

The Old Workhouse, Cumbergate, Peterborough

by *Richard Hillier*

The Old Workhouse, latterly Almshouses, lies on the west side of Cumbergate (TL 19109871) on a building plot aligned ESE-WNW. This property was obtained freehold in 1721 by the Peterborough Feoffees for use as the city's first workhouse. Their accounts for this period suggest five months of extensive building activity. By 1821 the buildings formed a U-shaped group: a range fronting the street and two wings. As a result of the beneficence of Miss Frances Pears in 1903, both the wings — except a short length of the north wing — were demolished. A new six-room north wing was added.

The main building was originally an early seventeenth-century domestic house, 13 by 6 metres in extent. It was probably timber-framed to the full height of the front elevation; the first floor is now under-built in stone. As a domestic house it contained two rooms on the ground floor, a hall and parlour, divided by a through cross-passage. A large fireplace in the west wall of the northern room is partly blocked.

The hall was reduced in size, probably in the early eighteenth century when the present stairs to the first floor were built. These stairs have square newels and turned balusters.

The front (east) elevation of the first floor is jettied out over the street, and is externally rendered, so that all timbers are obscured. Inside, however, the two principal corner posts and the internal faces of the bressumer and top-plate are all visible. The intermediate principal posts are braced to the tie-beams by concave braces rising from below the jowl heads on the posts.

The remaining part of the old north wing, also of the eighteenth century, was extensively altered in 1903. The south elevation is timber-framed, two principal posts — jointed to tie-beams — being evident on the inside of the first floor. Wattle and daub can be seen *in situ* on this floor.

The evidence in the attic over the front building is for a clasped-purlin roof with concave windbraces (between principal rafters and purlins) and slightly cambered collar beams which are also braced to the principal rafters. Oddly, only twice do the braced collar beam 'trusses' correspond to the tie-beams; it is probably therefore an 'unbound' roof.