A PRELIMINARY CATALOGUE OF CURING CHAMBERS IN SOMERSET

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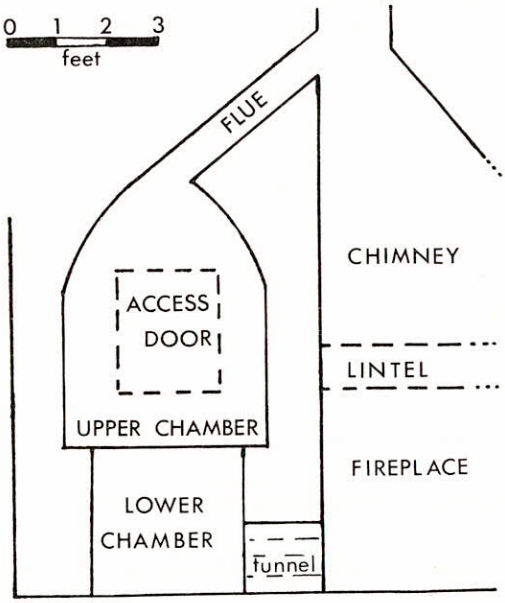
Fireplaces in vernacular houses of the South-West became general in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and those in the main living-room or the kitchen frequently had ancillary fittings. Of these, the bread-oven is common. Less often seen, and so far not recorded in Somerset, was the chamber for curing meat by smoking. In Devonshire, A. W. Everett found such chambers, or remains of them, in the belt south and east of Dartmoor, broadly from Totnes to near the Dorset border. And in Cornwall, J. W. Tonkin, studying the Great House, Truro, during demolition, found a second flue, the previous structure below which he took to have been either a chamber for curing bacon or a cream-oven.[1]

In Somerset, a vestige has been known to the author for many years, but the first notice of an almost complete chamber came from an architect, Miss G. Carter, who found it while modernising a house in Blackford, near Wincanton, in 1968. Other discoveries have followed, both physical and from the unrecorded knowledge of other people, and the numbers and distribution make it likely that many more await discovery in west and south Somerset. Rarely, they may be completely walled up: more frequently, they are likely to have been cut into to form a cupboard, or cut right through in making a passage, or even partly demolished to give way to a bread-oven. The normal elements are however, so characteristic as to make recognition easy, and this preliminary note is published in the hope that some such chambers (or their vestiges) may be preserved during the course of modernising houses.



The elements of a curing chamber are shown in the hypothetical section below:

1. The chamber itself, by the side of the fireplace, usually relatively narrow in diameter — 3 to 4 feet — in the lower part, and relatively wide — 4 to 5 feet — above. It may, as normally, be of similar height to the ground floor; or extend into the upper floor; or even be restricted to the upper floor and the roof space.

2. A tunnel from the lower part of the chamber to the fireplace.

3. The chamber being corbelled in at the top, a return flue thence to the main chimney.

[1] Seven Devonshire sites are named in M. W. Barley's The English Farmhouse and Cottage, the nearest to the Somerset border being at Weycroft, O.S. grid reference SY 308999, at p. 168 (by a printing error one is placed at Bridport, instead of Bridford). Another is known of at Drewston, Chagford. For The Great House, Truro, see *J. Roy. Inst. Cornwall*, NS 4, 1961, 17-35.

4. An access door.

There are marked differences, but insufficient instances yet for a typology to be attempted. A few brief notes are added to the catalogue which follows. The most convenient means of listing is by O.S. grid references, from west to east, and all instances so far known are in square ST.

048260 CHIPSTABLE, TROWELL FARMHOUSE. Now opened into the kitchen, while the flue has been removed to give room for a cupboard upstairs.

051242 CHIPSTABLE, SEVERIDGES FARMHOUSE. Discovered in 1969 during building work. A second chamber, the other side of the fireplace, came to light in 1971.[2]

072215 STAWLEY, ROSE COTTAGE, APPLEY. Now opened into an outside passage, where at one time it formed a convenient coal cellar. A measured plan by the present owner of the house shows that the chamber extends into the upper storey.

