

SUFFOLK CHIMNEYS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

By F. A. GIRLING.

There are few extant examples of chimney construction of earlier date than the sixteenth century. Before that time, ordinary houses were not usually provided with them. Primitive chimneys were contrived in the thickness of the walls of Norman castles as at Orford. These emerged on the exterior wall surface a few feet above the level of the fire and were in the nature of flues.

At Framlingham Castle, built in the late twelfth century, an advance seems to have been made, for flues are carried up through the walls to the top. There appear to have been no projecting shafts. The beautiful shafts on the castle date from the early sixteenth century. Some of these appear to have been built on the existing stone coping which presumably was the original top of the flues.

By the fifteenth century, in castles and monasteries, smoke was sometimes carried off by "tunnels made on the Syde of the wall" as noted by Leyland. In small manor houses, the main fire was in the middle of the central hall and the smoke escaped through the roof. As evidence of this, in some roofs of the king-post type, which usually indicates early work, the timbers are encrusted with soot.

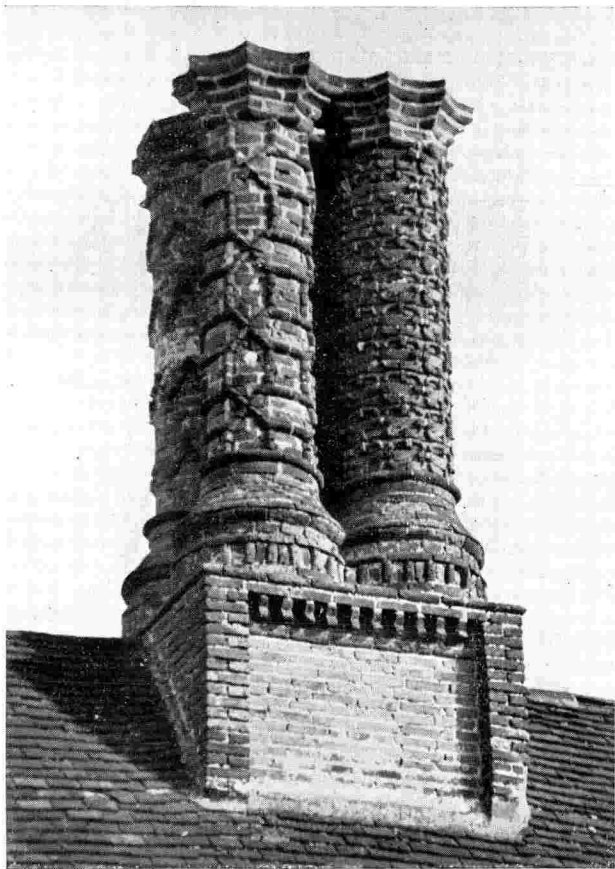
By the sixteenth century, the social habits of the people were changing, and there was a general desire for greater privacy. This led to the partitioning of the great hall of many old farms and manor houses into smaller rooms, a floor being inserted and bedrooms provided. The old open fire was made impossible by the new conditions and it was necessary therefore to construct chimneys and fireplaces.

In Suffolk, brick became a popular material owing to the absence of native building stone. Also the small size of the units made it convenient for this kind of work. Brick was so much in favour that, in districts where houses were normally built of stone, the chimneys were built of brick. An outstanding example of this is the magnificent brick chimney at Thornbury Castle, Gloucestershire, built for the Duke of Buckingham in 1514.

