

# A WEALDEN HOUSE AT IXWORTH, SUFFOLK

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I should like to place on record the existence of a mediaeval house at Ixworth, which presents features of some rarity in Suffolk. At present called Dover House, it is the property of Mr. and Mrs. George Reeve, who have been undertaking considerable restoration and renovation of the original fabric. Thanks to their co-operation and interest, my husband and I were enabled to make a survey of the house last summer.

The front of the house presents, externally, a combination of two jettied and storeyed wings with a recessed centre, the whole being under a continuous roof-line. Small braces support the roof over the recessed portion.<sup>1</sup> At some time, possibly in the later part of the seventeenth century, the external timbering was plastered and pargetted over. The roof is half-hipped, with a large brick chimney-stack, placed axially. These features are most easily understood by reference to Plate L.

The whole house is in four timber bays, and retains its original ground-floor plan (see Fig. 76). It has received, in fact, only those additions to its mediaeval structure which the passage of time rendered desirable to its occupants—the recessed central bays, originally a hall open to the roof timbers, have been ceiled over, and a large chimney-stack has been inserted between the hall and what was originally the 'parlour'.

Entrance to the house is still into the 'cross passage', a particularly consistent feature in all types of mediaeval house. The cross passage, with an entrance at each end, served to divide the service rooms at the lower end of the house from the living and sleeping quarters at the upper end. In the service rooms, often pantry and buttery, were kept the household wet and dry stores, such as milk, ale, flour and meal.

As will be seen on the plan, the service rooms at Dover House are on the left of the entrance, and still fulfil their functions of kitchen, larder, etc. The two original door-heads are in position over the doorways, but seem to have been raised; there are notches in the door-frames which evidently mean that they were once lower.

These two rooms, being in one of the jettied wings of the house, were always ceiled over, and the room above was probably in-

<sup>1</sup> M. W. Barley, *The English Farmhouse and Cottage*, 27.

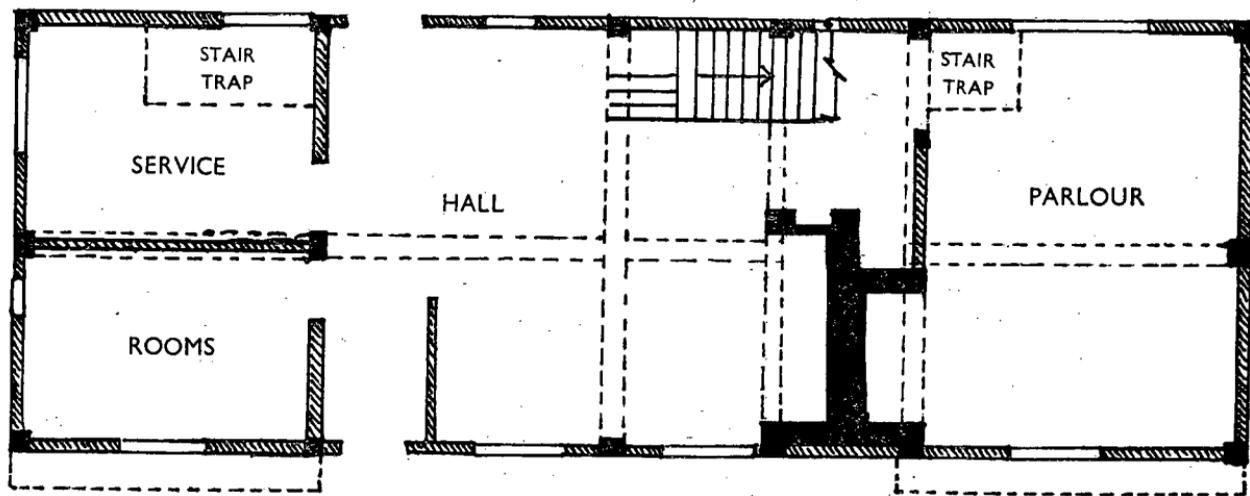


FIG. 76.—Dover House, Ixworth; ground floor plan.

*(Through an error, one of the main beams, between the service rooms and the hall, has been omitted; it should be indicated by a dotted line).*

tended for further storage. Access to this upper room would have been by a ladder-stair, and the timbers in the ceiling of the present kitchen clearly indicate the former presence of a large stair-trap. It is, in fact, considerably larger than the corresponding trap in the parlour; a curious fact, since the stair in the parlour gave access to what one would expect to be an upper room superior to that found over the service rooms.

