Medieval Domestic Architecture in Berkshire.

By E. T. Long, F.S.A.

Part I.—Introduction.

THE old houses of England, particularly those of the medieval period, rank next to the parish churches as our most priceless inheritance. Houses are more subject to alterations than churches, since they are affected by changes in fashion and reflect more closely the life and habits of the people through the ages. Consequently, it is often difficult at first glance to determine the approximate date of a domestic building. Careful examination of what appears to be a rather commonplace house of no great antiquity will frequently reveal features of outstanding interest and medieval date. Many a beautiful roof is concealed above a flat plaster ceiling and oak panelling has been found behind wall paper, or lathe and plaster partitions. Innumerable fine open fireplaces have been discovered behind hideous modern grates and, not infrequently, mural paintings of much interest and beauty have been revealed during alterations.

Berkshire, though in no sense ranking as a first-class county in the matter of medieval domestic architecture, has the distinction of possessing two examples of late twelfth century date, a distinction, moreover, which is not shared by the neighbouring counties of Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire, all, in other respects, so very much richer in medieval architecture, both religious and secular.

There is an absence of good building stone in the county, though cornbrash exists in considerable quantity in the west and it is here that the most numerous examples of medieval domestic architecture are to be found. Flint with chalk dressings was employed in the downland districts, while in the east, which in ancient times was covered by dense forests, the majority of surviving medieval houses are of timber framed construction. At Bisham, however, flint and stone are employed. The use of brick in domestic work does not become prevalent until the sixteenth century, though isolated examples may be found of rather earlier date. Southcote, near Reading, was one of the earliest examples of the use of brick in Berkshire and dated from the late fifteenth century, it was, unfortunately, destroyed in 1921. With regard to roofing materials, stone slates are largely employed in the west and brick tiles and thatch elsewhere. It is probable that oak shingles were used for house roofing in the forest district, but, so far as the present writer is aware, no ancient examples have survived.

Before proceeding to a brief description of the surviving examples of medieval domestic architecture in Berkshire, it will be as well to trace the history of the development of the English house from Saxon times to the middle of the sixteenth century, the period covered by this survey.

The medieval house has its origin in the Saxon hall, which was the common living room of the whole family. The fact that no certain remains of Pre-Conquest domestic architecture are in existence would suggest that most of these early houses were of timber construction in the manner of the still existing nave of Greenstead Church, in Essex, the walls of which are formed of massive split oak trunks set upright and smoothed with the adze on their flat faces. Such a hall would probably be divided into bays by arched trusses called crucks, a method of construction which persisted to a much later date in various parts of the country, *e.g.* Harwell, in Berkshire. In this single room the household fed, played and slept. Probably one end of the apartment was screened off in some way for the personal use of the lord and his lady. The kitchen, at any rate in the more important establishments, was probably a separate structure, though there is some reason to suppose that the cooking may often have been done in the hall.

With the advent of the Normans a greater degree of comfort was introduced and the more important houses at any rate were built of stone rather than wood. A solar, or withdrawing room, was added at the upper end of the hall and it became usual to raise the hall itself on an undercroft, which could serve for purposes of storage and which sometimes contained the kitchen. The hall was usually approached by an external stair as at Boothby Pagnell, in Lincolnshire. The ground floor hall was not abandoned, however, and is found in both the late twelfth century houses of Berkshire at Appleton and Sutton Courtenay. The finest twelfth century hall now surviving is at Oakham Castle, in Rutland, which is aisled like the nave of a church, a type which persisted into the thirteenth century as at Winchester Castle and Warnford, in Hampshire. In all these examples the arcades are of stone, but at Nurstead, in Kent, and formerly in Farnham Castle, in Surrey, they are of wood.

