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ATTACK AND DEFENCE AT OLD SOAR MANOR, PLAXTOL

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When Ken and the writer were wriggling our way up the tiny spiral staircase of the tower at Stone castle (Gravett and Renn 1981), we spoke of *Old Soar* as having a comparable stair and 'chamber' and one of us suggested that Soar might be a corruption of *solar*. However, 'Soar' is an early place-name element for a stream, and one known as the Shode runs just south-west of the house. Thomas de Shur' demised a messuage with 41 acres and 21s. of rent in *Shur* (in Wrotham) to his daughter Alice in 1245 (Churchill *et al.* 1956, 186-7). Wallenberg (1934, 156) noted the personal names *John le Suur de W'* and *Roger le Soure* (in Wrotham hundred) in the 1254 and 1292 Assize Rolls. *Le* (note the article) *Suur/Soure* might be the medieval job title *sewer* (corresponding to the modern *maitre d'*).

Jayne Semple (to whom the writer is indebted for much help with the manorial history) tells me that 'Old Soar' (*sic*) first appears on William Knowles' gravestone (1811) in Plaxtol churchyard, no doubt after the 'new' house had replaced part of the 'old'. The spelling was previously 'Sore': the manor of Sore is named in the 1483 Wrotham court rolls (Centre for Kent Studies, U55 M 15) and that of 'Sore otherwise Hores' in a 1521 rental (BM Addit.Ch. 37748). Mrs Semple suggests that it is a personal tenorial name: Walter le Hore held land in Hale borough (in which Sore manor lay) in 1283 (Archbishop Pecham's survey, Christ Church Cathedral E24: Witney 2000, 294) and Walter, Mabel and Thomas le Hore were substantial contributors to the Wrotham part of the 1334/5 lay subsidy (Hanley and Chalklin 1964, 145)

The site

Old Soar Manor (NGR TQ 619541) lies just below the great expanse of Mereworth Woods, which rise 300 feet higher within half a mile. The ground slopes down to the south-west, with Plaxtol on the far

side of a shallow valley, but Old Soar is over four miles from the mother parish (minster) church of Wrotham. Although deep in the Chartland, the land must have been cleared early, since a Roman tumulus and two villas have been excavated on the farms adjoining Old Soar to the west and south-west (Luard 1859; Haverfield *et al.* 1923, 122-4; Cockett and Connell 1987). The manor might be a relict of a very old estate indeed.

Description of the Building

Most writers on medieval domestic architecture mention *Old Soar*, but pass over its setting and its defences in silence. It is clearly a building of quality: the main roof with its carved crownpost and tiebeams, the carved stone corbels and the two large windows with traces of painting in the splays and their restored mullions and transoms, all demonstrate this. An updated summary of Margaret Wood's survey of 1947, when *Old Soar* was given to the National Trust by Mrs S. L. Cannon (Wood 1950a; 1950b; 1978), was the guide leaflet in 2000 (Semple. nd.) and there is a short account in the RCHME's gazetteer of medieval houses in Kent (Pearson, Barnwell and Adams 1994, 100-101).

The medieval part (**Fig. 1**) consists of three two-storey ranges, linked only by one corner, built of roughly-coursed local ragstone rubble with ashlar dressings. One wall is much thicker than the others at ground level, and a brick house was built against it in the eighteenth century on stone foundations which Wood, on the evidence of a corbel inside the house, suggested had belonged to an aisled hall. The writer will keep to Wood's names of Hall (now gone, replaced by the brick house) and (for both storeys) - Solar for the largest of the surviving ranges - Chapel and Garderobe for the smaller ranges (to east and north respectively) - since the purpose here is not to enter into argument about upper halls and chamber blocks but to look at the defence logistics by reference to the openings.