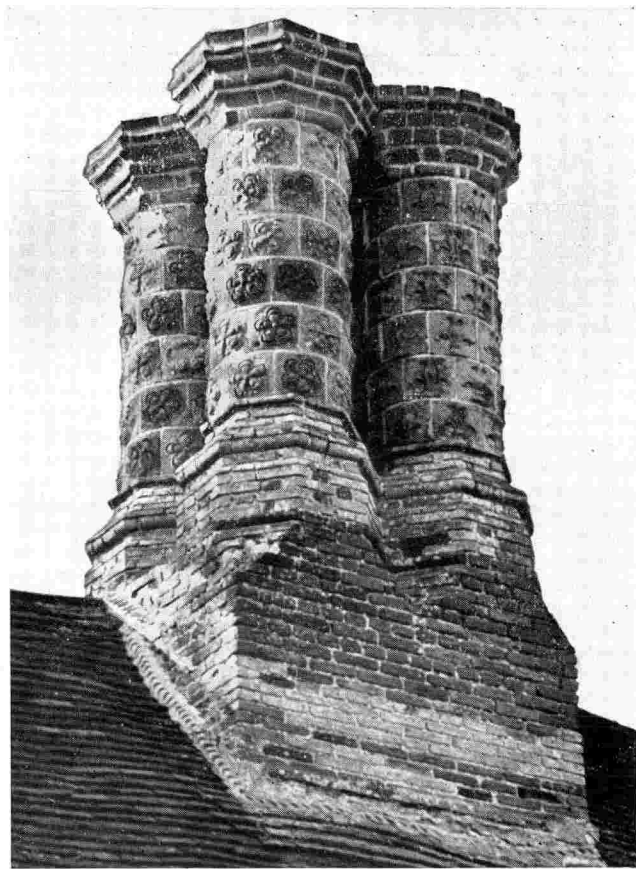
An interesting contemporary reference to chimneys occurs in Harrison's "England" (1577):—"The multitude of chimneys latelie erected, whereas in their yong daies . . . ech one made his fire against a reredos in the hall." Trevelyan says that:—"Elizabethan writers noted as innovations the use of glass instead of horn in the windows, and chimneys to draw the smoke out of the poor man's cottage . . ." John Aubrey (1626-1697) in one of his collections of notes has "Antiently before the Reformation ordinary men's houses, as copyholders and the like, had no chimneys, but fleus like louver holes."



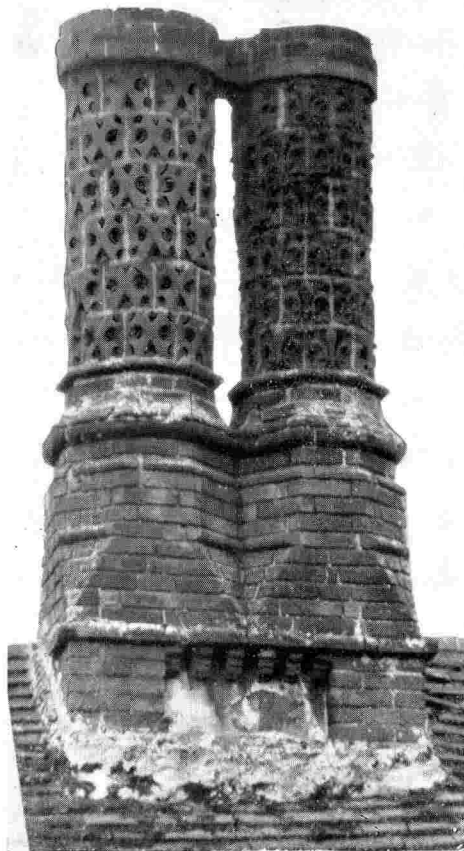
OLD "ANGEL" INN.
Brockford Street, Wetheringsett, Suffolk.



SOMERTON, SUFFOLK. Langleys Farm.

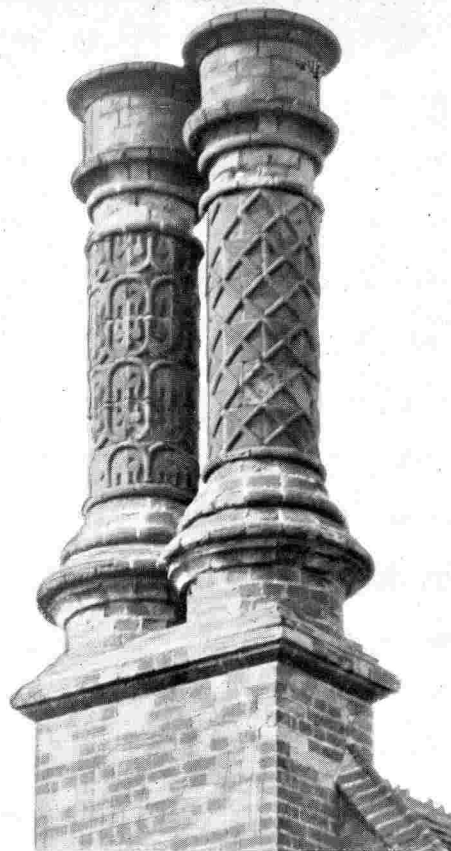


CLOCK HOUSE, LITTLE STONHAM, SUFFOLK.



