

Historic Houses of West Yorkshire

Shibden Hall, Halifax



Stone buildings are so much a traditional part of the Pennine landscape that it is difficult to imagine the region without them. Even three hundred years ago a visitor to the Halifax area would have seen numerous well-built stone houses, erected by the wealthy farmers of the district; but two centuries earlier still, the picture would have been quite different. In the later Middle Ages the yeomen, especially those who prospered from the rise of the textile industry, as well as the local gentry built their houses of timber rather than stone. Substantial timber-framed houses, now more characteristic of parts of the Midlands and the South, could have been found throughout the County, even in the Pennine uplands. Since then many of the timber buildings have, of course, been demolished. Others were simply encased in stone when masonry houses became more fashionable in the 17th century, and were thus preserved.

Shibden Hall is an important 15th-century timberframed building which has largely survived: it was extended and partly encased in stone during later centuries, but the core of the original house remains. It was built by the Otes family, who were living at Shibden in the 1420s and who constructed the earliest part of the existing house probably about fifty years later. Inside, much of the original timbering is now hidden by panelling, or was boxed-in during 19th-century restoration work. Since then, renovations and repairs have provided fresh

information about the Hall's early appearance; only recently an original 15th-century doorway was found behind the study panelling



The drawing above shows the building as it may originally have appeared. The basic structure is a framework of timber, formed by a series of vertical posts (principals) and horizontal beams. The frames are filled by smaller timbers, called 'studs', set vertically, and diagonally. Between these, the rendering of clay and plaster is backed by stone slates which are slotted into the sides of the studs; the lowest horizontal beam, or sill, is supported by sandstone walling. The single-storey housebody, in the centre of the building, would have been provided with a large window to light the high table. The top of the firehood would have been seen projecting from the roof. In the two-storey wing to the left, both upper and lower chambers had fireplaces, but there was probably no heating for the rooms in the other wing, beyond the cross-passage entrance.

In the 16th century (below) the south wall of the housebody was taken down and brought forward a distance of about one metre. Only the principal posts,

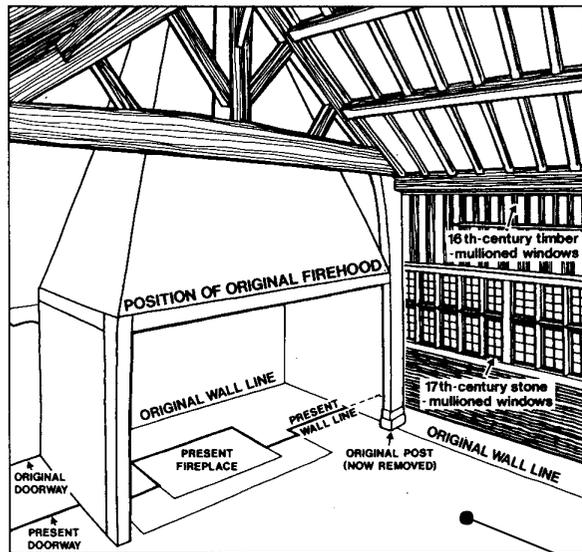


supporting the main roof timbers, were left in position. The shift is marked by a change in roof pitch. A first-floor chamber was inserted into the housebody, lit by timber-mullioned windows just under the eaves. In the late 16th or early 17th century much of the timbering was removed and replaced by a stone wall and stone-mullioned windows. By the early 19th century most of the cross-wing timbering had also been covered over; it was revealed again during restorations in the 1830s.

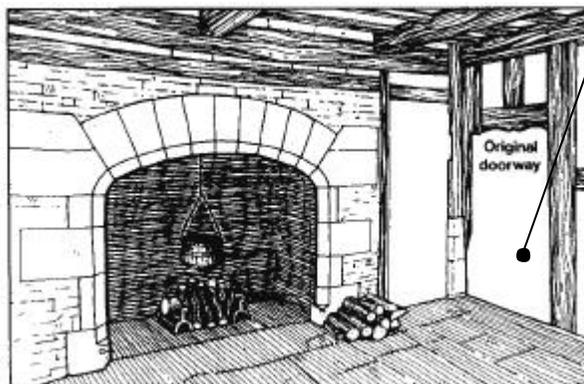
The north side of the building, shown in the drawing on



the left, was originally similar to the south side, the wings projecting on either side of the housebody. The right-hand wing probably had an external staircase giving access to the first-floor room: the upper floors of this wing are original, and show there was no internal staircase. In about 1600, however, a substantial stone building was erected directly in front of the housebody. It incorporated a new, internal staircase, and it had a cellar dairy with direct access from the yard. At the same time, or soon afterwards, rooms were added to the wing on the left; an early 19th-century painting shows that the building had mullioned windows. It was demolished and replaced in the 1830s, at the same time as a baronial-style tower was added to the other (right-hand) wing. The illustration on the cover (above right), is taken from a late 19th-century engraving. It shows the 'Norman' tower and other 19th-century additions, including a porch covering the cross-passage.



