

THE VANISHING HOUSES OF KENT

4. BRIDGE FARM, BRIDGE

By E. W. PARKIN

At a meeting of the joint sub-committee of the Kent Archaeological Society and the Council for the Preservation of Rural Kent in June 1962, a member reported that a house and outbuildings known as Bridge Farm, at Bridge near Canterbury, was to suffer immediate demolition.

The following Sunday several members visited Bridge, and found that the tiles had already been removed from the house.

At first glance, the house appeared to be a very ordinary eighteenth-century one, with a front of stucco, sides of weatherboard, and with three small bays and a doorway on the street front (Plate IA). It was situated on the main Canterbury to Dover road, known as Watling Street, in the centre of the village and almost directly opposite the White Horse Inn. Behind it was a square farmyard with a large and ancient barn, two cow-sheds and other buildings (Fig. 1).

The continuous jetty or overhang at the front gave the first clue that the house might be much older than it appeared, and as demolition proceeded, and the main timbers were exposed, this became increasingly evident. The right-hand end of the jetty proved to be false, and masked a fifteenth-century wagon entrance, which it will be noted, was in a direct line with the gateway into the farmyard. Over this wagon entrance was found a small medieval room complete with a transverse crown-post roof. The remainder of the house had once been a typical fifteenth-century Wealden house, with a central hall open to the roof, and small rooms each side of it, the upper ones being jettied out at the front. When wide brick fireplaces became the fashion in Tudor times, the open, central hearth was no longer needed, and an upper floor was usually inserted in the hall. In this house all evidence pointed to such an alteration having been made in the first half of the seventeenth century when a great fireplace was built at the rear of the old hall (Plate IIA) and an upper floor inserted, with joists protruding over the lower timbers, and giving now a continuous jetty on the street front as far as the wagon entrance. Windows of this period discovered under laths and plaster, confirm the date.



A. The house, seen from the road.



B. Same view later, showing wagon entrance.



A. View of rear of the house.



B. Remains of original stairway.

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A second 'modernization' of the house took place late in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, when its general appearance became very much as it was in modern times. Mortises at the extreme right-hand end of the building showed that another timbered house had once stood there, but it must have been pulled down not later than