UFFORD, SUFFOLK.

Each of the square tablets with which the left hand shaft is built have a sabbire cross in relief.
The tablets of the shaft on the right each bear a fleur-de lis.

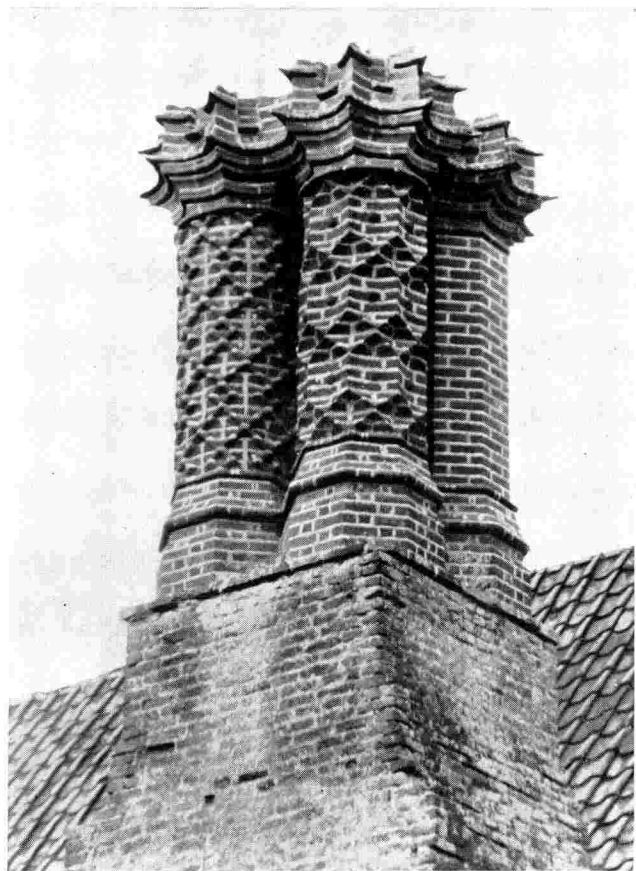


ALDEBURGH, SUFFOLK.

Decorated brick chimney shafts on
the Moot Hall,



HELMINGHAM HALL, SUFFOLK.
Built by Sir Lionel Tollemache, c. 1512.



WINGFIELD CASTLE, SUFFOLK.

It is frequently assumed that the open fire in the central hall was the only fire in a mediaeval house, but this was not the case, for chimneys were built to carry off the smoke from secondary fires in houses where a central fire was usual. Nevertheless, it was not until the sixteenth century that it became usual to build chimneys in smaller houses.

At this time many chimneys were built in houses which were already old. The walls of East Anglian houses consisted of timber framing and clay. Partly to avoid the risk of setting this alight and partly to avoid structural alterations, the chimneys were built in the middle of the house. At the Clock House, Little Stonham, is a good example of a chimney of this period built into an already existing house. Here the similarity of the ornamental motifs to those at East Barsham Manor House, suggest the second or third decade of the sixteenth century as the date when the chimney was built.

This practice probably gave rise to the Suffolk tradition of placing the chimney in the middle, even when building new houses. In the Ipswich Assembly Book 4 July 19 Elizabeth (1577), Mr. V. B. Redstone, F.S.A., has found the specification for the building of a small timber house at Holbrook. Here a chimney is shown on the plan in the middle of the house. Although this position was the most usual, it was not invariable. Wattisfield Hall, an Elizabethan house, has a magnificent collection of chimneys, all built outside the main structure, which is of the traditional timber framing.

A typical sixteenth century East Anglian chimney stack consists of two, four or six detached shafts, usually octagonal but sometimes circular or hexagonal in plan. They spring from moulded bases which in turn arise from the solid rectangular mass of brickwork which rises above the roof. The shafts themselves are slender and well proportioned when they remain in their original condition. Unfortunately, many have been shortened when repairs have been done.

