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The Sixteenth Century House

The late medieval domestic plan

With Bayleaf we are in the last phase of the medieval domestic plan. The sixteenth century is very much a period of transition. Architectural surveys show that many houses in Kent retained their open halls until the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries and new open hall houses continued to be built in the first half of the sixteenth century. However, the conversion of traditional houses by the insertion of a wooden or brick chimney stack and the ceiling over of the hall began in the early sixteenth century and two storied houses with enclosed fireplaces were being built from the first decade of the sixteenth century onwards. This fairly mixed picture is corroborated by evidence from Kent probate inventories (which survive from 1565 onwards) which show that at that date some houses had ceiled over halls ('the chamber over the hall') whilst in others they were still open. The date at which Bayleaf was converted is unclear. When it was dismantled the chimney contained a brick inscribed with the date 1636 which may suggest a relatively late date for conversion. However, it is also possible that this chimney replaced an earlier, wooden, one, a sequence which is seen in other medieval houses.

Room use

In terms of room use Bayleaf follows the conventional late medieval plan of a communal open hall with service rooms at the lower end and a private chamber at the upper end which was probably called the parlour. The parlour could have been used both as a private sitting room for the householder and his wife and as an additional bedchamber. Upstairs there are two further chambers which would have been used for sleeping and storage. Even without the integral privy the chamber at the upper end of the house is likely to have been the principal bedroom. It has been suggested that the chamber at the lower end would have been the servants' room but this is far from clear. Some of the yeomen's houses described in the 1565-6 probate inventories record separate servants' rooms. For example, John Gorney of Eythorne had a 'servants' chamber' containing four beds in a house which was similar in size to Bayleaf. In other instances the servant or servants seemed to have slept in the same room as their master. John Redborowe's house had a 'chamber over the parlour' which contained a 'bedstede with one other feather bed with the apparels to the same bed', '1 old mattress with the furniture of a servant's bed' and '1 old flock bed for a servant's bed'. It is probably safest to conclude that the sleeping arrangements of the various occupants of Bayleaf depended on the size of the household.

Detached kitchens

Detached were relatively common until the late fifteenth century. They were usually located at the back of the house near the lower end and were accessed through the rear doorway. In some instances they were connected to the house by a covered passage. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries kitchens were more likely to be attached to the house, frequently as an additional bay beyond the service end.

Toilet facilities

When ex-Carthusian monk and medical author Andrew Borde published his *Book of Knowledge* in 1542 he included the following advice on domestic sanitary arrangements:

Beware of pissing in drafts and permit no common pissing place be about the house or mansion; and let the common house of easement be over some water, or else elongated from the house. And beware of emptying piss pots and pissing in chimneys, so that all evil and contagious airs may be expelled, and clean air kept unputrified.

Borde's advice that the 'house of easement' (toilet) should be set away from the house reflected the prevalent view that 'dirty' activities should be elongated from the main living areas. It is probably for this reason that integral privies – like the one that has been reconstructed in Bayleaf – were relatively rare. There are no surviving examples but structural evidence shows that such privies projected from the end of the wall, usually at the back of the house. They could be located at the upper or the lower end and there is evidence that in some cases they had a chute below them to collect the waste.

Furnishings

One of the most famous passages from William Harrison's *Description of England* (1577) is his account of the domestic changes that had taken place within his lifetime. According to Harrison, 'there are old men yet dwelling in the village where I remain which have noted three things to be marvellously altered within their sound remembrance ...' The first of these is the 'multitude of chimneys lately erected, whereas in their young days there were not above two or three ...' The second is 'the great (although not general) amendment of lodging, for (they say) our fathers, yea, and we ourselves also, have lain full oft upon straw pallets, on rough mats covered only with a sheet, under coverlets made of dagswain or hap-harlots (I use their own terms) [coverlets of coarse, shaggy material, also known as 'rugs'], and a good round log under their heads instead of a bolster or pillow'. Nowadays men expected to lie on a feather or flock bed and at least to have chaff pillows. The third change is 'the exchange of vessel, as of treen [wooden] platters into pewter, and wooden spoons into silver or tin'.

Whilst we might be suspicious of his claim that men had formerly lain their heads on a 'good round log', Harrison's general point, that the standard of domestic 'comfort' had increased over the course of the sixteenth century is consistent with what we know from other sources like probate inventories. By the mid-1560s when Kent probate inventories start to survive in considerable numbers many households already contained feather or flock beds, bolsters and pillows and a variety of pewter tableware although furniture in their halls continued to be sparse – a table with its frame, a form or bench, some chairs and stools and the occasional cupboard. Few houses contained upholstered chairs but some had cushions and many had painted wall-hangings.