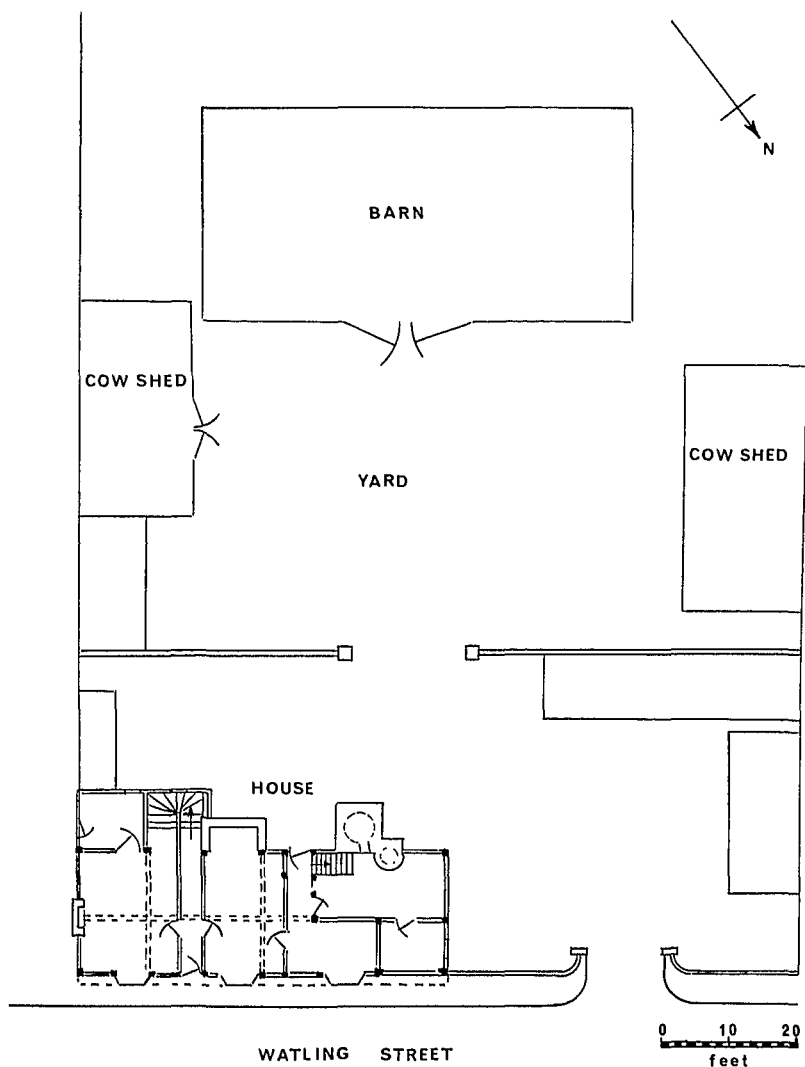
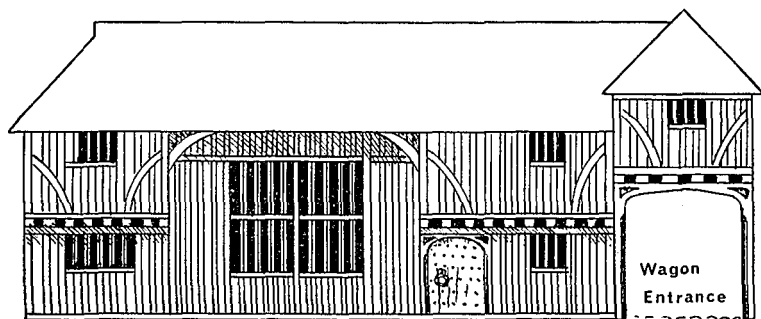


FIG. 1.

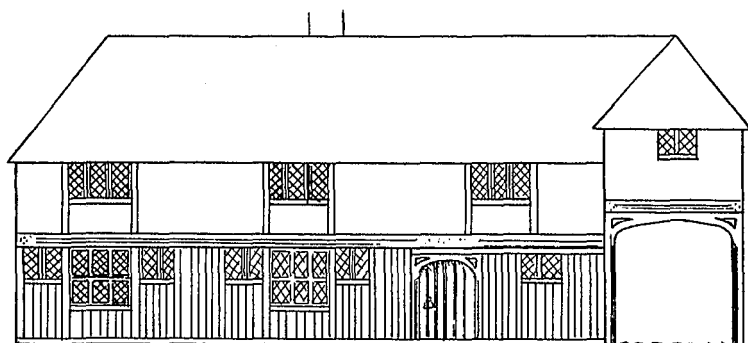
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the eighteenth century, when the wagon entrance was blocked and the way into the farmyard was moved further to the right.

Fig. 2 shows the appearance of the house during these three main periods of its history. May we now look a little more closely at the origins and at the constructional details of Bridge Farm?



15th Century



17th Century



18th Century

FIG. 2.

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EARLY HISTORY

Little is known of this, but there is little doubt that the farm was once part of the Bridge estate known in more recent times as Bridge Place. Hasted tells us that the manor of Blackmansbury, alias Bregg or Bridge was in early times parcel of the possessions of the Abbey of Saint Augustine, and belonged to the sacristry. After the dissolution of the monasteries the manor passed to one, Henry Laurence, and at his death to his son John. From him it was sold to a William Partherich, and passed ultimately to his son Edward. In 1638 we read of the property being transferred to Sir Arnold Braems, a gentleman of Flemish origin. It was he who pulled down the old Court Lodge, and built on the site a large mansion known later as Bridge Place. This was sold in 1704 to Sir John Taylor of nearby Bifrons, who pulled down all but one wing of the mansion, which has remained until modern times.

Of the farm with which we are concerned no separate mention is made, and we have only the structural evidence which tells its own story.

