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THE ANCIENT BUILDINGS OF NEW ROMNEY

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HISTORY

NEW ROMNEY, one of the five original Cinque Ports, was an important town and port before the Norman conquest. Its records go back to 1353, and much has been written about them,¹ but of its buildings, apart from the parish church of St. Nicholas,² the leper hospital of St. Stephen and St. Thomas,³ and Southland's Almshouses,⁴ very little study has been made.

In February 1287, an unusually violent storm ravaged the coast of Kent, causing widespread chaos and silting up the harbour at New Romney. The late Major Teichman-Derville referred to this in his excellent paper on the 'Annals of the town and port of New Romney', read before the Kent Archaeological Society on 25th July, 1929.⁵ In it he said: '... the hideous tempest of 1287, when the sea is said to have flowed twice without ebbing, ... our church, as you will have noticed, and some of our older houses still stand several feet below the level of the surrounding ground as a result largely of the deposit left when this dreadful storm and flood abated, ... the Rother was then found to have changed its course ...'

This statement presents a challenge which no one yet appears to have taken up, for if it be fact, then here we have a unique dating criterion for observing houses built before, or after, February, 1287.

The purpose of this paper is to seek out some of the oldest buildings in the town, and to examine at least one of them in the greatest possible detail in order to discover any evidence which may still survive of the pre-flood town.

The splendid parish church of St. Nicholas is open for all to see, and it so happened that one of the town's most ancient houses (3-4 West Street), was empty in 1973, and so provided an excellent opportunity

¹ K. M. E. Murray (Ed.), 'Register of Daniel Rough, Common Clerk of Romney, 1353-1380', *K.E.*, xvi (1945); M. Teichman-Derville, 'The Annals of the Town and Port of New Romney', *Arch. Cant.*, xli (1929), 153-73; M. Teichman-Derville, *Arch. Cant.*, xlii (1930), 5-13 (a list of the town records); E. B. Walker, *Arch. Cant.*, xliii (1880), 201.

² W. H. Elgar, 'St. Nicholas' Church, New Romney', *Folkestone Herald*, 11th April, 1925 (includes scale plan, and other drawings, available Folkestone Library). *Ibid.*, 26th December, 1925, and 2nd August, 1930; *Arch. Cant.*, xli (1934), 29.

³ S. E. Rigold, *Arch. Cant.*, lxxix (1964), 47-69; K. M. E. Murray and Anne Roper, *Arch. Cant.*, xlvii (1935), 198-204; *V.C.H. Kent*, ii, 225.

⁴ N. G. Jackson, *Southlands, 1610-1960*, Nottingham, 1960.

⁵ M. Teichman-Derville, *Arch. Cant.*, xli (1929), 153-73.

for detailed study. Other old buildings still remain, parts of which could possibly antedate the 1287 flood, but these are mostly in use as business premises, and therefore not so easily accessible. Some owners, especially of inns, are very co-operative, but though the buildings are certainly of great age, the original structure is so covered by additions of every century, that little or nothing at all of the earliest building can be seen.

New Romney is noteworthy in another sense, in that it is one of the few towns in England known to have been 'planted', or town-planned before the Norman conquest. Beresford puts this at about A.D. 960,⁶ S. E. Rigold judges it to be a little later.⁷ The modern street plan still shows much of the original 'grid pattern' (Fig. 2).

Romney—written Romenel in the Domesday survey, began as a settlement adjacent to a safe anchorage at the southern end of the Rhee Wall where Old Romney now stands, and as the old channel here of the Limene, or Rother slowly silted the early harbour (marked H on Fig. 1) the settlement was forced to move nearer to the sea, and New Romney was founded as a new town. The number of ruined churches in this Old Romney—New Romney area, as well as the laying out of the new town, confirms the importance of the port.

Romney, apparently, was the only Cinque Port to offer resistance to the fleet of William of Normandy, so much so that 'The Conqueror marched out of his way to inflict on the town such punishment as he thought fit . . .'.⁸ It must have, however, soon resumed its former state of prosperity, for Domesday reports: 'In Romenel there are four score and five burgesses which belonged to the Archbishop's manor of Aldington . . . besides which Robert de Romenel who held the manor of Lamport of the Archbishop by knight's service had twenty-one

⁶ Maurice Beresford, *New Towns of the Middle Ages*, London, 1967.

