Adapting houses to changing needs:

MULTI-PHASED MEDIEVAL AND TRANSITIONAL HOUSES IN EASTERN SUSSEX

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It is often asserted that the 150 years from 1380 witnessed an emerging nouveau riche class, able for the first time to construct houses incorporating a lofty open hall and substantial first-floor end-chambers, which were sufficiently well-built to survive to the present day. That this model is broadly correct there can be little doubt. But by implying that these houses were always constructed in one phase, wholly replacing their predecessors, we are in danger of oversimplifying the true picture. Research within eastern Sussex indicates that at least 29 per cent, and perhaps as many as 40 per cent of our surviving medieval and transitional housing stock are the result of piecemeal enlargement and reconstruction. The former figure is likely to rise as more examples are recognized for what they are.

INTRODUCTION

Whereas historians of vernacular architecture are content to allow the possibility of multi-phased improvement of houses during the post-medieval period, it was traditionally assumed that all but the most obviously multi-phase medieval buildings were constructed in a single campaign. In the preface to his pioneering study, R. T. Mason stated that ‘the fully developed house appears quite suddenly upon the medieval scene’, and the book as a whole treats alteration and improvement as an essentially post-medieval phenomenon.¹

In the standard model, these substantial medieval houses could easily be adapted when open halls went out of use during the ‘transitional’ period from the medieval to the post-medieval era which occurred in the middle of the 16th century, while the wealthier owners of less well-built houses generally replaced their inferior dwellings by ‘permanent’ houses of the new, fully-floored ‘transitional’ type.

But such a model ignores a substantial minority of medieval and transitional buildings. Research in the Rape of Hastings, the eastern third of East Sussex, based on surveys of 234 buildings of the period c. 1350 to c. 1570, has demonstrated that a minimum of 29 per cent of them are the product of several phases of construction. It is only through careful study, often in the course of building works, that the complete development of a building can be determined, and it is likely that, of a further 11 per cent of buildings which cannot be definitely proved to be of a single build, a large proportion are the result of several phases of construction.

Regardless of the precise percentage, it is safe to conclude that a substantial minority of owners did not replace their home in a single act, either preferring a staged approach to the enlargement or reconstruction of their home or being content to make piecemeal alterations without any overall long-term plan. The earliest phases of such houses are at best very fragmentary and more often evidenced by nothing more than a ‘ghost’ — for example a weathering-line from a demolished structure. Yet these glimpses — slight as they may be — are probably our best hope for understanding not only the buildings themselves, but also the buildings which immediately preceded the substantial single-phase textbook examples.

THE ADDITION OF FACILITIES

Some medieval vernacular houses were increased in size by the addition of facilities not incorporated within the original scheme. The most common was the addition of a parlour to a previously two-cell house having an open hall and storeyed service area only.
A number of these two-cell houses survive which were not extended until much later; typical examples are Sandhills in Warbleton, Tyles in Warbleton and Ellen Archers in Bodiam. It is not surprising that other such examples were converted to the more usual three-cell ‘textbook’ form comprising storeyed services, open hall and storeyed parlour. It is not always possible to be certain that the added parlour-bay does not replace an earlier bay as part of a sequence of progressive reconstruction (see below), though in a number of instances there is sufficient evidence to be sure. At The Old Thatch, Sedlescombe, for instance, the roof of the hall was originally hipped and thus the new parlour must represent an addition (Fig. 1). The design of the original end-walls of the halls at Woods Place, Whatlington and Manor Cottages, Sedlescombe indicate that here too the parlours were additions. However, at 43, 45, 47 High Street, Robertsbridge the new parlour can be shown to replace an earlier, contemporary in-line parlour which was destroyed by fire, as shown by heavy charring on the end truss. In this instance the new parlour-bay was merely a replacement of what was destroyed.

Although the construction of a parlour seems to have been the most common form of medieval and transitional addition, other arrangements are known. For instance, after its parlour had been rebuilt 43, 45 and 47 High Street, Robertsbridge was extended at its service end in about 1520 by the addition of a two-storeyed, single-bay shop unit (Fig. 2) and around the same date a similar addition was made at Iltonsbeth in Sedlescombe.

