

## CURING CHAMBERS AND DOMESTIC CORN DRYING KILNS

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During the period from 1971 when Sir Robert de Z. Hall published *A Preliminary Catalogue of Curing Chambers in Somerset*<sup>1</sup> until early 1976 the records of chambers have risen from 18 to over 100 including some further probable corn drying kilns similar to that described in 1972<sup>2</sup> at Severidges Farmhouse, Chipstable (ST 051242).

The bulk of the new records are in the area south of the Poldens ranging from Queen Camel and Keinton Mandeville westwards to the Devon border, and extending along both the north and south sides of the Brendons and Exmoor. In other areas less extensively studied, scattered finds to the east and north-east near Wookey and at Batcombe, Emborough and Hemington (in addition to the earlier discoveries near Wincanton and the Dorset border) and to the south-west into Devon suggest that further research may extend the known distribution. Knowledge of the area to the north of the Poldens and over the Mendips into Avon is insufficient to decide whether the apparent absence of chambers there is a reality or due to lack of research. The author will welcome any information regarding evidence for chambers there.<sup>3</sup>

The impression to date is that these curing chambers are a development of the 16th/17th centuries peculiar to Somerset and the adjoining areas of Devon and Dorset, which inexplicably did not spread farther afield. Enquiries amongst members of the Vernacular Architecture Group have so far revealed no knowledge of such chambers elsewhere except in Kent, Surrey and Sussex where types that differ considerably from those in the South West have been recorded by the Domestic Buildings Research Group (Surrey) and in particular Mr. K. W. E. Gravett. He also reports an isolated instance at Sulgrave Manor, Northamptonshire where the chamber is not an integral part of the kitchen fireplace but is in the back of the adjoining parlour stack, although access is from the kitchen; he regards both rooms as early 18th century additions to an older house.

He attributes an equally late date to many of the chambers in the south-east of the country which frequently appear to be additions to earlier chimneys and are often built of brick. In the South West they are always of stone and by the 18th century were starting to go out of use, some being replaced by stone lined bread ovens (Pl. 1). A further difference between the two parts of the country is that chimneys in the South East are in the centre of the building (instead of at the gable) and the chambers are mostly at first floor level between the stack and the side wall. In the timber-framed houses of Surrey the Research Group has recorded a number of bacon lofts in the upper parts of the wide smoke bays associated with the earliest fireplaces. In all these cases the smoke from the main hearth was used to cure the bacon, the flavour of which would thus depend on the fuel being burnt. In the South West, except in the very earliest types to be described later, the smoke for curing was obtained independently of the main fuel; from available evidence this seems to have been produced by laying sawdust, or possibly wood chippings, of chosen varieties of timber on the floor of the chamber and burning it with limited air supply so that it smouldered, producing the maximum amount of smoke. This had the added advantage that the bacon was not subjected to excessive heat from the fire: in *Under the Greenwood Tree* Thomas Hardy recounts in 1872 how Mrs. Dewy would now and then put her hand upon the hams and flitches of bacon lining the chimney to reassure herself that they were not being broiled instead of smoked, a misfortune that sometimes happened at Christmas time when there was an extra large fire on the hearth.

The earlier remarks of Sir Robert Hall can now be amplified in the light of the further knowledge gained of Somerset chambers. A number of early chambers,

