

# Templars (and Hospitallers) in Essex

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Cressing Temple, about 10 miles northeast of Chelmsford in Essex, [MAP] is thought to be the earliest settlement of the Knights Templar in England. Queen Matilda (wife of Stephen, not to be confused with Stephen's cousin and rival, the Empress Matilda) gave the manor of Cressing to the Templars in 1137. It is one of the three original Templar properties in the country, with the Old Temple in London and Temple Cowley in Oxfordshire founded slightly later. In 1147 King Stephen

granted the manor of Witham to the Templars as well, and the inquisition of 1185 into the English possessions of the Order indicates that the size of the two properties combined was 12 hides. The size of a hide varied but was usually 120 acres.

Another document, dated 1309, gives the order's landholdings as 1,287 acres and describes the buildings: a mansion house with associated buildings, gardens, a dovecote, a chapel with cemetery, a watermill, and a windmill. An inventory of 1313, taken after the suppression of the order, mentions a chapel, two chambers, a hall, a pantry, a buttery, a kitchen, a larder, a bakehouse, a brewhouse, a dairy, a granary, and a smithy.



Three of the early structures remain. The small well-house, the Barley Barn, built between 1205 and 1235, and the Wheat Barn, built some decades later, are still standing. The barns are the two finest Templar-built barns in Europe, and the Barley Barn is the oldest timber-framed barn in the world. Recently a dowser claimed to have found the foundations of a third barn, and Essex County Council

Archaeologist Barry Hillman-Crouch plans an excavation to see whether there were in fact three, as there often were on large medieval farms.

In 1310 Cressing Temple was handed over to the Knights Hospitaller, who built several new stone buildings and expanded the site. At the Reformation, the property was confiscated by Henry VIII and sold to the Smyth/Nevill family. In the late 16th century the family built a mansion on the site, called the 'Great House', with a Tudor garden, but it was demolished about 100 years later, and only the farmhouse, granary, wagon lodge,

and stableyards remain. Today they house displays of early farm implements and a wheelwright's shop.



Cressing was the largest and most important of the Templars' landholdings in Essex. The estate would have been in the charge of a preceptor accompanied by two or three resident knights or sergeants-at-arms, together with a chaplain, a bailiff, and numerous household servants. The estate would have employed agricultural laborers and craftsmen and would have been farmed

for profit to help the order pay for the war effort in the Holy Land.

The Order of Knights of the Temple of Jerusalem, founded in 1119 to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land, became extremely wealthy and powerful. At the peak of their power, they owned about 50 manors in England and many smaller landholdings. At Cressing, the Templars founded a new town with a market and fair in 1212, where they allotted about 45 acres to the townsfolk as half-acre homesteads.

During the 13th century, the Templars became the bankers of Europe. Eventually they became too influential, and the French King Philip IV had them suppressed by the pope on trumped-up charges of heresy. Like many other properties, Cressing was transferred to the other order of knights militant, the Hospitallers.



Although nearly as rich as the Templars, the Hospitallers were more circumspect politically. They managed to hang on to most of their English properties until Henry VIII suppressed the order in 1540. A report of 1338 lists the Hospital's holdings as 1400 acres and says that a brother warden lived there with twelve staff. Cressing Temple also features in the Anonimale Chronicle, an eyewitness account of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, in which Sir Robert Hale, the Master of the Hospital and Treasurer of England, was hanged by the mob. The manor was attacked by the rebels, who looted food and wine and 'threw the buildings to the ground, then burning it to the serious damage of the said master.'

Cecil Hewett, an authority on English architectural history, says, "The barns at Cressing are supremely important since both are conceived in different terms, structurally, while both of these constructional concepts are remarkable in that they are of the rarest incidence in Essex, a county that may well contain more timber buildings that are important to the student of the history of carpentry than other areas of England."

### ***The Barley barn***

Tree-ring studies and radiocarbon dating show that the Barley Barn was built between 1205 and 1235. Because the sapwood has been removed from the timbers, it is difficult to estimate a more specific construction date. Each barn was probably built in one season.



The barn is about 118 feet long and 45 feet wide, but it was originally much longer. About 1420 the side walls were rebuilt, making the barn somewhat shorter and narrower. In the late 17th century, the east wall was rebuilt and the porch or “strey” was constructed. Both barns are roofed with tiles weighing about 55 tons--the current ones are slightly smaller than the originals.