To the right of the cross passage is the present living-room, once the hall, and beyond it a further sitting-room, once the parlour, and used originally mainly for sleeping. Both these rooms are in process of careful restoration. The bulk of the chimney-stack lies within the hall, and has considerably reduced it from its original size of almost two bays (over 20 ft.).<sup>2</sup> When first built, the house would have had no chimneys at all, the smoke from the open hearth in the centre of the hall escaping through smoke-holes (or louveres) in the roof. The house was recently retiled, and although the original roof-timbers remain, there is no longer any external sign of louveres. In the hall, all the daily activities of the household took place. It was not only dining and living-room, but some cooking may have been done on the open hearth,<sup>3</sup> and in winter it must have been the only spot in the house where warmth was possible.

Windows in these open halls were generally set high in the walls to provide light without creating too great a draught. The original hall window at Dover House no longer exists, but parts of its frame-work seem to have been incorporated in the four smaller windows, two up and two down, which now light the recessed centre of the building. The frames of the ground-floor windows are very unusual, and it has been suggested<sup>4</sup> that their pedimented form is an attempt to copy in wood a style current in brick buildings in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

In hall-type houses, it is usual to examine the roof-timbers of signs of smoke-blackening. The blackened quality of the roof-timbers at Dover House proves beyond doubt the former existence of an open hall below. Structurally, the hall trusses consist of tie-beams supporting short crown-posts under a collar-purlin. Considerable sub-division of the upstairs space has been done at various times, but one cambered tie-beam and brace are visible,

<sup>2</sup> In view of the space previously taken up by the open hearth, however, the effective living space was probably not much reduced.

<sup>3</sup> The possibility of an outside kitchen must not be discounted, in view of considerable evidence for their existence in the Middle Ages.

<sup>4</sup> By Mr. J. T. Smith, Senior Investigator of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments.

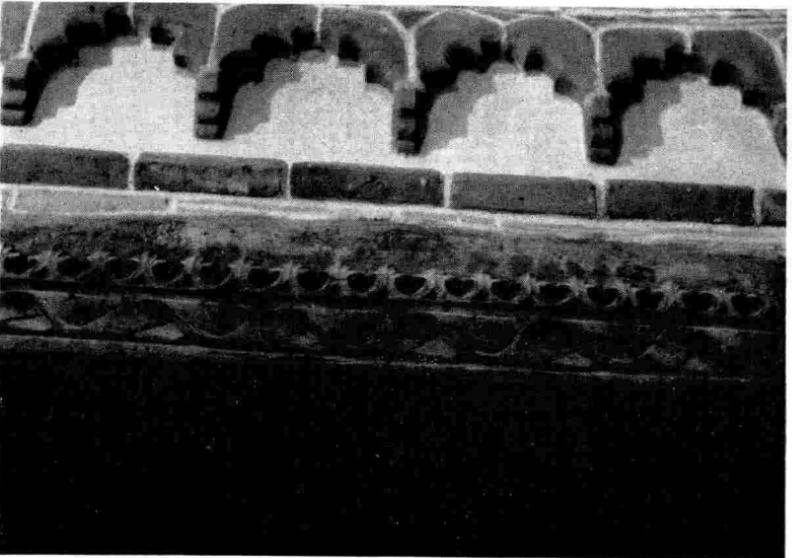
<sup>5</sup> Nathaniel Lloyd, *A History of the English House*, 339 Fig. 534; 340 Figs. 536 and 538.

PLATE L



Dover House, Ixworth; front.

PLATE LI



Dover House; fireplace lintel and brick arcading in hall.

PLATE LII



Dover House; fireplace lintel in parlour.

PLATE LIII



Dover House; inserted ceiling in hall, with carving on main beam.

and part of the other tie-beam. The timbers are well formed and massive and bear a plain chamfer on their lower edge.

There is a blocked-in original window of eight lights in the room above the parlour, and a small two-light one recently uncovered at the back of the hall. Both have diamond-shaped mullions.

It is scarcely surprising that open halls should, with the passage of time, and the general improvement in the standard of living, have come to be regarded as increasingly uncomfortable and inconvenient. From the middle of the sixteenth century, in the southern part of the country at least, new houses were being built with the hall ceiled over, providing sleeping or storage accommodation above. Upper rooms were being used more for sleeping by this time, though in the northern parts of the country the use of downstairs parlours as sleeping apartments persisted far later.

Where new houses were not built, the modernisation of existing mediaeval ones was undertaken. This was accomplished by the insertion of both a ceiling over the hall and an axially-placed chimney-stack, making it possible to heat the hall and the parlour beyond it. All this has been done at Dover House, and it is in the nature and quality of the insertions that much of the interest of the house lies.

