

Archaeological Observations

With a Statement of Significance

at

**WINDOUT FARM,
TEDBURN ST MARY, DEVON**

By R. W. Parker

For Felicity And Sam Ursell



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Fig. 2 General view of the farmhouse from the south, showing the 17th-century rear wing (right) attached to the rear of the main house.



Fig. 3 General view of the farmhouse from the west, showing the façade with a lateral stack and floor levels descending to the north.



Fig. 4 General view of the farmhouse from the east, showing the projection for the oven. The whole elevation is effectively the chimney breast of the kitchen fireplace.

probably when the ancillary buildings were listed in 1986. The listing text is extremely detailed and identifies the house as of ‘probably medieval origins, remodelled in the circa late C16’ with a three-room-and-cross-passage plan extended to the east by the addition, at the southern end (Fig. 2), of a kitchen wing ‘added in the C17’ (EH Listing Description; Building ID: 401607). The main body of the house retains important features such as decorated plaster ceilings and plank-and-muntin screens dividing the rooms and the cross passage. There is a large lateral and two gable stacks (Fig. 3) and a further, very large chimney stack in the south-east wing, with ovens, which forms the main subject of this report (Fig 4).

A further archaeological survey of the house was undertaken in 2010 by Sarah Daligan of the Devon Rural Archive (Daligan 2010). This report reinforces the suggestions of the listing description, that the house probably originated as a medieval open hall house, with storeyed ends jettying into the open hall, and also identified important 17th-century features such as a sgraffito decorated fireplace in the ‘lower room’, the large room to the north of the cross passage.

2. INTERPRETATION OF THE FARMHOUSE

This section of the report is based upon the author’s first impressions of the house, made on a very rapid visit to the property, and outlines the probable development of the house in order to set the areas proposed for alteration in context. The suggested development of the house presented here may need to be revised should any further archaeological recording or documentary research be undertaken at the farm.

2.1 The Main Range

Hall and Inner Room

This part of the house clearly originated as an open hall house on a three-room-and-cross-passage plan. The hall lies at the centre of the house with the inner room to the south, up the hill slope, and the passage lying below the hall to the north. The most elaborately decorated room, retaining the early 17th-century plaster ceilings, lies in the north part of the house, below the passage.

Although evidence for smoke blackening in the roofs was not visible due to the enclosure of the roof with plaster ceilings, the existence of an open volume at the centre of the house is not in doubt, due to the survival of a jettying structure at the south end of the hall. This proves that the first-floor structure at the south end of the house is earlier than the ceiling of the hall. Whether the handsome plank-and-muntin screen beneath this structure pre-dates the flooring of this end of the house remains unclear. Future inspection of the roof structure might show smoke blackening along the whole length of the roof, which would support this conjecture. One of the beams supporting the ceiling of the hall is built into the chimney breast of the hall stack, which suggests that the large fireplace, lateral stack and the first-floor structure over the hall are of the same period. The fireplace has monolithic granite jambs and a granite lintel, and probably dates from the late 16th or early 17th century. This must be an insertion into the former open hall of an earlier house. At the opposite end of the hall a further plank-and-muntin screen defines the passage. Daligan noted that the joists of the first-floor structure at this end of the house had been ‘cut away... flush with the existing screen’. Thus there may have been an internal jetty over this screen too, though the context for the removal of this feature is unclear. Alternatively, the whole north end and centre of the house may have been open to the roof until the enclosure of these areas in the late 16th or 17th century.

Cross Passage and Lower Room

The cross passage is very broad and the lower room at the north end of the house very large. The elaborate plaster ceilings and decorated fireplace show that from the late 16th or early 17th-century at least, the rooms below the passage were a high-status area. The Ursell family maintain that their house was formerly a long house, with access for humans and animals through the same cross passage, the lower room being originally occupied as a shippon (Mr Ursell senior, pers. comm. 28.09.2014). Although no visible diagnostic features remain to prove this, the

position of the room, at a lower level than the hall (Fig. 3), might perhaps have been chosen to allow effluent to drain away to the north, and the broad passage would have allowed easy access to the shippon for cattle. If this room was originally a shippon it appears to have been converted to a lavishly-decorated, high-status room at an early date by the insertion of the plaster ceilings and the large sgraffito fireplace at the north end of the house. Unfortunately the insertion of the fireplace may have removed any evidence in the end gable for a primary drain. Evidence of a shippon in the form of stake-holes for tethering posts and earlier floor surfaces with drains might survive below the modern floor surface but no evidence of such features is now visible.