At the caps, the brickwork is corbelled out so that all are fused together. They exemplify the expert manner in which the early bricklayers managed projections. Where bricks were considered too thick, tiles were used in the oversailing courses. The facets of the octagonal caps were hollowed out, and spurs inserted at the points, giving them a bizarre aspect. In stacks where the shafts are undecorated, the presence of spurs on the caps prevents the chimney from appearing top heavy.

Occasionally shafts were built singly, an example being the round shaft with a diaper pattern which surmounts the crowstepped brick gable of an outbuilding at Cockfield Hall, which was built about 1540 by Sir Arthur Hopton. It is similar to the brick finials at Crows Hall, Debenham.

When there were four or more flues to be accommodated it was more usual to arrange the shafts in pairs on a rectangular base. Good examples of groups of four shafts thus arranged occur at Helmingham Hall built by Sir Lionel Tollemache about 1512; Cliftons, Clare; Langleys Farm, Somerton; and Basts, Grundisburgh, built by Thomas Awall about 1520.

There are many groups of six shafts set in three pairs. Examples may be cited at Woolpit, and Thorington Hall, Stoke-by-Nayland. Shafts were frequently built in pairs as at Ufford and the Moot Hall, Aldeburgh. Some buildings have stacks of three shafts set side by side as at the Old Angel Inn, Brockford Street and the Valley Farm, Stratford St. Mary. Four set side by side occur at Monks' Hall, Syleham, and at Stutton Hall, built about 1520. At Wattisfield Hall there is a fine stack of five shafts in line.

The decorative character of chimneys was fully exploited by the English bricklayers of the sixteenth century. They reflect the energy of men engaged in a new art whose skill stamps them as craftsmen of the first rank. Presumably the evolution of the elaborately decorated chimney was influenced by the Renaissance. It seems to be a purely English development and its origin remains a puzzle. The craftsmen obtained variety of effect by skilled manipulation of projections and recesses in the brickwork. Patterns which appear to be complicated are remarkable in that they were achieved by simple devices. Commonly, all the bricks in a shaft were cast in the same mould, the pattern being obtained by placing the bricks in their proper positions one toward the other. The four shafts of the stack at Monks' Hall, Syleham, are built thus, so are two of the shafts at Framlingham Castle.

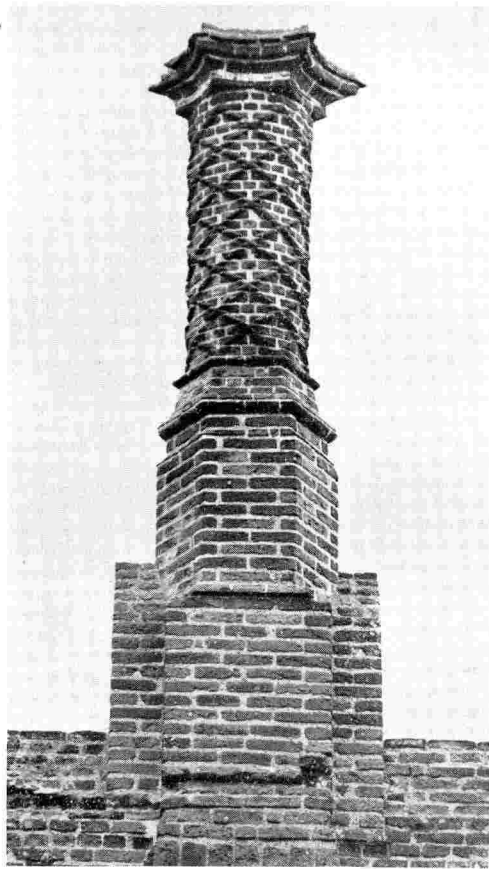
The spiral and its variations such as zig-zags and lattice patterns, were popular motifs. A more difficult pattern to achieve was the "hollowed honeycomb." The four-shafted stacks at Cliftons, Clare, and at Wingfield Castle, each have one shaft thus adorned.

