

TWO SMALL MEDIAEVAL HOUSES

WALNUT TREE COTTAGE, WATTISFIELD
AND FRIARS HALL, RATTLEDSEN

The Effects of Modernisation

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We are quite familiar nowadays with the fact that during the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, mediaeval houses underwent a series of modernisations which gave them, in many instances, substantially the form they have today. The essential points in this modernisation were the insertion of a chimney-stack and the ceiling-over of the open hall, thereby creating a building which was of two storeys throughout. What we do not always pause to consider is the effect of modernising on the functions of the various rooms in the house. These changes mainly depend upon the position chosen for the inserted stack. If it is placed at the upper end of the hall, little change of function takes place: but if placed at the lower end, in, or adjoining, the cross-passage, it will affect the service area radically. In most instances such a large internal chimney-stack serves two ground-floor rooms—the hall, or main living-room, and what is generally called the ‘parlour’. In many small mediaeval houses in Suffolk a little heated parlour can be found on examination to have marked remains of its earlier form as an unheated service room, or rooms.

An interesting example is in a semi-derelict house at Monks Eleigh Tye¹ where the brickwork of the stack on the new ‘parlour’ side is sandwiched between the two outer halves of the service door-frames. Again, a house at Whepstead,² standing empty, has the original service-end recognisable as a later parlour, and a new block added beyond the hall. Broadway House on the corner of Nethergate Street, Clare, is another example. The earlier features of this house have been so concealed under roughcast, plaster and wallpaper that its crown-post and soot-blackened rafters come as a great surprise.

It is not intended to suggest that this particular effect is confined to Suffolk, but simply to draw attention to it as a point not always taken into account. In Essex it is certainly found that inserting the stack between the hall and service-rooms can mean the

¹ Map ref. TL 955485.

² Map ref. TL 826584.

replacement of the latter by a kind of living-room.³ Such an effect is most easily recognisable in the case of the small houses of the Middle Ages in which Suffolk abounds, without cross-wings, where the whole building is under one continuous roof. Among such buildings, those which consisted initially of but two units—hall and service—were probably the most common.

Little mediaeval houses of this type are still relatively plentiful in Suffolk; they are probably more characteristic of the county's humbler fifteenth-century vernacular than any other. Within the limits set by such a restricted plan, individual buildings vary considerably in size and quality, and particularly in height. The more opulent examples have fine crown-post roofs; the simpler ones are more likely to retain a rudimentary construction of trussed rafters, without lengthwise strengthening.

By the seventeenth century, the possession of a parlour, as a combined living-and-sleeping room, seems implicit in the alteration of these small homes: a sign both of increased opulence on the part of the occupants and of the decline in the importance of the hall as the centre of household activities. Mid-seventeenth century probate inventories certainly suggest that the hall was by then being furnished in very simple fashion, the best furniture being reserved for the parlour. Sometimes the old service area was evidently not suitable for conversion directly into a parlour. In the case of the two little houses which form the subject of this paper all the evidence points to the demolition of the service end and its replacement by a new parlour with a 'best chamber' over it.

Walnut Tree Cottage, Wattisfield, and Friars Hall, Rattlesden, are both small, mediaeval, timber-framed buildings, plastered externally, with thatched roofs (Plate VIII). In each case the upper storey is partly in the roof space, lighted by dormer windows. Their basic plan is of a two-bay hall and a service end, divided from the hall by a cross-passage which is structurally part of the lower hall bay. It is unlikely that this cross-passage had more than some unsubstantial screen at ground-floor level between it and the hall (see plans, Figs. 7 and 8).

Of the two houses, Walnut Tree Cottage is certainly the humbler. The wide spacing of the studs, visible inside this house, suggest that the framework was always intended to be covered. The hall and cross-passage are all that remain of the original house; both cross-passage doorways are in situ, and sufficient traces of the partition at the service end survive to indicate the position of the two doorways for the buttery and dairy. There is no sign of the service-

³ Harry Forrester, *The Timber-Framed Houses of Essex*, p. 75. It is referred to here rather as one of the changes of internal lay-out made possible by the use of a large axial stack with two hearths, than as an alteration to existing buildings.