Hewett says, “The barley barn is very much the older of the two and is built upon six transverse frames, the principal posts of any two of which indicate the corners of bays containing about 500 square feet, excluding the areas within the outshots, or aisles....,”



The 12 principal posts are the largest timbers that could be squared out of quite small oaks. A nearby “plantation” provided straight-trunked trees whose average age was about 100 years. The use of straight, squared timbers is characteristic of the 12th century, as is the notched lap-joint method of joining beams. The carpenters used green timber, because it is easier to shape, and the wood was then allowed to season in the finished building.

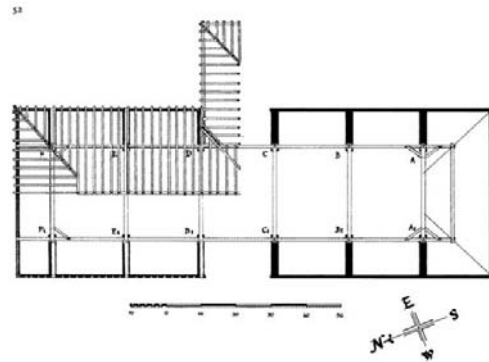


Fig. 4. Scale plan showing various levels of construction of the Barley Barn, Cressing.

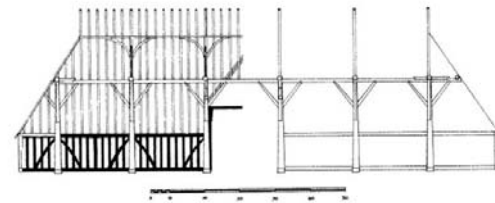


Fig. 5. Scale section, from the west, of the Barley Barn, Cressing, the left side showing the existing walls and crown post roof, the right side showing all that can certainly be deduced of the original building.

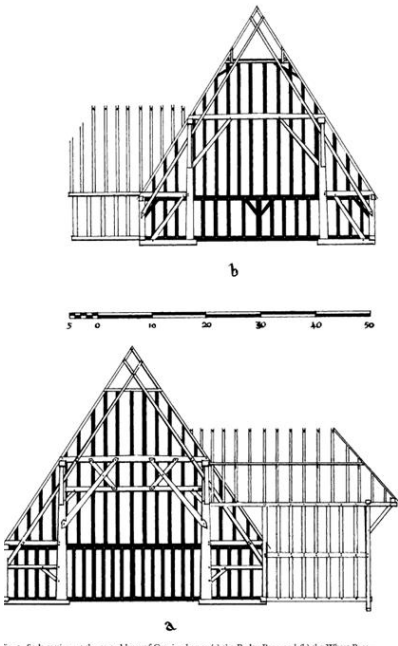


## The Wheat Barn

The Wheat Barn is larger and some decades younger than the Barley Barn.



It is about 130 feet long by 39 feet wide. Its construction date is somewhere between 1257 and 1280. Radiocarbon dating produced an estimate of “around 1255.” Both barns were designed with strict geometry, using straight-edge and dividers, as churches were designed. Their essential measurements are multiples or simple fractions of the medieval unit of measurement called the rod, pole, or perch (16-1/2 feet).



The doors of many medieval barns are higher on one side than the other, so that laden carts could enter the higher door, be unloaded inside, and be driven out the lower door on the other side. The original walls were of boards. The brick infill between the wall studs probably dates to the Tudor period, except on the west wall, where the bricks are datable to 1700.

The Wheat Barn has 7 bays, 2 of them formed by the hipped ends, and a central aisle. You can see the slightly different construction.

Hewett says, “The design is distinguished from the majority of English medieval timber buildings by the austerity of straight component timbers. Nowhere is the slightest curvature allowed.... The majority of the timbers are jointed with variants of the mortise-and-tenon joint but the notched lap joint is very much in evidence.”



