

Each month of this 125th anniversary year, COUNTRY LIFE will illustrate a period in the development of the English great house, from the Middle Ages to the present day. In the first of this 12-part series, John Goodall looks at the architecture of the Norman and Plantagenet home

AT sunset on December 29, 1170, a group of knights famously murdered Archbishop Thomas Becket in the lamp-lit gloom of Canterbury Cathedral. Less well known is the fact that this brutal episode followed an angry confrontation in the archbishop's house, laid out in the shadow of the cathedral. It's possible to reconstruct from the various eye-witness accounts of this episode—as well as the archaeology of the site (the last parts of the building described here were swept away in the 1830s)—a vivid impression of a 12th-century English residence on the grand scale and the realities of life within it.

Whether in towns or the countryside, large houses of this period—together with their surrounding gardens—were usually laid out inside walled or ditched enclosures. In the case of castles, these enclosures could be fortified on a monumental scale, but even at Canterbury the archbishop's house occupied a walled precinct with a gate. It was part

of a huge three-acre site cleared at the expense of the town after the Norman Conquest.

The knights entered this precinct at about 3pm, having previously replaced the archbishop's gatekeeper with one of their own men. This is one of many details that underlines the ubiquity of servants in medieval domestic life, the importance of their personal loyalty and their specific responsibilities. They entered a spacious courtyard with freestanding buildings dotted around it

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including service buildings, stabling, a guest house, a residential block and kitchens. Collectively, these comprised the archbishop's house and the chief elements of it would have been monumental in scale (*Fig 1*).

The living unit of the great medieval residence was not the family, but the household. This comprised individuals of every social degree, from knights to menial servants who were united in the service of one important individual, in this case the archbishop. In return, they were fed, clothed and accommodated according to their status. Households were divided into specialist departments, each charged with particular concerns, such as cooking, stabling, the chapel or hunting, and, following the figures they served, moved continuously between residences. Except in the households of noblewomen, the retinue was almost exclusively male. →

Fig 1: The keep at Hedingham Castle, Essex, was built to mark the elevation of its owner to the dignity of an earldom in 1141. The scale and ornament of its main room—perhaps intended as an outer, ceremonial chamber—hints at the splendour and formality of 12th-century noble life





Leaving their horses beneath a ‘mulberry’ tree on that fateful day and disarming themselves—for guests an action as reflexive as taking off coats—the knights walked to the hall. This was the communal focus of life for the many people who lived and worked in this sprawling residence and also the entrance chamber of the house (for which reason we still call the entrance room of a house the ‘hall’). By long tradition stretching back to the Anglo-Saxon period, the hall was the largest room in a house. It was always covered by a high, open timber roof, warmed by a central hearth and entered at one end through a porch and door asymmetrically placed in a long wall of the building.

In this period, the hall was a multipurpose space used for eating, ceremony, judicial proceedings and even for sleeping (household members probably slept where they worked). The furniture within it, therefore, changed both through the course of the day and depending on the function of the moment. It also needed to be easily dismountable. The room would have been strewn with rushes that freshened the air and kept the floor, which was probably of beaten earth, dry.

Most halls, including this Canterbury example, were ground-level rooms, although there was also an English tradition of building first-floor halls from the Norman Conquest, as, for example, the 1080s Scolland’s Hall at Richmond Castle, North Yorkshire.

Fig 2 above: The 1340s hall of Penshurst Place, Kent, with its single-span roof and central hearth. In the distance is the dais reserved for the high table. Fig 3 below: The 1180s hall of Oakham Castle, Rutland. The walls preserve traces of medieval decoration. Edward IV apparently instigated the curious tradition of presenting horseshoes



It’s likely that the hall roof was supported by arcades constructed of stone or timber that ran the length of the room (**Fig 3**) and it is also possible that fabrics were hung on the lower register of the walls (a treatment sometimes depicted in English wall paintings).

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The archbishop had recently finished lunch, which he had eaten in the hall with his household. At this date, all households ate in common and the provision of food to members always remained important. As a consequence, cooking was undertaken on an industrial scale in enormous kitchens (**Fig 7**). The religious calendar and the seasons imposed strikingly different menus through the year, but we know from monastic evidence that, from at least the 12th century, dishes were served to ‘messes’ or small groups of people, usually four, who were seated together. They ate with their fingers and knives off plates of bread, termed trenchers. The quality and quantity of food served to a mess might depend on their status within the household.

