

Historic Houses of West Yorkshire

Oakwell Hall Birstall



In medieval times Oakwell was a small farming community, with its own fields grouped around the settlement. The present Hall was built during the reign of Elizabeth I, but there is no doubt that it was a replacement for an earlier, timber dwelling. Archaeological excavations in various places around the Hall have uncovered foundations of structures dating to the 14th and 15th centuries. Several were found on the east side of the Hall, between the herb garden and the pond; these included what may have been a kitchen and bakehouse. The kitchens of substantial medieval houses were frequently constructed as separate buildings, detached from but close to the hall. These discoveries suggest that the medieval hall was on or near the site of the present house. Excavations have also shown that the hall and various outbuildings were surrounded by a moat, stretches of which are preserved in the modern water courses. From the 14th century onwards it was common for houses of the gentry to have moats dug around them, partly for protection but also to emphasise the importance of the owners.

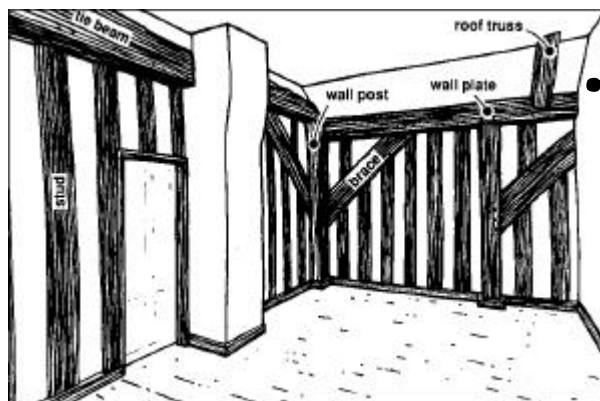
The man who built the present house, John Batt, came from Halifax: his father had bought Oakwell and several neighbouring properties in the 1560s; his mother, Margaret Waterhouse, belonged to the family which owned Shibden Hall. John's son, Robert Batt, inherited the house in 1607. He did not live at Oakwell, and the house was leased to various Waterhouse cousins. It was during this period, in 1611, that an inventory was drawn up, listing Robert's possessions in each room. The document gives a valuable insight into the use and furnishing of the rooms at Oakwell, and has enabled the building history to be worked out in greater detail than would otherwise have been possible.

Set in 87 acres of country park the site includes a visitor centre, shop, craft workshops, toilets, formal gardens, herb garden, Countryside Information Centre, picnic areas, adventure playground and Oaktree Café.

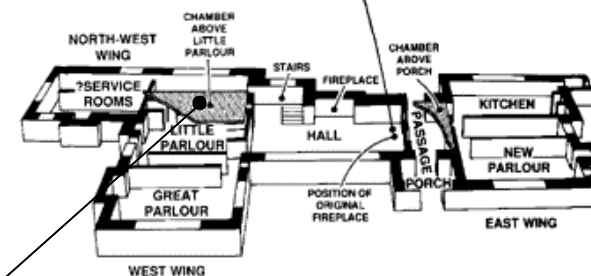
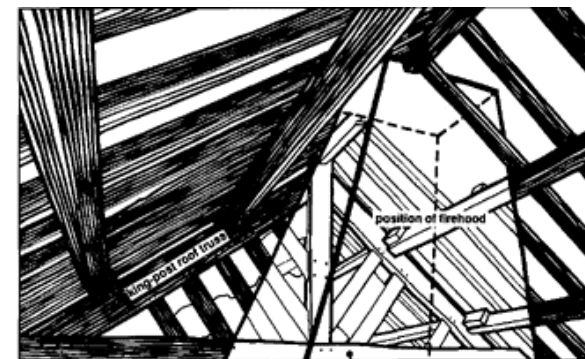
Views inside

In terms of its construction and design, Oakwell Hall stands between the medieval and the more recent building traditions of West Yorkshire. Outwardly, it is entirely a stone building, foreshadowing the yeoman and gentry houses of the 17th century; but inside there is much use of timber-framing techniques developed in the 15th century and earlier. The hall and west-wing roofs are supported in part by vertical timber posts which extend to the ground; and though the south, east and west walls of the house have always been of stone, the north side wall may originally have been timber-framed.

