

THE 15th CENTURY OPEN HALL HOUSE OF WOKING

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On my monthly Heritage Walks around Woking and North West Surrey, I often talk about buildings that started out as 'open hall houses', but what exactly was an 'open hall'.



The thatched Elmbriidge Cottage in Kingfield Road has signs of an internal jetty over its open hall.

Almost opposite Brooklyn Road, Cross Lanes Farm & April Cottage was once a two bay open hall house.

Most homes now have central heating, but before the advent of radiators or under-floor heating almost every house had fireplaces – even if they were only in one or two rooms. But a fireplace, or more specifically the bricks required for its chimney, were very expensive. In medieval times apart from the richest households few could afford enough bricks or tiles to make a hearth, let alone a chimney. The solution was to place the fire in the middle of the house so that it could warm (to a limited extent) the rooms around it. With the fire in the middle of the hall, open to the rafters, it shouldn't set fire to any of the timbers or wattle and daub partitions, and the smoke could easily escape through the thatch of the roof. The fire would not just provide heat for the house - it was where all the food was cooked and liquids boiled. Almost every inventory taken after the death of a local householder recorded the apparatus required to cook on the open fire. There were brackets and hooks, pot-holders and spits with cob irons, pot-holders, plus the various vessels to cook things in, such as cauldrons, kettles, pots and pans.

Edward Matthews of Woking who died in 1573 had 'one lyttell spit and to lyttell cobyornes' (worth just two shillings) with a 'gryddyorne and a ffrying pane' worth eight pence; whilst John Shaddatt (or Sherratt) of Woking eight years later has recorded in the inventory after he died 'a pothangar, pothoukes, cobyams, trevettes and tonges' worth six shillings.



The open hall was the centre of the house, with the parlour and buttery (where the butts of ale were stored) in the service wing to one side with a bed-chamber above, and in the more substantial houses another ground floor room off the other side of the hall with a bed-chamber above that too. But the space above the open fire obviously had to be kept clear to the roof (a waste of space that could only be exploited once a smoke bay or chimney was added) and it is often the soot on the rafters in the roof that are the tell tale sign that a house once had an 'open hall'.

In Surrey we are fortunate to have a group of enthusiasts who go around looking at old buildings, working out their date of construction from the cut of the timbers, the joints that the carpenters used, and other evidence such as the soot from an open fire. They are the Domestic Buildings Research Group (Surrey) and in Woking alone they have looked at nearly one hundred listed buildings in the borough to carefully decipher when they were first built, which bits may have been removed or replaced and when any alterations were made.

Their reports, together with the listing of buildings of national importance, reveal that a number of houses in this area date from at least the 15th century, with many of those starting out life as simple open hall houses. Elmbridge Cottage in Kingfield, Chestnut Cottage at Sutton Park, and Beetle Cottage at Carthouse Lane in Horsell were all such buildings, with Esgairs in Horsell High Street also once being part of a 15th century open hall



Hunts Farm, on the roundabout in Mayford, dates from the mid 15th century, with a 17th century wing added to the front. It was probably the home of William de Hunte in 1583.

house before a smoke bay was added in the 16th century with other alterations in almost every century since.

Indeed all of the houses that date back to the 15th century have been substantially altered, with often whole bays being taken down and rebuilt, new wings added, and the original wattle and daub walls being replaced by bricks (probably when they became much cheaper in the 18th or 19th centuries). There are minor alterations too, with the replacement of rotten

beams, the blocking up (or opening) of windows and doors and the changing of fireplaces – which prompted one of my walkers to once query 'well how much of this 15th century house that you are talking about is actually 15th century?' The answer, quite often, is very little, but that is not the point. The point is that by carefully unravelling the layers of history (each layer being of interest in its own right), we can take ourselves back to the time of Edward Matthews and John Sherratt, and build up a detailed history of the area house by house.

EAST GUISE FARM, HORSELL HIGH STREET



According to the DBRG, Esgairs in Horsell High Street is a two bay wing of a medieval hall house, with a smoke bay added in the 16th century. The brick gabled front to the road is much later, being added in the 18th century when bricks started to become cheaper and more the fashion.

At that stage it was known as East Guise Farm, with a John Freeland leaving his daughter Ann in January 1730 his 'leasehold messuage and seven plots of arable land known as East Guise, in Horsell'.

By the 19th century it was not at all fashionable to have a timber-framed house and there are many cases of old houses being encased in brick to make them look 'younger' than they really were. Which might explain why in 1841 an auction notice recorded the 'substantial brick built dwelling' called

"Eastgaze Farm House", with 'six convenient bed rooms, large kitchen and two parlours, with wash-house – dairy and cellar'.

Any auction notice or estate agents blurb today would almost certainly emphasise the old timber framing, and delight in pointing out the evidence of the 15th century open hall – no matter how little of that evidence can be actually seen!

THE LOST OPEN HALL OF ANNE SYNACLES IN OLD WOKING?



In some cases the open hall part of the building has been lost or replaced, but the signs are still there in the timbers that remain. No 1 Church Cottages in Church Street Old Woking is one such building. The little row of cottages behind the main house on the road dates from the mid 15th century and it appears from their timbers that originally there was an open hall house at the front. That is before it was demolished in the 18th century and replaced by the current Church Cottage facing the street.

The manor court records in the mid 16th century record a cottage with garden near the church called 'Synacles' which some have postulated might be No 1 Church Cottages. In which case it seems likely that the old open hall at the front was once part of the home of Alice Synacle who died in 1489.