Tables—set on trestles for ease of movement—were ranged round the room with



Fig 4: The hall of Wells, Somerset, built by Bishop Burnell in the 1280s. As was typical by this date, the upper parts of the windows were glazed and the lower sections barred. Both levels could be sealed with shutters. The hall interior once possessed an encaustic tile floor and arcades. The idea of adding a battlemented parapet—rather than gables—to a non-defensive building proved hugely influential

those eating seated with their backs to the wall. This created space for servants to move around in the middle of the room. It's likely that the archbishop's seat was centrally placed at the end of the hall opposite the porch entrance. He would have been the only person to be served with his own mess and his household probably sat in hierarchical relationship to his seat. By the 14th century, the area around the principal hall seat was a privileged area, termed a dais, usually defined by a step. In the 12th century, hall arrangements could be more varied.

As the knights encountered it, however, lunch had recently finished and the archbishop had withdrawn from the hall with some senior members of his household leaving a milling crowd of people behind. At the same time, the archbishop's servants, who had waited at his table, were themselves

now eating. Some late-medieval households might have three sittings for meals, with the first being the most formal. The knights were greeted by the archbishop's steward, a knight called William FitzNeal. He was the household officer in charge of the hall and offered the intruders food as part of this second mealtime sitting; hospitality was an important obligation.

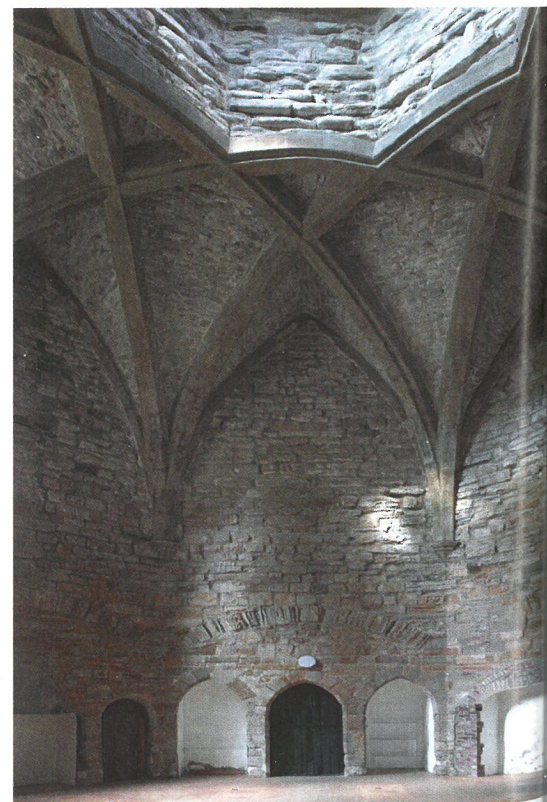
Refusing food, the knights demanded the archbishop be informed of a message they carried from the King. FitzNeal conducted them upstairs to the first floor of a range attached to the hall; his attendance licensed their passage beyond the public hall. They were led through an 'outer' chamber, which was filled with the other members of the household who had withdrawn from the hall, to the presence of the archbishop in an 'inner' chamber—also his bedroom—beyond.

They found Becket seated on his bed and in conversation with a monk. Beds were valuable pieces of furniture and it remained common to use them as daytime chairs even into the 15th century. For this reason, their dressing with curtains and testers directly informed the design of canopied thrones (**Fig 8**). It would be typical of the period if this room had a fireplace and the walls painted with figurative imagery or hung with fabrics for warmth, but there is no record of either detail in this case.

In a deliberate slight, the archbishop initially paid no attention to the knights, who sat down—presumably on the floor—at his feet. When he did greet them, they asked whether he wanted to hear their message publicly or privately. His first reaction was to dismiss the monk in the room, but, when he guessed at the nature of the message—and their →



Fig 5 above: At Stokesay Castle, Shropshire, of the 1290s, the elements of a grand medieval house have been drawn together, but are externally legible. Note, for example, the gabled hall. Fig 6 below left: Longthorpe Tower, Cambridgeshire, with 1340s painted decoration. The chequered 'cloth' was possibly the backdrop to a bed. Fig 7 below right: The monumental 14th-century Prior's Kitchen at Durham. Food was the most expensive outlay for the household and was prepared on an industrial scale by specialist staff



hostility—he called on the usher, who controlled the bedroom door (and had clearly remained in the room), to admit his ‘clerks’. The ensuing exchange grew heated and everyone stood up. One account describes the enraged knights twisting their gloves into knots and gesticulating wildly. At the sound of the quarrel, both chambers began to fill up with members of the household.