The construction of attached kitchens was becoming more widespread during the first half of the 16th century. Either late in the 15th century or early the next, a two-bay ‘kitchen’ extension was added at the service end of the earlier, relatively small, apparently three-cell house at Baldocks, Boreham Street, Wartling (Fig. 3). A similar addition was made at Little Harmers in Beckley early in the 16th century, though in that instance to a layout which is more unusual, and not fully understood. At 25, 27 High Street (Fig. 4) and at Monks House, both in Robertsbridge, kitchens were added as rear ranges accessed from the cross passages. At Crouchers in Crowhurst, it was felt necessary during the 15th century to add extra service space and first-floor accommodation to the textbook
to improve some of the existing rooms. Thus at Ruth Cottage in Beckley, the single-bay open hall (known from excavations) was entirely rebuilt as a slightly larger, floored-over hall when the parlour was added in about 1570. The medieval service bay — with overshot cross-passage — was retained, though the cross-passage area was converted into a smokebay serving the hall (Fig. 6).

PROGRESSIVE RECONSTRUCTION

Ruth Cottage is an example of a phenomenon known as progressive reconstruction (also known as progressive rebuilding or alternate rebuilding), in that part of the earlier house was demolished in order to improve the building. At Ruth Cottage it was clear from excavation that the reconstruction involved the addition, rather than the reconstruction, of a parlour, but without archaeological investigation it is usually impossible to determine whether demolished sections have been replaced by better quality, but otherwise similar, facilities, or whether additional facilities were incorporated within the reconstruction. Thus in the late 15th century at The Queens Head in Sedlescombe, the open bay of the hall (and — if it existed — the parlour) was demolished and a new ‘wealden-style’ two-bay open hall, with a parlour beyond it, was built against the retained service bay. Similarly, at Brays Hill Farm
House in Ashburnham, the service bay and rear 'kitchen' range (both subsequently destroyed) were left standing when a new floored-over hall and parlour were constructed (Fig. 7) in about 1560. In neither instance is it clear whether a parlour was incorporated in the destroyed section.

At Ruth Cottage, the reason for demolishing a perfectly sound hall is clear: it was rebuilt to a higher standard, slightly larger than its predecessor and of the new floored-over type. It is likely that at The Queens Head and Brays Hill too the new halls were longer and better built than their predecessors. Similarly, when the parlour at Square Farm in Burwash was either added or rebuilt in the 15th century, the owner took the opportunity of extending the length of the hall by adding a second bay to it, though in this instance the enlargement was achieved without entirely demolishing the existing hall bay (Fig. 8). At Wenbans in Wadhurst as at Crouchers, the owner wished to enlarge his service area, but unlike Crouchers (where he merely added a further bay), at Wenbans the old services were entirely demolished and rebuilt as a large two-bay separately-framed section with a front jetty (Fig. 9).

**Vanished Earlier Phases**

It is unclear why the earlier services at Wenbans were destroyed, rather than extended as at Crouchers; to judge from the retained 15th-century hall, the
existing services had been of good-quality construction. But such reasoning assumes that the services were of the same date as the hall; what if they survived from a still earlier house which had been only partially rebuilt when the hall was constructed in the 15th century? Services retained from an earlier house might have been less well-built than the more recent hall, or could have been at the end of their life by the end of the 15th century.

Such a model for the development of Wenbans might seem fanciful and probably cannot be proven without dismantling. But there are a number of examples where just such a multi-phased reconstruction can be shown to have taken place. One such example is Laceys in Northiam, where detailed examination following severe fire-damage revealed that the parlour-bay of this otherwise textbook, four-bay, three-cell house predates the adjacent hall and services (Fig. 10). Although indicated by a difference in scantling and quality and by joints cut in situ in the front wall where the two phases abut, it is in the rear wall where, for reasons of economy, a second principal post was incorporated next to the earlier post, that the two phases are most noticeable. There are no mortices for lost framing on the hall face of the earlier post, proving that the original hall and the parlour were separately framed. The only explanation must be that the original hall and parlour were of different dates.

In all probability the 15th-century parlour at Laceys represents an addition to a small two-cell hall house, similar to that already described at The Old Thatch in Sedlescombe. At Laceys, however, the original two-cell house was itself soon afterwards rebuilt, either because it was considered too small — perhaps its hall was of only one bay, or the earlier section had by then reached the end of its life — or perhaps because of a combination of factors. What is clear is that, when added, the new parlour was of the same width and height as the adjacent structure, and that those same dimensions were again replicated when the earlier hall and services were replaced. By normal local standards the building was small: only 5.15 m (16’ 10”) wide with side walls only 3.05 m (10’ 0”) high from underside of soleplate to top of wallplate. We cannot tell whether the original length was similarly replicated — perhaps the new hall and services were larger than their predecessors.

