



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. This week, John Goodall looks at the 15th-century home

ON May 20, 1612, two gentlemen arrived at the village of Ewelme, Oxfordshire, with a royal commission to value the remains of the manor house there. This once magnificent building, erected in the 1440s, had fallen into neglect and its materials were a tempting source of money for the cash-strapped James I. Soon after the visit, therefore, the site was almost completely cleared and the brick, tile, stone, timber and iron sold off. The survey is one of several documents that can be used to reconstruct a uniquely detailed impression of this exceptional lost building and—by extension—the organisation, appearance and furnishing of a great English house in the 15th century.

Ewelme Manor was a favoured residence from 1435 of William de la Pole and his wife, Alice, the granddaughter of the poet Geoffrey Chaucer. William, who inherited the Earldom of Suffolk, secured the favour of the boy king Henry VI and—in the eyes of hostile critics—proceeded to usurp the resources of the realm to himself. He was elevated in 1444 to the estate of Marquess and then, in 1448, to that of Duke of Suffolk. Following English reverses in France, however, his enemies struck back and, in 1450, he was brutally murdered; decapitated with a rusty sword in a parody of a nobleman's execution. Alice

survived him for a further 25 years and, as a widow, proved a formidable power herself.

The manor at Ewelme, the former seat of Alice's father, was one of several residences regularly used by the couple. They also owned Wingfield Castle in their titular county of Suffolk and a great house at Kingston-upon-Hull, East Yorkshire, where the de la Pole family first made their money in the wool trade. Their household regularly moved between these properties and London, the seat of the royal administration, as pleasure and business demanded. Ewelme, standing in relative proximity to Henry VI's favoured seat at Windsor, served both purposes, hence its extravagant remodelling from 1444.

As were all grand medieval residences, the manor house was the focus of an agricultural estate and, according to the 1612 survey, including stables, barns, a pool and other ancillary buildings, extended over nine acres. No less conventional—although not referred to in the survey—is the fact that the village parish church, which was completely rebuilt by the couple in the 1430s, also formed part of its architectural landscape (*Fig 7*). The church still has attached to it not only the burial chapel of the Chaucers (the dead of English noble families usually resided close to the living), but an almshouse for family retainers and a school founded by the Duke and Duchess in 1437. Both still operate today.

In 1612, the entrance to the domestic heart of the manor house was through a gatehouse two storeys high. This gave access to an →

Fig 1: Great Chalfield, Wiltshire, of the 1460s. The grouping of gables reflects the developing interest in symmetry





Fig 2: The late-15th-century chapel at Knole, Kent. Whole communities of clergy might celebrate divine service in great residences

outer or 'base' court of service buildings, including a lodging range that provided individual rooms for at least 10 senior members of the ducal household. This was the home of a very large community. Beyond this and encircled by a moat were the principal domestic interiors long familiar in a house of this scale—a hall, chambers, chapel and kitchens. Importantly, these were no longer dotted around as individual, free-standing buildings, as they might have been in a 12th-century residence. Instead, they were integrated to form an inner court.

At this period, there was a conscious attempt to impose symmetry and regularity on the design of English domestic buildings (*Fig 1*). The survey certainly implies regularity in its estimates of wall depths and construction,

but it also notes the existence of windows in many sizes. This suggests that, although the courtyard was probably laid out on a coherent four-square plan, in time-honoured English fashion, the different types of fenestration made the position of each element of the house legible externally.

The inner court was constructed in brick detailed with parapets, windows and doors of cut stone. This combination of materials, which created rich contrasts of colour, was a fashionable novelty in the 1440s (and a taste for it continued in the English tradition of grand domestic architecture into the early 18th century). The technology of mass-producing brick—the English name, like so much else in this period hinting at admiration of things French—was introduced to England by

Continental craftsmen in the 1420s and, within a century, was almost universally available across the kingdom (*Fig 3*).

In 1612, the chambers of the inner court were 'utterly wasted and decayed' and we must turn to yet earlier descriptions of the manor house to rescue some sense of their opulence. A herald, Richard Lee, visiting in 1574, recorded several coats of arms in the windows of the building. Heraldic glazing schemes were a commonplace of the period and the arms he saw probably decorated the hall windows, which were otherwise set with clear glass. In addition, however, Lee marvelled at the wider decoration of the interiors: 'Note that the the roofs of all the principal rooms in this house... be garnished with these things forunder very rich with



Fig 3 above: **Herstmonceux Castle, East Sussex**, lavishly built in the 1440s with a combination of brick and stone detailing.

Fig 4 right: **Crosby Hall, relocated to Chelsea from the City of London**. The high windows allowed for the display of tapestries on the lower walls. From the late 14th century, hall oriel windows were privileged spaces

diverse other devices so rich as I did never see the like.' To illustrate his text, he draws three images of a 'wool pack', 'blue skeins of thread' and a 'box and collar', the last a 'clog' worn by pet monkeys.

These images in blue and gold almost certainly decorated the panelled timber ceilings of the withdrawing chambers (*Fig 6*) that lay beyond the public space of the hall (although they may also have appeared in the glass). During the 14th century, it became common for families to assume identifying badges, which they employed in addition to heraldry as marks of ownership. They could be playful—like the clog—or represent names in visual form, a so-called rebus. Some Lancastrian courtiers used them to celebrate their royal offices (*Fig 8*). In this case, the Duke was appointed Governor of the Wool Staple at Calais in 1448, which presumably explains the wool packs (like the Lord Chancellor's seat in the House of Lords) and thread.