Each surviving range has a ground level doorway with a two-centred head and holes for door-bolts but not large sliding bars (except for the modern fixed one in the doorway between Solar and now-private Hall). However, although the opening in the south-east wall of the Solar undercroft is shown as a doorway by Hudson Turner (1851) - Wadmore (1897), Lloyd (1931, fig. 60) and Wood (1950a; 1950b; 1965; 1978), all plan it as a window, although the description in Wood 1978 is as a doorway. Exterior photographs (Lloyd 1931, fig. 58, Oswald 1933, fig. 41, Wood 1950a, plate IIIB) have the site covered by a climbing bush. Wadmore shows the ground-floor

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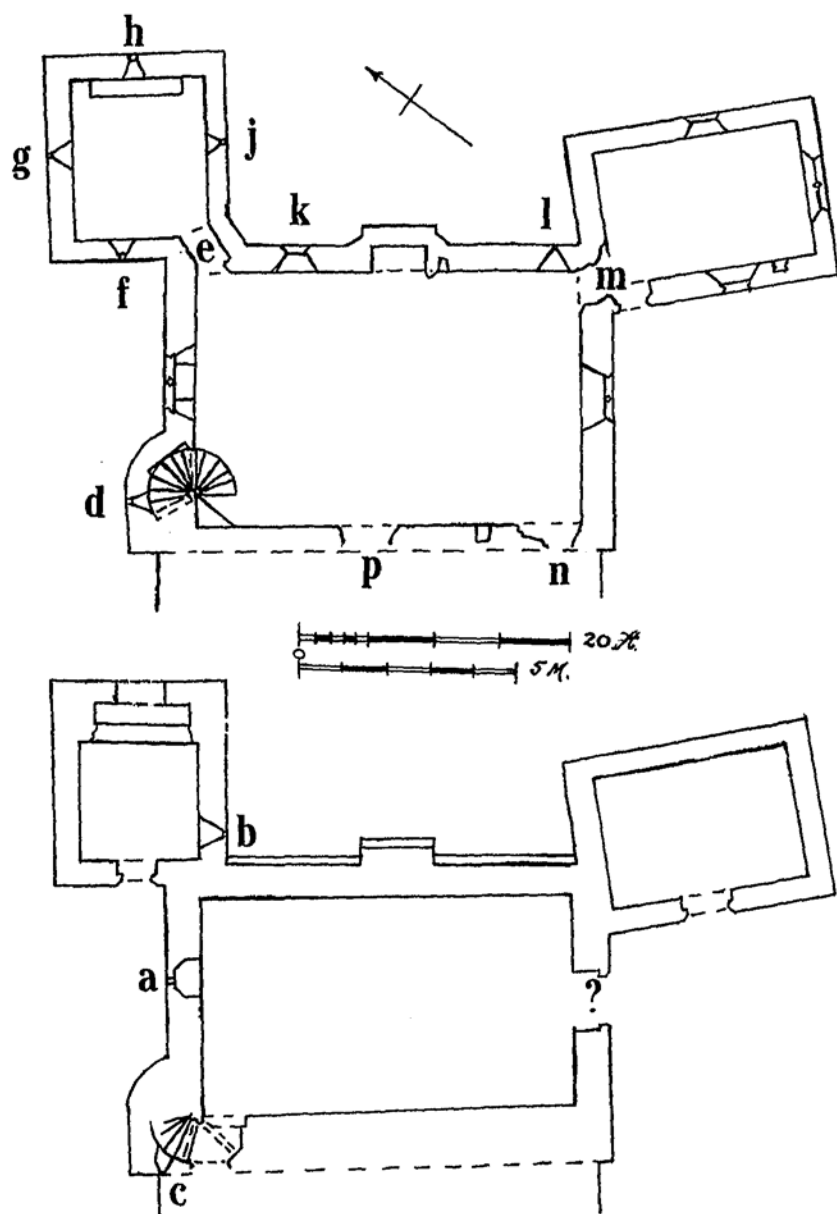


Fig. 1 Ground (below) and upper (above) plans of the medieval part of Old Soar Manor.