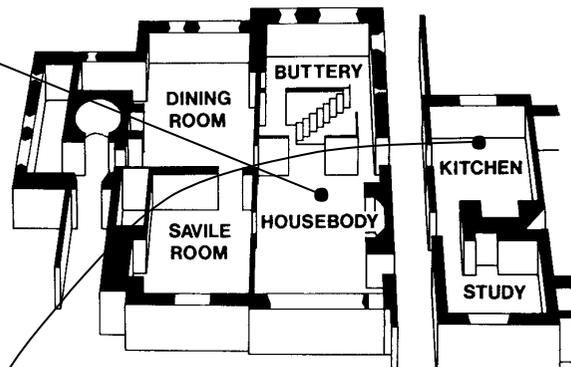
The drawing above shows the interior of the principal room of the house: the hall or 'housebody', to use a local name. It was originally open to the roof; later a floor was inserted to create a chamber over the housebody, lit by the windows just under the eaves. The chamber was removed in the 19th-century restorations; at the same time the main timbers were boxed-in, obscuring evidence which shows that the original south wall was inside the line of the present one. The position of the earliest wall-line is shown on the illustration. Also marked on the drawing is the arrangement of the earliest hearthplace. The present one belongs, again, to the 19th century, but there has been a stone fireplace and chimney in this position since, perhaps, the late 16th century. Before



then, the original hearth would have been set against the cross-passage wall. Smoke rising from it would have been carried through the roof in a timber-framed canopy, called a firehood.

The high table would have been set against the wall opposite the firehood, raised on a dais and fit by the main hall window. It may also have had a decorated timber canopy. Neither dais nor canopy survives, and the original window would have been removed when the south wall was repositioned. But the surviving timber windows may have been cut from the original ones, and some of the decorative carving on the lintels and sill-beams of the windows may have come from the dais canopy.

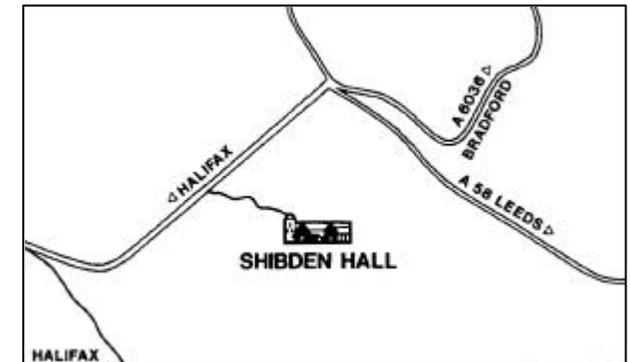
Behind the high table, the west wing contained the



principal private apartments on two floors. The main rooms, now the Savile Room and the Red Chamber above it, were provided with fireplaces from the first.

The kitchen, shown on the left, was not part of the original arrangement of facilities: the stone chimney stack, with its large arched fireplace, was inserted in the 16th century into one of the service rooms, where food had been prepared for the table, but not cooked. Either the Hall had been provided with a detached kitchen building, later demolished, or cooking had been done in the housebody itself, on the hearth beneath the firehood. The service rooms (now the kitchen and study) were originally entered from the cross-passage by two doorways with lintels carved in the shape of a double

curve (or ogee); one of these can be seen, now blocked-up, in the drawing. The two rooms were at first separated by a timber partition wall. Most of this was removed when the chimney stack was built, but a short stretch, including a doorway, survives behind the stonework. The timber beam set in the wall above the fireplace arch probably came from the same partition: it contains peg-holes for vertical timber studs. The ceiling was renewed and lifted when the room was converted into a kitchen.



Shibden Hall lies just east of Halifax, close to the A58 road to Leeds.

The Hall and Folk Museum are in the care of Calderdale Leisure Services. The house has period furnishings; a 17th-century barn and outbuildings contain agricultural and craft collections. From March to November the buildings are open from 10 am, Monday to Saturday, and from 2 pm Sundays.

West Yorkshire Archaeology Service
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