

## EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY DECORATED BRICKS AT ASPALL HALL

By F. A. GIRLING, F.S.A.

Members who visited Aspull Hall with the Institute's excursion in 1956, may recall the interesting collection of early decorated bricks which are incorporated into the plinth of the building which houses the cider press (Plate LIV). Similar bricks were used to block the lower part of the front door when it was converted into a window.

It is here suggested that these decorated bricks are sixteenth century chimney shaft bricks. The tudor chimney-shafts may have been taken down a short time before the erection of this building, probably about 1728; perhaps the owner realised that these unusual bricks were worthy of preservation and had the happy idea of putting them in their present position.

The bricks at Aspull are similar to bricks used in the construction of some early sixteenth century chimney-shafts in the district. Examples occur at the former Angel Inn at Brockford Street, the Clock House at Little Stonham<sup>1</sup> and The Lone at Gipping, all within five miles of Aspull (Plates LIV, LV, and LVI).

The Aspull bricks are about eight inches square and their decorated face is slightly convex, so that they would form a cylindrical shaft when built into the position for which they were designed. There is a record at St. John's College, Cambridge, of a consignment of special 'brike' for the 'tonnelles of chymnes'.<sup>2</sup>

The decoration is of five types, a fleur-de-lys; a cross saltire or X pattern; and another, slighter, form of cross saltire. The fourth and fifth types are four-petalled flowers, sunk in the face of the brick. In one case the 'petals' point to the corners and in the other, to the middle of the sides of the squares.

The fleur-de-lys pattern at Aspull recurs at Brockford Street<sup>3</sup> and at Little Stonham<sup>4</sup> but the designs are not identical.

The saltire cross or X pattern recurs at Gipping Lone. These bricks are very similar to those at Aspull. At Ufford, one of a pair of shafts is built of bricks of a similar design (Plate LV). At

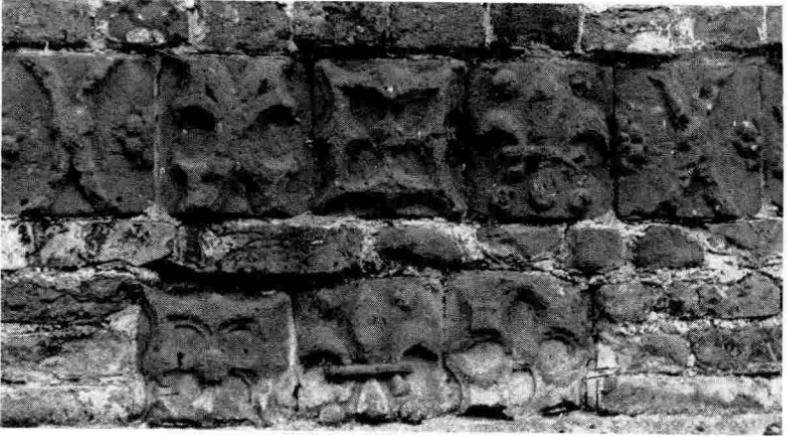
<sup>1</sup> See my 'Clock House, Little Stonham' in *Country Life*, 13 October 1934.

<sup>2</sup> L. F. Salzman, F.S.A. *Building in England down to 1540* (1952).

<sup>3</sup> Illustrated in 'East Anglian Chimneys' in *The Architect and Building News*, 18 April 1930.

<sup>4</sup> F. A. Girling, 'Suffolk Chimneys of the Sixteenth Century', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, xxii, pt. 1 (1934).