entrance as through a porch and doorway at the north-west corner of the Hall, and modern steps leading up to the east window of the Chapel. The latter visitor entrance lasted until at least 1947; Wood (1978) shows modern steps along the south wall of the Chapel up to the blocked doorway. So the Solar undercroft may once have only been reached from the Hall. The north-east wall of the Garderobe has a large arch opening into a walled-off space, probably a latrine pit. This arch seems unnecessarily large for emptying the latrine; a small blocked arch at the base of the south-east wall is likely to have been the normal (downhill) outlet. The larger arch might have been a booby-trap - an obvious target which would give an intruder an unpleasant surprise when he broke through the ?timber blocking, both from the stinking filling and from missiles dropped through the wide slit above. Also, the slit and the arch provided an emergency exit (Gerald of Windsor escaped in this way from Cenarth in 1109). But it was also a potential weakness: the timber upper floor of the Garderobe could have been reached or fired by someone getting through the latrine exit, as was done at Chateau Gaillard in 1204. The barrel-vaulted Solar has an arrowloop [*a*, Fig. 1], giving the only natural light when the door (if it was a door, see above) was shut, like that at [*b*] in the Garderobe: the ground floor of the Chapel is unlit.

A spiral stair is placed in a partly-rounded projection between the Solar and the Hall with a doorway to each. Apart from the latrine chute, this is the only link between the floors. This stair position is awkward but, given the corbel indicating an aisle and the traces of a dais, may have been so placed for partial concealment from the Hall side. The stair has two loops: the lower [*c*] is small and twists sharply to the left (see below, page 244). The door near the top of the stair has diagonal lattice bracing fastened with square-headed nails clenched over diamond roves; the iron hinge-straps and mid-rail have been renewed. Mrs Semple tells me that its framing is similar to those of fifteenth-century doors at Ightham Moat nearby. Although the door swings back into a recess in the stair wall to give a clear path, it is part of another booby-trap. Nathaniel Lloyd (1931, 450) pointed out that the door opens into the stairwell, not into the room. Consequently the door was difficult to force open: an attacker coming up the stair had to pull it towards him rather than push it out of the way. It is strange that the bracing is on the side facing an attacker. The door does not appear to have been turned back to front since the area of the lock-block is still near the newel. An alternative of turning the door upside-down and reshaping it seems very unlikely. The bracing might deflect or absorb blows, but the most probable explanation is that, whether open or shut, the door shows its best face toward the upper room of the Solar.

Passing the door, a visitor finds himself with only his head and shoulders above the upper floor level. Going up five more spiralling steps, he arrives on a small uneven patch of that floor, facing a blank wall. Visitors are still disconcerted by this. This wall appears to be secondary: it is not bonded into the main wall of the Solar, and is only about half its height. The uneven patch may indicate that at least one more step was planned, perhaps to access the top of the north-west wall of the Hall, even if not to go higher as an observation turret. At one time, two straight steps forked off the spiral to give an easier approach to the Solar, probably part of the conversion to farm use (Wadmore 1897, plan; Lloyd 1931, fig. 818; and Wood, 1950a, fig. 9 and plate IIID).

Clockwise from the stairwell, beyond the large window with side seats and hinge-hooks for shutters to each of its four panels, is the skewed entrance into the Garderobe [*e*] with an arrowloop in each wall [*f, g, h, j*] and a slit in the floor to the latrine pit below. Wood suggested that this was either a bedroom with en suite facilities (1965, 380), or a strongroom/wardrobe with privy 'akin to the cloakroom of double meaning today' (1950a, 135 n.1). The Garderobe could have been all these, and also constituted the core of the defences. Wood (1950a, 126) described the loops as 'like military arrowslits': the writer believes that they *were* arrowslits, not mere symbols; their skilful construction must have been costly, and unnecessary for simple lighting slits.

The inserted window with shouldered head [*k*] may have replaced a smaller opening, perhaps an arrowloop like that on the other side of the fireplace [*l*]. Sarah Pearson (1994, 40-41) noted that the opening between Solar and Chapel [*m*] is roughly broken through, perhaps destroying a squint beside the outer doorway which provided the only original access to the Chapel. There is a two-light window at the far end of the Chapel, and a single-light window on each side; its identification as a chapel rests on a later piscina and the very approximate orientation. Separation of the chapel from the other accommodation gave mutual privacy in many houses, but a squint would have allowed someone in the Solar both to see the ceremony and to check on arrivals at the Chapel door. Unlike the Garderobe, the Chapel range has no defensive arrowloops and, unlike the Solar, the evidence for window shutters (which would have provided some protection against attack) is slight.