The view below shows the first-floor chamber above the



Little Parlour, situated towards the north end of the west wing (see plan). The timbered walls face north (on the left) and east (towards the hall); but the west wall is stone. Beyond a corner of the room is the north-west wing, on a slightly different alignment and possibly an addition to the original house. A document of 1611 records that at ground-floor level it contained 'service' rooms - the butteries and pantries where food and drink were stored and prepared for the table. Such rooms would more usually be positioned at the far end of the building, in the

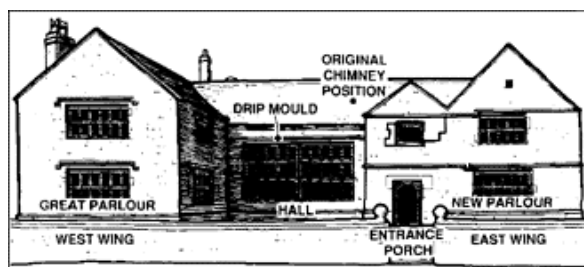


wing beyond the entrance passage (see plan); but the document describes one room in the east wing as the 'new parlour', suggesting significant changes of use between 1583, when the building was erected, and 1611. It is likely, therefore, that the service rooms had originally been sited in the east wing, and that they had been moved to the north-west corner to allow the New Parlour to be created. The alterations may also have been linked to a change in cooking arrangements: it is possible that cooking was originally carried out on the hearth in the hall, and was only later transferred to the room which now contains the kitchen.

The earliest hall fireplace backed on to the entrance passage, where the timber screen with columns now stands. Its chimney or 'firehood' was made of timber, and extended up to the roof between the hall chamber and the chamber over the entrance passage. The drawing above shows the firehood area as seen from the porch chamber. Although the hood was removed before the middle of the 17th century, and the present stone chimney had been built against the north wall, the scars of its former position can still be seen on the roofing timbers; a section of ridge timber, lengths of rafter and extra braces have had to be inserted where the chimney used to pass through the roof. The king-post roof truss beyond would have screened the upper part of the chimney from the hall chamber.

Views outside

Standing outside the front of the house (above), the visitor sees Oakwell Hall largely as it was built in the late 16th century. The date of construction, 1583, is carved in the wall above the porch doorway, along with the initials of John Batt, for whom it was built. The date has in fact been carved twice: the original, very faint carving is just above the doorway, and a 19th-century copy appears in the next course up.

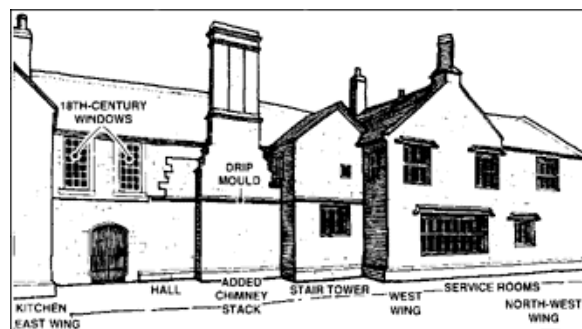


The house consists of a central hall with crosswings at each end. The porch leads into a passage (see below, right) which runs right through the building, separating the hall from the east wing. There have been a few major changes since the 1580s, the most important involving the hall. A document of 1611, which names the rooms, records not only the 'hall', but also the 'hall chamber'. It indicates that there was then a room above the hall, although there is not one now: the hall extends up into the roofspace, with a gallery to link the upper rooms of the wings. One of the most significant stages in the development of medieval houses occurred when first-floor rooms began to be inserted into halls which had previously been open to the

roof. At Oakwell, the trend is reversed, perhaps to make it more like the medieval halls of the older-established gentry families in the region.

This information suggests that the large hall window in the view above is a replacement for two smaller windows lighting the hall and its chamber above. It is confirmed by the areas of walling around the window, which from sill level upwards are not coursed in with the adjacent porch and west-wing walls. Rebuilding is also indicated by the western end of the drip-mould above the window (marked on drawing) which cuts awkwardly across a small window in the wing. These changes were probably made in the middle of the 17th century; they were accompanied by a change in hearth position. The original hearth, set towards the east end of the hall and backing on to the passage, was replaced by a fireplace in the north wall. The only other alteration visible in this view is to the room above the entrance, where a new window seems to have been inserted in the 17th century. The courses of masonry have been disturbed, and the window mullions (the vertical stones dividing areas of glass) are shaped differently from those elsewhere on the front.

On the north side of the house, seen above, there are signs of many more alterations, though the full story of these changes is not yet clear. As suggested overleaf, the beginning of the 17th century may have been a time when the north-west wing was built to provide additional 'service' rooms; changes in coursing suggest it is later than at least part of the west wing. The hall wall and stair tower may also be modifications - and perhaps rebuilds in stone of originally timber-framed walls - as indicated by the stair tower drip-mould stopping short of the west wing. The chimney stack is later still, having been built in the mid-



17th century; again the evidence is a break in the drip-mould at the junction of the chimney stack and the hall wall. The windows above the doorway are later still.

Oakwell Hall is administered by Kirklees Metropolitan Council. It is open every day except Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Years Day. At the time of going to press opening hours were *1st March - 31st October*: Mon. to Fri. 10.00 am - 5.00 pm; Sat. and Sun. 12.00pm - 5.00pm. *1st November - 28th February*: All week, 12.00pm - 5.00pm. Admission free (tel. Batley 474926 for further information).

