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THE VANISHING HOUSES OF KENT

1. DURLOCK GRANGE, MINSTER-IN-THANET

By E. W. PARKIN

KENT is rich in ancient timbered houses. Many have been lovingly restored, but hundreds still remain to be discovered—hidden behind brickwork, tiles, weatherboard or shop fronts.

Indeed, some have undergone so many modernizations over the centuries, that they have become completely buried, and may be almost impossible to recognize.

In some counties, such as Essex, much more exploring and recording has been done. We have in some cases the excellent inventories of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, coupled with the files of the National Buildings Record, but here in Kent, all too little is known.

Sad it is then, that owing to the accelerated pace of slum clearance, town re-development and the modernization of farms or other country buildings, many old timbered houses just disappear into oblivion.

Lovers of old buildings are waking up to an increasing sense of loss. A joint sub-committee of the Kent Archæological Society and the Society for the Preservation of Rural Kent has recently been formed. This committee meets regularly, pooling knowledge of old buildings which are threatened, and working with other interested bodies, endeavours to preserve and to restore wherever possible. Much good work has already been done, but despite all efforts, there is too often the sad sight of yet another old timbered house being torn down, most of it being consigned to a bonfire. All that remains in such a case is to record by measurement and photograph all interesting details, so that something may be saved for posterity.

It is hoped to publish in *Archæologia Cantiana* some of the best examples of old houses which have recently disappeared. In investigating these, many interesting and hitherto unknown facts have come to light.

Until 1960 Durlock Grange stood in a lane near the main gates of the abbey of Minster-in-Thanet—an old and rather derelict house. A farm labourer and his wife lived there, but the rain dripped through the roof, and most of the timbers at ground level were rotten. The cost of restoration would be high, and so demolition began. The sound

timbers were taken down carefully, for incorporation into a new house which was to be erected at Doomsday Green, near Horsham in Sussex.

It was soon realized that here was a house of unusual interest, for despite alterations and additions, almost all the mediæval features were discernible.

The history of the house is bound up with that of Minster Abbey. Following the destruction of that institution by the Danes, the site, together with ten thousand acres of land around it, was granted by King Cnut to St. Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury. Then, following the Black Death more than three hundred years later, the abbey again fell into disrepair and a complete restoration was undertaken in the years 1413-14 by Thomas Hunden, abbot of St. Augustine's. His arms and initials may still be seen above the main doorway of the north range of the abbey.

Durlock Grange dates from this period. Its design and detail are early fifteenth century, and a comparison with the fine crown-post¹ (or king-post) roof in the abbey, the work of Abbot Hunden, shows identical workmanship.

The house as first built, was a typical Kentish hall house or Wealden house. It had a central hall open to the roof, with a smooth floor of beaten clay. In the centre was the hearth, a rough circle of flat stones about 4 ft. across and pressed into the clay. This was found almost undisturbed beneath a later floor. Between the stones was white wood ash, as fresh as if it had been left there the day before. The brown clay floor was blackened for about a foot around the hearth, but underneath the stones it was burned a bright brick red.