Beyond the other large window in the Solar (which has hinge-hooks and recesses in its head for folded-back shutters) are two large recesses going down to the floor. The size and position of [*n*] suggest that it might have once been a squint or an arrowloop, overlooking the

Hall roof. The sill was partly cut down to floor level and the recess widened into a hatch (now blocked) giving access to the top of the south-east wall of the Hall for defence or repairs. Recess [*p*] is larger, with a rounded top and tapering plan, perhaps either a former observation window into the Hall, a doorway to a gallery over a ground-floor dais in the Hall or the setting for a lordly seat facing the fireplace of the Solar.

In Kent, ranges touching only at one corner occur in several houses, usually after 1300 (*Court Lodge*, Great Chart, 1313; *Gallant's Manor*, East Farleigh and *Mersham Manor*, both 1322) although at *Nurstead Court*, Meopham, the small but strong block may be earlier than the hall of 1309 to which it is attached (Cherry 1989, 458). We do not know how the new chapel with a garderobe and oriel built in 1289, and a new solar with garderobe towards the south in 1313, were attached at Godmersham (*BL Cotton Ms. Galba E.iv, fol. 105b*, cited by Hudson Turner 1851, 151, fn.).

Previous writers have assumed that the three surviving ranges of *Old Soar* are of the same date, but the skewed openings between the upper rooms [*e, m*] may indicate either later additions or a change of plan while building was in progress. Each of their doorways has only one proper jamb chamfer, the other dying into a wall of the Solar. A possible explanation is that they were originally windows or arrow-loops which were broken out when the smaller ranges were added to the Solar. Unconformities in the external masonry at the re-entrant angles (particularly against the batter along the north-east face of the Solar) also suggest changes. Both the smaller ranges have wallplates lower than those of the Solar. While the Chapel roof is fitted neatly into that of the Solar, the Garderobe is uncomfortable, a hip at one end and a gable at the other. The upper inner face of the west wall of the Chapel and that of the south wall of the Garderobe, if continued, meet the outer angles of the Solar. If the Garderobe east wall had been set further out, the rough oversailing masonry would have been avoided and a straight upper doorway made possible. So there might have been originally an arrowloop at the left-hand end (as seen from inside) of each wall of the Solar [*d, e, m, n*] plus others in the north wall [*k, l*]. This offsetting was necessary because the middle of each wall was taken up by either a large window, the Hall roof frame or the fireplace. Such a minimal provision for the Solar (with [*a*] and [*c*] below) would have needed reinforcement when the smaller ranges were added, by the Garderobe five [*f, g, h, j* with *b* below] but with the loss of two [*e, m*], enlarged into doorways to connect the ranges. This rearrangement still allowed easy internal control: standing in the middle of the Solar. one could see into the Garderobe. the Chapel and

(probably) the Hall, check on those entering the Chapel from outside and also dominate anyone - friend or foe - who came stumbling up the spiral stair, the only direct access to the Solar from below.

Active defence

The arrowloops (**Fig. 2**) were not merely ornamental and symbolic: they were meant to be used. Internally, the rectangular embrasures vary somewhat in height and width, but the general pattern is apparent externally: a slit 5-7cm wide and 90cm long with, towards the upper end, a cross-slit 15cm across, chamfered outward and downward externally to improve the close-up view (and perhaps the zone of fire), made up from four pairs of stones plus a single capstone and a footstone with an half-moon oilet cut into it, all in ashlar. The field of view (and of fire) from each was fairly good. Nearly all the slits are now blocked internally by a translucent sheet to prevent the entry of birds, but the horizontal traverse can be estimated at between 45 and 70°; the vertical arc would depend upon the characteristics of both archer and weapon (crossbow, longbow and shortbow differ significantly in their requirements), but up to $\pm 45^\circ$ might be achieved.

The arrowloops on the stair [*c, d*] are rather smaller than the rest; [*c*] (now blocked by an external brick wall) only has half a cross-slit, but this was correctly sited to allow the best field of view southward. The loop in the Solar basement [*a*] is rather larger than the others, with jambs which only converge through the outer half of the thickness of the wall: it is the only one with both stepped soffit and sill. The Garderobe group [*f, g, h, j*] have stepped soffits.

