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# OLD STONES, IGHTHAM

## The History of an Ancient Home in Kent

By Sir Edward Harrison

More than half a century has passed since I became the owner of an old house and cottage at the upper end of a picturesque village in Kent; in which pleasant surroundings a family that included my own ancestors had come to live in 1704, and had stayed put for two centuries and a half, till the link was broken in 1956. Their occupation of the house was continuous: a doorplate bearing their surname could have remained unaltered during that period. The cottage was sometimes let, and was sometimes the abode of elderly members of the family, who retired there to enjoy the leisure that comes when active occupation ends. Both house and cottage have a part in the narrative that follows.

The interesting structural history revealed by extensive restoration and reconstruction in 1922-3 is my sufficient *apologia* for telling the story of the old property. It must be almost wholly a factual record, lightened here and there by any references to those who dwelt therein, or others, that may provide an emollient. With this statement I pass on; may I do so in your company?

Well, to begin, the house contained eight rooms in addition to two spacious garrets; the cottage, which I planned to add to it, so making the whole one dwelling, had six rooms, none of them large. As the west wall of the cottage stood against the east wall of the house their union would be easy. Both buildings faced the south; the cottage fronting directly on the village street and the house standing back about fifteen feet behind a strip of garden. In plan house and cottage together formed a letter L, turned twice heels over head (ꟻ), the cottage being the shorter limb. The work done in 1922-3 filled a period of eighteen months, during which time the buildings disclosed their structural history through several centuries, in effect telling their own story.

The first step was to find a suitable builder, and there fortune was kind. In the village was a craftsman of the old school who had done good work on more than one ancient Kentish house. I approached him without hesitation, and a short talk was enough to explain my wishes. I asked him to go over house and cottage " inch by inch " (his own expression, which I adopted), and to bring out their best features,

exposing all the oak posts and beams that he might find hidden in wall, ceiling, or roof. Too many unexplored areas covered by plaster or paper made it unreasonable to demand at the outset a firm estimate of the cost. He made a rough guess in all good faith, which had to be multiplied by two and a half to reach the figure that finally emerged. As the work progressed I made appropriate advances on account; but he disliked so much to turn from congenial construction to uncongenial costing that not till four years after he finished the " inch by inch " overhaul did I learn that I owed him a final payment of nearly one-third of his total charges. And when I gently hinted at the loss of interest he must have suffered by not presenting his bill years before, his smiling answer was, " Well, I don't suppose I have lost more than it would have cost me to employ an accountant." So, all things considered, his old-fashioned methods gave both of us satisfaction and left us with easy consciences.

The work done on the property may best be described by taking each unit separately: the cottage first, both because it appeared to be the older and also because it was the first to be worked through. It had three rooms, front, middle and back, on each floor, the middle room below receiving only indirect light from the kitchen. The inference was drawn that an erstwhile window had been blocked by the building of the house alongside. Confirmation came later.

The stripping of internal walls soon revealed successively, features of much interest. A timber frame was uncovered, constructed of great oak posts standing upright in the walls and supported by curved braces. There were heavy ceiling beams over the front room; trimmed, not by the axe but by the adze: a reliable pointer to an early building. These beams had weathered and were paler in hue for about two feet of their length immediately inside the front wall. This could mean only that the existing front wall of stone and brick was not original: there had been an older wall, set two feet or so back from the street, with an overhanging storey above. From the dating evidence so far obtained a confident inference, supported later by expert opinion, was drawn that the cottage was built not later than 1460, a view that had never to be qualified by later discoveries.

Here it is convenient to add that after examination of the house it was assigned to 1560 as a close approximation. Confirmatory evidence was at hand, for an entry in the Manorial Court Rolls named " Rob$^{te}$ Greenewell " as owner of the property in 1586, so limiting any possible error due to ante-dating to a maximum of twenty-six years. In this way it was sufficiently established that the cottage had stood a full century before its larger neighbour was built by its side.

The next find brought with it a happy stroke of luck. The house roof joined that of the cottage at a right angle, where the two limbs of

the overturned L met [⅂]; and overtopped it by several feet, so covering in part of the original cottage roof and leaving it undisturbed and open to examination. Inspection revealed a roof of clay, well bonded by a filling of straw—disclosed after being hidden for four centuries, and confirming the early date assigned to the cottage. Such roofing would be liable to rapid destruction by the elements, and it may be inferred that the clay was thatched over, though no trace of a thatched roof was to be seen.

The timber frame had a filling of clay in the walls, held together, perhaps, by wattles rather than straw. Respect for the work of an old craftsman forbade the pulling of a wall to pieces in order to settle a point of little import, which was not pursued further.