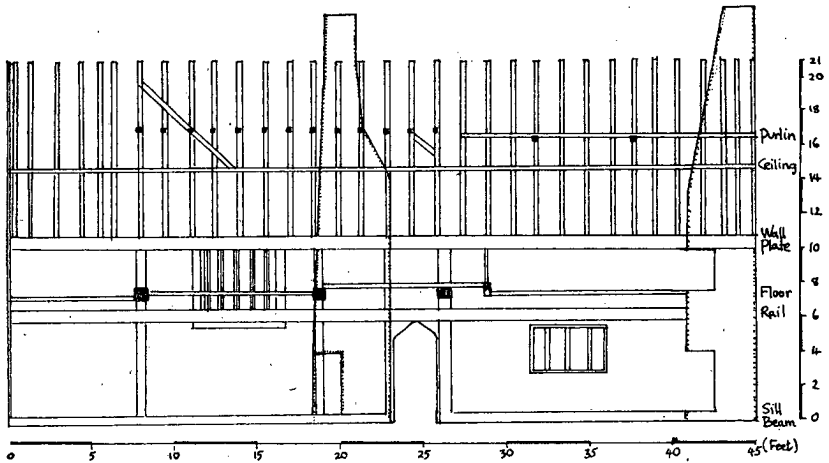
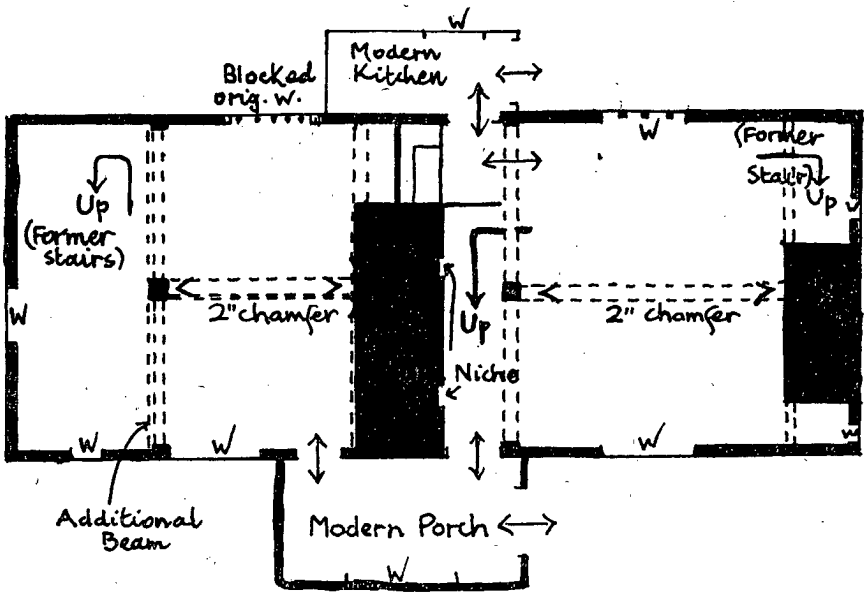


FIG. 7.—Walnut Tree Cottage, plan and section.