⁷ Beresford in his 'gazetteer' (*op. cit.* in n. 6, p. 459) implies a date not later than c. 960, without citing any authority, there or elsewhere, except a vague and incorrect statement that Romney had a mint 'a century before the battle of Hastings'. In fact Romney's coinage began with Ethelred's 'long-cross' type (997-1003, according to M. Dolley's reckoning and certainly not far off these dates) and continued more or less unbrokenly to Henry I. Mintage was a privilege of every Old English 'port' (market-town, not necessarily a sea-port) and the attainment of this status by each of the Cinque Ports in turn is surely signalized by the commencement of their coinage, which corresponds with their traditional order of seniority, even illuminating the vexed contention for primacy between Dover and Hastings (Hastings had the statutory right of mintage under Athelstan but apparently did not exercise it: Dover began coining first). In practice the status of a port and the status of a borough (*burh*) seem to have been almost always granted together and the provision of a market-place and of burgages (burgess tenements), the physical manifestations of either status, both implicit in the artificial plan, cannot appreciably antedate the formal status. The plan might be a subsequent regularization of an existing port, but much more likely the whole settlement was planted together. On this reasonable hypothesis the plan may be dated from the first coinage, i.e. c. A.D. 1000. (S.E.R.)

⁸ F. M. Hueffer, *The Cinque Ports*, Edinburgh, 1900.

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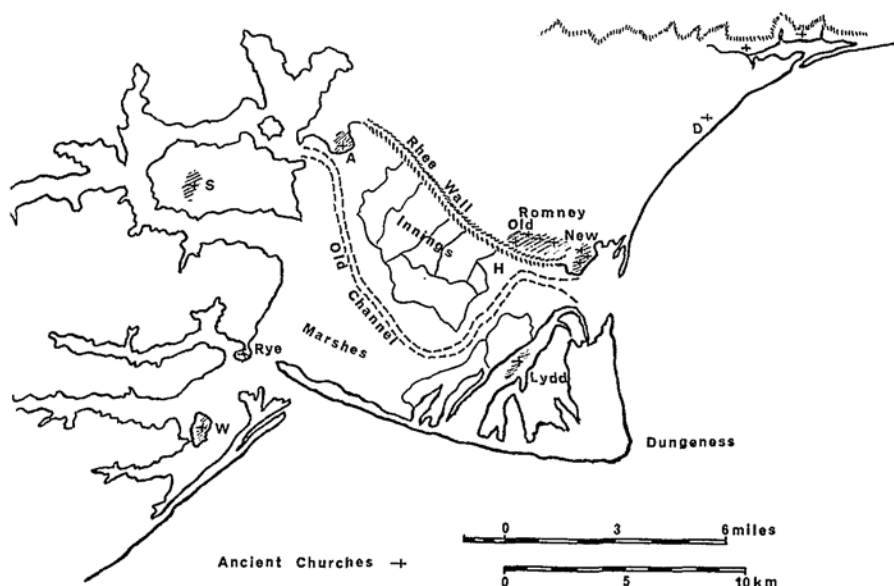


FIG. 1. The Romney Area about A.D. 1200.

burgesses there which belonged to that manor, and fifty which he held of the Bishop of Baieux, . . . it was divided into twelve wards and had five parish churches, a priory and a hospital for the sick'.

As Canon Scott-Robertson points out, however,⁹ there seems to have been in fact only three parish churches in New Romney, the other two being chapels. The present parish church of St. Nicholas became the principal church in Norman times, but was not the oldest one. St. Martin's church stood on the green at the corner of the present Ashford Road and Fairfield Road, and was built in the tenth century when the town was founded. It was ultimately demolished in 1550, and the materials sold for £136 16s 10d, a sum which was applied to the relief of the poor.

The third parish church of St. Laurence stood between the present High Street and Church Road. It had a high tower on which the town clock was mounted, and not possessing apparently a churchyard, had a small market on its south side. The town records show that it was in a poor state in the early sixteenth century, and that it was pulled down by 1539.