The first-floor type of hall continued in use during the thirteenth century as formerly in the Bishop's Palace at Sonning, in Berkshire. It occurs even later in some parts of the country, *e.g.* Markenfield, in Yorkshire (fourteenth century), and Lyddington, in Rutland (fifteenth century). During the thirteenth century the English House developed a plan which continued in essential features until the end of the medieval period. The lower end of the hall was screened off to form a passage with external doors at either end. Two, or more, doors in the end wall of the hall

communicated with the kitchen and offices. The solar, usually raised on an undercroft, was attached to the opposite end of the hall. Charney Basset, in Berkshire, is an outstanding example of this plan though only the solar wing remains in anything like its original form. Sometimes the solar is found above the kitchen as in the fourteenth century example at Fyfield, in Berkshire. The earlier houses had been more or less rectangular in plan, but as time went on and a greater degree of comfort and privacy was sought the solar end was extended so as to afford more accommodation for the family. Thus the L-shaped plan came into existence.

It was probably a desire for symmetry as much as anything which was responsible for the origin of the H-shaped plan, which was obtained by prolonging the kitchen and solar wings at right angles to the hall in either direction and is characteristic of many late medieval houses. Meantime, early in the fifteenth century the final development of medieval planning—the quadrangular—came into fashion. It is confined for the most part to the larger and more important houses. Some houses became quadrangular in course of time by a series of enlargements and alterations as at Sutton Courtenay, in Berkshire, and Haddon Hall, in Derbyshire. Others, like South Wingfield, also in Derbyshire, and Ockwells, in Berkshire, were from the first built round a quadrangle, or were so intended. Childrey Manor, in Berkshire, an early sixteenth century house is said to have been quadrangular but a disastrous reconstruction of the nineteenth century has completely obscured the original plan. Such a house was usually provided with a fore court approached through a gatehouse with the outbuildings grouped on either side as at Ockwells. Though the quadrangular plan was, generally speaking, confined to the larger houses it is sometimes found in smaller examples as at Little Hempston, in Devonshire. On the other hand the simple rectangular form was often retained in smaller houses until the sixteenth century as at Marcham, in Berkshire.

The last development of the English house in medieval times affected the elevation rather than the ground plan. In order to provide more accommodation as economically as possible, it became customary towards the end of the fifteenth century to place rooms over the hall. By the middle of the sixteenth century this arrangement was well-nigh universal in all the smaller houses and even in many of the larger ones. Berkshire has a particularly good example of this type in Ashbury Manor, which belongs to the last quarter of the fifteenth century and is in many respects the most interesting medieval house in the county.

The chapel was by no means an invariable feature of the medieval house and, consequently, has no fixed place in the plan. It occurs in most of the larger houses and is perhaps most frequently found in Somerset and other parts of the West Country. Several

of the medieval houses of Berkshire have, or had, chapels, notably at Brimpton and East Hendred. In the former case it would appear to have been always a completely detached building.

Though medieval domestic architecture differs not at all in essentials from contemporary ecclesiastical work there are, nevertheless, certain features such as chimneys and fireplaces, which, being definitely secular in origin, are found only occasionally in churches.

Fireplaces and chimneys were in use as early as the twelfth century and several examples of the period survive in different parts of the country, though none in Berkshire. The early chimney shafts are generally circular and rather slender as at Boothby Pagnell, in Lincolnshire, and Christchurch, in Hampshire. In the thirteenth century the chimney assumed various forms, but was often rectangular and sometimes had a gabled top with lancet-shaped openings for the escape of the smoke, of which there is a good example in the Abbot's lodging at Abingdon. About the end of the century a very graceful form was evolved consisting of a short octagonal shaft surmounted by a small spirelet, both shaft and cap being pierced. There are apparently no surviving examples of this type in Berkshire, but Oxfordshire affords instances at Kingham and Woodstock.

The normal form of fourteenth century chimney seems to have been octagonal in plan rising from a square base, though sometimes it is rectangular. The octagonal form continues until the Tudor period when clustered shafts, often of brick, came into vogue with the multiplication of fireplaces. The graceful fifteenth century chimneys at All Souls' College, Oxford, are octagonal with panelled shafts. The plain rectangular form is common in late Gothic work and there are several examples in Berkshire, notably at Ashbury, Marcham and Shellingford. The medieval chimney was a most decorative feature of the exterior of the house and it is a misfortune that so many have been replaced by ugly modern substitutes. Medieval chimneys are usually placed in the lateral walls and occasionally in the gables. They are never, or hardly ever, placed in the centre of the house, an arrangement not prevalent before the Elizabethan era.

