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Forgotten buildings: detached kitchens in Southeast England

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Few archaeologists study standing domestic buildings, but such investigation can yield novel insights into how people lived in their home environments, especially when it is coupled with documentary evidence. Recent research by a member of the UCL Field Archaeology Unit has led to the surprising conclusion that detached kitchens were, after houses and barns, the most common type of building during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Southeast England. Much of the new evidence comes from the assessment of listed buildings in the planning process and shows how commercial archaeology can serve academic research.

Today very few detached kitchens survive, and those that do mainly date from the period AD 1450–1550. They are surprisingly large and complex, often with two storeys, and documentary evidence suggests that, in addition to the kitchen itself, they sometimes contained such service rooms as bakehouses and dairies, and had upper chambers used for living accommodation and extra storage. However, the surviving kitchens probably represent the larger, more elaborate types, and many of those now lost may have been no more than single-room single-storey outhouses. Households with detached kitchens, of whatever type, evidently enjoyed higher social status than those without, a difference often obscured by the fact that the surviving houses are of similar size and layout.

Until recently it had been assumed that, except on a few high-status sites, the standard late-medieval English homestead comprised a house, a barn and perhaps one or two minor agricultural buildings. But, in Southeast England at least, this picture is now being challenged by information derived from field studies. Buildings are increasingly being identified that, although house-like in their general size and appearance, and certainly serving domestic purposes, do not conform to the general layout and design of traditional domestic (vernacular) houses. More significantly, most of these buildings are closely associated with a house of more standard design on the same holding. A reappraisal of the documentary evidence suggests that they should be identified with the medieval Latin term "coquina" or kitchen. It is becoming evident that, at least for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Southeast England, a whole class of building – the detached kitchen – has been overlooked. More surprising still, the former kitchens that survive appear to have been substantial multi-room two-storey buildings only slightly smaller than the main house – a conclusion with major implications for the study of late-medieval vernacular households in England.

The historical evidence

It is normally assumed that detached kitchens were commonplace only on monastic and large manorial sites. However, re-appraisal of historical sources suggests that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries many vernacular households in Southeast England included such a building. The abundance of detached kitchens is illustrated by a particularly detailed survey of Robertsbridge Manor, Sussex, made in 1567.[1] This mentions a total of 123 houses within the small township of Robertsbridge and the surrounding rural parishes. Of these, 43 had detached kitchens, a ratio of over one in three. There is a noticeable difference between the figures for the Robertsbridge township and those for the rural parishes. Of the 48 houses within Robertsbridge only 8 (17 per cent) are mentioned as having kitchens, whereas in the rural parishes 41 per cent of the houses had them. It was only on smallholdings of less than 6 ha (15 acres) that kitchens were rare; they are mentioned on 48 per cent of holdings above that size. From these figures, it can be inferred that in the mid-sixteenth century, in this part of Sussex at least, detached kitchens were the most common type of building after houses and barns.

Evidence from the records of several local manors suggests that detached kitchens experienced rapid destruction as they became redundant during the late sixteenth century, presumably as a result of changes in living patterns. Such changes are reflected in the houses by the flooring over of open halls, the glazing of windows and improvements to privacy. Manorial records suggest that by 1567 the popularity of the detached kitchen was already on the wane, and therefore the evidence from the Robertsbridge survey may not represent the peak of such buildings. This could explain the dearth of detached kitchens within the then wealthy township of Robertsbridge, where evidence from the buildings suggests that modernization was being carried out ahead of such change in its rural hinterland.

Surviving detached kitchens

Although the documents suggest that vernacular detached kitchens were once common, very few of them appear to have survived. However, the total is gradually increasing as more buildings are recognized for what they are. One example at Littlebrook (Crowborough, Sussex) exists today as a freestanding "shed" in front of the house (Fig. 1), but usually those that remain have either been incorporated into the expanded main house or have been demoted to agricultural use.