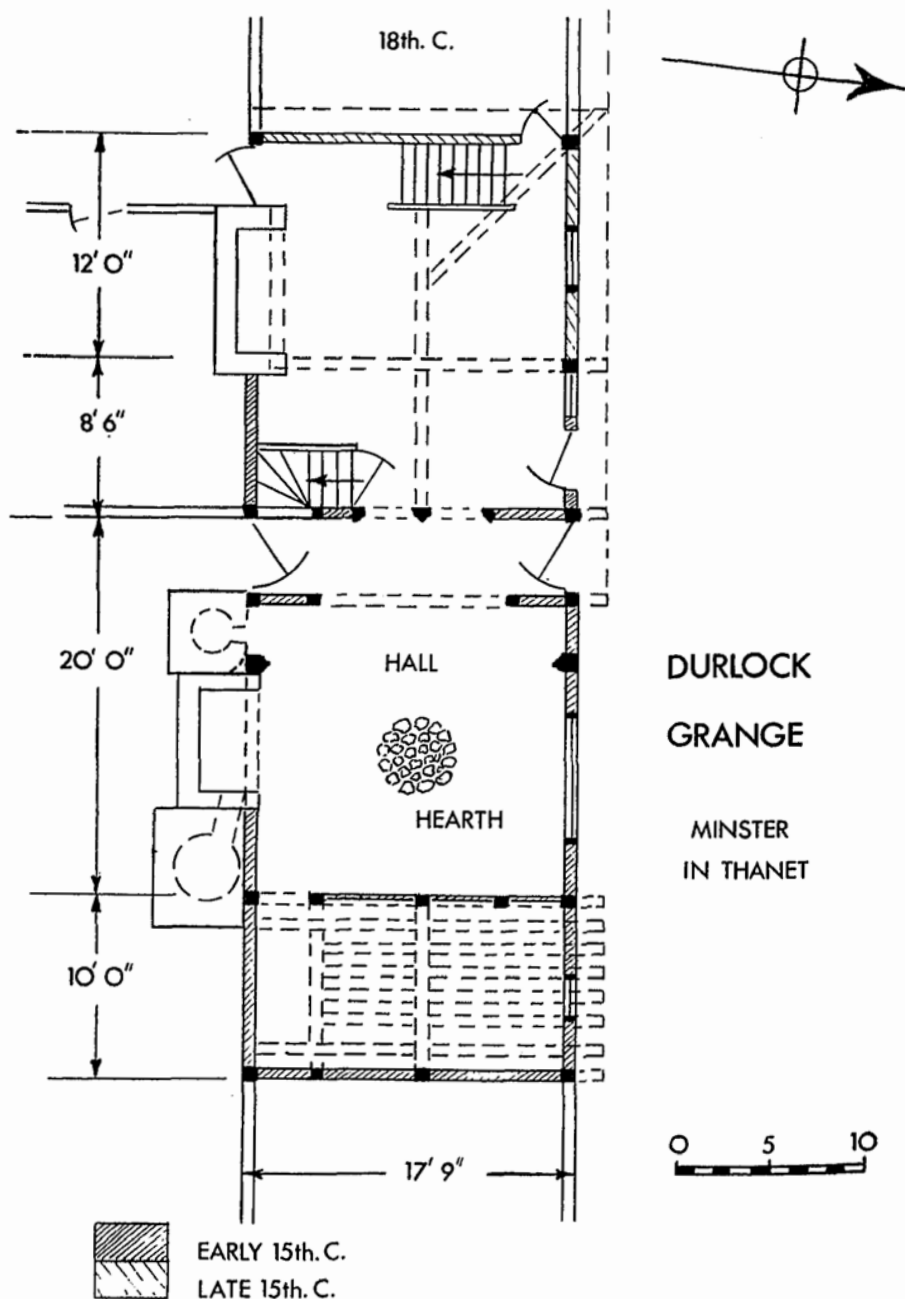
On the east side of the hall was a small room which had once been the parlour. This was separated from the hall by old oak panelling which had been whitewashed over so many times that it looked merely like rough boards. Before its value was realized, the workmen smashed it out and burned it. Only a few small pieces were salvaged which showed that it had been part of the original house, and consisted of hand planed oak boards fitting vertically with tongues and grooves.

The room above this parlour, called the solar, had once been reached by a steep "solid block" staircase at the rear, for a trimmer in the heavy oak joists showed this.

The upper room on the far side of the hall had a similar staircase leading to it from the rear of the hall, while twin doors led into the buttery and the pantry on the ground floor. These two small service rooms are of Norman origin, the name buttery being a corruption of "bouteillerie" or bottle place, and a butler being a bouteillier or