The reader may have begun to wonder whether the old cottage began life as little more than a mud hut; if so, he is invited to reserve a decision till more of its structural history has been related. It had in fact been built round a strong framework skeleton of a pattern common in early Kentish houses. A pair of heavy oak posts, set in opposite (east and west) walls towards the front, and a similar pair near the back, stood upright till the ceiling of the lower floor was reached, and curved inwards above, to meet in the roof-tree. Cross-beams at ceiling level of both storeys supported and prevented movement of the great posts, the whole erection forming a double-barred A, or a Gothic arch. For some unknown reason the upper storey was found to have a double ceiling; one at normal level, the other high in the roof—the intervening space being far too restricted to be called a garret. The higher ceiling was strengthened by at least one pair of nicely-carved little corbels.

There was no good reason for opening up the higher ceiling throughout its whole length, and it was not done, but some regret that its secrets were not more fully explored is justifiable. Enough was seen, however, to show that it was much blackened by smoke, a fact that points to a defective chimney, or none at all, in the original back room.

Another problem had a ready solution. The adze-trimmed beams in the front room downstairs did not cover a space of a few feet square in the north-east corner, near the fireplace, where two small timbers blocked what must once have been an opening in the ceiling. The upper floor disclosed a walled-up doorway in the corresponding corner, establishing that an original stair or ladder, ascending nearly vertically —the term break-neck might aptly be applied to it—had been replaced, perhaps about 1560, or possibly later, by a staircase with an easier gradient in the middle room.

There followed a less welcome discovery: the cottage had been built up on a base of sleeper beams laid directly on the soil, without underlying foundations. The sleepers, when exposed, were decayed; some even threatened to cause a sinkage or a collapse of the walls above.

However, the builder rose to the occasion and by speedy underpinning the danger was removed and all made safe and sound.

A question that has left its uncertainties is the date or period to which should be assigned some structural changes—whether to the time when the house was built by the side of the cottage, or afterwards. After standing as a detached building for a century or more it is likely to have needed substantial repair, but nothing clearly attributable to 1560 was traced, possibly because too much was obscured by later work. At some date, much later, the old front wall was removed and replaced by a wall of brick and stone, set forward so as to be flush with the previously projecting upper floor. Part of the west wall was also rebuilt. The bricks used were of a type common in the eighteenth century, but were not characteristic sixteenth-century bricks. A suggested date for the alterations is 1704, when the house, and it may be the cottage also, were reconditioned for or by an incoming tenant, of whom something will be said later.

Traces of an old doorway in the west wall, clearly blocked by the erection of the house (1560), pointed to an original side entrance which long antedated an entrance through the front wall. No doubt a window giving direct light to the middle room was blocked at the same time and indirect light through the back room provided in its place.

The back room was the old kitchen and contained an open fireplace recessed to include brick ovens and stands for drinking vessels. This fireplace had, however, been re-lined with late brickwork and was filled by a modern range and boiler.

Starting from the building of the cottage in 1460, the alterations described above, and possibly others not specified because not noticed, may have taken place (*a*) about 1560, (*b*) in 1704, (*c*) in 1784 when an addition to the house was made, (*d*) about 1846, when the outer east wall with a projecting chimney stack was hidden by new cottages built by its side, and (*e*) at the reconstruction of 1922-3. Thus it does not seem to have been left undisturbed for any very long period, while the house, to which the narrative now turns, fared only a little better.

Its timber framework was made up of several rectangular, box-shaped frames, each of them suited, when enclosed, to make a long, narrow room, although this natural arrangement had been modified considerably from time to time to meet contemporary requirements. Two spacious attics occupied the space under the roof. Secondary posts with curved braces were inserted in the walls, supporting the frames and helping to carry the weight of the horizontal beams placed at ceiling level.

The main support of the roof-tree was of a common local pattern; a king-post (strictly utilitarian, for it had no ornamental carving), with its base on a slightly humped ceiling beam in the upper storey,

ran up to the roof through an attic, matched by others, less conspicuous because they were placed in dividing walls. The roof supports were sloping rafters arranged in pairs meeting at the roof-tree, each pair held rigid by a light cross-bar.

The attics, which had a story of their own to tell, were well lighted, plastered throughout, and furnished with low benches, six feet or more square, screwed to the floor. Family tradition, supported by the recollections of elderly people still living in the middle of the nineteenth century, has it that they were used for the making of smock frocks. It is said that women workers sat cross-legged, tailor fashion, on the benches to follow their needle-craft. Who could fail to reflect on the opportunity so provided for the never-ending interchange of local gossip week in and week out, as needle and thread were plied?

Along the front of the house ran an overhanging upper storey, giving it the characteristic appearance of old timber-framed buildings. A tiled roof covered all the rooms on the bedroom floor, and sloped down towards the back of the house by a long descent to within six feet of ground level, where there were only kitchen and store-room to be covered. About two-thirds of the distance down the slope the roof was pierced by a fine chimney breast and stack. Once upright, no doubt, this chimney had bent gently over, first on one side and then on the other, so producing a serpentine effect. Interesting as it was for all with an eye for the picturesque, it was too unsafe to remain, and the upper part was rebuilt in 1922-3.