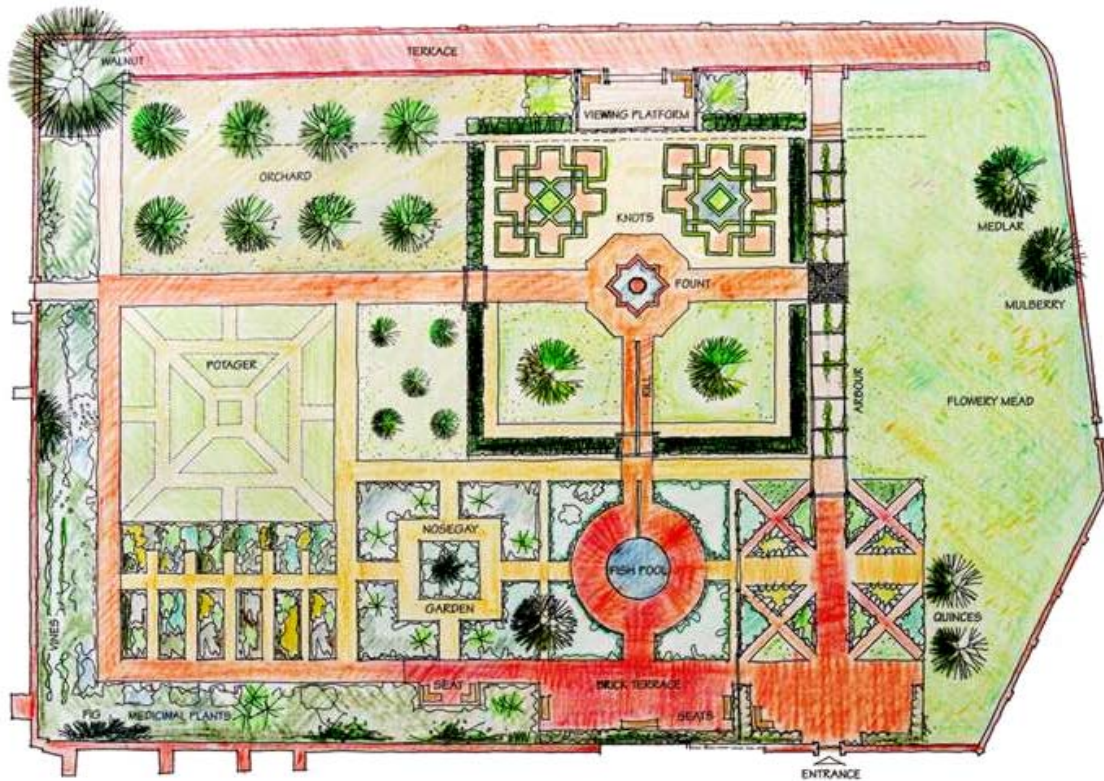


At one end of the Wheat Barn, several hawks are tethered for falconry displays (left).

The little well-house beside the entry to the garden (right) could easily be a snug cottage, but it was built to protect the monks' water supply.

## Tudor gardens

The Smyth family planted the Tudor garden sometime in the second half of the 16th century. When the Great House was torn down, it was used as a kitchen garden for a long time. The pleasure garden was re-created within the 16th-century walls about a decade ago.



Like many gardens of the time, it was divided into several smaller gardens or “rooms” for practical use, including ones for fruit trees, medicinal herbs, and vegetables, as well as geometric beds outlined in box. A raised viewing platform gives a good overview of the garden, with its fountain, fishpond, and herringbone brick pathways.



Just inside the gates, the brick-paved Forecourt is bordered by strewing herbs, such as hyssop, English lavender, rosemary, rue, sage, and wild thyme. When the plants were trimmed, the clippings were taken into the house and strewn on the floors to combat 'pestilent ayres'.





The Pool Garden (left) demonstrates a range of plants with household uses, such as plants used for washing, potpourri, and insect repellents. The central plant in each border is a Gallica rose, which has particularly fragrant dried petals and was important for potpourri. Other plants for potpourri include balm, lavender, southernwood, and sweet fennel. Orris root could be used to make ink or as an air freshener or deodorant, and the leaves could be used to cover chair seats, mend roofs, and make paper. The circular pool is watered by a rill leading from the Star Pool (right).

The Star Pool follows a form seen in oriental rugs depicting garden designs. The four spouts symbolize the four rivers of paradise, source of the world's waters, belonging to an eastern tradition extending back 4000 years and expressed in the description of the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis.



The four bronze heads depict the Green Man, the vegetation sprite often seen in the carving and roof bosses of churches built in the Middle Ages. The leaves are those of native trees characteristic of Essex; hornbeam, field maple, small-leaved lime, and oak.

The Knot Garden (top right on this page) is enclosed by a hawthorn or quickset hedge. Knots were a popular feature in gardens of this period and developed into complex patterns. Knots were designed to be viewed from above, in this case from the viewing platform.



The Arbour (left) is a walkway covered with climbing roses, hops, and eglantine.