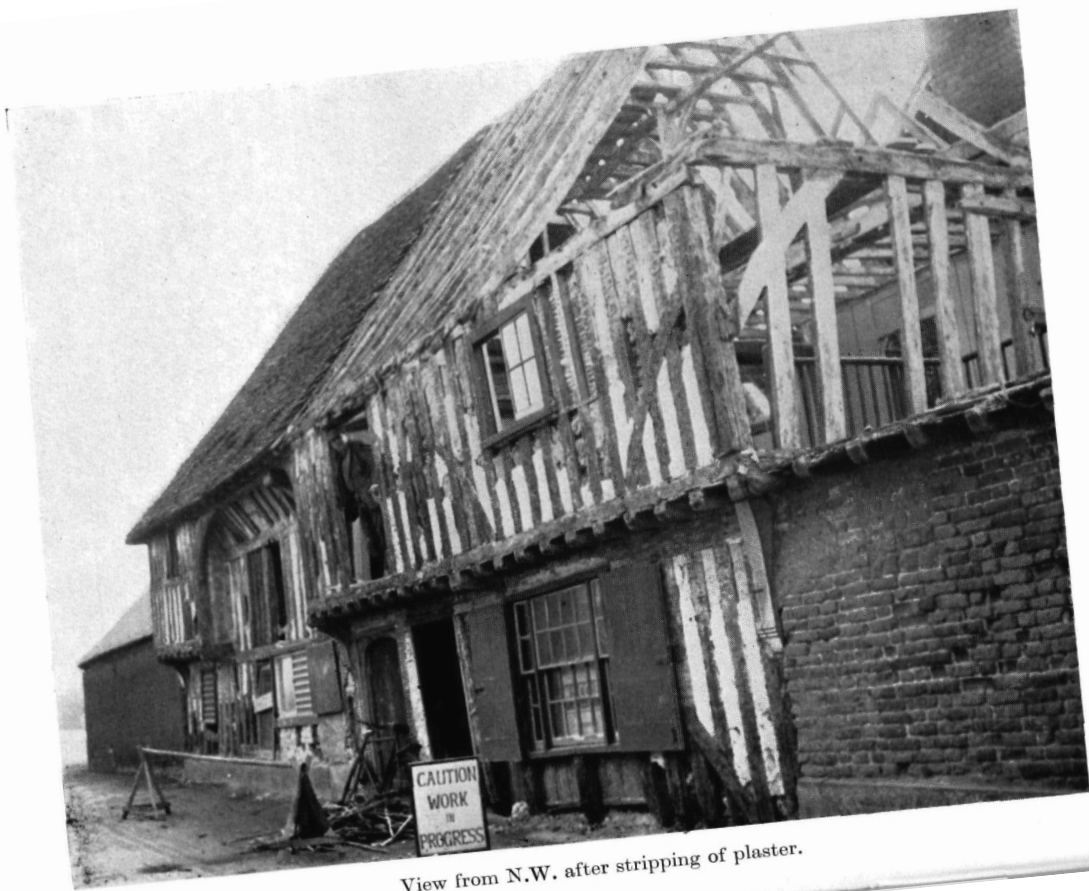
¹ The term "Crown-post" has been suggested by Professor R. A. Cordingley to avoid confusion with the king-post roof of more northern counties, where a "King-post" supports a ridge-piece.

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View from N.E. after stripping of plaster.



View from N.W. after stripping of plaster.



North-east view of the Darenth house, shortly before its demolition.

bottle man ("butuiller" in old Norman-French). Pantry, or paneterie was the place for "pain" or bread.

Outside doors both at the front and at the back once led into this side of the hall, and short speers or screens jutted out to screen the hall from draughts when either outer door was opened. This forms the "cross passage" which is always found at the buttery, or services end of the hall.

In Durlock Grange the inside of the old front door was blocked by a Victorian cupboard, and when this was removed it was discovered that the door itself was still in position. Outside it was covered with plaster, but when this too was removed, there was the fine old doorway with moulded jambs and arched head with recessed spandrels.

The boards of the door itself were somewhat decayed and some of the large hand-made nails were rusting away, yet the old door opened creakily on its massive hinges.

At this point it was realized that the corresponding door on the far side of the passage, though much patched and repaired was the original one and had never been out of use.

When all plaster had been removed from the outside of the house, a fine timbered front was revealed. The original hall house had had a frontage of 38 ft. which had been extended to 50 ft. later in the fifteenth century. The hall formed a cove or recess, with the upper rooms on each side of it jettied out.