Date: architectural evidence

The semicircular base oilet is very uncommon in Britain but occurs in high quality early thirteenth-century castles in France (Mesqui 1993, II, 297-300), for example at Loches by 1204 (Langeuin, 1996, figs 11-20). At Coudray-Salbart around 1219, there are also *internally* splayed cross-slits (Baudry 1991, figs 21-61). Contemporary loops at Dover and Rochester are simple vertical slits: cross-slits appear about 1240 at the Tower of London and Kenilworth castle (Warks), although those at Skipton (Yorks, West Riding) might be earlier (Renn 1975). The style of slit in the nearby castle gatehouses at Leybourne (circular oilets at each end of both vertical and cross-slit) and Tonbridge (vertical slit only, trefoil head and circular oilet foot) are very different from each other, although both sets are probably of the late 1260s (Renn 1981, 99-100). Those at *Old Soar* are different again: their small size, high sills and unusual externally-splayed cross-slits

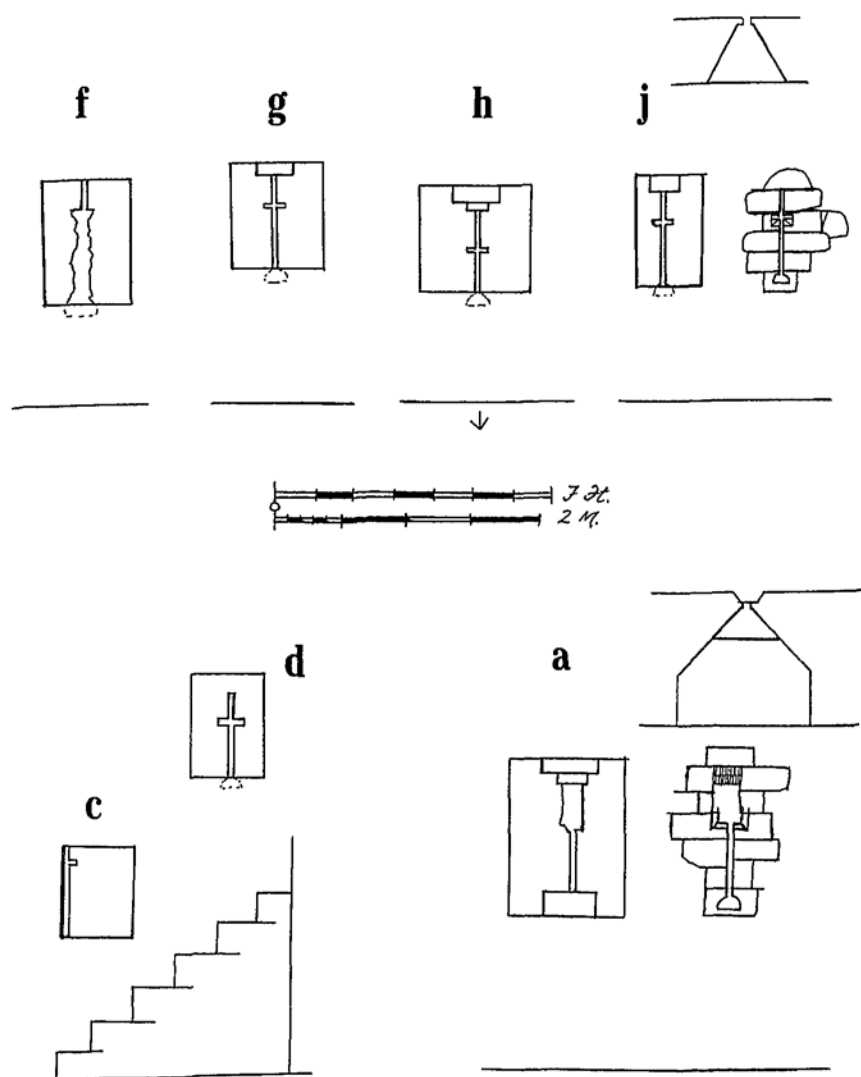


Fig. 2 Details of selected arrowloops at Old Soar Manor in the Garderobe (above) and staircase and Solar (below). See Fig. 1 for sites.

suggest that they were meant to be used by crossbows or shortbows at close range. As at Tonbridge, those on the *Old Soar* stair could be used with caution. Some rectangular openings – perhaps widened from lancets – in the tower at Godlingston manor, Swanage (Dorset)

have cross-arms with somewhat similar external splays (c. 1290: Wood 1950a, 14-15 and pl. IIIC) and a blocked slit on an internal parapet at Allington castle (licensed 1281, see below, page 246) is also comparable.