The chapel of St. John the Baptist was, according to the town records, used for services until at least 1450. It was attached to buildings

⁹ W. A. Scott-Robertson, 'The Destroyed Churches of New Romney', *Arch. Cant.*, xiii (1880), 247.

known as the 'Priory', a dependency of Pontigny, and perhaps a grange rather than a small priory. Some remains of this establishment may still be seen in the Ashford Road, and shows some fourteenth-century features, but owing to over-restoration and some fancy additions, it is difficult to decipher.

The chapel of the leper hospital fell into disuse in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, perhaps owing to plague, being re-founded in 1363 by John Fraunceys,¹⁰ a bailiff of New Romney, as a chantry chapel. Magdalen College, Oxford, acquired the land and chapel in 1481, the latter being marked as a church on an old map dated 1641, still in the possession of the college.

The town continued at the height of its prosperity until the great storm of 1287, after which, according to Hasted it 'slowly decayed apace'.¹¹

SOME OLD BUILDINGS OF THE TOWN

Turning now to the present town, it is soon discovered that the most ancient buildings may indeed be divided into two categories. Some of the medieval timber-framed houses are clearly built on the present ground level—a fine example of which is the present Electricity Showrooms at the corner of the High Street and the Church Approach. Here one enters into a restored fifteenth century hall which is open to its fine crown-post roof.

Another example is the row of shops immediately adjoining the Town Hall on its right side. Here, in passage-ways and elsewhere, one can clearly see the oak framework of the medieval buildings, with a bracket and jetty on the street front, and the stone ground-wall which supports the timber work, showing above the present level. Elsewhere, however, there are indeed buildings which appear to be set at a lower level, and where one has to bend one's head to avoid the low lintel and ceiling joists, before descending steps into the interior. These are marked in solid black on the town plan (Fig. 2), and have ringed reference numbers. The buildings which are hatched are at the higher level, and thus built after 1287.

It would appear therefore, that there has been very little alteration in the ground level of the town since at least the fifteenth century, but of the buildings which appear to be standing on the lower, pre-1287 level, the parish church of St. Nicholas (marked 1 on town plan) is the most accessible, and the most obvious. It has a very fine Norman tower and nave, with both the Norman aisles remaining for two bays. The richly ornamented west doorway, with its triple jamb-shafts is

¹⁰ *Arch. Cant.*, xlvii (1935), 198–204; S. E. Rigold, *Arch. Cant.*, lxxix (1964), 47–69, and lxxx (1965), 29.

¹¹ Edward Hasted, *History of Kent*, 1st edn., iii, 521.



A. The West Doorway of the Church of St. Nicholas.

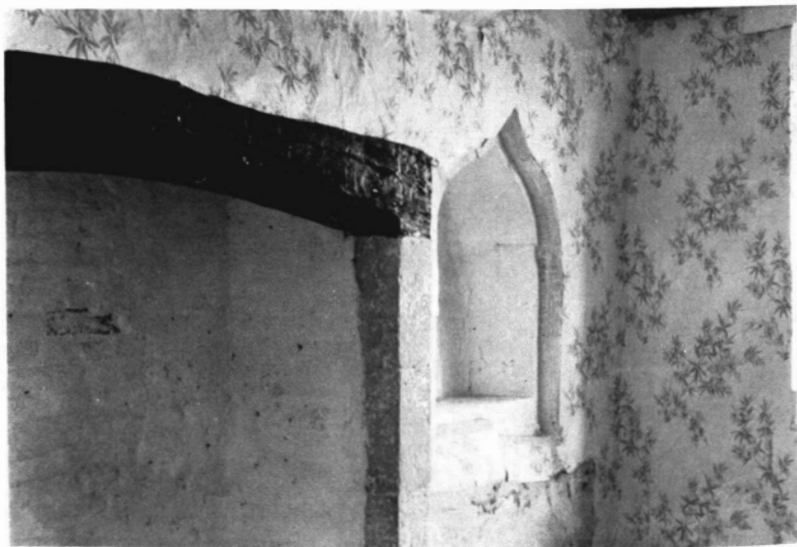


B. Nos. 28 and 30 High Street.

PLATE II



A. The old House in West Street.



B. The Fireplace and Niche in the Owner's Room at West Street.

approached down seven steps from the roadway, the sill being 0.97 m. (3 ft. 2 in.) below street level. The whole Norman part of the church is set at this lower level, while the large chancel, with its lofty aisles which were added in the fourteenth century, has its windows patently designed for the higher level, the interiors being adapted to the Norman section.