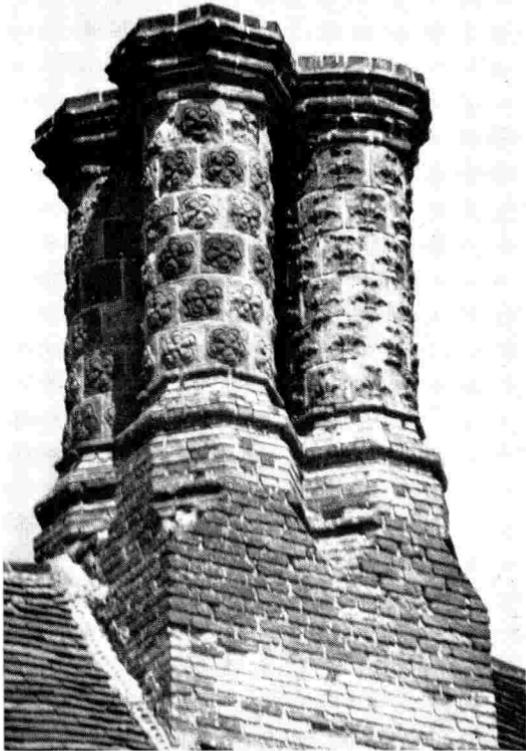
PLATE LIV



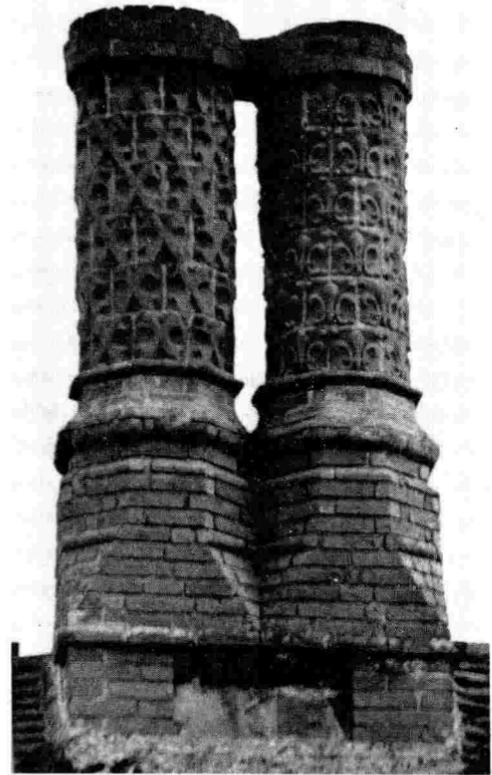
Aspall Hall.



Angel Inn, Brockford Street.



Clock House, Little Stonham.



Ufford, house  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile S.W. of church.

PLATE LVI



The Lone, Gipping.

Brockford Street the X design is different. The slighter saltire cross pattern may perhaps be better described as two C's placed back to back.

The four-petalled flower designs are uncommon. They recall the pattern on the small square bricks which form part of the south porch of the church at Needham, Norfolk. The south porch of Shadingfield church has bricks which carry a roughly similar pattern, but here the bricks are oblong in shape and each bears two contrasting quatrefoil designs.

This group of chimney-shafts in a small locality is an interesting example of local style in building detail. Probably the bricks were produced in the neighbourhood by an enterprising brickmaker, ready to exploit, in his own district, the transient Tudor fashion for decorated chimney shafts. At this period, the decorative value of the chimney stack was highly developed in the brick architecture of East Anglia.<sup>5</sup>

These shafts, built of purpose-moulded brick, are of the same period as those which are worked into spiral curves and elaborate panels.<sup>6</sup> The fashion arose quickly, gave its distinctive character to early Tudor chimneys and faded away as quickly as it had arisen.<sup>7</sup> In the early sixteenth century, chimneys in smaller houses were a novelty. They were made a bold feature, if not a dominant one, in the design of a house.<sup>8</sup>

At East Barsham Manor House in Norfolk, where there is a riot of decorative brickwork, there are chimney shafts built of similar purpose-moulded bricks, but the fleur-de-lys design is the only one which resembles the designs at Aspall. The dating of small houses, when few or no documentary records exist, is, of necessity, imprecise. However, there are similar bricks at East Barsham which are dated by Professor Nikolaus Pevsner<sup>9</sup> at about 1520-30 and by the late Nathaniel Lloyd<sup>10</sup> at about 1535. It seems reasonable, therefore, to suggest a date for this group in Suffolk of about 1530-40.

The two chimney shafts of the Moot Hall at Aldeburgh are built in the same manner as those in the Aspall group, but they have been restored to so great an extent that it is difficult to judge how much, if any, of the early work still exists.

A chimney stack which is akin to, but distinct from, the Aspall group is the six-shafted stack at Catts Hill Farm, Clopton. It is related because purpose-moulded decorated bricks are used in the

<sup>5</sup> A. Hamilton Thompson, *The English House* (1960).

<sup>6</sup> L. F. Salzman, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> J. A. Gotch, *Old English Houses* (1925).

<sup>8</sup> J. A. Gotch, *Early Renaissance Architecture in England* (1914).

<sup>9</sup> N. Pevsner, *North-East Norfolk and Norwich* (1962).

<sup>10</sup> N. Lloyd, *History of English Brickwork* (1925).

construction of the shafts, but different because the designs on the bricks are Italianate in conception and very small in scale. Individually they are of excellent design and workmanship, but their small size, coupled with their distance from an observer at ground level, renders them somewhat ineffective as chimney-shaft embellishments.