Laceys is by no means unique. An even more interesting example is Dunsters Mill House in Ticehurst, studied in detail during its dismantling and subsequent re-erection on a new site. Here a new hall and services were built in about 1450, retaining an earlier parlour which itself almost certainly represented an addition (Fig. 11). Thus, as at Laceys, the new hall and services represent the third phase in the life of the building and replaced a phase-1 hall and service. Because the phase-2 parlour was to be retained, the new hall and services were designed, as at Laceys, to reflect the height of

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Fig. 10. Laceys, Northiam. Above:- Phase 2 showing added parlour. Below:- Phase 3 with hall and services rebuilt.
the parlour. Again as at Laceys, the parlour was both low and narrow — the side walls measured only 3.65 m (12' 0") high from underside of soleplate to top of wallplate, and the width was a mere 5.10 m (16' 9"). Despite the replication of low storey-heights, at Dunsters Mill the clever use of a collar-truss within the new hall gave it a loftiness which would otherwise have been absent (Fig. 12). The narrow width of the parlour also presented a problem, a problem which was principally overcome by the inclusion of an aisle along the rear of the new hall and services. Cunningly, the width of the new section was still further increased by canting the front wall within the bay nearest to the retained parlour to give an additional 250 mm (10") of width, thereby increasing the overall dimension to 6.50 m (21' 3") — a full 1.40 m (4' 7") wider than the original house (Fig. 11). Thus Dunsters illustrates how, by careful design, a small though otherwise serviceable parlour addition could be retained when an older hall and services became due for renewal.

At Laceys, despite the slight scantling of the parlour timbers, the quality of both the carpentry and the material was sufficient to allow its survival to present times. For some unknown reason that was not the case at Dunsters, where after the hall and services were rebuilt the retained second-phase was itself replaced about 80 to 100 years later. Although probably longer than the original, the inferior quality of the materials used within the replacement, coupled with the very obvious economies in its design, strongly suggest that reconstruction of the phase-2 parlour was by about 1540 a necessity despite lack of finance — it should not be seen as a response to increased wealth on the part of the owners.

It is fortunate that the features which survive at Laceys and Dunsters are those necessary to allow this fascinating story to be told. But there are other
Fig. 13. Shovells, 125 All Saints Street, Hastings. An intended phased reconstruction within a built-up street. Only phase 1 was completed.

examples. At Rowley in Ticehurst, Sowdens in Brede, Knelle Dower in Beckley, Asselton in Sedlescombe and The Banks in Mountfield, halls and parlours were rebuilt while earlier services were retained, only to be later replaced. At Yewtree in Northiam, an earlier end-bay, probably a parlour, was likewise
retained when the hall and services were rebuilt. In all these instances, the surviving visible details are insufficient to determine the precise circumstances which made the reconstructions necessary. Neither is it known whether the retained parts were fragments of earlier single-phased buildings or more serviceable later phases which were spared when earlier work was destroyed. It is impossible to tell whether the new sections replicated the widths and heights of their predecessors or whether they were built wider and taller.

**Uncompleted Phased Reconstructions**

It may at first sight seem surprising to undertake new work which was taller and/or wider than the section being retained; surely such constructions would look odd and have been avoided if at all possible. Odd perhaps, but avoided no. There are a number of examples where it can be proven that taller and/or wider rebuilds were placed in-line with work retained from an earlier building (see Figs 13, 14 & 17). It can only be assumed that where this occurs it was often the owner’s intention to rebuild the retained part to the same height and width as the new section at a later date, but that circumstances prevented it.

Today probably the best example of this phenomenon is The Shovells in All Saints Street, Hastings, where during the late 15th century the owner built a new service-bay across a former lane or alley, trimming back the end of his existing house in order to do so. Significantly, not only does the new jettied bay tower over the earlier house, but its ground floor is set 140 mm (6") above that of the retained bay, despite being sited at the down-hill end of the existing house (Fig. 13).

Nobody would have designed the new extension in this way unless as the first phase in a scheme of reconstruction. Indeed, even though the scheme was never completed, the design of the first phase makes it clear that the completed house was to have been a three-unit ‘wealden-style’ hall house, its parlour sited where the original services had stood.

Why the scheme at The Shovells was never completed is impossible to say, but it is not the only example. During the middle to late 15th century, a large and impressive two-bay service and ‘kitchen’ structure was built at Adams Farm, Crowhurst. Although the earliest phase of the house was rebuilt at the beginning of the 18th century, it is clear from
a surviving brick chimney of the early 17th century that an earlier structure had formerly occupied the site (Fig. 14). The weathering-courses on its cap, now visible within the roof of the rebuild, indicate that the house which it served was much lower and probably narrower than the 15th-century ‘kitchen’ to the south.