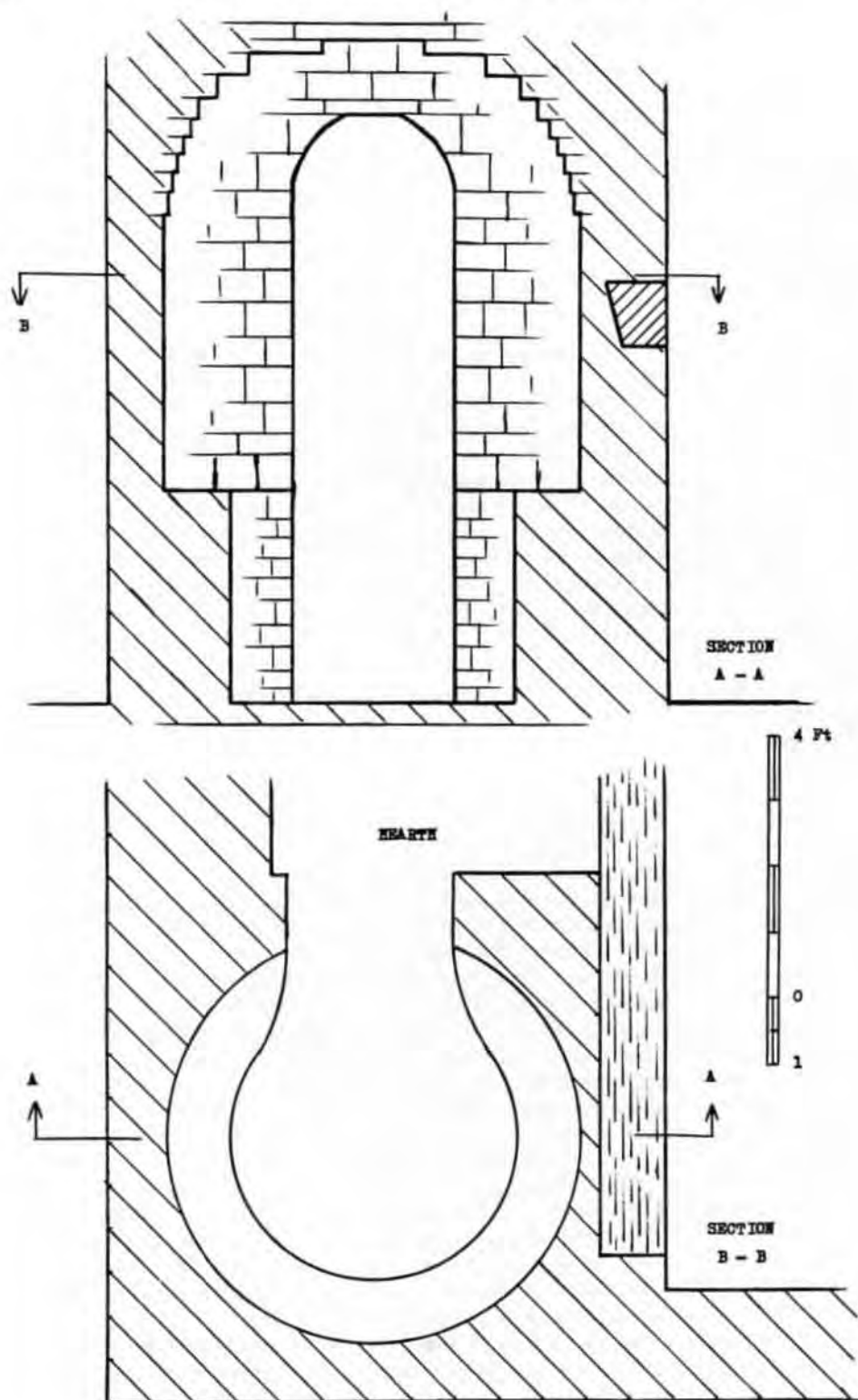


Fig. 1. Curing Chamber — Type 2 — Wrantage, North Curry, ST 309226.



Plate 1. Floor of oven inserted above earlier hearth tunnel to bacon chamber at Stoneley Farm, Kingsdon.



Plate 2. Type 2 chamber fully open to the hearth at a house in Wranitage.

usually of greater size, differ in some respects from the commonly found 'standard' type described by him and these enable a typological sequence of development to be envisaged as follows. These lists, which for the sake of completeness include those chambers in the *Preliminary Catalogue* (marked with \*), summarize the records of which full details are deposited in the Somerset Record Office. All Grid References are in square ST unless otherwise indicated.