All the sixteenth century work that has been done in the house is of remarkably fine quality, and it is clear that it was commissioned by someone of considerable wealth. All the beams in the hall ceiling are moulded. The main beam which runs at right angles to the chimney-stack, and that which is embedded in the brickwork of the stack itself, are elaborately carved also. Both fireplace lintels have ornate carving, and the hall has, in addition, arcading in the brickwork above the lintel. This has been beautifully restored. Even the studs in the partitions inserted upstairs are moulded.

The decoration employed on the fireplace lintels and ceiling beams suggests that the hall was ceiled over at a remarkably early date for this kind of vernacular building. The decorative motifs employed all appear to be variants of one basic type: a folded-leaf ornament which is always pre-Elizabethan in date. In the hall (see Plate LI), the cresting on the lintel is of a common mediaeval type,<sup>6</sup> and the cinquefoiled brick arcading is consistent with a date in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. In the parlour (see Plate LII), the folded-leaf motif is combined with a central ornament; and a circular ornament at each end of the lintel; these are still of a pure Gothic type. The decoration on the hall beams (see

<sup>6</sup> There is a similar cresting on the lower part of the rood-screen in Ixworth Church. This is an exact Victorian copy of the mediaeval screen.

Plate LIII) also suggests a very early sixteenth century date. It is conceivable that the alterations at Dover House are as early as 1500. Even a most conservative estimate would not suggest that they were made later than 1540. This alone makes Dover House a most remarkable building.<sup>7</sup>

It is generally assumed that alterations like these were being made from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards. Some mediaeval houses bear a date which relates, not to the original construction of the building, but to the time when some addition or modernisation was made to it. For example, Kite Manor, at Monk's Horton in Kent, a fourteenth-century hall-type house, has an inserted dormer window dated 1574, and a fireplace and chimney for the hall dated 1578.<sup>8</sup> Other dated examples in the southern counties suggest that similar modernisations were taking place in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. It would be interesting to trace the circumstances which led to such early alterations being made in the house we are considering.

At some date after the other alterations, a framed staircase was added at the back of the hall to replace the ladder-stair formerly used.<sup>9</sup> In order to insert this stair, a section of beams in the hall ceiling had to be cut away, and even the main carved beam over the fireplace severed. The stair treads were of oak; the balusters, with barley-sugar twists, suggesting a date in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Since our main examination of the house took place, further investigation by the family has revealed a fireplace in the room above the parlour. The lintel is moulded on its lower edge, but otherwise undecorated. The existence of the fireplace shows beyond doubt that this upper room was used as a living and sleeping apartment, and not simply for storage of implements and supplies. It adds further to the interest and importance of the house: for, while not by any means unknown in vernacular building, upstairs fireplaces are not common in houses of this date.

Mediaeval houses of this distinctive type—known as 'Wealden' from their origin in the Weald of Kent,<sup>11</sup> are particularly characterised by all the features of interest in Dover House. The combination of jettied sides and a recessed centre under a continuous

<sup>7</sup> I am deeply indebted to Mr. J. T. Smith and to Mr. E. Mercer of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for much advice and assistance on matters of dating, which would otherwise have been far beyond me.

<sup>8</sup> M. W. Barley, *op. cit.*, 63 and Plate IIIA.

<sup>9</sup> Since we first examined the house, this staircase has been removed and another one inserted. The balusters have been incorporated in the new arrangement, and the whole effect is very much in keeping with the rest of the hall woodwork.

<sup>10</sup> Nathaniel Lloyd, *op. cit.*, 456 and 457.

<sup>11</sup> Nathaniel Lloyd, *op. cit.*, 197, Fig. 99.

roof-line is not found in other types of mediaeval house.<sup>12</sup> Other examples exist in Suffolk, but often in a much-altered form which makes them difficult to identify. Amongst others may be mentioned Stonewall Farm, Hemingstone; the Post Office at Kersey; and 87 Church Street, Lavenham. Two are in the main street at Debenham; one at 14 High Street, Clare; and another in the main street of Woolpit. This by no means exhausts the list, and all are awaiting investigation.

The dating of such a building is necessarily somewhat tentative, but it might not be unwise to postulate a date in the early fifteenth century. While naturally ante-dated in structure by parts of the Church and the Abbey at Ixworth, it seems probable that it is the oldest building remaining there to have been used continuously as a purely domestic dwelling.

<sup>12</sup> M. W. Barley, *op. cit.*, 26-29.