In all, 15 surviving detached kitchens have now been identified by the author in eastern Sussex alone, and others are suspected. Judging from surviving monastic examples, one might expect such buildings to take the form of a single room, square in plan and open throughout its height. However, the Sussex examples typically measure between 8 m and 11.5 m (26–38 feet) long and 5.25–6.5 m (17–21 feet) wide. Only Littlebrook has a one-room plan, and two others have only one

Figure 1 *The detached kitchen (right) at Littlebrook (Crowborough, Sussex) in 1973.*

ground-floor room with a small first-floor chamber built over one end. With the exception of Littlebrook, all have at least one, and usually two, upper chambers. Research suggests that a typical arrangement was a building in which a two-bay "kitchen" room had one bay open to the roof, with a first-floor chamber over the second bay. In addition, there was a further ground-floor room (in some instances more than one) with a chamber above. In some buildings a gallery ran across the open bay linking the chambers (Fig. 2). Other variations occur. At Comphurst, (Wartling, Sussex) the cooking room is located at the end with only a narrow area, called a "smoke bay", open to the roof. Externally this example is particularly elaborate, with an overhanging upper storey, moulded beams and costly wall framing, although internally it is very plain (Figs 3, 4).

It is often the location of these structures, close to the rear of a main house of standard layout, that gives the first clue to their true function. For example, at ground-floor level, Comphurst is located just 2.5 m behind the house, and at Darwell Beech (Mountfield, Sussex) the kitchen is even closer (just over 2 m from the house). In both cases the internal arrangement of the kitchen indicates very clearly its subservience to the dwelling: both incorporated a wide passage leading through the service rooms of the kitchen to give easy access to the house (Figs 3, 5).

Given the superficial resemblance of detached kitchens to houses, it is always worth re-assessing existing records of standing buildings to check whether any kitchens have been wrongly classified as houses. Such an exercise in Sussex revealed two kitchens previously wrongly identified. Nor is the need for re-assessment limited to standing buildings. A two-room "building 3" found in 1952 during excavation of the deserted medieval village of Hangleton, north of Brighton, was reconstructed at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum near Chichester as an example of a typical thirteenth- or fourteenth-century village house. This structure was chosen for reconstruction at the museum because it was the best preserved, the remains being partially protected as a result of the platform having been cut into the hillside. The base of an oven incorporated into the northeastern corner of the structure was particularly significant.[2] The interpretation of this structure as a house appears never to have been challenged, but its location, cut into the bank immediately behind building 8 (the probable house) seems far more consistent with it having been a detached kitchen.

Despite their wholesale destruction or conversion during the late sixteenth century, some kitchens continued to be used until remarkably recently. Thus, at Gate House Farm (Ewhurst, Sussex) the detached kitchen mentioned in the 1567 Robertsbridge survey was rebuilt as a detached structure around 1600 and was not incorporated into the main body of the house until later in the seventeenth century. Additional evidence comes from a 1727 map of Robertsbridge manor that shows domestic structures shaded pink and farm buildings grey.[3] Two houses, both of which were described as having detached kitchens in 1567, are shown with a smaller pink-shaded structure to one end, suggesting that at that date the detached kitchens still survived and continued to fulfil their original function. Similarly, a plan drawn in 1706 shows the large detached kitchen at the Old Rectory (Chiddingstone, Kent) still in use at that date (Fig. 6). It was not replaced until 1733 when a service wing was added to the house.[4] Likewise, the house and kitchen at Darwell Beech, Mountfield (Fig. 5), were not joined to form a single structure until about 1730.