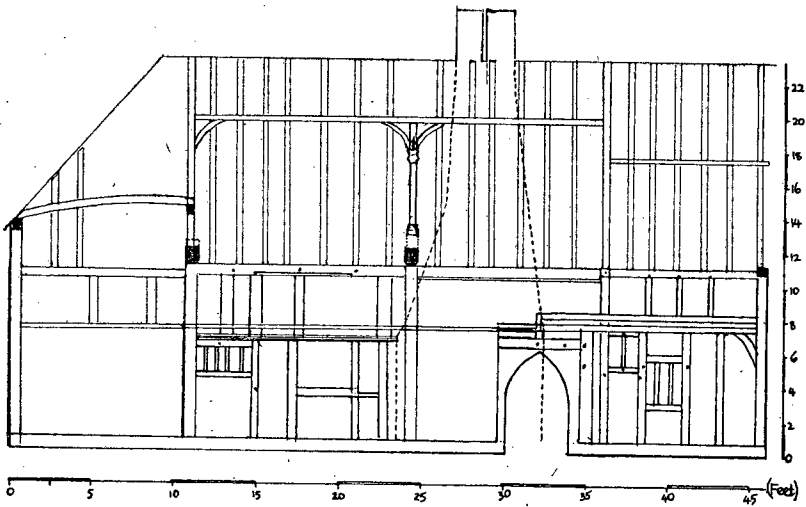
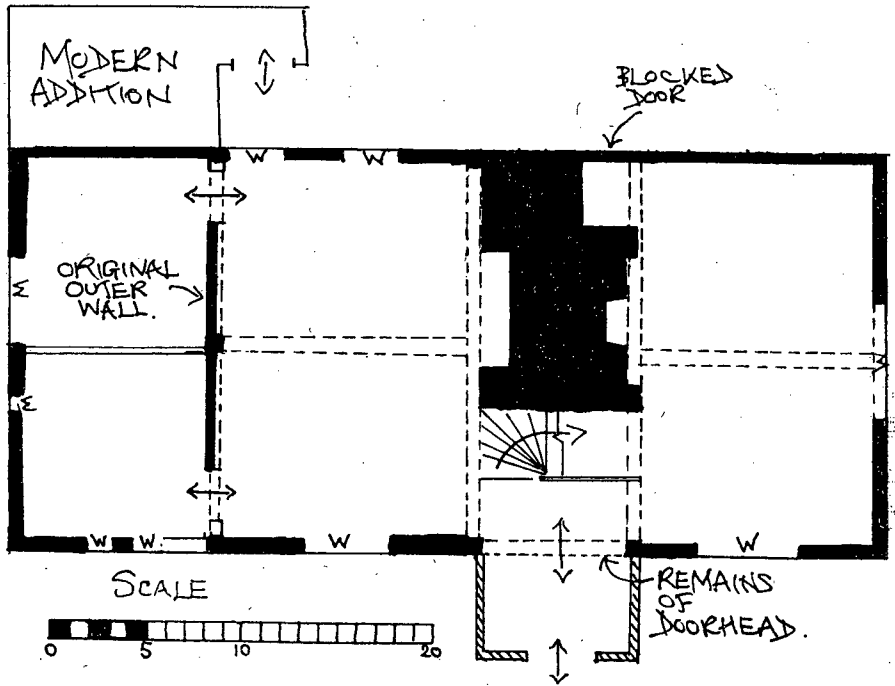


FIG. 8.—Friars Hall, plan and section.

rooms themselves, for a sharp break in the wall-plate, and a marked change in the roof-structure, show that this end of the building has been replaced.

The roof over the hall, much smoke-blackened, is of the simplest kind. Pairs of rough rafters of very small scantling are halved together and pegged at the apex, and joined by collars. There are no purlins for lengthwise support. The collars are jointed to the rafters with plain halvings. One of the most interesting survivals in the roof is a thick layer of rough plaster, incorporating much chopped straw, and encrusted with soot, laid between the rafters against the underside of the thatch. This is presumably a form of fire protection, and is still intact along the back of the roof, though at the front it has disappeared as a result of alterations.⁴

Part of the diamond-mullioned five-light hall window at the back of the house is now visible at floor level in the bedroom over the hall; it seems likely that the rest of it is embedded in the plaster of the room below. No trace of the corresponding window at the front of the house remains, but its sill-beam, showing housings for the mullions, has been re-used in the newer part of the house.

When the house was modernised in the post-mediaeval period the hall was ceiled over and a brick chimney-stack inserted backing on to the cross-passage. The stack is narrower than many internal ones, and served only the hall. On the cross-passage side of it are two small niches in the brickwork.

Following the insertion of the stack, the service end of the house was evidently demolished and replaced by a new 'parlour' with a room above which gives every indication of being the best bedroom. Both these rooms were heated by a second stack placed internally at the gable-end. The downstairs fireplace has been rebuilt; the upstairs one retains its original form, with a depressed brick arch of somewhat crude workmanship. The bricks of both stacks are of a similar type, soft pink in colour, somewhat irregular in shape, approximately 9 x 4 x 2, so that it is certainly arguable that they are contemporary with each other. A small stair (now removed) wound up one side of the parlour stack to the chamber above (see plan, and longitudinal section, Fig. 7).

The roof over the new parlour block, while quite as poor and rough as that over the hall, is constructed with rudimentary side-purlins. It is certain it was never meant to be exposed.

Several points suggest that the building of this new end was contemporaneous with the ceiling-over of the hall. First, the sill of one hall window (see above) has been re-used as a main ceiling-beam in the parlour chamber, and second, the muntins from a

⁴ Plaster used in this way to protect the thatch has also been noted in Essex, *ex inf.* C. A. Hewett.

plank-and-muntin partition have been removed to act as mullions for the windows in the parlour and the chamber above. It is tempting—and not unreasonable—to surmise that initially such a partition screened the hall from the cross-passage.