*TYPE 1.* Although no instances of this have actually been found it is not unreasonable to conclude that the early smoke bays, which extended the full width of the house, had open hanging areas to one side from which evolved type 2. Sir Robert Hall has suggested that a small door which used to give access to the chimney at West Coker Manor House may have been associated with such an arrangement.

*TYPE 2.* These comprised an area to one side of a full width hearth enclosed from the room but still fully open to the hearth. Except where otherwise stated they were 6ft or more across. See Fig. 1 and Plate 2.

Cothelstone	196307	If not type 2 definitely type 3.
Fiddington	215399	Subsequently divided from the hearth by an inserted wall incorporating a tunnel.
Fivehead	337239	Unaltered except for late installation of a boiling copper.
Keinton Mandeville	550306	Much altered, certainly type 3 if not 2.
Kingston St. Mary	212295	Below average size, much altered, probably type 2.
Long Sutton	468253	Ditto
	485251	Ditto
North Curry	309226	Fireplace and chamber only remain in later cottage.
Somerton	495287	Small and completely external to the side wall.
Uffculme, Craddock (Devon)	087125	No details remain but probably type 2.

*TYPE 3.* This was an improvement over type 2 in that there was partial enclosure from the hearth by a stone wall 4ft or so high in which was a tunnel at hearth level; this served both to control (by means of a damper?) the air supply for combustion and to enable the resulting ash to be raked out. Above the wall it was fully open to the stack; width 6ft or more. See Plate 3.

Batcombe	694393	Much altered, probably type 3.
Bridgwater	335388	Only the gable end of a demolished house in a farmyard.
Culmstock (Devon)	108135	
Curry Rivel	388252	In a detached bakehouse; timber and cob front and flat top over stone base.
Huish Episcopi	426265	
Long Sutton	468244	
Stogumber	119345	A door from the hearth subsequently fitted.
Stoke St. Gregory	335268	Extends beyond the side wall of the house; the stone division from the hearth later raised (to give improved protection from the heat?).

*TYPE 3A.* Like the foregoing these are much larger than the standard type but have the additional characteristic that the sides protrude beyond the side wall and/or the gable and, with few exceptions, are all to the west of Taunton. Except for the kiln at Severidges Farm, Chipstable, it is now difficult to be certain of the original details and

function, and provisionally it seems best to list them separately. Some may have been kilns but otherwise are assumed to have been bacon chambers.

Ashbrittle	053221	
	056228	House derelict, now a farm building.
Bicknoller	095397	Mostly destroyed.
*Broomfield	212316	
Carhampton	001422	
	012425	
*Chipstable	051242	A corn kiln; also a bacon chamber on the opposite side.
*	048260	
Creech St. Michael	266267	
Culmstock (Devon)	110144	A 17th century structure modified in the 19th century to a malt kiln when the house became a cider cellar and malt house. Additional to a bacon chamber.
Halse	145288	Probable kiln; bacon chamber on opposite side.
Ilminster	347129	As Halse; kiln subsequently altered to stairs.
Long Sutton	468244	An unidentified structure opposite the bacon chamber.
Lydeard St. Lawrence	107306	
Monksilver	073375	House demolished.

A further development intermediate between types 3 and 4 was the fitting of an access door at the side of the hearth above the low stone wall of type 3, thus in effect completing the separation of the chamber from the fireplace; when this was done an exit smoke flue was provided above the door into the main stack.

*TYPE 4.* As previously described these are fully enclosed with a tunnel at hearth level and a return flue under a corbelled-in top (Pl. 4). In early 1976 these numbered 69 including the 14 previously published; full details are recorded in the Somerset Record Office and only new outlying examples are listed below.