The use of detached kitchens

That the terms "kitchen" or "coquina" were used in contemporary documents to indicate a multi-room multi-function structure should be no surprise. The term "barn" or "horreum" was used regardless of whether it referred to a traditional single-room structure, used solely for the storage and processing of cereals and other crops, or to a multi-room multi-function farm building that incorporated as one of its several uses the storage and processing of crops. Likewise, manorial records commonly refer to the dwelling on a holding as the "hall" or "aula", although it is accepted that this referred not just to the hall but also to its attendant service rooms and chambers. Proof that the term "coquina" does indeed relate to multi-room structures in which the "kitchen" was the most important room is to be found in a 1567 description of Great Worge (Brightling, Sussex). The fifteenth-century house upon this holding still survives and is accurately described room by room in the survey. Measurements given correspond closely to those of the surviving house. Having completed the description of the house, the entry then describes a building that it calls a kitchen and which measured 9.15×5.05 m (30 ft long by 16.5 ft wide) and stood 4.25 m (14 ft) to the rear of the house. It was built of timber and covered with tile, and it contained three ground-floor rooms, all with further rooms or lofts above. The principal room was where carcasses were cut into joints, but it also contained an oven and an oast (i.e. a kiln) for drying malt. The other two ground-floor rooms were called a bakehouse and a milkhouse (i.e. a dairy).[5] A second documentary reference to such a kitchen comes from Essex in 1356, when the abbot and convent of Westminster gave the vicar of Kelvedon "one hall . . . with a solar and chamber at one end of the hall and with a buttery and cellar at the other. Also, one other house in three parts, namely a kitchen, with a convenient chamber in the end of the said house for guests, and a bakehouse".[6] It is worth noting that in both of the above examples the additional ground-floor rooms are said to have fulfilled a service function. At Kelvedon the upper chamber served as a guest lodging, but at Great Worge how the upper rooms were used is not stated.

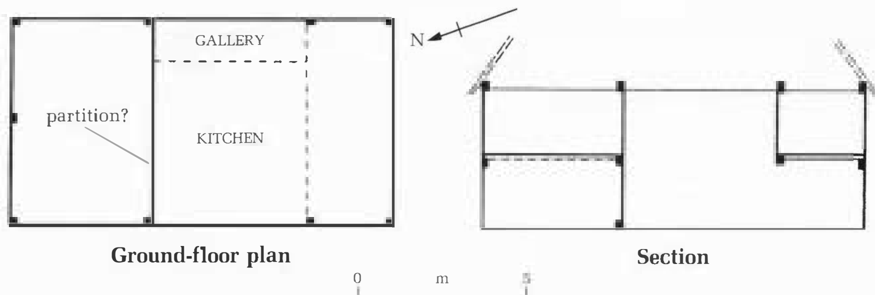

Figure 2 *Plan of typical kitchen of the standard medieval model; Beestons (Warbleton, Sussex).*

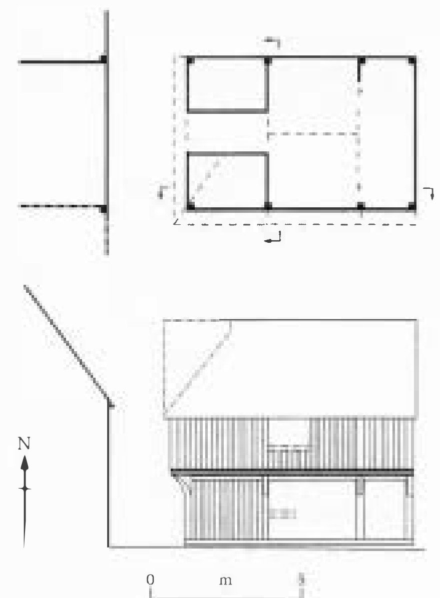

Figure 3 *The detached kitchen at Comphurst (Wartling, Sussex) showing its superficial house-like appearance. Note the relationship of the building to the main house on the west (left) side, and the passage in the kitchen that leads towards the house.*

Figure 4 *The original southern external wall (upper left) of the kitchen at Comphurst, now visible within a later addition. The ground-floor section of the external wall has been removed, but mortices in the remaining timbers provide evidence of its design.*