Wadmore (1897, 312) dated *Old Soar* to the 1350s or 1360s, no doubt influenced by the (inserted) piscina in the Chapel and the (alleged) Culpeper ownership by 1327. Other writers have dated it earlier: Hudson Turner (1851, 175) 'not far from 1300'; Lloyd (1931, 46) to c. 1300; Oswald (1933, 13) 'probably late thirteenth - or early fourteenth-century'; and Wood (1950a, 36, 1950b) to c. 1290. Pearson, Barnwell and Adams (1994, 100) jointly gave it a date bracket of 1271-1299. Elsewhere Barnwell and Adams quote either about 1280 (1994, 11, 75) or about 1290 (*Ibid.*, 88, 93) and Pearson (1994, 37) refers it either to the 1280s or the 1290s. The 1271-1299 date range happens to correspond closely to the ownership of Little Wenham Hall, Suffolk (Wood 1950a, 76-81) by its probable builder (1270/71 to 1294/5: Martin 1998, 160). Little Wenham makes both an interesting comparison and contrast with *Old Soar*: it is largely of brick with stone dressings, L-shaped in plan, the smaller but taller range consisting of storage, chapel and ?bed chamber one above the other. A third range was at one time attached to the opposite corner of the larger range, either a hall or a kitchen (Martin 1998, 162; Quiney 1999, 42). The better quality of Little Wenham's architectural details suggest that its owner was rather higher up the social scale than *Old Soar*'s, and its active defence was external (a moat and a looped parapet) not internal as at *Old Soar*. But *Old Soar*'s owner may simply have had more calls on his purse than Little Wenham's.

Date: historical evidence

Unlike the situation at Little Wenham, the early ownership of *Old Soar* is unknown, although the manor may have included the 1245 holding of Thomas de Shur' in Wrotham (above, page 237). An early thirteenth-century seal matrix was found nearby at Broadfield Farm (Grove 1980). Today, the building lies in Plaxtol parish, part of the large manor of Wrotham belonging to the archbishops of Canterbury, much of which was subinfeudated (Colvin 1964, 4-6) or converted into small lay lordships (Witney 1976, 80) before this was forbidden by the 1290 statute of *Quia emptores*. It adjoins Hurst Woods, part of the archbishop's demesne lands next to Mereworth Woods the pre-Conquest king's wood (Witney 1976, 61, maps 7, 12, 17). Tonbridge was the *caput* of the Clares, earls of Gloucester, and its *lowy* extended to within two miles of *Old Soar* (Dumbreck 1958, esp. fig. 2). The

boundaries of the archbishop's fee and the *lowy* were discussed in 1136 and 1259 (Lambeth MS. 1212 pp. 340, 148-59, cited by Du Boulay 1966, 47, 85). The Clares had held part of Wrotham manor and East Peckham in 1086, purchased land at Hadlow and rented West Peckham (Altschul 1965, 208, 212). Richard de Clare had the view of frankpledge of Mereworth in 1263 and a fee in Swanton (a mile south-east of *Old Soar*) is also mentioned; John Le Hore held a knight's fee (Anon. 1861, 314-5). Pearson (1994, 22-3, 31-2) has suggested that the earliest surviving stone houses in Kent were built for magnates whose principal houses were elsewhere. *Old Soar* may have been a hunting or forester's lodge, but its architectural detail suggests that it was more probably a manor-house for a middle-ranking official, within the archbishop's estates but subject to Clare influence (Ward 1980, 120, 122). The chapel seems to have remained purely manorial (Everitt 1986, 220).