Three explanations were considered: that the ‘kitchen’ was originally a free-standing building, serving a house now lost; that it formed the crosswing of a lost main range to the west; or that in the early 17th century the chimney had been inserted into an old house against which the ‘kitchen’ had originally been built. In the course of the survey, the first two of these options were preferred, and the third dismissed through a failure to contemplate that earlier structures of more than one phase could be deduced although none of their elements survived. It is impossible to tell whether part of the original house was demolished when the new service-end was constructed. What does now seem clear is that the variation in scale between the two phases indicates that the then owner, either Stephen or John Adams, regarded his new work as the first phase in a progressive reconstruction, an intention he never fulfilled.

Another such example is 1–2 Church Cottages, Ewhurst, where half the earlier house was rebuilt, much taller than formerly, in about 1550. Here too the other half of the earlier building was retained and was not replaced until about 1770, when the truss of the original house was left fossilized in the wall dividing the two phases (Fig. 15).

**PHASED RECONSTRUCTIONS WITH A DELAY BETWEEN PHASES**

Even had it been completed with little delay, the two-phased reconstruction at 1–2 Church Cottages would have been obvious from the truss of the earlier house trapped at the junction between the two phases (Fig. 16). But had Shovells or Adams been completed as planned, today the only structural evidence of their two-phase reconstruction would be joints in the wallplates and purlins at the junction between the phases.

How many examples of successfully completed phased reconstruction are missed during analysis is impossible to judge. However, that such buildings do exist is indicated by Rosewell in Whatlington, seeming a standard four-bay, three-unit, continuously jettied, transitional house of about 1540. There are no obvious architectural variations within the building to suggest that it dates from more than one phase. Yet the roof truss between the smokebay and the end-bay shows slight, but conclusive evidence of weathering where the roof of a much lower building has at some date abutted against it. Scarf joints within the wallplates and side-purlins coincide with the weathered truss.

Despite its single-phase appearance, there can be no doubt that Rosewell was reconstructed in two phases and that there was sufficient delay between them for weathering to occur (Fig. 17). Although not located within the study area, an even more remarkable example is Manor Cottages at Southwick in West Sussex where the weathering lines of a low fully-aisled structure are visible against the end-wall of the single-aisled hall, again indicating the two-phased reconstruction of an earlier lower building (Fig. 18).
In another example, Dalehill in Ticehurst, the building was for many years mistaken for a two-unit single-ended 'wealden-style' house of some size. Here too the weathering lines of a lower, non-jettied parlour have now been recognized on the roof timbers of the hall's end-wall. In this instance the difference in height was only slight (Fig. 19). Although the full wealden design was finally completed, it was not achieved until the middle of the 16th century, when joists of post-medieval scantling were employed in the new parlour, and the roof was framed with windbraced, clasped side-purlins. The open hall had probably been floored over already by the time the parlour was built.

Two other single-ended wealdens within the same parish — Rowley and The Bull Inn — have near-identical dimensions to Dalehill's, suggesting a local carpenter specializing in two-phase reconstructions, allowing his clients to rebuild on a grander scale than would otherwise have been possible. There are today no indications of a parlour at The Bull Inn, but at Rowley it is the service end, not the parlour, which is absent. It is inconceivable that the house would have been built without a service end, so again a phased reconstruction of a smaller house, carried out in similar manner to that at Dalehill, seems all but certain. The services at Rowley were finally replaced by a parlour crosswing in about 1600.

**NEW HOUSES ADDED AT THE SIDE OF OLDER DWELLINGS**

While some chose to reconstruct their small houses piecemeal, others built their new larger houses next to them, downgrading the earlier structures to more menial uses. At Chateau briand in Burwash village, the hall of an earlier house was re-erected in redesigned form as a detached building to the rear of the large and lofty hall house constructed in about 1500, and it seems likely that it was the original hall from the same site which was reused. Further along the same street, Shadwell Row incorporates...
two hall houses which stood end-to-end upon the same plot, with a narrow passage between them. One dates from the 15th century, but the other, set at the service-end of the 15th-century house, is a two-cell dwelling of the middle of the 14th century. The information which can be recovered from the fabric of the building suggests that the old hall was downgraded, either to workshops or ‘kitchen’ use, when the new house was built.

In isolated rural situations, where the sites of houses are not determined as they are in a village, it is possible that old hall houses would quite commonly have been downgraded to form the service quarters of the new house. At Silverden in Northiam, a fully-hipped two-cell 15th-century house was almost tripled in size in about 1500 by the addition of a new wing, incorporating hall and parlour, at right-angles to the original house. Evidently the earlier two-cell house was considered too good to warrant demolition, for it was downgraded to form the service-crosswing of the redesigned building. The old hall remained open and served either as a workshop or, more likely, as an attached kitchen.