The second very interesting building, now known as nos. 3 and 4 West Street (2 on plan), was originally one house built of stone rubble with ashlar dressings, and later converted into two cottages. It once had a central hall open to the roof, with one aisle at the rear, or west side (Fig. 3) and an inside floor level of not less than 0.76 m. (2 ft. 6 in.) below the present street level. It will be described in detail later.

On the north side of the High Street, from directly opposite the Town Hall westwards, is a row of buildings with roofs of unusually steep pitch. These are now mostly small modern shops with eighteenth-century brick fronts above them, which in reality mask much older buildings. No. 28 (3 on plan) is a newsagent's shop, and with no. 30 on its right was once all one house. Both have doorways with low lintels and steps down into the interior, and are timber-framed behind their façades. The steep roofs have common rafters with collars only, and no purlins. No. 28 has main posts supporting a straight tie-beam, while no. 30 appears to have been a cross-wing, being the only building on the lower level with signs of a forward jetty, or overhang.

No. 16, further west, is a wine shop (4 on plan). It has the same steep roof and low ceilings, but the shop floor is on the same level as the street. Upon enquiry, this was found to have been built up from a lower level in recent times, other floors at the rear being still at a lower level. Nos. 18, 20 and 22 have similar features.

A house in Victoria Street (6 on plan) has no door on the street front, but in a side passage. Here again the floor inside is over 0.60 m. (2 ft.) below street level, and the ceiling only 1.52 m. (just 5 ft.) above street level. The roof timbers above are exposed in the attic space, and again have heavy oak rafters with collars only, and no purlins.

In observing these levels, however, one must remember the Norman liking for first-floor halls over semi-subterranean undercrofts,¹² though in New Romney the evidence of only one of this type has so far been discovered. This is at the rear of the Assembly Hall in Church Approach, where, in some ancient walling, is a blocked stone window and doorway of the thirteenth century.

The tall window appears to be that of a former hall, and the doorway has its sill a foot or more above ground. This was at first puzzling, until the top part of a small stone loop window was found, half buried in the

¹² P. A. Faulkner, 'Medieval Undercrofts and Town Houses', *Arch. Journ.*, cxxiii (1966), 120-35; E. W. Parkin, *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxvii (1972), 184.

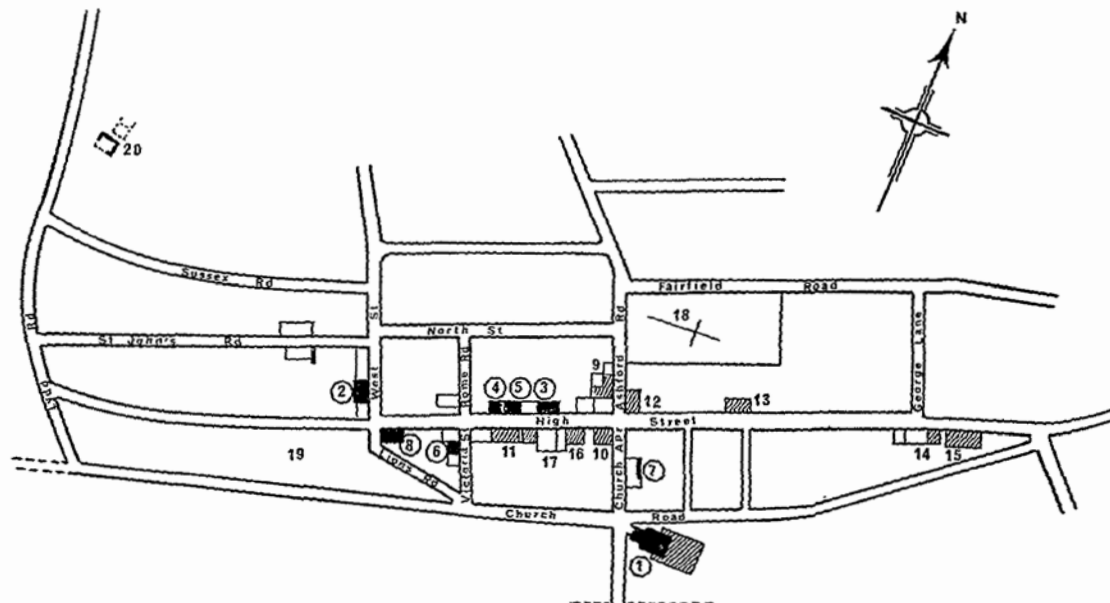


FIG. 2. Town Plan of New Romney, showing ancient Buildings.