Unusually for a small house, *Old Soar* has very practical defences. There were several turbulent periods for the neighbourhood, particularly during the second half of the thirteenth century, which may have led to this fortification. In 1259 Richard de Clare obtained licence to enclose the town of Tonbridge (CPR 1258-66, 108) and in the following year Roger de Leyburn was ordered to cease fortifying Leybourne (CCIR 1259-61, 283-4). There were disturbances in Kent among the lesser freeholders in 1262 when Henry III annulled the Provisions of Westminster, which had promised local reform and a limit to the powers of officials of the Crown and of the barons alike (Powicke 1947, II, 436-7).

By 1263 the Clares were usurping the rights and franchises of others (Altschul 1965, 213 n.29, 235 n.121). In 1264/5 the king's forces were ravaging Kent while Gilbert de Clare was disputing with Roger de Leyburn (keeper of the county) over rebel lands (CPR 1258-66, 490, 493). About 1265 Gilbert began strengthening Tonbridge castle with a powerful gatehouse, only five miles to the south of *Old Soar*, while Roger was doing the same at Leybourne only five miles in the other direction (Renn 1981, 100; Simmonds 1998). The roving 'Disinherited' and their men added to the disruption of the time. Roger de Leyburn was improving his local strength, replacing gavel-kind tenure by knight service (CCIR 1272-9, 203; Hundred Rolls I, 201 and *Placita de Quo Warranto* 342, 356, cited by Du Boulay 1962). He acquired Leeds castle in 1268 but his heir surrendered it for debt ten years later (Colvin, Brown and Taylor 1963, II, 695). In 1271 Stephen de Penchester was granted licence to crenellate his manor house at Hever and ten years later (with his wife) another to crenellate their manor of Allington (CPR 1266-72, 507; 1272-81, 437). The

only other local licences to crenellate before (say) 1308 were a few miles west over the Surrey border, at Lagham in 1262 and at Addington in 1269 (CPR 1258-66, 199; 1266-72, 395).

From this, it is tempting to associate the building of *Old Soar* with the 1260s, but this appears to be ruled out on architectural grounds. The Clare encroachments were examined in 1274 and 1279 (Furley 1874, II chapter VI; Dumbreck 1958). From about 1268 until his death in 1295, Gilbert de Clare was engaged on the Welsh march and Altschul (1965) describes how King Edward I reduced the Clare power, first by the general *Quo warranto* inquest from 1281 and then by the Brecknock case and the marriage treaty of 1289-90. The Leyburn power also declined after the death of Roger in 1271, but that of the Penchesters rose, with their licences to crenellate Hever and Allington already mentioned. Were these fortified houses responses to real threats or simply symbolic gestures? Local disputes would have multiplied with the reduction of the power of Clare and Leyburn after 1270. The political crisis and local frauds of 1297 (Prestwich 1997, 425, 431) is another possible context for the fortification of *Old Soar*.

Conclusion

Old Soar manor lands probably extended south and west of the house. While the vanished Hall and outworks may also have had defensive features, the strongest face of *Old Soar* today, with the majority of the arrowloops, is towards the north and west, facing the sharply rising ground and the droveways from Wrotham (Everitt 1986, 207, 216). The turbulent local history in the late thirteenth century provides contexts for the defensive aspect of the surviving medieval part of the house.

Anyone standing in the middle of the upper room of the Solar range was in command of the whole building, both psychologically and practically, with a view extending into all the ranges. The original upper Solar may have had one arrowloop in each wall, plus one in the undercroft and another at the foot of the stair, providing some view and fire cover all round, but with 'dead zones', allowing attackers to approach both unseen and unhindered from certain directions. These 'dead zones' are reduced but not eliminated by the arrowloops in the Garderobe: the eastern side, with most of the Chapel range, was apparently unprotected. However, with defences both active (arrowloops) and passive (the 'dead ends' of the ground floor rooms of the Chapel, Garderobe and perhaps the Solar, the latrine, the awkward entry to, and ending of, the stairwell with an intermediate door), such

a small building might be held successfully (for a time) by two or three people, like the town jail in many a Western film. This demonstrates how much thought went into the design of the manor house of *Old Soar*.

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