‘At this period, there was a conscious attempt to impose symmetry and regularity on domestic buildings’

A yet earlier visitor reveals another unexpected detail of this magnificent interior. In about 1545—when Henry VIII had grand plans to develop Ewelme as a major royal seat—the antiquarian John Leland marvelled that the 'fair' hall had 'great bars of iron overthwart it instead of cross beams'. These must have been a striking feature of the interior for him to have noticed them. The 1612 account mechanically notes two bars of cast iron →





Fig 5: The great chamber at Lydington, Rutland, naked of tapestries and fittings

weighing a quarter of a ton crossing the hall, but, sadly, offers no insight into their form.

It's easy to forget that both Lee and Leland admired Ewelme Manor as an architectural shell with only its permanent fittings—ceilings, windows and spaces—visible (**Fig 5**). To the Duke and Duchess, it would have seemed naked in this form because, when they were in residence, it would have been filled with portable possessions of immense value. Incredibly, at Ewelme, we can glimpse that reality through a surviving series of inventories drawn up between August and December 1466 that describe the house dressed for the occupation of Duchess Alice and for the lying in of her daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, Duchess of Suffolk, the sister of Edward IV.

These were almost certainly drawn up by—or for—Alice's chaplain, the punctilious man of business Master Simon Brayles. Given the complications of living between houses, they show a particular concern with recording the provenance of objects, whether stored at Ewelme or brought from Wingfield or London. The most important of them is a room-by-room description of the tapestries on both the walls and beds of the principal rooms.

English domestic spaces had long been hung with fabrics for decoration and warmth, but it was Richard II (d. 1400) who pioneered the English taste for these portable wall-coverings woven with imagery. Tapestries were not only fabulously expensive, but they were also extremely difficult to acquire. Those who wanted to buy them needed to operate through agents in the centres of their production in northern France in modern-day Belgium (including Arras, by which name they are sometimes known). They also required



Fig 6 above: Domestic ceilings could be painted, in the manner of surviving church interiors, as here at the Great Hospital, Norwich, Norfolk. Fig 7 below: The characteristic juxtaposition of church and castle at Tattershall, Lincolnshire, begun in the 1440s





Fig 8: Domestic glass of the 1440s by royal glazier John Prudde at Ockwells, Berkshire. It includes mottos and the device of crossed distaffs, an emblem of service to the Queen

royal licences to import them. Today, tapestries can look fustian, but the modern viewer must imagine them as portable wall paintings, freshly made and brilliantly coloured. Indeed, those who couldn't afford the real thing painted cloths with imagery to resemble them.

Such was the prestige attached to tapestries that they changed the form of the English interior: to hang them, it became conventional to elevate the windows of halls—and sometimes other formal chambers, too—to the cornice level so as to create a blind lower register to the wall (Fig 4). In smaller rooms, tapestries would hang between windows, often concealing doorways. At Ewelme, large windows created rooms that Leland admired as 'exceeding fair and lightsome'.

The inventory begins in the 'great chamber', usually a first-floor room accessible from the dais of the hall up a stair. This was a grand reception room, where formal social protocols would have been observed. It was

furnished with a canopied bed, probably used by Alice as a throne. The walls were hung with tapestries celebrating women, including an image of the Tournay of Hercules, when the hero is worsted by Amazonian warriors (this story is narrated in Christian de Pisan's *Les Cité des Dames*, of which Alice possessed a copy at Ewelme). In the great chamber of a powerful widow, this theme must have been deliberately and pointedly chosen.

Beyond this were two more rooms hung with tapestry and furnished with beds. Again, these were probably day rooms, with their splendid beds used as thrones rather than for sleeping (another inventory in the set records that several principal bedchambers and the nursery were provided with hangings in cheaper worsted). Household protocol demanded a sequence of rooms to which it was possible to withdraw and transact business. In one there was imagery of 'bergery' or rustic scenes. The other included depictions

of birds in cages and the brutal story of Duke Herkenbold woven in gold. This must have been a particularly valuable tapestry; the subject was otherwise associated with courtrooms and the public exercise of justice.

Opening from these rooms were two closets, rooms for private devotion overlooking the chapel. One was—called the 'Chamber of Ape Clogs', doubtless referring to decoration of the ceiling with this device—for the use of Alice and the other for her gentlewomen. Both were counter-intuitively hung with hunting scenes in 'counterfeit arras', presumably slightly less costly than the real thing.

'Such was the prestige attached to tapestries that they changed the form of the English interior'

The chapel itself had two tapestries, one of the Fifteen Signs of Doom, depicting the last days of the world, and one of the story of St Anna. The household had a substantial clerical component (Fig 2) and there is an independent note of a great chest delivered from Wingfield filled with vestments, liturgical instruments and even books of music; the Duke is known to have been a patron of the French composer Dufay. It also lists literary works; the Duchess was a patron of the poet John Lydgate.

The last room described is the 'Great Parlour', probably a ground-floor chamber at the head of the hall immediately below the Great Chamber. Parlours are first referred to in descriptions of English houses in the late 14th century and, as the French-derived name suggests, were rooms for informal conversation. It consequently had no bed, but was decorated with tapestries of the Seven Sciences and a bed-covering hung as a tapestry showing men and women playing cards. There follows a list of the contents of the 'Great Wardrobe', crammed with household goods and several standards or great chests that were locked with keys in the possession of 'my lady'.

Ewelme Manor is representative of the finest 15th-century domestic buildings not only for its splendour, but also—sadly—because it no longer exists. It's important to rescue this and other lost buildings of the period from obscurity, however, because the English have a bad habit of viewing the Tudor age as the horizon of their history. The interest and sophistication of the Tudor house, which we will explore in the next article, only properly makes sense as a development of Lancastrian and Yorkist domestic architecture. 