KEY TO BUILDINGS SHOWN ON THE TOWN PLAN (Fig. 2)

The ringed numbers indicate buildings on the lower level.

- 1 The Norman church of St. Nicholas.
- 2 Nos. 3-4 West Street.
- 3 Nos. 28 and 30 High Street.
4. No. 16 High Street.
5. Nos. 18 and 20 High Street.
6. Part of a house in Victoria Street.
- 7 Ancient walling with blocked stone doorway and windows.
- 8 The Cinque Ports Arms.

Buildings hatched on plan stand on the present higher level, and were built after 1287.

- 9 Remains of the 'Priory'. Some parts over-restored.
- 10 A fine fifteenth-century timber-framed hall-house, now the Electricity Showrooms.
- 11 A row of timber-framed buildings with jetty hidden by modern shop fronts.
- 12 No. 46 High Street, a timber-framed hall-house, possibly a Wealden house, encased in eighteenth-century brickwork, now a shop.
- 13 Nos. 78 and 80 High Street, now known as Henbury Cottage and Henbury House, timber-framed and probably a Wealden.
- 14 The 'Ship Inn', mostly eighteenth century, but incorporating part of a Wealden house.
- 15 A large timber-framed house known as 'Buckhurst', completely encased in eighteenth-century brickwork. Believed to have been an unusually large Wealden house.
- 16 The 'New Inn' has been an inn since at least the fourteenth century, but with a later brick front.
- 17 The Town Hall, once supported by pillars, with the adjoining house, once the prison, and still with barred windows and heavy studded doors.
- 18 The site of St. Martin's parish church.
- 19 The site of the church of St. Laurence.
- 20 The site of the leper hospital of St. Stephen and St. Thomas.

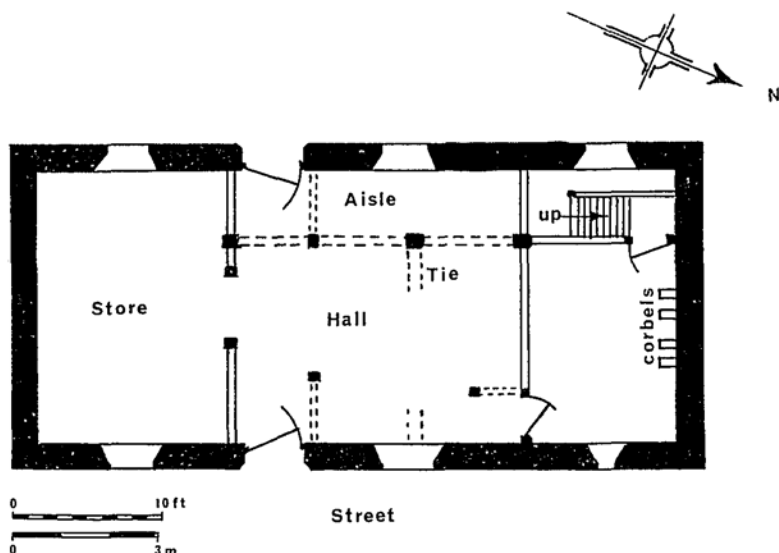


FIG. 3. The original Plan of the House in West Street.

ground. This presumably was once in the undercroft, and the doorway must have been approached by outside steps, as was often Norman practice (no. 7 on Fig. 2).

Other interesting buildings in the town still await exploration; for example, the Cinque Ports Arms is a timber-framed building with a later front, which appears to be set low in comparison with the house adjoining. Inside, practically nothing of the oak framing can be seen, except in the small saloon bar at the east end. This presumably was once the parlour next to the hall which is now floored in, and here the joists run parallel to the street, and thus could not have had a jetty on the street front, though they may have had one at the end of the building.