Some of the earliest surviving fireplaces are in Rochester Castle, where they project slightly from the wall and are formed by a round headed arch with typical Norman zig-zag decoration. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the fireplace is usually surmounted by a hood supported on stone corbels, or, occasionally on shafts. There is a good example of this type in the Abbot's lodgings at Abingdon. Another form of this period exhibits a shouldered arch as at Charney Basset, in Berkshire. In the fifteenth century the four-centred arched fireplace came into fashion and continued into the seventeenth century. So traditional are some of the Jacobean examples that they might well pass for work

of a century earlier save for certain indications in the mouldings. When the manor house of Kennington, in Berkshire, was restored in 1938, several fireplaces of this type were discovered all of which dated from after 1600. Sometimes the head was of wood, especially in the later examples.

Until the middle of the fifteenth century, fireplaces seem to have been practically unknown in ground-floor halls, the heat being provided by an open brazier in the centre of the room, the smoke escaping through a louvre in the roof. In first-floor halls and solars, on the other hand, they are the rule rather than the exception from the twelfth century onwards.

Another characteristic of domestic architecture is the comparatively early occurrence of the transom in windows, a feature rarely found in ecclesiastical work before the fifteenth century. It appears as early as 1250 in the castles of Stokesay (Shropshire) and Winchester, and becomes quite common in the fourteenth century. Instances in Berkshire may be seen at Dean Court Farm, Cumnor, c. 1330 and Sutton Courtenay "Abbey" of much the same period and formerly at Cumnor Hall. The purpose of the transom was, doubtless, not only to give support to the mullions, but also to facilitate the fixing of the wooden shutters with which medieval domestic windows were furnished, particularly before the use of glass became common.

A word must be said about the internal treatment of the walls. From the earliest times it was customary to plaster the surface of the walls and clear indications of this treatment have been found in the remains of houses erected during the Roman occupation. Woven hangings were employed even in Saxon times, and later on it became usual to decorate the plaster surface with paintings in tempera. Very little medieval domestic wall painting survives in Berkshire, but there are much restored remains in the hall at Bisham of thirteenth century origin. There are several instances of seventeenth century mural paintings, which are outside the scope of this survey. Wooden panelling does not become common until the end of the medieval period. Ashbury Manor has some plain oaken partitions of about 1500, but of medieval wall panelling Berkshire has very little to show.

Medieval roofing is a subject of the greatest interest and there can be little doubt that England is supreme in timber roof construction and design, especially in the case of churches, where, as a rule, ancient examples are better preserved and less altered and mutilated than in domestic work. The earliest type of timber roof of which we have definite evidence in this country is the braced rafter form with, or without, tie beams and king posts. This type being usually very plain is often difficult to date, since it was in use from, at any rate, the thirteenth to the end of the sixteenth century. Where there are king posts with moulded caps it is, of course, easier to assign an approximate date. The

solar at Charney. Basset has a good example with king posts, which, probably belongs to the latter part of the thirteenth century. The hall at Bisham has a plain example without ties and king posts, which may also belong to the same period. The collar braced form of roof is in use from the fourteenth century onwards. There is a splendid example at Bisham over the great chamber, and another in the hall of the "Abbey" at Sutton Courtenay, both of mid fourteenth century date. Probably the finest domestic timber roof in the county is at Ashbury. This superb example of medieval carpentry is of arch collar braced construction with moulded principles and purlins, cusped windbraces and chamfered rafters. It retains considerable remains of colour and has an unusually rich wall plate. The hammer beam type of roof occurs fairly frequently in domestic buildings, though there are, apparently, no examples in Berkshire. Flat ceilings with massive moulded beams and chamfered joists are a feature of late medieval work in most parts of the country, though they are often concealed, at any rate partly, by laths and plaster. The hall at Ashbury Manor has a ceiling of this sort with carved bosses at the intersection of the beams. Sometimes these ceilings are panelled.

