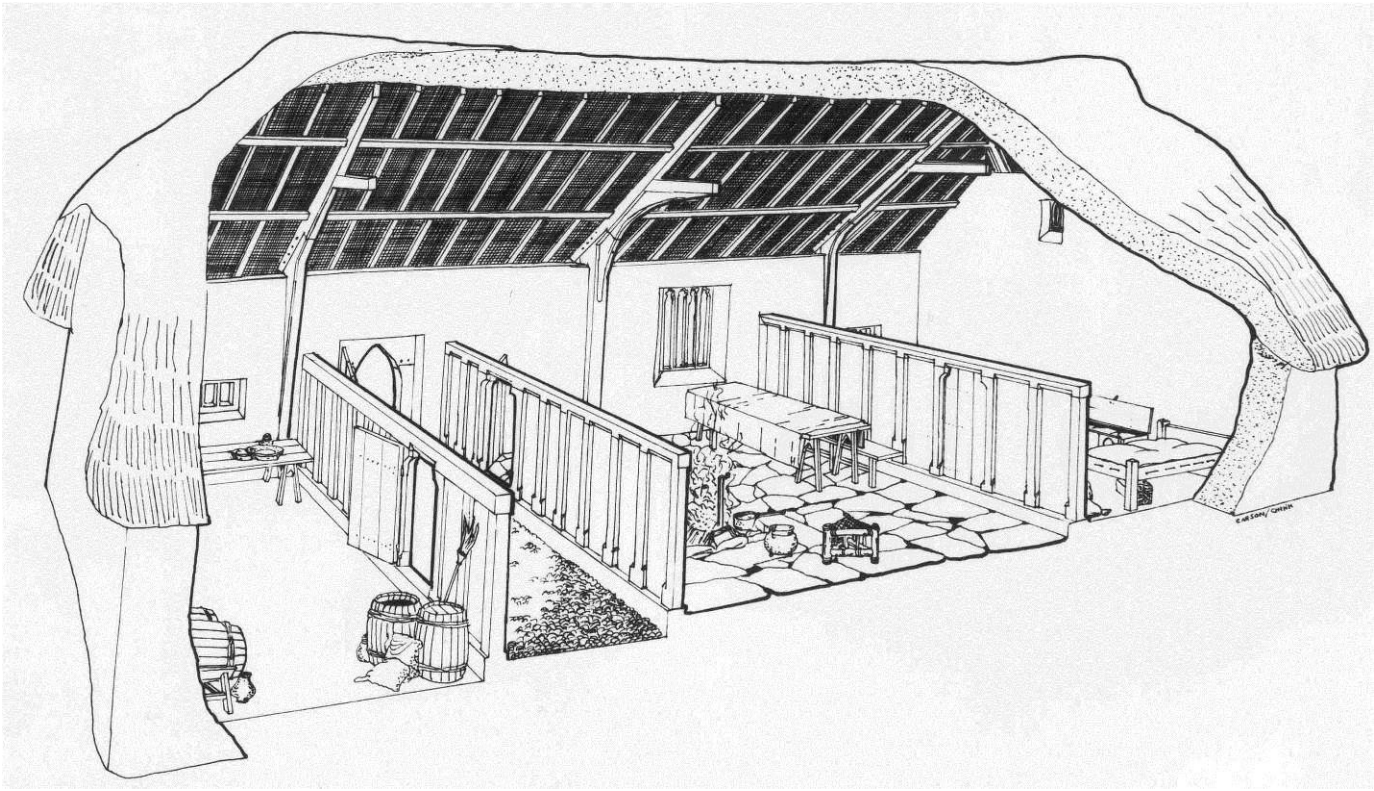


3. (a) Jointed cruck truss in the barn at Bury Barton, Lapford



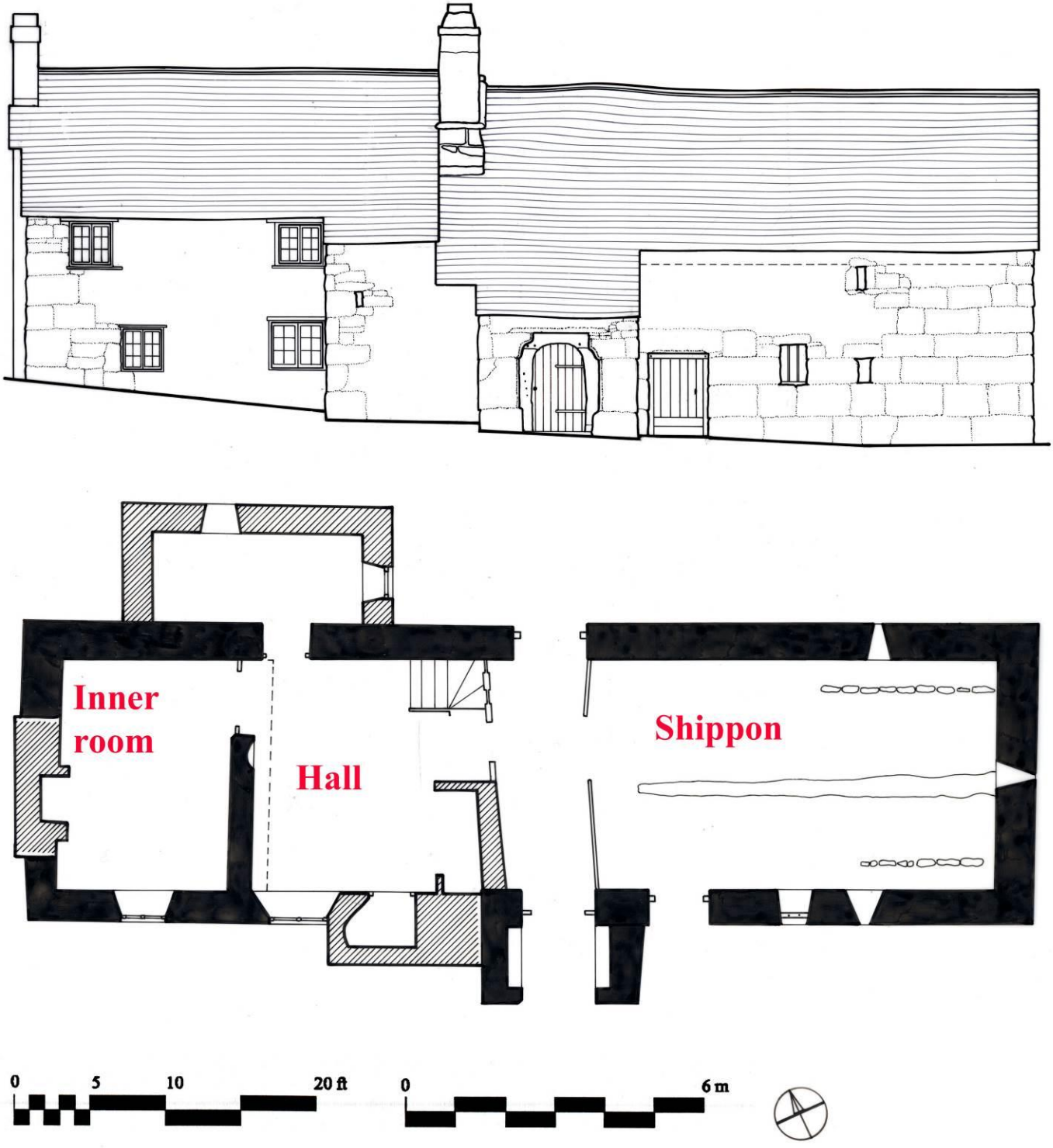
3. (b) Jointed and true cruck blades at Chimsworthy, Bratton Clovelly.

John R.L. Thorp for EMAFU, later Exeter Archaeology.