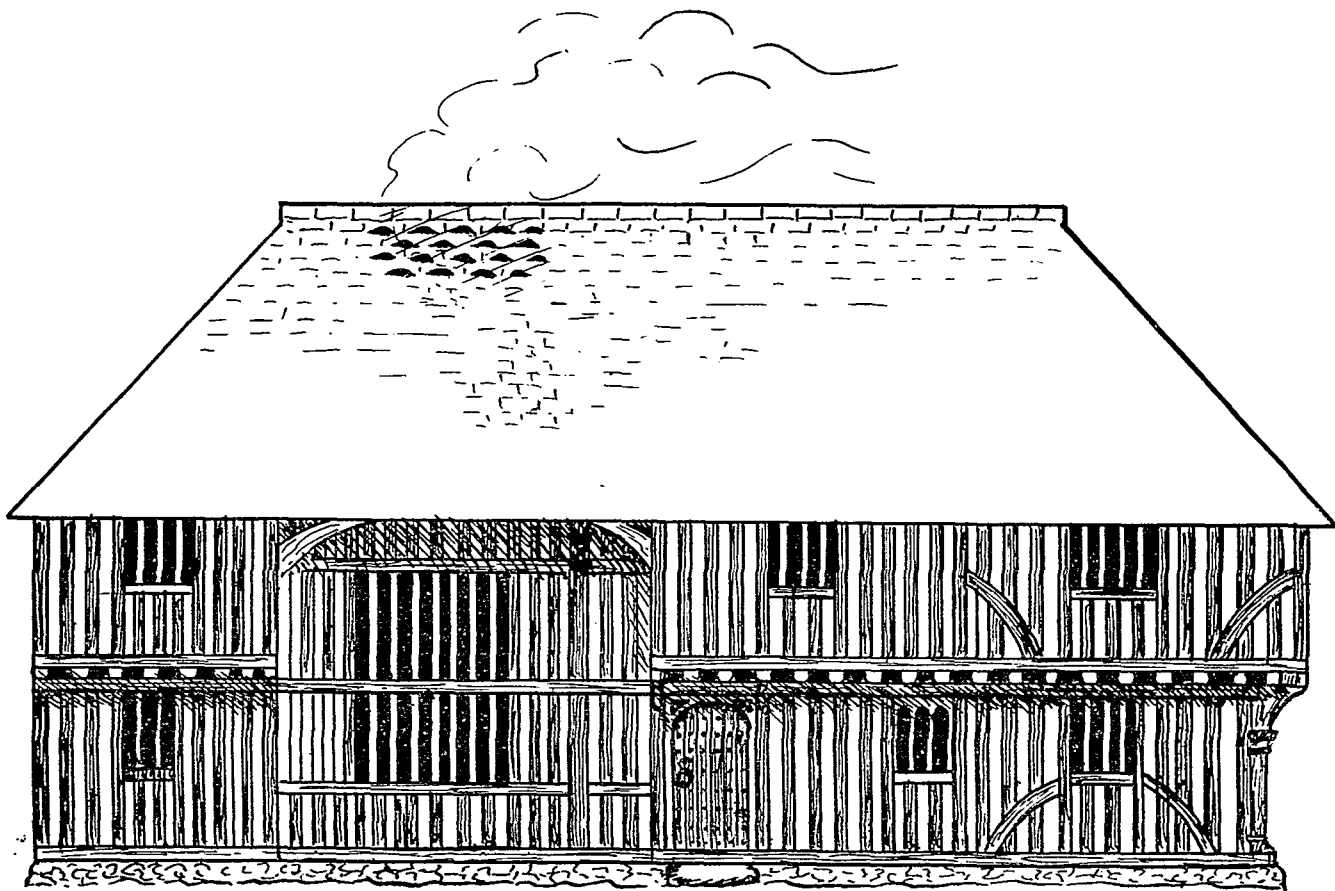
The great hall window was now exposed. This was some 10 ft. high by 7 ft. wide, and was divided into four quarters with three vertical oak bars in each quarter. It had not been made to take glass but had been fitted with sliding shutters to cover the two lower lights, and with two hinged shutters behind the upper lights.