All these three came to notice by different means; they are all close to the river Tone and within a mile or so of the Devon border.

073375 MONKSILVER, BIRDS HILL COTTAGE.

212316 BROOMFIELD, RASWELL HOUSE.

346127 ILMINSTER, SEA MILLS FARMHOUSE.

347129 ILMINSTER, SEA OLD FARMHOUSE. Only egress flue visible, the structure having been destroyed to accommodate a later bread-oven. On the other side of the fireplace, there is evidence for a cream-stand.

These four were communicated by R. C. Edmunds.

400270 CURRY RIVEL, WICK FARMHOUSE. Now a storage area. The chamber was circular below and rectangular above, and went beyond ceiling height. The entry tunnel, blocked, was half-oval in shape, formed in two large stones of Ham Hill type on the fireplace side. Communicated by Commander E. H. D. Williams, O.B.E.

422126 HINTON ST. GEORGE, FOSSEWAY. Communicated by Mrs. C. Austin.

430297 HIGH HAM, FIR TREE FARMHOUSE, LOW HAM. Cut right through to make a passage; but at ceiling height has been left, narrowing to a rectangular flue, near the top of which a piece of timber has been let in, to hold two substantial iron hooks.

432189 KINGSBURY EPISCOPI, EAST LAMBROOK MANOR HOUSE.

453284 PITNEY, EAST END FARMHOUSE. Blocked, half-oval tunnel.

485286 SOMERTON, MOWRIES FARMHOUSE. A ground-floor specimen, with a semi-circular tunnel made of 7 voussoirs of oolite stone, the main walling being of lias. The stones are worn and much reddened by heat.

488285 SOMERTON, MEDWYN. Extends over two storeys. Rectangular tunnel.

The five above were communicated by Commander Williams.

519135 WEST COKER, CROSS HOUSE. Cut through to make a passage, the square tunnel being blocked with brick. The history of the house indicates that the destruction accompanied the extension of the house about 1765. The chamber might have

[2] Detailed study by Commander Williams of this building has led to the conclusion that one of the two chambers was used for corn-drying. The same use may have been applicable to other chambers which have a markedly great diameter than is usual.
He also communicates:
211188 BLAGDON, MATTHEW'S FARMHOUSE. Blocked tunnel and partly blocked flue.

been double-storeyed, since upstairs there is now a large cupboard by the side of the chimney.

657262 BLACKFORD, HOLLOW BOTTOM COTTAGE. The most easterly, and the most curious, example. Access was by a hole, 18″ in and 18″ up from the right side of the fireplace. Thence a flue passed diagonally up behind the fireplace to emerge in a circular chamber on the first floor, just over 3 feet in diameter, under a projecting stone which would spread the smoke. A foot higher the chamber widened to 5 feet and on reaching eaves level narrowed rapidly to the return flue. Under the roof timbers, the chamber was covered by lias slabs. Possibly disuse began before 18th century — the bottom of the chamber had fallen out or had been removed, and below it is a brick bread-oven. Examined by the author with the architect.

Less than two miles over the Dorset border, at

601145 BRADFORD ABBAS, WYKE FARMHOUSE. An access hole on the left side of the fireplace, and similarly sited at the back, has a vertical flue to an upper storey chamber which is not now visible.

There is also a possibility, which could only be established by demolition, at 528143 WEST COKER, FEEBARROW FARMHOUSE, where a fine bread-oven, with a semi-circular opening, has below it, about a foot from floor level, a similar blocked opening.

Enquiries from field investigators elsewhere along the Jurassic belt brought no parallels. But there is a fine example of similar construction at Warkworth Castle, Northumberland, where the official guide refers to the chamber as a sett-pot; and at Tankerness House, Kirkwall, Orkney, the various elements are present, a use for curing fish being supposed (*ex inf.* A. Fenton and J. W. Tonkin). At Cliffash Farm, Idridgehay, Derbyshire, Dr. P. Strange has seen an opening, now blocked, at ground level at the side of the main fireplace.