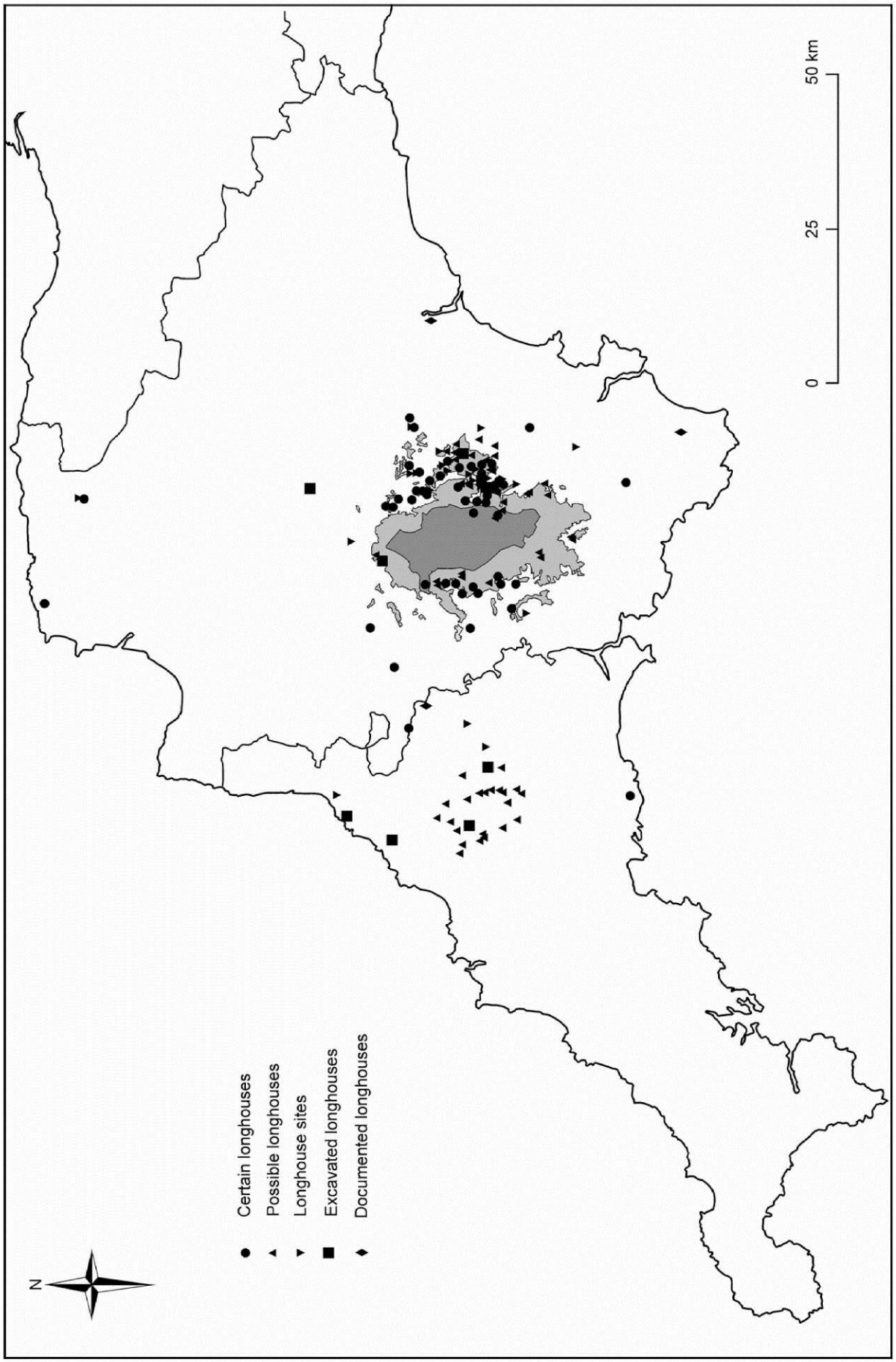


4. Typical medieval Devon house (drawing by Cary Carson)

5. (a) View of Sanders, Lettaford



5. (b) plan and long-section of Sanders, Lettaford


Certain longhouses
Possible longhouses
Longhouse sites
Excavated longhouses
Documented longhouses
N
0
25
50 km

6. Longhouse distribution map