Stone vaulting is confined, as a rule, to cellars, gatehouses, porches and undercrofts. There is very little domestic vaulting in Berkshire, but the porch at Bisham has a quadripartite example of the thirteenth century and there is a late fourteenth century vault in the gatehouse at Donnington.

The main walls of medieval houses are invariably of considerable thickness, at any rate where the material is stone, or flint; and where definite architectural features are not in evidence a thick wall often makes it possible to assign a considerably earlier date to a house than would appear to be the case from a casual observation of the fabric. The average thickness of the walls is usually from 2ft. 6ins. to 3ft., but occasionally it is considerably more.

The construction of timber framed houses forms an interesting study and Berkshire possesses numerous examples, many of which are certainly of medieval date, though lack of distinctive features and the fact that this form of construction persisted up to the eighteenth century makes it difficult to assign a definite date to the majority of them. The wooden framework is usually set on a base of stone, or flint, and sometimes the whole of the ground-floor walls are so constructed. The material employed for filling the interstices between the timbers seems to have been generally wattle and daub, but it is evident that split flints were sometimes used for this purpose in chalk districts. Brick was not employed for fillings before the sixteenth century and where it occurs in earlier buildings, it doubtless replaces the original wattle and daub. Timber framed houses were sometimes faced up with brick or stone in the eighteenth century, or even earlier, so as to give them a more fashionable appearance.

The outbuildings of a medieval manor house, which included barns, stables and pigeon houses, often survive and exhibit the same excellence of construction and design as the house itself. They were usually grouped round an outer court approached through a gatehouse as at Ockwells. Fine barns remain in Berkshire at Bisham, Great Coxwell and Hurley. That at Great Coxwell belongs to the fourteenth century and is one of the finest in the country. Good medieval pigeon houses survive at Bisham, Hurley and Ockwells, all circular in plan. The first two are of flint and stone, while that at Ockwells is of brick with stone dressings and is contemporary with the great house, dating, therefore, from the third quarter of the fifteenth century.

Many medieval houses were fortified to a certain extent and it was necessary to obtain a licence from the Crown before any house was allowed to be fortified. These licences are of value as affording evidence of the date of the houses to which they refer as the date of licence frequently agrees with some, at any rate, of the existing architectural details, as is the case with Donnington Castle, in Berkshire.

The following licences relate to Berkshire: Abingdon Abbey 1330, Donnington 1385, Sonning 1337.

Within recent years there has been a growing interest in domestic architecture and many notable old houses have been intelligently restored with the result that numerous interesting features have been brought to light and long obscured beauties revealed after centuries of oblivion. Berkshire has played its part in this rehabilitation, though to a lesser degree than some of the adjacent counties, notably Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. The outstanding restoration in this county is that of Ockwells, which within living memory was derelict and ruinous. Now as a result of much care and perseverance this noble fifteenth century house has been restored to its pristine beauty. Appleton and the Norman hall at Sutton Courtenay have also been renovated with satisfactory results. Good work, too, has been accomplished at Charney Basset and Denchworth. Many old cottages have been reconditioned and a Tudor barn at Appleton has been skilfully repaired under the supervision of Mr. C. B. Willcocks, F.S.A. It is greatly to be desired that Ashbury Manor should be added to the list. No ancient house would respond better to careful treatment and were all its interesting features revealed it would be one of the most notable examples of its period in the country.

PART II

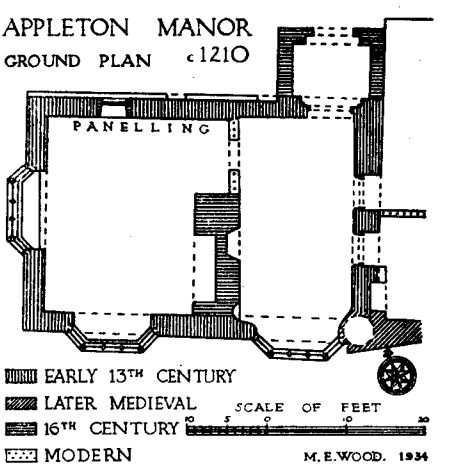
DESCRIPTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL HOUSES.