FIFTEENTH CENTURY

As has already been stated, the farm house was originally a typical timber-framed Wealden house built during the first half of the fifteenth century, with a wagon entrance leading to the buildings behind it. Evidence supporting this date was found in such details as the moulding of the crenellated beam at the service end of the hall, in the four-centred arches and the plain hollow spandrels of original doorways. The tall wagon entrance (Plate IB) had moulded jambs and a flat arch with the same hollow spandrels. Above this arch the small medieval room with its separate crown-post roof remained virtually intact. Of the main part of the house most of the timber-framing remained, though much mutilated. The old front doorway was discovered under laths and plaster but directly behind this only the rear half of the cross passage survived. Here was one of the service doors, the back doorway itself with its short speer or screen still intact in the partition wall, and, on the other side of the back door a steep stairway. This proved to be one of the most interesting finds in the house; its treads were worn and old, but on being tapped they sounded curiously solid. The foreman in charge of the demolition obligingly removed one of the treads and a riser, and underneath was discovered the solid block stairway which had once been part of the old house (Fig. 3). Apart from one missing tread the stairs were intact, and exactly similar to other medieval stairs still surviving in Kent and Essex.¹ Eight solid oak steps of

¹ The most perfect surviving example of a medieval solid-block stairway is at Old Bell Farm, at Harrietsham, others are at Pierce House, Charing, Rochester, Buston near Maidstone, and in Essex at Great Easton, Thaxted and Theydon.

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triangular section were nailed on to two sloping bearers, a third central bearer having been added at some later date. Each tread measured 3 ft. 3 in. by $7\frac{1}{2}$ in., rising 8 to 9 in., the angle of the stairway being thus about 47 degrees from the horizontal. The bearers were $5\frac{1}{2}$ in. wide by $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick, and were nailed to a heavy beam at the top, and to a baulk of oak 8 in. square behind the door sill at the bottom. Each triangular step was fixed by only two large hand-made nails near the bottom edge, and although some of the nail heads had rusted completely away, all the steps except one were still firmly fixed (Fig. 3 and Plate IIB).

The house must have presented a very attractive appearance at this time, for on the front of the house vertical timbers known as studs were set close together. The position of several of the earliest unglazed windows was noted under bressumers or wall-plates, where grooves for sliding shutters and 'diamond' mortises for oak window bars were found.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

In the first half of the seventeenth century alterations and improvements were made to the house, presumably by Sir Arnold Braems, the wealthy Flemish merchant who purchased the estate in 1638. An upper floor was inserted in the old hall, the cross-girders of which were beautifully moulded, while the roof of the main part of the house was rebuilt at this time, re-using most of the old timbers. The great fireplace at the rear of the hall was added, and attractive windows with leaded diamond panes put in. These had mullions and transoms of 'ovolo' section typical of the period, and the glass was reinforced by vertical iron bars. Two windows at the front of the house measured 4ft. 4 in. wide by 3 ft. 8 in. high, and were bordered at the top and at each side by small two-light windows sometimes referred to as 'frieze' windows.

At this time the protruding ends of the joists, over the front jetty were covered by carved and moulded fascia boards, fragments of which were found *in situ*.

A ground plan of the house after these alterations would have shown two large rooms with two small service rooms at the west end, the rear one of which contained the steep solid block staircase. The corresponding stairway at the far side of the hall must have been removed at this time, and no trace of a main staircase of this period could be found.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Late in this century or early in the nineteenth, the house received its second and final 'modernization'. All older windows were covered with laths and plaster, the three small bays on the street front were inserted also the three corresponding sash windows on the floor above. The old

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front doorway was blocked, and a new and narrower one let in between the two left-hand bays. Behind this, a narrow passage now led to the newel staircase built out at the back. The brickwork surrounding this showed it to be later than the great fireplace.