The house during its early years no doubt had outside as well as inside walls of clay and wattle, but in 1704 or later, all the exterior was rebuilt in brickwork as far as the top of the lower storey, and the old walls above were weather-tiled. The overhang of the upper floor was not interfered with, though it suffered eclipse for a time, when the property was adapted for business purposes.

Internally there were two front living-rooms and probably an entrance passage, with kitchen and store-room behind them; four bedrooms and two attics. The larger living-room had its spacious open fireplace under the curving chimney. This fireplace had been completely filled in by a modern grate with side cupboards, perhaps in 1784, when an addition at the back of the house was made. On the removal, in 1922-3, of the masking grate and cupboards, the old brickwork was found to be ruinous. However, a circular and a square brick oven, and smaller recesses, could be seen. The fireplace was re-lined with new bricks, and with jambs that had been discarded during alterations at the Ightham Manor House, and had found a temporary resting-place in the builder's yard. The old chimney base was too large and inconvenient for modern comfort: in stormy weather the hearth might receive a considerable downpour of rain—and soot. In order to

remove these difficulties an arch, well hidden from view, was thrown across the chimney from side to side, reducing it above arch level to the dimensions of the rebuilt upper portion.

In the bedroom over the larger living-room was a second open fireplace, smaller than its fellow below, and also concealed by a grate, with a tiny cupboard on each side. The cupboards had been left in place, and plastered and papered over, when the grate was installed. When they came to light in 1922-3 a search for any contents of interest was at once made. Alas, like Mother Hubbard's cupboard, they were bare, containing not so much as a bone.

After such a disappointment it seemed a duty to make amends for the neglect of a previous owner. As a consequence, the house now contains two well-hidden, tightly-corked bottles, each containing a reference to its reconstruction. One of these hiding-places is in a recess behind the brick re-lining of the living-room fireplace; the other is buried in an old cellar to which there is now no access. The reason for its sealing off will appear hereafter.

The house was built as a private residence of moderate size. This fact seems to be established by entries in the Manorial Court Rolls, which name three early owners as (1) 1586. Robt$^{e}$ Greenewell, (2) 1594. John Spratt, clerk, and (3) 1598. John Alchin, clerk. Greenewell may have built the house, as the date assigned to it, about 1560, was only twenty-six years before he was recorded as owner. His clerical successors are not likely to have carried on a business, and may well have come to live in Ightham after retirement from an incumbency.

It may be considered rash, nay, even irreverent, to identify the Rev. John Spratt as the gentleman of weak digestion commemorated in a nursery rhyme. Yet so fond an illusion may fairly be cherished in the parish in which he lived.

In 1704 a linen-draper's business was set up. About one half of the front of the larger living-room was sacrificed for this purpose, whilst the smaller room was reduced to a tiny parlour behind the newly-made shop. The parlour was already cramped by the presence of a break-neck stair or ladder, like that of the cottage, in one corner; so its west end was extended by some five feet by a lean-to addition. The insertion of a fireplace followed, with the consequent blocking by its chimney of a window in the room above—for which a new site was found. The steep stair was removed and its successor sited elsewhere.

Under the parlour was the cellar already mentioned. In 1922-3 its ceiling was lowered to give more headroom to the room above (then reconstructed and enlarged), so reducing its height to four feet or less. Its two entrances were walled up and its only present use is to harbour the second bottle and its contents: it may be for centuries yet to come.

In the parlour wall next to the linen-draper's shop there was set,

probably in 1704, a small artistic treasure—a window made of a single pane of spun glass, with its well-developed bulge at the approximate centre. It gave occupants of the parlour warning of the coming in of customers at a time when the business may have been carried on by the linen-draper and his family with no outside help. This spy-hole, less than a foot square, was no longer necessary when, in 1841, the shop was carried outwards to the village street, so obscuring the overhanging front of the old house. Assistants must have been necessary when the enlargement was made, and the little window was covered with canvas and papered over. It remained unbroken in the wall till alterations brought it to light in 1922-3. After being taken out at that time it was refixed in a new light by the front entrance, to be shattered by a bomb on Michaelmas Day, 1940, during the Battle of Britain. A fragment, which fortunately includes the bulge, itself undamaged, was all that could be preserved.

Returning to the events of 1704, mention should be made of a score of blue Delft (" English Delft," it is said) landscape tiles set round the parlour grate. They pictured Dutch scenes in pairs, each pair seeming at first glance identical, but revealing minute differences of detail when closely examined. It was a children's " parlour game " to find the differences and describe them. They were really due to rather cruder work on one member of each pair, suggesting that the artist's execution became a little careless or hurried before his picture was finished.