THE OLD HOUSE IN WEST STREET (Figs. 3-5)

This is without doubt one of the oldest houses in the town, and is well worth a close examination. It has at some time been divided into two cottages, though divided in a curious way. The roof-space attic over both belongs to no. 3, while a small front ground-floor room in no. 4 is only reached through no. 5 next door.

Fig. 3 shows a plan of the house as it was first built; it then had a central hall open to the roof, with a single aisle at the rear. The front of the house (Plate IIA) still shows the stone jambs of three original windows, and a wide stone doorway which is unaltered except that its

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arch has been raised to adjust to the higher ground level. Inside there was once the usual cross-passage, with a corresponding doorway at the far side. This has now gone, but a mortise under the arcade plate shows that there was once a post there, probably part of a screen, or spear.

At the upper end of the old hall, on the right, is a timber-framed partition going right up to the ridge, which has survived largely intact. It has across it a moulded beam, which though somewhat worn and mutilated, provides a vital clue to the age of the house. It has along its centre a deep $\frac{3}{4}$ -radius hollow, on each side of which is a half roll with two fillets (Fig. 4)—certainly a thirteenth-century moulding. Beneath the beam is a deep groove for panelling, which shows that there was not originally a doorway in the aisle, and that it must have been on the east side of the panelling, and now plastered over.

Behind this partition is the small ground-floor room which now belongs to no. 5 next door, and above it a room which once was patently the owner's private chamber, and incidentally the only first-floor room in the original house. It is reached by an eighteenth-century stairway in the aisle which doubtless occupies the site of the earlier solid block stairs, as the oak-framed doorway at the top still has heavy pin hinges

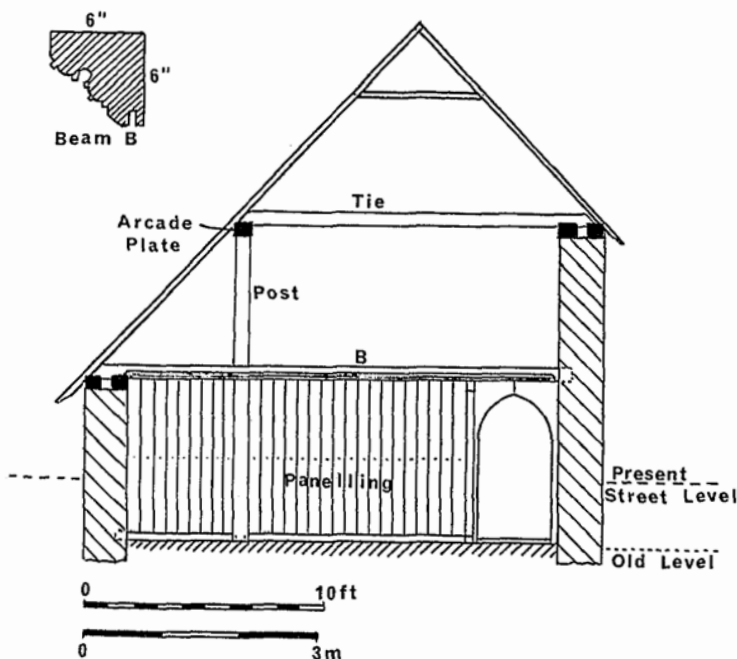


FIG. 4. Cross-section of the original House.

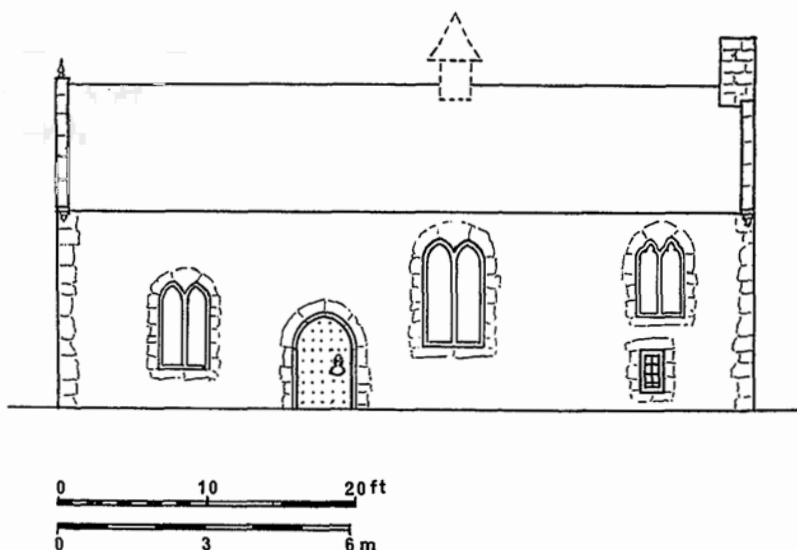


FIG. 5. Reconstruction of the Street Front.