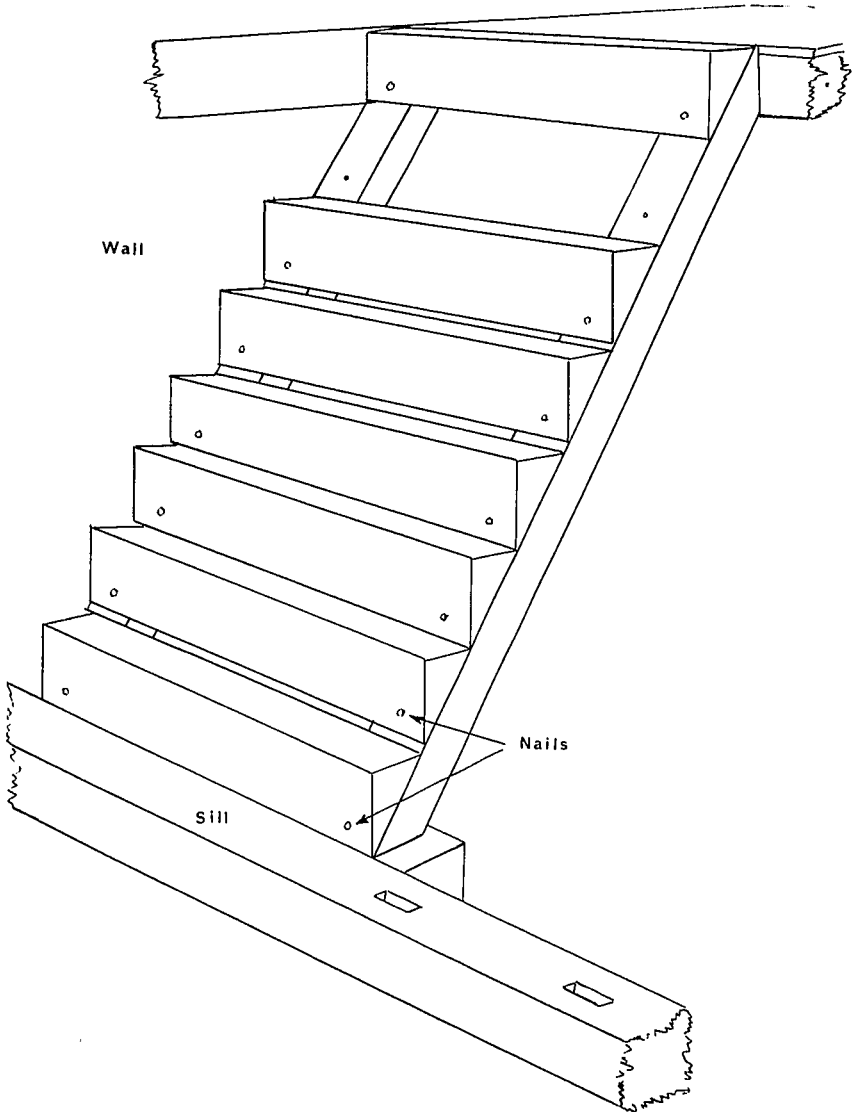


FIG. 3.

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The wagon entrance was now blocked, and, as has already been stated the entrance to the farmyard moved further to the right.

At the rear the bread oven was probably added during the 1638 alterations, when red brick floors were put in on the ground floor. The copper dates from the nineteenth century.

FARM BUILDINGS

Of these, the great barn and the cowshed to the left of it undoubtedly date from the fifteenth century, though both had been much restored and had newer roofs. The main posts, tie-beams and other timbers of the barn were original, though patched and repaired in places, the outside had been covered with weatherboarding. The cowshed had only a few of its original timbers left, and had been largely rebuilt, with an infilling of red brick. The rest of the sheds were nineteenth century or modern.

This house had many points of close resemblance to Durlock Grange, the first house reviewed in this series,² both houses had belonged in the first place to the Abbey of Saint Augustine, and in both cases the last owner was the then Marquis of Conyngham. Both houses must have been built very nearly at the same time, perhaps by the same master carpenter of Abbot Hunden, exactly similar details of design, mouldings, construction and so on seem to confirm this.

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² *Arch. Cant.*, lxxvii (1962), 82-91.