Although it can be demonstrated that these multi-room structures were, at the time of their construction and use, referred to as kitchens, the word is perhaps misleading to us today. It conjures up the mental image of fully prepared meals being carried from the detached kitchen to be consumed – probably lukewarm – within the house. This impression is likely to be inaccurate . These buildings are perhaps better referred to as detached service buildings where the dirty, smelly elements of food preparation were carried out. The description of the Great Worge example specifically mentioned the dressing of meat (the cutting up of the carcass into its joints). In this room too the tasks of malting and baking were carried out. Brewing was probably also undertaken there. These detached buildings are not unlike the rear service ranges that increasingly formed part of larger vernacular houses from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. And it is surely no coincidence that the internal layouts of these attached service ranges are very similar and in some instances identical to those of their earlier detached cousins. In these attached versions there is usually no intercommunication between the first-floor chambers within the service range and those within the main house, and it is likely that they functioned as lodgings for the household servants. A similar function for these chambers also seems likely for the earlier detached versions.

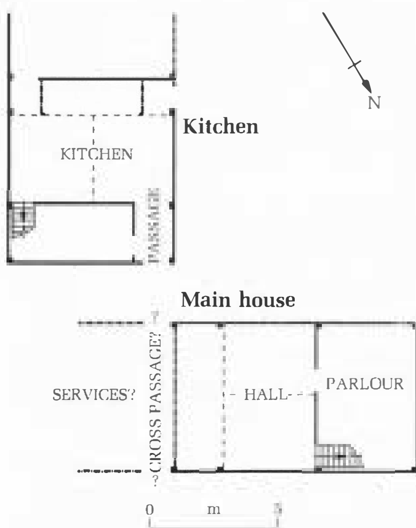

Figure 5 *Plan of the early to mid-sixteenth century house and kitchen at Darwell Beech (Mountfield, Sussex). Note the passage that, as at Comphurst (Fig. 3), leads towards the house.*

Implications for studies of English vernacular houses

It has long been believed that a medieval or early to mid-sixteenth century house incorporating an attached kitchen was of superior social status to a similar structure without an attached kitchen. It is perhaps time we re-evaluated this conclusion. Although late sixteenth-century and later houses incorporating attached kitchens are often of high status, in earlier buildings the attached kitchen normally took the form of a single open room attached either to the end or rear of a house of standard medieval layout. Now that it is evident at least on the larger vernacular holdings that many detached kitchens were multi-room structures with upper chambers, it seems likely that a household with such a structure was markedly superior in social status to one that incorporated a single-room attached kitchen and not the reverse, as is usually assumed. There is a further point. Consider two houses of similar size and layout, one formerly serviced by a detached kitchen and the other lacking any form of kitchen. Today both would seem to represent households of equal size and status, whereas one would have possessed almost double the accommodation of the other – an observation with important implications for the study of vernacular buildings in many parts of England.

Notes

1. The Robertsbridge manorial survey is published in full (pp. 1–155) in "Surveys of the manors of Robertsbridge, Sussex, and Michelmarsh, Hampshire, and of the demesne lands of Halden in Rolvenden, Kent, 1567–1570", R. H. D'Elboux (ed.), *Sussex Record Society* **47**, 1944.
2. See E. W. Holden, "Excavations at the deserted medieval village of Hangleton, part 1", *Sussex Archaeological Collections* **101**, 54–181, 1963.
3. See manuscript plan held at the East Sussex Record Office, The Maltings, Lewes, Sussex, reference A4728/8.
4. See documents held at the Centre for Kentish Studies, County Hall, Maidstone, Kent, reference U908, P81.
5. See manuscript held at the British Library, London, reference Add Mss 45194.
6. See pp. 17–18 in A. Savidge, *The parsonage in England, its history and architecture* (London: SPCK, 1964).

Figure 6 *The buildings at the Old Rectory, Chiddingstone, Kent, in 1706 showing the relationship of the kitchen (which was approximately 15 m (49 feet) long) to the house; based upon a plan held at the Centre for Kentish Studies (see n. 4), reference U909, P9.*