A corresponding great window had existed also at the rear of the hall as mortises under the wall-plate showed, but most of the timberwork on that side had been removed some years later in order to insert the great fireplace and chimney.

The lack of comfort in a hall such as this during a cold fifteenth century winter can well be imagined. The shutters would have had to have been closed, or nearly so, while in the fitful light of the fire on the central hearth the womenfolk would shuffle about the smooth clay floor, preparing food for the return of their menfolk at dusk.

The smoky atmosphere and meagre washing facilities of those days must have made complexions somewhat grimy. The rafters of Durlock Grange, in common with similar old houses, showed a coating of black carbon which could be flaked off with a knife.

The brick fireplace was inserted in the hall near the beginning of the seventeenth century, and at the same time an upper floor was put in. Two finely moulded great posts at the front and rear of the hall



Durlock Grange—Reconstruction.

supported a massive tie-beam, on which stood the king-post or crown-post as we should now call it. The tie-beam was steeply cambered and measured 11 in. thick by 24 in. high in the centre, tapering down to 15 in. at each side of the hall. It was not placed centrally in the hall but nearer the passage side, presumably to avoid the most intense heat of the fire.

Close to the crown-post a "mystery" beam crossed the hall. It was tenoned into two rafters and must always have been there. Its use was probably for curing bacon or other meat in the smoke of the fire, for it must be remembered that the question of food storage was much more pressing in those days. Root crops were unknown and most beasts had to be slaughtered before the lean days of winter set in.

The roof of Durlock Grange was still in excellent condition. The heavy oak rafters measured 6 in. wide by 5 in. thick, and stood in pairs without a ridge piece or side purlins. Each pair had a collar, or cross-piece, forming thus a large letter A. Under the collars, a beam known as a collar purlin ran the length of the house supporting each pair of rafters, and being itself supported in the centre by the crown-post. The collar purlin was a single piece of oak 27 ft. long.

Some mediæval roofs show evidence of a louvre or smoke outlet over the hearth, but in this case there was none, not a rebate or even a peg hole. When all tiles had been removed, the roof was examined even more closely, but still without finding any trace of a smoke outlet. The partitions between the hall and the rooms on either side were complete right up to the ridge. These had always been so in order to exclude smoke from the sleeping quarters. The rafters over the hall were all original and had a heavy coating of soot, but beyond the partitions on either side the roof timbers were comparatively clean. The little gablets at both ends of the ridge, which are characteristic of these old Kent houses, were in the clean part and therefore could not have been used as smoke outlets, as has been so often supposed. Where then did the smoke escape? Later, the foreman in charge of the demolition produced three curious tiles which he had taken from one hip end of the roof. They were flat, with a hump, or raised part in the middle, and did not fit properly with the other hip tiles. He suggested that if they had been fitted with the flat tiles on the main roof, they would have acted as small vents. Soot under each of these tiles added weight to the theory, and so fitting them alternately with flat tiles was tried, and seemed to provide the answer. How many of these special tiles were used, or in what pattern is not known, but similar circumstances have been since observed in two other houses.

The size of the original hall house, some 38 ft. long by 18 ft. wide, is moderate for such a house. The date of construction can reasonably be put at around 1414, as such evidence as there is, both historical and

architectural, all points to this period. The mouldings of the crown-post, great posts and crenellated beams, the doorways with four-centred arches and plain recessed spandrels, are all typical of the early fifteenth century.

As has been stated, the house was extended a further 12 ft. later in the same century. The buttery and pantry were made into one room, and the room above it now measured 25 ft. long, for it extended over the passage as far as the screens in the hall.

It seems probable that this was done to accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims which thronged every road to Canterbury in the first half of the fifteenth century. Durlock Grange stands on a lane which was once the main road to Sandwich, and probably served as a hostel outside the abbey gates on this side, while another ancient house still surviving, and calling itself "The Old Oak Cottage" claims to have been a hostel for travellers outside the abbey walls on the west side.

