

CORN DRYING KILNS

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In the course of structural alterations to Severidges Farmhouse, Waterrow, Chipstable, ST051242, a 6' diameter recess about 14' high at the side of a gable end fireplace was opened up; Mr. L. J. Trott, the owner, and Mr. D. Kerslake, the builder, considered it to be of such unusual interest that they promptly informed the Somerset County Museum; the author is indebted to the Staff of the latter for drawing his attention to the discovery and is especially grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Trott for allowing him to examine, measure and record details of their house.

Examination showed that it was not, as first thought, a bacon curing chamber; not only had it several features not normally associated with them (as described by Sir Robert Hall in *Somerset Archaeol. Natur. Hist.*, **115**, 1971, pp. 45-47), but there was clear evidence on the opposite side of the fireplace that a bacon chamber had once existed there: a blocked fuel tunnel at hearth level and the remains of a normal sized circular chamber through which a modern passage had been cut, with signs of smoke blackening overhead. Although no longer visible, Mr. Trott confirmed there was a return flue to the chimney on that side.

The unusual features of the larger recess are:

- (i) Its diameter and height, and correspondingly the height at which the outlet flue returns to the chimney.
- (ii) A (blocked) opening 4' high with its base 8' above hearth level in the rear (gable end) wall.
- (iii) A small opening 6' above the hearth in the side wall. Both these openings gave access to the chamber from outside the house.
- (iv) At the same height as (iii) a shelf of pierced slate slabs resting on iron bars; the slates are drilled with about 1" holes symmetrically arranged in rows a few inches apart.
- (v) The recess was divided from the chimney for a height of 11½' by a wattle and daub partition; this had been destroyed but its head beam with the usual holes in its soffit for the rods of the wattling remained. At its base the partition appears to have stood on a stone wall 2-3' high.

The front of the recess had also been of stone probably up to the fireplace lintel, which extended the full width of the house, but original details could not be ascertained as a small cupboard had been inserted at some past date. At 4' above the hearth was a 7-8" wide ledge running part way (originally the whole way?), round the chamber; its function, like that of similar ledges in bacon chambers, cannot be explained satisfactorily.

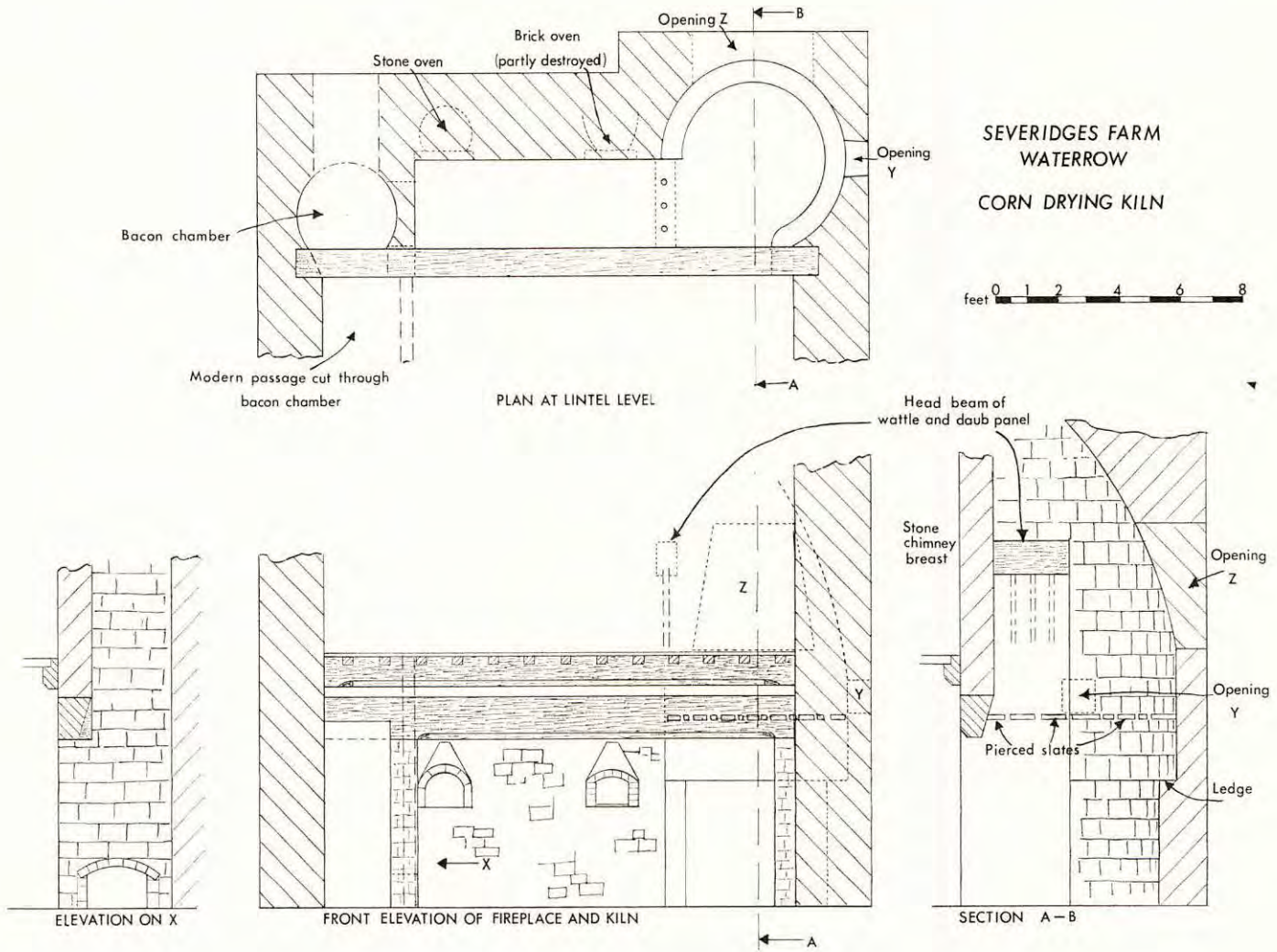
The following points also appear relevant to any consideration of the function of this chamber:

- (i) There was a two storey building with internal stairs (now replaced by a modern store room), attached to the gable wall; its upper floor coincided with the base of the 4' opening from the chamber.
- (ii) There is immediately beyond (i) the barn, still with its wooden thrashing floor.

It is suggested that the intermediate building was the granary from which damp corn could have been fed into the chamber, where it could have lain on a (horse hair?) mat on the slate shelf. Heat from the household fire, or possibly from a special fire lit in or near the base of the chamber, would have dried the corn, which could then be shovelled out via the side opening into sacks for use or return to the granary as required; there was an entrance door in the outbuilding convenient for such purposes.

Corn drying kilns, resembling the above in principle, but as separate buildings existed in the wetter agricultural regions (vide R. W. Brunskill, *Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture* (1971) p. 153). If the quantity of corn to be dried at any one time was not large, it seems reasonable that facilities should be incorporated with those of the main cooking fire. That this fireplace was such is shown by its other ancillary appendages, the bacon chamber, the small early completely stone built oven and its (19th century?) successor in the form of the later brick oven with iron door.

Severidges Farm is situated on the southern slopes of Exmoor where the rainfall is above average. There are two other chambers of even larger size, 7' and 8' diameter, at Monksilver and in the Quantocks where there is also a high rainfall; although far less complete they do retain some features that suggest a similar function. Although in an area of less rainfall, there is also at Longcroft, previously Lower Sea Farmhouse, Sea, Ilminster, to one side of a gable end fireplace an (18th century?) bake oven which replaced a bacon chamber; the latter is evidenced by a disused return flue at about 9' above the hearth; on the other side was a late inserted wooden spiral stair in a 6' recess from which at 16' above hearth level a flue also returned to the chimney. In the gable wall are signs of a large blocked opening from an adjoining outbuilding.



SEVERIDGES FARM
WATERROW
CORN DRYING KILN



In the light of evidence from Severidges it is reasonable to assume that a corn kiln existed in all three houses; but the features therein observed would not have been understood had the opportunity to see the former not previously occurred. This highlights the value of reporting all discoveries to provide as much comparative material as possible. Even items which in themselves may appear of little interest can be valuable when considered as a whole and may help shed light on otherwise inexplicable problems.

Despite extensive modernisation a date of about mid 16th century may be attributed to Severidges Farmhouse; it is of two room and cross passage plan; to one side of the latter was the 'parlour', its fireplace backing on the passage, entered through a door beside which solid baulk wooden stairs rose to the first floor; its ceiling is supported on three transverse beams carried at each end on two longitudinal beams set against the walls, all with stepped run out stops to plain chamfers. The passage was divided from the other room by a stud and panel screen, at the gable end of which room is the fireplace described above; the ceiling beams are likewise of the same 16th century type; a second set of spiral stairs is built within a rear turret. The roof is supported on three pairs of jointed crucks.

There is no doubt that both fireplaces are an integral part of the original building, but it is possible that the corn kiln *may* be a later development. The lintel of the gable end fireplace extends the full width of the house but its small plain chamfer for only 12' 6" of its length, 8' over the present fireplace and 4' 6" in way of the kiln indicating there never was a supporting jamb between the two. Thus the kiln was either constructed out of a part of a wider fireplace at a later date, or if contemporary its lower part was an integral part of the fireplace. The absence of any small outer or of the larger inner chamfer in way of the bacon chamber shows it to be an original feature.

The room at Lower Sea Farmhouse containing the fireplace referred to above is undoubtedly a 16th century addition to, or a rebuilding of that date of a part of, a medieval 'hall' house. Such dating is consistent with the first reference to grain drying quoted by Nigel Harvey in his *History of Farm Buildings in England and Wales* (1970).

A farming acquaintance has suggested that the primary purpose of these early corn driers was the preparation of winter seed corn; the short time available between reaping and autumn sowing necessitated threshing before the corn had dried and matured naturally in the sheaf, as would be the case for the bulk of the harvest threshed during the winter after several months storage in the barn. In a wet season it was also desirable to dry corn before grinding for flour.