Shafts built of very large square bricks or terra cotta tablets must be placed in a category by themselves. The tablets usually have on their outer face some decorative motif such as a fleur-de-lis, saltire cross or Tudor rose. Examples of this type of shaft occur at Ufford, Aldeburgh Moot Hall, the old Angel Inn at Brockford Street; the Clock House, Little Stonham, and the High House, Badwell Ash.

The fashion for building elaborately decorated and twisted chimneys was a transitory one, nearly all of them dating from the time of Henry VIII; but when it was in vogue, a great deal of building was going on all over England. This sort of shaft is to be found in widely separated districts; however, they are most plentiful in East Anglia.

It is of interest to compare Suffolk examples with those in neighbouring counties. In Essex particularly good specimens are to be seen at Newport, Little Leez Priory, Layer Marney and St. Osyth Priory. In Norfolk good chimneys occur at Methwold, East Barsham Manor House and Oxburgh Hall. Among the best examples outside East Anglia may be mentioned those at Aston Bury, Stevenage (c. 1545), Rye House, Herts; Hampton Court Palace; Compton Winnyates Manor House; the old Manor House, Buckingham.

The slender detached shafts of the sixteenth century gave place in the seventeenth to more substantial stacks. The older form exposed a great surface area to the weather, and when built of poor quality brick, soon fell into disrepair. At first they were replaced by shafts square in plan and set diagonally one toward the other.



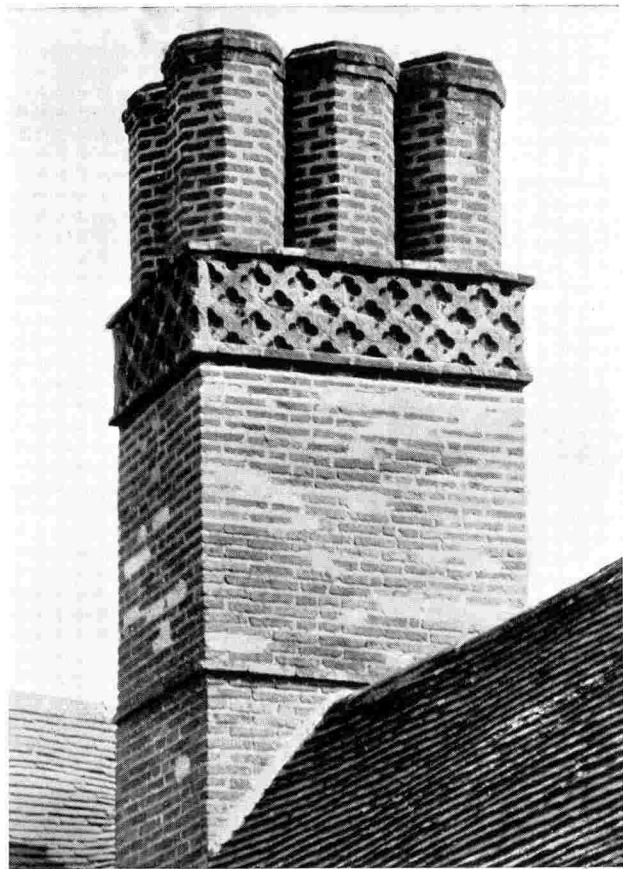
FRAMLINGHAM CASTLE.



LITTLE WENHAM HALL, SUFFOLK.
Octagonal brick chimney. Probably built about 1565-1569, when alterations and additions were made to the earlier building.



OLD VALLEY FARM, STRATFORD ST. MARY,
SUFFOLK.



WOOLPIT, SUFFOLK.

From this transitional type was derived the stack of fused lozenge shaped shafts which is a common form in Suffolk. A later stage in the evolution of this type is the solid stack with diagonal pillaster strips. A great number of such stacks were built during the seventeenth century on the base of much older chimneys. Complete new stacks were built on similar lines. A characteristic common to these chimneys is that they bell out slightly at the top. The top courses are corbelled out, each slightly oversailing the one below it.

There are, of course, a great number of fine stacks in the county, known to the writer, which have not been mentioned individually in this article, and no claim is made to an exhaustive acquaintance with all the chimney stacks of fine craftsmanship dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If members of the Institute care to send particulars of old chimneys in their district, it might form the nucleus of a more complete record of those still extant in Suffolk.