The extension to the original house could easily be seen as it incorporated curved braces, whereas the earlier part had none. The original front jetty, or overhang, was continued to the massive carved corner-post surmounted by a dragon beam, which enabled the end of the house to be also jettied. The assembly of posts and beams at the corner-post was a masterpiece of the carpenter's art. Cleverly arranged tenons locked the main parts together, even without any oak pegs in position.

Following the dissolution of the monasteries, all lands and buildings belonging to the abbey became vested in the Crown. Monks and servants were granted a small pension and were allowed to live on in some of the lesser buildings. Perhaps Durlock Grange was used for this purpose.

We hear next that on 7th February, in the year 1571, the "capital messuage of the manor of Minster" was let to one Edward Carye at an annual rent of £127 9s.

Then in December, 1612, the whole property was divided and sold to three persons, viz. Sir Phillip Carye, William Pytt, and a certain John Williams, a wealthy London goldsmith. It is this last gentleman with whom we are primarily concerned, as much of the property at Minster, including Durlock Grange, has remained in this same family ever since.

In 1633 John Williams acquired the major share of the property after the death of Lord Cary, who had become Viscount Falkland, and in 1675 a schedule of lands allotted to him included "Durlock Leas", 20 acres, then held by a tenant Gregory Philpott.

John Williams became a baronet, and died a bachelor on 27th February, 1668, being buried in the Temple church in London,

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The estate passed to a nephew, also John Williams, who in 1673 married one Susanna Skipworth, two daughters being born to them and named Mary and Susanna. Mary eventually married twice, her second husband being Lieut.-Gen. Henry Conyngham of Slane, M.P. for Co. Donegal. He was killed at Estevans in Spain, and left two sons and a daughter. From the eldest son, the property passed down directly to the present owner, the Marquis of Conyngham.¹

Early in the seventeenth century Durlock Grange underwent further alterations, presumably when acquired by the first John Williams. The great fireplace was built into the rear of the hall, and an upper floor inserted, while the old earth floor below was covered and paved. The stone flags used for this purpose measured 2 ft. by 2 ft. 6 in., and were beautifully cut and fitted. At the same time, the floors of the other downstairs rooms were paved with red brick, a common practice in the seventeenth century. The boards of the upper floor inserted in the hall were of unusual size, and were all sawn from one oak tree. The widest board in the centre measured no less than 22½ in., then diminishing in width on either side, 19½ in., 14, 12, and so on.

The upper rooms on each side of the hall were found to have two layers of old oak floorboards very worn and patched in places. It would seem that the underneath layer dated from the earliest days of the house, as the outer boards were rebated into the bressumers at the front and back. All boards were of random width, 1 in. thick and lap jointed. Only the upper layer covered the well of the original ladder stairs. On each side of the hall was the fancy beam, moulded and crenellated, which is so often seen in these old hall houses.

Again and again one had to stop to admire the workmanship and resourcefulness of the medieval carpenter. All posts were inverted oak trees, that is they were placed root upwards so that the jowl, or wider part could be formed at the top, in order to fit together the various roof timbers. This applied also to the shorter posts such as the carved corner post, and the moulded jambs of the front door each with its integral bracket to support the overhang.

Before making say a mortise, the carpenter would mark the position accurately with a "draught nayle". These setting out marks could often be clearly seen, and it is interesting to note how accurate they were by modern standards. Markings 3½ in. apart one way by 1 in. the other way would be exactly so, measured by a steel rule.

Mortise and tenon joints were used wherever possible, almost to the

¹ Documents relating to property at Minster and elsewhere belonging to the Conyngham family are deposited in the Archives Office in Maidstone. Extracts from these were printed privately in 1889 for Henry W. Aldred, Esq., at Dover Terrace, 181 Coldharbour Lane, Camberwell, Surrey.

exclusion of all others, and even the rafters were tenoned at the ridge. All the main joints were numbered with Latin figures about 3 in. high, scratched on. It so happened that the modern carpenter taking these same joints apart, marked them again with Latin figures for re-assembly, but this time with a hammer and chisel.