Roofs

The character of the roof structures is difficult to determine since so much of the roof is inaccessible. Nevertheless, sufficient evidence is visible to suggest that the roof of this range was constructed in two phases. The part of the roof over the north end of the house is supported by jointed cruck trusses which appear to be face-pegged, whereas the roof over the upper end of the house, including perhaps the hall and the inner room has similar jointed cruck trusses with side pegging. One explanation for the two-phase development of the roof might be that the roof over the lower part of the house was raised or rebuilt when the first-floor structure was inserted in this area. If so this is perhaps another pointer to the possibility that the house may originally have been a long house, with a lower roof over the agricultural end than over the domestic end of the house. The northern part of the present roof may have been reconstructed at the same height as the southern part when the shippon was converted into an elegant parlour and a new chamber was created above it. Evidence against this interpretation is the face pegging of this roof, which the present author understands to be an earlier technique than side pegging. This would argue that the roof of the shippon is earlier than that of the hall and inner room. It is, of course, conceivable that the roof over the southern part of the house was rebuilt subsequently; perhaps when the hall was first storeyed, to increase the headroom in the hall chamber and parlour chamber. These issues of phasing might be resolved by a more intensive survey of the building than was possible as part of the current project. No smoke-blackening of the cruck blades is now visible, but evidence of smoke blackened timbers and perhaps also smoke-blackened thatch might survive in the upper parts of the roof, above the existing ceilings

2.2 The South-East Wing

The south-east wing of the house is interpreted in both the listing description and in Daligan's account of the house as a kitchen wing, added at the south end of the house in the 17th century. There is no reason to doubt this interpretation, especially given the enormous scale of the fireplace serving the ground-floor room in this wing. The new kitchen wing may conceivably have been added as part of a general refurbishment of this part of the house, perhaps in the context of the addition of a first-floor within the hall, and appears to have been storeyed from the beginning. This is confirmed by the staircase, which is a very interesting and rather unusual timber newel stair within an internal turret rising to the east of the inner room, where it arrives at a first-floor landing from which a pair of doorways with mouldings and stops consistent with a 17th-century date give access to both the hall chamber and the chamber over the inner room. Assuming the inner room to have been storeyed before this alteration it is likely that there must have been a pre-existing stair turret in this position or, perhaps, a simpler arrangement with a stair ladder from the hall, for which no evidence is now visible. A similar doorway from the same landing, facing east, gave access to the kitchen chamber, which is now partially subdivided to form two rooms but may originally have occupied the whole first floor of the wing. The floor of the room is supported on a large beam decorated with deep chamfers and stepped run-out stops. The ceiling below is plastered and it is uncertain whether or not the joists are also decorated and intended for display. This wing also has a jointed cruck roof, of which only the lower parts are now visible. It would be interesting to compare this roof with that over the southern part of the house, to see if they are contemporary.

The kitchen fireplace

The ground-floor room was clearly the kitchen and is dominated by the enormous fireplace, which fills the entire east wall of the room. This has a long timber lintel spanning the whole width of the room and decorated with a chamfer (Fig. 5). The lintel is now propped with wooden posts, but it is probable that it originally spanned the room without interruption. The sides of the chimney did



Fig. 5 View within the south-east wing, looking east, showing the enormous fireplace filling the entire east wall.



Fig. 6 View within the fireplace looking south, showing the very large space within the kitchen chimney which may have been employed as a smoking chamber.



Fig. 7 View within the fireplace looking north showing the very large size of the flue area.



Fig. 8 View of the ovens in the south-eastern corner of the fireplace, showing a clay cloam oven built into a recess alongside a larger bread oven.

not rapidly contract inward above the level of the lintel to form a narrow flue, as is usual, but rather formed a high, enclosed area (Figs 6, 7) screened off from the kitchen by the lintel and the front of the chimney breast and rising higher than the first-floor level. The main chimney flue must have risen off-centre in this semi-enclosed bay, its position perhaps being betrayed by the stove pipe of the modern range. The interior of the chimney is now plastered and the upper parts of the flue are blocked off to reduce heat loss to the room.

The very large scale of the fireplace implies that it was designed to serve several different functions, with different areas within the embrasure designated to activities requiring different levels of heat and smoke. In addition to the main hearth there may have been separate hearths for roasting and boiling, both of which would probably have had specially designed structures to ensure the efficient use of fuel and to minimise potential mess and danger. No evidence of separate hearths or boiling furnaces are now visible, and apart from the two ovens (discussed below) there are no visible recesses or vents to show how the fireplace functioned. It is possible that the embrasure was formerly divided into separate areas by structural divisions, but none now survives. Some infilling of the fireplace remained in 2010 at the time of the first survey (Daligan 2010, 10 & Fig. 17) but this has since been removed.

Large compartments or open areas within chimneys are frequently identified by archaeologists as smoking chambers, but Peter Brears in a recent paper has demonstrated that this interpretation is very often incorrect and that many such features were in fact boiling furnaces or malting kilns (Brears 2009, 5). An essential requirement of a facility for smoking cured meat, to flavour it rather than to preserve it (which was achieved by salting) was that the smoke should be cool by time it circulated around the meat so that the meat would be dried and flavoured rather than cooked. If the meat joints became too hot the fat would melt and the meat would spoil. Meat was successfully smoked by slow-burning, relatively cool and smoky wood fires rather than by the fierce, hot fires required for roasting and boiling. For this reason separate chambers or compartments were sometimes constructed either within the chimney or adjacent to it, with vents for drawing the cool smoke past the meats, before venting through a window to the open air. Access to the smoking chamber within a chimney might be by a hatch driven through

the chimney breast at first-floor level, allowing the meat to be hung and checked on without having to enter the dirty interior of the chimney. Brears notes that purpose built smoking chambers are rare, as the construction of these facilities was a relatively costly operation. In smaller households the meat was usually hung within the chimney, but always at a height and at a distance from the fire which prevented the meat from becoming too hot and yet which allowed relatively easy access for those hanging and checking the temperature of the meat.