of an older door. In this upper chamber is an ancient fireplace, the stone jambs of which are plain chamfered, with pyramid stops. To the right of the fireplace is an attractive stone niche with a pointed ogee arch, while the only window is a deeply splayed one in the thick stone wall on the street front.

To the left, or south end of the hall was another room, once open to the roof, and presumably a store. It now has a timber-framed first-floor room which is jettied out over the street; this must have been an insertion as it cuts through the jambs of an original stone window. This upper room must once have been a very attractive one, open to the roof, but now ceiled in and divided into two by a partition, in which a transverse tie-beam can still be seen, supported by posts and brackets all nicely moulded and suggesting a date of about 1500. It is interesting to note that this is a reversal of the 'high' end, the later owner choosing to have his private chamber moved to the south end of the hall. This chamber may have a crown post, now hidden by the ceiling.

The roof space over the hall has been made into an attic, and here the roof timbers are covered by laths and plaster, but their outline again shows that there are paired rafters with collars, but no purlins. Judging by the exposed ends of the rafters, the roof appears to be original, though much repaired.

The arcade plate can be seen along most of its length, with posts surviving in the partitions on each side of the hall, and some braces still

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in situ. Mortises beneath the arcade plate show that there was formerly one free-standing post in the hall, and another in the speer close to the back door. The hall seems to have been divided up, and the central chimney inserted in the early sixteenth century. It has a wide stone fireplace, nicely moulded all round, and with carved spandrels; the brickwork above being of 5 cm. (2 in.) brick, wide jointed. The sawn-off ends of the main tie-beam between the two front wall-plates and the arcade plate remain in the second bedroom upstairs.

Although wooden floors have been added to the house, access is gained down two steps from the street, and there are two lower levels in rear rooms. As already stated, the original floor level was not less than 0.76 m. (2 ft. 6 in.) below present street level.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence of the raised ground level in New Romney following the great storm of 1287 is indeed fascinating, and is distinct enough to compel serious investigation. It is most perfectly demonstrated by the two very obvious levels of building in the parish church of St. Nicholas, and the ample architectural detail of the Norman and the fourteenth-century parts.

In the case of the old stone house in West Street, a more detailed examination was necessary, but enough evidence has been uncovered to justify the claim that this is indeed a house of the thirteenth century. Everything in fact points to its having been the dwelling, and the business place of a merchant of some affluence. It has the four-foot wide (1.22 m.) stone doorway leading into the large hall with its single aisle, the ample storeroom on the left of the hall, and the remarkably small, though luxurious (for those days) private accommodation of the owner.

With regard to the rest of the houses noted, the evidence obtained is at least consistent, although obviously more research is needed. Inside floor levels are well below the street, the steeply pitched roofs are all of simple construction, having paired rafters with collars, but no purlins. First-floor rooms are few, and forward jettying is in its infancy. The Wealden type of house has not yet appeared—although several are to be found in the town, but all apparently built on the higher level. No trace could be found of the more archaic long cross-bracing, nor any lap-joints; all joints being of the mortise and tenon type.

Several questions yet remain unanswered; for example, what of the ground plates of the earlier timber-framed houses?—do these still survive below the present ground level, or has the upper framework been underbuilt? Also, in these timber houses no traces of windows or doorways have so far been uncovered.

It is sad to think that many such questions may not be answered until a house is pulled down, or at least completely stripped. For the archæologist, it is an intriguing thought that the 1287 streets of the town must lie virtually undisturbed some three feet (1 m.) below the present surface. Many poorer dwellings must have collapsed before the onslaught of wind and water, leaving their contents scattered beneath the build up of silt.

Admittedly, this study must be far from complete, but it is hoped that such a glimpse into a unique group of town buildings of the thirteenth century will at some time stimulate further research.