The standard size holes for inserting oak pegs measured exactly $\frac{3}{4}$ in., and it appears that in making a joint one hole would be drilled first, and then the corresponding hole marked and drilled slightly off centre. When the peg was then driven home, the effect would be to clamp up the joints really tightly. In fact, many of the joints were still so tight that it was found impossible to knock the pegs out, and a large electric drill had to be used.

In all the original work in this house, only two mistakes were observed. The four holes in the large tenon at the top of the corner-post had been drilled twice, and a mortise in one of the main partitions had been started in the wrong place and then abandoned.

It was of considerable interest to observe closely the marks of the various tools used—saws, wedges, adze, plane, chisels, augers and so on. All the ordinary hand tools we know, and more besides were in use then.

One sign of the original affluence of the house was that wattle and daub had never been used. Even in the partitions right up in the roof split oak laths were nailed across studs, and then an infilling of yellow clay and chopped straw added, with a finishing coat of fine white hair plaster. Any doubts that the plaster was not original was dispelled when it was found that the surface nearest the heat of the central hearth was shrunken and cracked into a mosaic of small squares. Many pounds of hand-made nails must have been used in this house.

In the eighteenth century the house was again extended, from 50 ft. to 66 ft. long. The overhang was continued into this part, though now resting on a brick wall. The workmanship in this newer part, especially of the roof, was much poorer than that in the older parts of the house. A further wing was subsequently added at the rear, also such "improvements" as a bread oven, a copper, and a pump on the old well outside the back door.

Workmen on the site half hopefully kept an eye open for secret hiding places, and perhaps treasure, but extraneous finds of this nature were meagre indeed. Two coins were found, first a farthing dated 1672 and bearing the head of Charles II crowned with a wreath of laurels, and bearing the curious inscription "CAROLUS A CAROLO".

On the reverse side was the first known effigy of Britannia, her arm resting on a shield with the "old" Union Jack, i.e. the crosses of St. George and St. Andrew only, with the inscription "Britannia".

The other coin found was a halfpenny of George I. Other finds

included broken bowls and stems of early clay pipes, and a number of brown polished stone marbles, lost no doubt by a child.

Old barns and outhouses at the side and rear of Durlock Grange make it clear that it had been used as a farm-house for at least four centuries.

2. ~~A DESTROYED TIMBER HOUSE AT DARENTH~~

By P. J. TESTER, F.S.A.

~~The small timber-framed house described in this note stood on the south side of Parsonage Lane, close to the bridge over the Darent stream.¹ It was pulled down together with some adjoining brick cottages in 1961, but I had the opportunity of recording its features of interest shortly before this took place.~~

~~In general it could be regarded as an interesting example of late timber-framed construction in the medieval and Tudor tradition, though clearly distinguishable from the common hall-house type and probably of seventeenth-century age.~~

~~The introduction of chimneys in poorer class homes in the Elizabethan period rendered the traditional lofty hall with its open hearth no longer necessary. Such halls were consequently divided by the insertion of an upper floor, with the new brick chimney frequently occupying part of the narrow entry passage. Subsequently, when new houses were built, the wide chimney was often made to stand in the middle of the house, forming in itself a division between the two main living rooms. The Darent house belonged to this class and originally comprised two ground-floor rooms with a continuous upper storey. Attached to the south side was a lean-to addition, or outshut, which showed evidence of having been part of the house in its early form.~~

~~In the accompanying plan—which is simplified by the omission of some later features—the positions of the ten wall-posts are indicated (Fig. 1). These were spaced so as to divide the house into three structural bays, the central one being much narrower than those at the ends. The narrow bay was evidently intended to accommodate the central chimney, and the main entrance was situated at its north end, roughly mid-way along the front of the house.² This was in accordance with the tradition of the converted hall-houses where, as noted, the~~

¹ National Grid Reference TQ 55907128. O.S. 6 in. Kent Sheet IX, S.E.

² Part of the actual door could be seen, still in position, from inside, though the exterior had been plastered over.