Eventually, the knights stormed out and the archbishop pursued them to the threshold of his chamber, shouting after them that if they came back they would find him here. One of the archbishop’s followers later criticised this action; he should have remained calm and on his bed. The knights returned to the mulberry tree and began to arm themselves, forcing the archbishop’s trencherman, Robert Tibias, to help. Two of their party, meanwhile, then rode fully mounted and armed into the hall porch to keep the door open, evidence of its scale.

Nevertheless, two servants, Osbert and Algar, managed to shut and bar the hall door, forcing the knights to find another way back in. Passing between the hall and the kitchen, they entered an orchard and, breaking down a wooden fence, they got access to an external staircase that connected the archbishop’s outer chamber to this garden area. The staircase was being repaired and the workmen had abandoned their tools for lunch (perhaps they qualified for the second sitting in the hall). Using these and a ladder, the knights forced their way in and fought their way back to the hall to let in reinforcements. Meanwhile, the terrified archbishop’s clerks dragged their resisting master from his chamber down a back stair to the cloister and cathedral, where he was murdered minutes later.

The buildings in which this drama was enacted were constructed in the late 11th century, but they illustrate the essential form of a great English residence throughout the high Middle Ages with a hall (entered through a porch), a sequence of withdrawing rooms beyond it and a kitchen. Most houses possessed a chapel, too. From the 13th century, chapels began to incorporate ‘closets’ or ‘parcloses’. These might be small rooms or even fabric tents in which the head of the household could perform their devotions alone and they can claim to be the first properly private spaces in English domestic life. Privacy, indeed, in the modern sense, was strikingly lacking in Becket’s domestic arrangements.

As at Canterbury, these constituent buildings of a great house could all be freestanding, but in castle architecture—as, for example, the 1090s keep at Norwich—and with growing regularity in courtyard houses from the late 13th century onwards, they were often linked together. Even then, it was common



Fig 8: A re-creation of a late-12th-century bed at Dover, Kent, derived from stained glass, manuscripts and rare surviving pieces of furniture. Beds might be used as thrones

for the internal function of each part of the building to be externally legible, with contrasting window forms and outlines (**Fig 5**).

Over the same period, the hall, although it retained its use as a place for eating meals, gradually became less of a focus of life for those at both extremes of the household. Servants ceased to sleep here and senior members of the household withdrew into steadily larger and more complex sequences of withdrawing chambers. This latter change was famously lamented in the late-14th-century poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman*: ‘Wretched is the hall... there neither the lord nor lady likes to sit [but]... to eat by himself in a private parlour to avoid poor men, or in a chamber with a chimney [Passus X].’ Such rooms were hung with fabrics or painted (**Fig 6**).

Despite this change—or perhaps because of it—the idea of the hall as an architectural expression of the household’s corporate identity lost none of its force. Paradoxically, as these buildings grew less important, they also became more splendid, with tall windows (**Fig 4**) and single-span roofs (**Fig 2**). They also underwent further standardisation

of layout. In particular, from the mid 14th century, there is documentary reference to fixed timber screens in halls. These created a so-called ‘screens passage’ or lobby at one end of the room onto which the entrance, kitchen and service doors all opened.

Until the late 13th century, timber remained the most common material for the construction of domestic buildings. England enjoyed a well-developed tradition of architectural carpentry, so such buildings were not necessarily crude or comfortless. Thereafter, however, and depending on the materials available locally, stone grew steadily more common. It was often used for the most important elements—notably withdrawing chambers and chapels—rather than the whole structure. Halls and service buildings were commonly of timber frame throughout this period.

The essential form of the residence occupied by Becket at Canterbury not only proved extremely long lasting, but was imitated on different scales at all levels of medieval society. As we will see in the months ahead, it was also of foundational importance to the entire tradition of English domestic architecture. 🐉