In 1772 or earlier the business seems to have prospered, for an extensive range of buildings was built out from the west side of the shop: warehouses, stable and van-lodge, with a loft running over the whole. On a beam crossing the loft was carved " T.H. 1772," by which time at latest the additions were made. A church bell-rope provided a hand-rail to a ladder leading up to the loft, justifying an inference that T.H. had been a churchwarden when the holder of that office customarily appropriated a discarded bell-rope at the end of his term, a practice that may not be obsolete in some of our remoter rural parishes.

More initials, " B.H., 1784; T.H. 1784; E.H. 1784; " were found carved in the brickwork of an addition to the domestic buildings at the back of the house. A new kitchen and wash-house were put up in that year and a bedroom was built over the old kitchen, which served thenceforth as a roomy passage. The new roofing joined the long slope of the older roof, so masking its western half and closing in an old window near the great chimney.

Precautions against robbers included heavy shutters for living-rooms and kitchen. The kitchen shutter was placed inside; and there, hinged at the top of the window frame, it was raised daily to a horizontal position under the ceiling and held by a stout hook. At night it was let down and secured by a bar across the middle. The shutters of the

two living-rooms were outside the house and were fastened by bolts passing through the window frames and fixed by iron pins. In spite of such precautions a burglary took place early in the nineteenth century, entry being made through an unshuttered light opening into the old cellar.

A well, sixty-odd feet in depth, and a pump, situated just outside the kitchen served all requirements till water mains were laid through the village. This event, dating from *c.* 1900, happened none too soon, for the water level had sunk and the pump functioned with difficulty. So the old well was bricked over, leaving many feet of lead piping hidden in its depths.

A few coins were found under old floors as the overhaul of the property progressed, but none earlier than a shilling of Charles I.

After the death, in 1921, of its most distinguished resident, who had retired from business in 1905, the house became once more a private dwelling. The business premises were demolished, with the consequent reappearance of the overhanging front.

The structural history of the property has now been recorded, but little has been said of its inhabitants, beyond the mention of three early owners and of the occasional use of the cottage by elderly members of that family whose occupation began in 1704 and continued for two centuries and a half. The names of the three earliest owners of the house, 1586. Robt[e] Greenewell; 1594. John Spratt, clerk; and 1598. John Alchin, clerk, are repeated here as links of the chain of owners that follows: Before 1614, John Alchin, junr.; 1614, Percival Ive, or Eve; 1617, Arthur Baldwyn—here probably comes a gap in the record—; before 1701, Reginald Packham and other trustees; 1701, John Burtonshaw; 1739, Thomas Buttenshaw; 1777, John Buttenshaw. The last half-dozen of these names need not detain us, but in 1787 we reach John Harrison, a surname oft repeated in the Manor Rolls until they ceased to be kept (*c.* 1924).

Although the Harrison ownership did not quite cover a century and three-quarters (it ceased in 1956), there were Harrison tenants for three-quarters of a century earlier. The first was Thomas Harrison who removed from Luton (Beds) and settled in Ightham, establishing a business as linen-draper. He signed his name on the fly-leaf of a book, a Latin version of the *Fables of Aesop*, as "Thomas Harrison, 1704," and a family tradition has it that he did so after taking up his abode in the old house. The business was continued by him and his descendants till 1905. The shop was then let separately for a few years before its demolition, but the house continued in the family occupation and ownership till 1956.

These quiet country linen-drapers "pursued the noiseless tenor of their way" as well-known inhabitants carrying on their business and

filling the parochial offices (Churchwarden, Overseer of the Poor, etc.) when called upon to do so. They may, in general, have gone through life content to have no higher ambition, but fame was to come to the last of them to be mentioned here.

Benjamin Harrison, who willynilly was drawn into the family business, had a mentality that demanded a wider field of activity. He found it by devoting every hour of his restricted leisure for over 65 years, ending only with his death, to exploring the country within a walking radius of his home, for relics of the past. He found there an ever-growing number of the flint implements of a succession of prehistoric peoples who had lived in the district. He was the pioneer among those who recognized man's work on the chipped tools known as eoliths, a discovery which brought him lasting, world-wide distinction.

He needs no further introduction; his achievements are commemorated in three places:

(1) On a tablet set in the north wall of Ightham church: *Benjamin Harrison . . . whose discoveries of eolithic flint implements around Ightham opened a fruitful field of scientific investigation into the greater Antiquity of Man.*

(2) On the megalithic monument (or long barrow) at Coldrum, which also bears an inscribed tablet affixed to a sarsen (though not one belonging to the monument).

(3) On a small tablet set in the front wall of his home at Old Stones, Ightham, which has the simple inscription, *Benjamin Harrison* (1837-1921) *lived here.*