Bickleigh (Devon)	SS 935068	Above average size, most details lost.
Brompton Ralph	ST 086323	
Chedzoy	341376	Demolished.
Culmstock (Devon)	110144	Additional to the kiln; destroyed when the house became a cider cellar and malt house.
Emborough	608496	Probable, mostly destroyed.
Hemington	741538	As Emborough.
North Petherton	299311	
	303306	
Queen Camel	595249	Sloped timber top.
Sampford Brett	089401	
Skilgate	002265	On the Devon border. Large but fully enclosed: a 30in square access doorframe in situ. Access door in the fireplace.
Stoke St. Gregory	354280	
St. Cuthbert Out, Burcott	522456	
Wootton Courtney	SS 938421	The only instance known beside a lateral fireplace.

The highest concentration in any one area are the 7 chambers recorded in Ilton and Isle Abbots, one of which is in a detached bake-house where until a few years ago all meals were cooked. At Hawkwell Farm, Near Dulverton (SS 873258) is a heavily soot-encrusted rectangular chamber 12½ft wide by 7ft long within 28in walls



Plate 3. Type 3 chamber fully open above the low partition at Poplar Farm, Stoke St. Gregory.



Plate 4. Return flue from top of type 4 fully enclosed chamber at Fir Tree Farm, Low Ham, with bacon hooks still in situ.



under a 7-8ft high arched roof sited behind the fireplace; access was apparently originally from the fireplace. Nothing similar is known anywhere else and its purpose remains a mystery.

**KILNS.** Corn for home consumption would have had to be dried before grinding and the quantity which these kilns could have handled, although small, would have been adequate for this. It has also been suggested that in a wet season corn for autumn sowing might have required drying since, unlike the bulk of the seed for spring sowing which was threshed during the winter, it would have had to be threshed soon after harvesting without time to dry naturally. Alternatively the kilns could have been associated with malting barley and home brewing.

In Surrey and Kent Mr. Gravett has found early 18th century internal oast-houses for drying hops. In Somerset a malting kiln was built in the 19th century in an annex at one side of the house at Nethercott Farm, Lydeard St. Lawrence (ST 147325), the upper floor of the house at that end being used as the malt house. The brick kiln is in the form of an inverted truncated pyramid with an iron grate at the bottom and perforated tiles laid across the top on a level with the malting floor. Large openings in the top of the wall allowed free egress of the hot air after it had risen through the barley laid on the tiles. At South Petherton, where a kiln was demolished within living memory, the tiles have been reused to floor a room in the house. These tiles, like others seen in Devon and Northamptonshire, are about 12in square with minute holes pierced in groups along diagonal lines.

At Pitt Farm, Culmstock, Devon (ST 110144), where the tiles were made by John Sealey of Bridgwater who ceased trading by 1872, the late 16th/17th-century cob and jointed-cruck house was utilized as a malt and cider house after a new brick house was built in the 19th century. The upper part of a bacon chamber at one side of the gable fireplace was demolished and its base cemented to form a storage pit for the 'pummace' from the apple mill before making it up into the 'cheese' with layers of straw on the bed of the press. On the opposite side of the fireplace a malt kiln was built within an earlier cob-walled structure which protrudes beyond the house wall. All original details are lost so it is listed as type 3A. Within its base a brick stoke-hole was built and an iron grid to carry the tiles was supported on brick pillars just above the upper floor of the house where the barley would have been spread for germinating. The window was presumably inserted at this time for the escape of the hot air from above the tiled floor.

1. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 115 (1971), 45.

2. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, 116 (1972), 101.

3. Mrs. L. J. Hall in recent correspondence has reported finding four curing chambers in south Gloucestershire of a type resembling those in Somerset. They are at Newhouse Farm (ST 674882), Pendick's Farm (ST 681885) and Boyt's Farm (ST 671884) in Tytherington, and at Moorend Farm (ST 652789) in Harebrook. When the one at Newhouse Farm was opened up it contained a newspaper dated 1796, this being the first firm evidence of the date at which bacon chambers were going out of use. At six other houses the possibility of bacon chambers has not yet been confirmed.