At Silverden the house was improved without the need to demolish any part of the existing structure. Whether part of the medieval house at Ponts, Burwash, was demolished to make way for the new two-bay crosswing in about 1570 is unknown, for the retained medieval section was replaced during the 17th century. It is significant that a new floored-over hall and service rooms were incorporated within the crosswing and not retained within the main range, which it can be assumed was downgraded to serve as a kitchen from that time.

Although never common, such an arrangement became increasingly used during the early 17th century. Ponts is almost certainly typical of the upgrading of small medieval houses during the transitional period; the original house at Little Dixter in Northiam, however, was itself of transitional date. This small early 16th-century smoke-bay house of four bays measured only 4.60 metres (15' 1") wide. By 1583, at the end of the transitional period, it was considered too small, yet it was too good to destroy. Here too the owner chose to build new accommodation, including a floored-over hall, within a crosswing at one end of the earlier house, downgrading the original house to serve as a kitchen.

CONCLUSION

Even at the minimum level of likelihood, the proportion of medieval and transitional houses which were improved or simply replaced in more than one phase is too great to ignore. There is no reason why multi-phase reconstruction, taken for granted in a post-medieval context by students of vernacular architecture, should not have been common during earlier periods, indeed perhaps more common in the case of poorer buildings which may not survive. It is clear from documentary evidence that many locations formed the sites of buildings at dates long before any fabric survives. It is inconceivable that techniques of improvement other than that of entire replacement were not adopted in the medieval period.

The findings of this research pose many questions. Does multi-phase reconstruction have anything to tell us about the availability of capital in the period in question? Have we been too ready to assume that replacement always involved improvement, or are the examples of rebuilding to a lesser specification or the same dimensions as likely to survive and be studied?
to have been the norm? Has sufficient attention always been paid to the critical yet elusive evidence for this phenomenon in surveys of timber-framed buildings? The example offered by Adams in Crowhurst is instructive. When the building was surveyed in 1981, the possibility of the earliest surviving phase being anything other than a free-standing building or a fragment of a house of similar status was dismissed. Over 600 surveys later, it has become clear that the development of Adams, revealing as it does the unfulfilled ambitions of its 15th-century owner, probably typifies that of almost half the medieval buildings in the Rape of Hastings.

It has been generally assumed that the social and economic circumstances of the 15th and 16th centuries allowed the emergence of houses, built in large numbers, in a single campaign and intended to last more than a couple of generations. But if, as the buildings of the Rape of Hastings suggest, a potential 40 per cent of medieval and transitional buildings were not the product of a single building campaign but rather of an evolution considered unremarkable in later centuries, then a serious reappraisal of the traditional model is now required.

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NOTES
1 R. T. Mason, Framed Buildings of the Weald (Horsham, 1964), [3].
2 The notes and drawings (but not the photographs) from the surveys upon which this article is based are deposited at East Sussex Record Office (hereafter ESRO). ESRO HBR 1/501, 1/524, 1/147.
3 ESRO HBR 1/324.
4 ESRO HBR 1/364, 1/208.
5 ESRO HBR 1/23.
6 ESRO HBR 1/325.
7 ESRO HBR 1/1106.
8 ESRO HBR 1/731.
9 ESRO HBR 1/40, 1/7.
10 ESRO HBR 1/692.
11 ESRO HBR 1/72.
12 ESRO HBR 1/335.
13 ESRO HBR 1/1322.
14 ESRO HBR 1/610.
15 ESRO HBR 1/373.
16 ESRO HBR 1/309.
17 ESRO HBR 1/182.
18 ESRO HBR 1/376, 1/267, 1/831, 1/312, 1/1013.
19 ESRO HBR 1/733.
20 ESRO HBR 1/698.
21 ESRO HBR 1/636.
22 ESRO HBR 1/999.
23 No allowance for such possibility has been made in the calculation of the percentages referred to in the introduction to this article.
24 ESRO HBR 1/1032.
25 We are grateful to Richard Harris for inviting us to view this building with him and for his valuable comments.
26 ESRO HBR 1/45.
27 ESRO HBR 1/376, 1/44.
28 ESRO HBR 1/29.
29 ESRO HBR 1/12, 1/27.
30 ESRO HBR 1/515.
31 ESRO HBR 1/94.
32 ESRO HBR 1/620.