

REPORT

A survey of
FIR TREE COTTAGE, SEDLESCOMBE
carried out at the invitation of
MR THOMPSON-SMITH



R.O.H.A.S

AN INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATION
FOR THE STUDY OF
HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE
IN EASTERN SUSSEX

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WHY DO WE NEED A SURVEY?

Many buildings of 14th-18th century date survive in England, each one of which, however small or apparently insignificant, is an important source of information to the medieval and early modern historian. Most incorporate several periods of construction and alteration. These modifications reflect the changing fortunes, as well as the needs and aspirations of their past occupants and their families. Just as today, owners in the past strove continually to keep their homes up to date, and it is in this important respect that such buildings vary most markedly from other sources available to the historian; a house is an artifact which is still adapting to changing fashions and still performing a useful function.

It is only by analysing a large and representative sample of the surviving buildings of a region that a composite picture can be built up. Our small voluntary organization was set up in 1967 with this purpose in mind. We are interested in all buildings in the area erected before 1750. Over one thousand such buildings were surveyed and reported upon during our first nineteen years. A list of parishes covered by our survey is reproduced on the final page of this report.

A study such as ours should not be viewed in isolation, for if we are to get the most from the information available, then a region's architecture has to be viewed in conjunction with its documents, geology and archaeology. It is important, therefore, that the information gathered is made available to all serious students of history, and to this end copies of our records are lodged in a central repository at the National Monuments Record, London.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Your report is arranged and written to enable easy comparison with other buildings of similar age or type. We appreciate that this necessity does not make it the easiest of documents to read and digest, and for this we apologise. The notes are accompanied by scale drawings showing the building as it appeared at various stages during its development; only features surviving or for which there is evidence are depicted. Details in broken outline either represent features for which precise details are not known, or alternatively features not proven beyond reasonable doubt. A glossary of principal terms used is given at the end of the report.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION

Our deepest debt is owed to householders such as yourselves who have without fail courteously allowed us to invade your privacy and look at your homes. Without your help our work would be impossible.

FUNDING THE SURVEY

All surveys are undertaken free of charge. The Survey receives no subsidy from public funds and depends exclusively for its day-to-day running on the generosity of private individuals and independent grant-giving bodies. To these we are much indebted.

A list of the principal grants and awards received by the survey follows:-

- 1971 Society for Mediaeval Archaeology - Colt Award.
- 1977 BBC Chronicle Archaeology Award.
- 1980 Sussex Archaeological Society - Margary Award.
- 1982 Lloyds Bank Award to Independent Archaeologists (for photographic equipment).
- 1984 Sussex Archaeological Society - Margary Award (for introduction of computerised database).
- 1988 Mr & Mrs Seydlitz (for photocopier to improve efficiency).

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The survey which follows was carried out in 1991
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REPORT NO. 1149

SEDESLESCOMBE - FIR TREE COTTAGE NGR TQ 78171786

LOCATION Fir Tree Cottage is situated on the western side of Sedlescombe Street, immediately to the south of Sackville Cottages. It lies approximately 225 metres NNE of Sedlescombe Bridge and 0.65 of a mile SSE of Sedlescombe church. It is constructed upon a NNW-SSE axis (here assumed N-S) upon ground which falls away to the south. Like the other properties on this side of the village, the house is set well back from the highway.

SUMMARY OF DEVELOPMENT The present house was constructed during the second quarter of the 18th century (probably in 1737) (period A) upon a virgin site divided off from the manorial holding upon which Sackville Cottages are located. It is a narrow three cell structure with axial chimney and wide rear leanto outshot. At some subsequent date (probably around 1800) the building was divided into two cottages, both of which made use of the original front door and shared the original entrance lobby. Probably late in the 19th century false framing was planted onto the front facade, as too was the date 1737: both are shown in photographs of c.1900. The date fits the style of architecture perfectly, and it therefore seems likely that the present feature replaces an original date-plaque or similar painted-on date. Other 19th century alterations include the rebuilding of the leanto walls in brick, and the underbuilding the southern wall in brick: otherwise the structure has been little altered. The house is today once more in single occupancy.

Since the purpose of this report is to record the architecture of the building up to 1750, only the period A works are included within the more detailed description which follows.