The other extension of the house was the building-on of a small room beyond the upper end of the hall. This room has now been made into one with the hall, but in the absence of any form of original heating, it seems reasonable to assume that it was a service-room. A small winding stair (now removed) led to the room above. Access between this little chamber and the hall chamber was by a large doorway, with re-used plank door, inserted into the original end wall. Not only the roof timbers but also the wall-framing of this end are poor, and one wonders whether this part of the building is contemporary with the other additions or later.

The main beam of the inserted hall ceiling has a carved zigzag design which is repeated on the post-head: the parlour main-beam, with a plain chamfer, has complex stops of a scroll-type. Both these details suggest a seventeenth century date for the modernisations.

Although the basic plan is the same as at Walnut Tree Cottage, Friars Hall is certainly a building of higher social status (see plan and section, Fig. 8). In overall measurements it is slightly larger and higher, and it has a roof of the crown-post type, structurally more advanced than that of Wattisfield. The crownpost is a particularly fine one, with a moulded base and battlemented cap; the octagonal shaft approaches five feet in height. The tie-beam is markedly cambered and finished with a plain chamfer: the heavy arched braces have a hollow-chamfer mould.⁵

As with the other house, the impression is that the building was plastered from the outset, an impression very generally made by timber-framed farmhouses of all periods in Suffolk.

The hall and cross-passage are all that remain of the original building. One of the cross-passage doorways, with plain arched spandrels, is blocked up in the rear wall. The corresponding entrance at the front of the house has been removed, but the housing for the doorhead is visible in the wall-framing.

No sign of the service end survives, so that it is impossible to say whether the house had originally one or two service rooms.

The brick chimney-stack has been inserted directly into the cross-passage and serves both the hall and the new parlour on the site of the old service-end. The bricks are soft reds and pinks with some greys, reminiscent of the beautiful subdued colourings of Norfolk brick. The parlour fireplace has a very shallow arched

⁵ Part of the tie-beam and one brace have been cut away to allow a through passage upstairs.

head, formed of a double row of bricks set on edge; in the hall is a large plain lintel. The staircase which winds up beside the chimney-stack has solid treads and a row of very rough, flat balusters at the top with Jacobean-type decoration.

Beyond the old upper end of the hall two new service-rooms have been added, with two little rooms above them. The menial nature of this part of the building has been accentuated, as so often in Suffolk, by a hipped roof over it. The parlour end of a house has more frequently a gable, as here, and Walnut Tree Cottage also has this combination of gable and hip.

The alterations at Friars Hall once more give a seventeenth-century impression. The ceiling of the new parlour has plain joists, less substantial than those general in the sixteenth century, and a main beam with ovolo moulding. There is also the form of the parlour fireplace with its depressed brick arch.

The marked similarity in the modernisation of both these houses can readily be appreciated. The placing of an internal chimney-stack at the lower end of the hall, or directly into the cross-passage, has led to the creation of a parlour in place of the mediaeval service-rooms—a virtual turning-round of the house, with a new service area appearing at the old upper end of the hall.

Why it was necessary to demolish the service end completely is naturally a matter for speculation, but the most likely explanation is that it was too small. It is even possible that there was originally no upper floor, as has been found, for example, in some fourteenth-century Kentish buildings.⁶ Even if this were not so, the practice of differentiating between the upper and lower ends of a house by the combined use of a hip and gable would mean that the roof over the service end was almost certainly a low hipped one, providing very limited space for an upper chamber of any consequence.

One additional point which these two houses raise is that, although a major rebuilding of one end was undertaken, no attempt was made to create a new parlour block higher than the remainder of the house, in spite of this causing the new heated best bedroom over the parlour to be partly within the roof space. Although in many instances the post-mediaeval additions to a house are strikingly obvious externally because of a marked difference in the height of the various parts, there are probably just as many cases where a major internal alteration is completely concealed from the outside.

Faced with a three-cell timber-framed building, containing hall, parlour and service rooms, with an internal chimney, several possible lines of development emerge. It may be 'all one build', the typical farmhouse of late sixteenth-century Suffolk; or it may

⁶ E. W. Parkin, 'The Vanishing Houses of Kent: 3, Leeds Priory Gatehouse', *Archæologia Cantiana*, LXXVIII (1963), p. 142.

PLATE VIII



Walnut Tree Cottage, Wattisfield.



Friars Hall, Rattlesden.

have been built with only two cells—hall and parlour—linked by the chimney-stack, and have had a third service unit added later. But it may also—and more probably so if its wall-height does not allow for two full storeys—be a mediaeval house which has been modernised, reversed and added-to, and has emerged from the process with an all-concealing coat of plaster, ready for several more centuries of life.

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