It is now time to consider in more detail the surviving examples of medieval domestic architecture in Berkshire. Each century will be treated separately and the respective houses described in alphabetical order. Where, as is often the case, a house has medieval work of more than one period the history of the fabric will be given under the century to which the earliest portions belong.

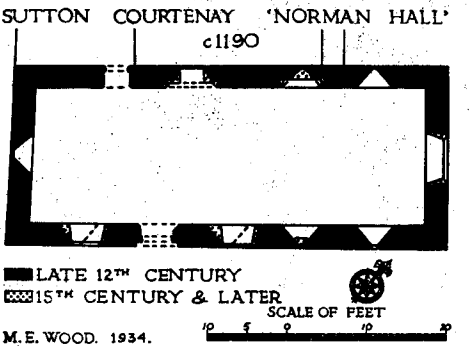
I. Twelfth Century.

Appleton manor house is situated at a short distance to the south-west of the church. It is surrounded on three sides by a dry moat, which is the only evidence of defensive measures now visible. The house, which dates from about 1200, is of particular interest as affording an early instance of the normal medieval plan. There were, apparently, considerable additions to the house in the fifteenth century and during the Tudor period it was completely refashioned. Within recent years it has been extensively and, on the whole, wisely restored. The material is stone and the roofs are covered with stone slates.

So far as can be judged from what remains of the original work the house at first consisted of a ground-floor hall running east and west with the kitchen and offices at the east end. It is probable that the solar was over the kitchen and there are remains of a newel stair at the south-east angle of the hall. This stair appears to be of later date, but it may well represent an original feature. Additions were made subsequently, probably in the fifteenth century, and during the Tudor period the house assumed more or less its present form. At this time the hall was divided into two storeys and the ground floor converted into two rooms by the insertion of a partition with a large fireplace and chimney stack. A porch with chamber above was placed in front of the north doorway. As a result of these and subsequent alterations the only original features now visible are the north entrance doorway and two others in the wall at right angles to it, which led to the offices. The position of these doorways is quite in accordance with the normal medieval scheme, of which this is probably the earliest surviving instance. The north doorway has a round arch of three orders with deep roll mouldings and stiff-stalk capitals to the jamb shafts. The service doorways are much less elaborate with roll hoods and a carved head between them.



Sutton Courtenay possesses three medieval houses of some importance, the oldest of which, now called " Norman Hall," dates in part from the end of the twelfth century. It stands to the west of the church and consists of a large hall running east and west, to which is attached a modern residence on the north. The material is rubble with ashlar quoins and the roof is covered with tiles. Some authorities, including the late Sir Harold Brakspear and the late Mr. F. E. Howard, believe it to be a chapel, but beyond the fact that it is correctly orientated there would seem to be no reason for a large chapel in close proximity to a church of contemporary date. On the other hand Mr. A. E. Preston, F.S.A.,[1] and Miss Margaret Wood[2] hold that it was built as a hall, probably by Reginald de Courtenay about 1190. The absence of windows in the west front of the north wall suggests some annexe on the site of part of the modern wing, which may well have contained the kitchen with the solar above. The hall retains its north and south doorways, which are not exactly opposite one another, and seven lancets set high in the walls, several of which are blocked. The south doorway is the more elaborate with roll mouldings and nail-head and dog-tooth ornament on the arch. These were originally jamb shafts, of which the foliated capitals survive. The large east window, which has lost its tracery, is a fifteenth century insertion and the plain queen post roof may be of the same period. In the seventeenth century the hall was divided into two storeys and several rooms, but all the partitions and floors have been removed. A good Tudor fireplace from elsewhere has been recently inserted in the north wall.



To be continued.

[1] *Berks, Bucks and Oxon Arch. Journal*, XXV, No. 1 (1919), No. 2 (1920).
[2] *Arch. Journal*, 92 (1935).

Sutton Courtenay Norman Hall : Exterior. *Photo : M. E. Wood.*