Despite Brears' reservations, the very spacious chimney compartment at Windout Farm could well have been designed for smoking meats; the high, rectangular recess within the fireplace would have allowed the meats to be hung up well away from the heat of the fire, probably in the northern part of the chimney recess. A high-level window in the eastern gable of the house (Fig. 4), lying more or less between ground and first-floor level, might perhaps have served as a vent for a flue from the chimney, drawing the smoke past any hung meats, but the existing modern finishes and blocking of the chimney obscure any evidence within the upper part of the chimney for flues, recesses or hatches and it is difficult to be certain how the fireplace functioned. Evidence for bars chains and other fixtures for hanging the meat, and also devices such as pot hooks may yet survive within the chimney, above the modern blocking of the flue.

The ovens

In the southern part of the fireplace are a pair of ovens of great interest. One of these has a pointed brick arch over a cast-iron door cast by the Bodley foundry in Exeter. This oven is contained within a large semi-circular projection beyond the east wall (Fig. 4) and probably dates from the 19th century. The other oven, within a smaller recess in the south side of the fireplace is a more unusual and potentially important survival. This has a square opening with a stone lintel and a stone shelf below it and contains a ceramic cloam oven, built into the thickness of the wall beyond the opening. This oven is a hollow structure with a dome featuring raised seams radiating towards the rear where the sheets of clay were 'draped' to form the dome and then pinched together, to considerable decorative effect.

This type of ceramic oven was sometimes intended as a portable, or free standing oven, but they could be built, as here, into an opening in the side of the fireplace. They were fired with bundles of brushwood, which, when the clay oven was white hot, were raked out and the unbaked food inserted. The opening was then sealed with a detachable door bedded in wet clay and, after a suitable cooking period, the door would be opened and the cooked loaves removed.

Ceramic cloam ovens of this type, and with this kind of decoration, were manufactured in great quantities in the north Devon potteries, such as those at Barnstaple, Bideford and Fremington, from the 17th to the 20th centuries and also at Calstock in Cornwall. Examples with similar decorations, dating from the 17th century, survive in the Museum of London, and at the Museums in Bideford and Great Torrington, Devon. These ovens were often exported to Wales and also to north America, where 17th-century examples survive at Jamestown, Virginia, at Long Island, New York and Plymouth, Massachusetts (Watkins 1960, 21; 32-4).

Despite their popularity over a long period, and the fact that some such ovens remained in use into the 1960s, complete examples of ceramic cloam ovens are now extremely rare. Tedburn St Mary lies at about the southern limit of the known distribution of such ovens in the county, most surviving examples being found north of Dartmoor. Without specialist study of the fabric of this oven it is difficult to be certain whether it is an early example; however, it seems highly likely that in this case the early oven was superseded in the 19th century by the more modern oven adjoining, with a cast iron door, and it is thus possible that the clay oven may perhaps be of 18th-century or even earlier date.

3. CONCLUSION AND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Windout Farm is an exceptionally interesting house preserving some remarkable historic features, The details of the development of the house remains uncertain, but it is beyond reasonable doubt that the building is of medieval date and that it originally had an open hall at the centre with a storeyed element jutting into it at the south end. These rooms seem to have been the

high-status rooms during the early part of the history of the house. The north end of the building was improved in the 16th or early 17th century by the addition of decorative features including the plaster ceilings and the sgraffito fireplace of the lower room, which may have been added when this end was first storeyed. These features suggest that the north end of the house had now become a high-status area and, perhaps, that the hall and the inner room to the south had suffered some diminution in status. The house was further improved in the 17th century by the addition of a new kitchen wing at the south-eastern corner of the house. This wing was probably of two storeys from its construction and was provided with a staircase which gave access to the chambers over the inner room and over the hall, suggesting that the addition of the wing was contemporary with the enclosure of the open hall. The chimney in the hall may also have been added at this period. The kitchen was provided with a very large fireplace, filling the entire eastern bay of the kitchen wing and with a high, wide internal compartment rising above first-floor level. This very large and high void within the fireplace was very probably designed to allow the hanging of cured meats for smoking within the canopy. Other parts of the fireplace were perhaps separated off for other culinary activities, and the survival of two ovens, including a traditional north Devon ceramic cloam oven is of particular interest. The cloam oven may be an early example of this type, and lies at the edge of the known distribution of these ovens in the county. Although modern infilling of the fireplace has been removed in recent years it remains an archaeologically important and very impressive feature of the house. It is possible that the upper parts of the chimney may contain evidence, in the form of flues, chases and fixtures for cooking facilities such as pot hooks, of traditional farmhouse food-processing technologies. If the fireplace is to be altered, some archaeological observation of the works aimed at identifying such evidence is recommended.

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