PERIOD A (2nd quarter of 18th C; probably 1737)

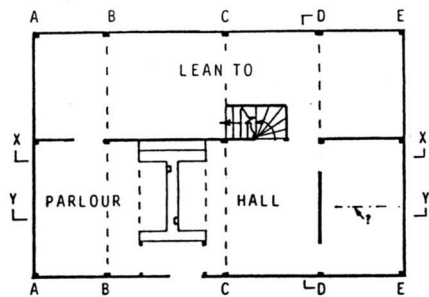
(Drawing No. 1149/1)

LAYOUT A four bay structure having a main frame measuring 10.40 m x 3.95 m (34'2" x 12'11") with a 3.00 m (9'10") leanto outshot running along the full length of the building at the rear. Curiously, the only long bay in the house accommodates the central chimney, which is itself set considerably nearer to truss C-C than truss B-B. This unusual placement may suggest that the frame was bought 'off the peg' and adapted to the clients particular requirements. From the architectural features there can be no doubt that the frame is no earlier than the 2nd quarter of the 18th century, and thus there is no possibility of the frame having been reused from elsewhere. All material is 'first use' and purpose cut, rather than second-hand.

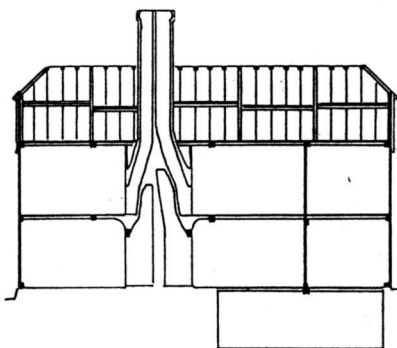
Whatever form the original fabricator of the frame intended, the house was built as a three cell structure with what is best called a parlour to the south, a hall set centrally, and a small northern service area. There is mortice evidence for two doorways leading from the hall into this small northern bay, and thus this bay was presumably divided by an axial partition, though any such dividing partition has been destroyed without trace. The chimney is sited between the hall and parlour and is set towards the rear of the frame, leaving room for narrow cupboard areas to the west. In front of the chimney is a lobby entry containing the front door, the location of which is biased towards the hall. Along the full length of the structure runs the contemporary service leanto, which shows no signs of having originally been divided, the present partitions being insertions. Against the wall dividing the main frame from the leanto is sited the stairs, beneath which a flight of steps lead down from the leanto to the cellar which, unusually, is located beneath the hall and services. Cellars are usually sited beneath the parlour. Another curious feature of the cellar is that it does not extend up to the chimney, but stops in line with truss C-C.

The staircase rises to give access to the triangular roofspace above the leanto outshot. This area was probably used for storage, but also gave access to the parlour chamber, hall chamber, and probably the small attic space above. Access to the service chamber was always through the hall chamber. There are some problems with the doorways leading into the staircase area: both appear to have been 'inserted' suggesting an alteration to the original design. However, a lack of joist mortices in the staircase area indicates that the stairs were always located in this position and the alterations were probably therefore associated with the presumed client's modifications suggested earlier in this report.

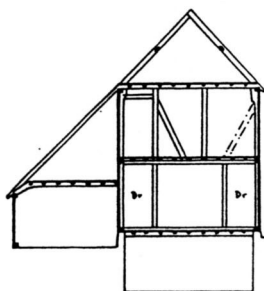
The storey heights on both the ground and first floor are ample. Indeed at 2.00 m (6'7") measured from first floor to top of wallplate, or 2.10 m (6'10") from first floor to attic floor, the first floor storey height slightly exceeds that of the ground floor. Being a very narrow structure, there is only limited



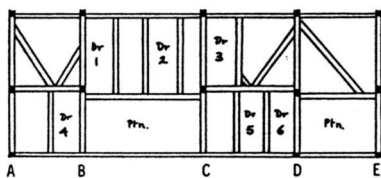
GROUND PLAN



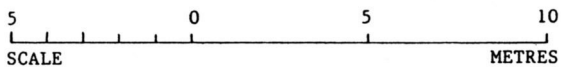
Y-Y



D-D



X-X (MAIN FRAME ONLY)



SEDLSCOMBE - FIR TREE COTTAGE

PERIOD A

1149/1 - 1991

headroom within the roofspace. It should be noted, incidentally, that the ground floor of the leanto is set 450 mm below that of the main rooms, and there is a corresponding difference in the first floor levels. This feature allowed greater headroom at first floor level within the leanto, beneath the sloping roof.