Outside it, the Flowery Mead (right) is planted with spring and summer flowering plants such as fritillaries, primroses, daisies, bugle, and wild strawberry.



Smaller enclosures create a Nosegay Garden (left) full of sweetly scented plants for use as decorations in the house or chapel, as garlands, or for cosmetic purposes and flowerwater. Its outer borders contain gillyflowers (July flowers) such as carnations, stock, wallflowers, and sweet rocket.

The Dyers Border (right) features plants commonly grown to dye food, drink, and cloth and to make inks and paints for manuscripts. Celandine produces yellow dye, for instance, and marjoram flowers were used to dye linen purple.



The Medicinal Border (left) contains plants grown for their medicinal or 'physick' use. They include angelica, mandrake, henbane, lungwort, foxglove, selfheal, and comfrey. The leaves or seeds were used in dried form, infused in drinks, or applied to the skin as poultices.

The Culinary Border is planted with examples of plants used to flavor food, stilling herbs (for herbal concoctions and remedies), and sallets (medieval form of



salad). These include chives, dill, borage, rampions, spearmint, peppermint, and sweet basil.



The orchard (left) includes varieties of apples, walnut, quince, and mulberry. The Nuttery is planted with hazelnuts and red and white filberts.

### ***St John the Baptist: Little Maplestead, Essex***

At Cressing Temple, we were encouraged to go a little farther to visit the “Templar church” at Little Maplestead. When we got there, however, we discovered that it wasn’t a Templar church at all, but a Hospitaller church.

The parish of St John at Little Maplestead was given to the Hospitallers in 1185 by Juliana, wife of William Fitz-Andelin, one of the great officers of the court of Henry II. The Norman church was pulled down and replaced by the current round church about 1335.



18<sup>th</sup> century view (left); 19<sup>th</sup> century view (right).

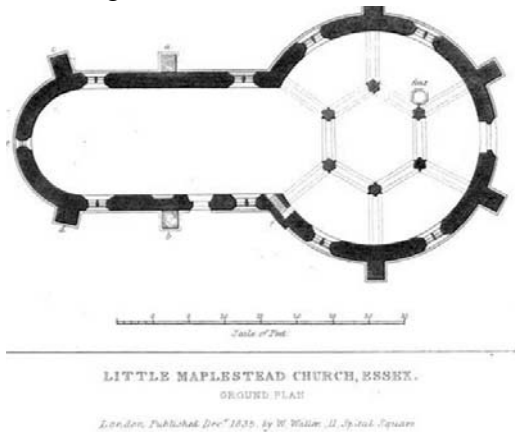
It is by far the latest of the four round churches still standing in England, and no one can explain why it is built in a style that had gone out of fashion two centuries earlier. All four of the round churches are associated with the orders of knights militant; the most famous being the Temple Church in London. The other two, in Cambridge and Northampton, are both called St Sepulchre and supposedly modeled on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

During the 1850s the church was drastically restored. The external walls were completely refaced and the windows and buttresses renewed. Five incongruous little dormer

ventilators were set above the aisle roof. The wooden belfry was rebuilt, and the old western porch was replaced by a smaller one.



The long chancel terminates in a semicircular eastern apse. The six-sided nave is topped by a low belfry and surrounded by a circular aisle.



Its design was adapted to the special ritual requirements of the Hospitallers rather than to the needs of a parish church, and the chancel was screened off from the nave to make a private chapel for the knights. At the east end of the chancel another screen rose to the roof, against which the altar was placed. In between the two screens the knights apparently had stalls where they performed the various services prescribed by the order.

The circular nave probably contained an altar for use by the public. Continued use as a parish church would explain why the church was not demolished after the Reformation.

The western doorway is protected by a porch (right) dating from the restoration. The doorway is original 14th-century work, and the carved heads on either side (below) were repaired but not replaced. The rosette carvings on the lower portions of the doorway have been mutilated, possibly by the children who used the old porch as a schoolroom for many years.







The roof of the chancel and apse is beamed and painted with flowers, probably dating from the restoration of the 1850s but possibly modeled on the original.



The Romanesque font was discovered during the restoration. It probably dates to about 1080 and came from the original Norman church. The bowl was originally square, but at some time the corners were cut off, converting it into an irregular octagon. The carvings are rather rough and crude.

Two other Essex barns from the medieval period survive: Grange Barn at Coggeshall and Priors Hall Barn at Widdington. Neither is connected to the knights militant, however, so I will end here and take questions.