WALL DESIGN Only the basic frame was intended to be visible from within the main rooms, though the infill framing was left exposed within the leanto. The frame is braced by straight struts at first floor level, and occasional studs (mainly acting as door jambs and window jambs) are jointed in. Otherwise the frame is infilled with staves. Those staves associated with the internal walls are roughly cut and are jointed into the frame using traditional round-ended stave holes. The laths carrying the daub infill are nailed to one face of the partition only, and thus the staves are left exposed on the secondary face of the walls. In contrast, the external walls incorporate more neatly cut stud-like staves which are jointed into square-ended mortices and which are lathed and daubed over on both faces leaving a central void. The frame was always hidden from view externally by rendering.

WINDOWS The present windows are located on their original sites and are unusual in that the heads are dropped down below ceiling level, having their own head-beams. More typically the heads of the windows are formed by the timbers of the main frame. No original windows survive.

DOORWAYS All doorways which survive are entirely plain. Those between the main frame and the leanto are shown in section X-X in Drawing No. 1149/1. Doorways 1 and 2 (and probably doorway 6) were always intended, but doorways 3 and 5 are alterations to the original scheme. This is particularly obvious with doorway 3, the insertion of which has cut through a raking strut. Likewise, there are stave holes cut into the head of doorway 5. Despite being clear alterations, it seems likely that these modifications were carried out during initial construction, perhaps associated with the adjustment of an 'off the peg' frame to the client's particular requirements. Doorway 4 may be original, but could equally have been added when the structure was divided into two cottages - the details at the head are today masked from view.

The present front door (with its fielded panels) may be an original feature.

FLOORS All floors comprise joists aligned along the axis of the building. Most of the joists are jointed into the crossbeams and tiebeams, but within the first floor at truss D-D they are lodged over the crossbeam. There are plastered ceilings over the hall and parlour, but elsewhere the 60 mm x 100 mm joists appear always to have been exposed; the lower leading edges have been chamfered off.

STAIRS From the lack of joist mortices in the tiebeam of the leanto at the very point where the stairs rise, it would seem that the stairs were always located in their present position within the leanto, adjacent the hall. Indeed, the half turn, central newel staircase is clearly of antiquity and could well be original. However, the problems regarding the doorways at the foot and head of the staircase should be borne in mind.

Access to the attic area was probably from the rear leanto via a 'ladder' running up to the rear of the chimney, through the doorway numbered 2 in section X-X, though this point cannot be proven.

CHIMNEY The axial stack is of brick construction and incorporates four flues. Those on the ground floor are identical and have heavy timber lintels, and both have triangular headed niches incorporated into the rear wall. The lintel of the fireplace serving the hall incorporates the marks of a spit mechanism, whilst that in the parlour retains the notched brackets of a 'gun rack' of uncertain date. Both first floor fireplaces are very small and incorporate brick arches, rather than timber lintels - a typical mid 18th century feature. The cap, which rises principally through the front roof slope, is of plain square 18th century type with the flues arranged in a block, two behind two.

ROOF Unlike the main frame, the roof is constructed in five equal bays with most trusses not set above the tiebeams. One of the trusses is interrupted by the chimney, again suggesting that the frame was adapted to the client's requirements. In construction the roof is of staggered butted side purlin form with continuous common rafters and some straight windbracing. There are no collars to the trusses, suggesting that the attic space was intended to be used: the inclusion of collars in such a small roof would have caused much inconvenience. Both terminals are of hiplet type, without a high-set collar at their apex. There is no ridge.

The roof to the leanto comprises common rafters, and lacks purlins.

QUALITY AND DECOR The main components of the frame are put together in an entirely traditional form, using standard assembly with principal posts having a mixture of swelling and rounded bowls to their jowls. A typical late feature of the frame is the staggered location of the bresssumers in adjacent bays, a feature illustrated in section X-X in Drawing No. 1149/1. The timbers generally are neatly cut and of good quality, with no signs of re-use anywhere amongst the period A material. As would be expected at this late date, all members are very slender, with principal posts measuring only 145 mm across. Even so, many of the principal timbers are chamfered along their leading edges.