

“LOWER GORE-END FARM”

by Adrian Jackson written in 1921

Imagine a scene on the north coast of the Isle of Thanet in the year 1581. It is late autumn, and the afternoon light is beginning to fade over desolate wind-swept coastal marshes. The tide is high, and the waves, whipped into ‘white-horses’, come tumbling in, rank upon serried rank, as far as the eye can see, throwing themselves in relentless fury at the base of chalk headlands, retreating each time in a flurry of whitened water. Gnawing relentlessly, eating away at the coastline at the rate of 2ft. or so per year.

Dividing these time-worn sentinels, a wedge-shaped inlet, bounded by marshes, reaches inland to still give some little protection to the cluster of ships moored at its apex. Time was, when for many hundreds of years, this was a small thriving port. It was linked with Dover as a non-corporate member of the Cinque Ports Confederation. From time immemorial the port served the Ancient Briton, Roman, Saxon and Norman masters, right up to the Middle Ages.

However, great storms, for which this coast is notorious (remember 1953?), had done their worst, pushing the coastline back and reducing the length of the Gore channel by 900ft. Now, the former headlands could no longer provide safe anchorage in their lee for the big trading ships, and the port had shrunk to a mere shadow of its former usefulness.

Close by the rocking masts, at the head of the inlet, an Old Saxon farmstead, lonely and isolated, a group of small farm buildings with the great barn looked inwards, and huddled together as if for mutual protection. Being the only vertical feature in this salt-soaked, wind-swept plane, they had already born the brunt of North Sea gales for 400 years or more. Flecks of snow were beginning to whirl in the air, and the wind tore a thin plume of smoke from the tall farmhouse chimney.

Booming in its cavernous flue, it caused the cook below to agitate the glowing logs into more vigorous life, and send a shower of sparks snaking up into the black void above. The harvest was over and gathered into the great barn, and the farm was settling down to see out another winter. The two young ox drivers had seen their teams watered and fed, and bedded down in their stalls, each a bay of the great barn 4 oxen wide. This was a Saxon module, one rod or 5½ yards or 16½ ft. and was used in farm building and house construction, each so many bays (rods) long. Also used as a unit of land measurement, one acre equalled a strip of land 4 rods wide by 10 rods long (one furrow long or furlong), 22 yards by 22 yards.

The ox drivers would return to the barn to sleep above their charges sharing their restlessness and comforting warmth, after their evening meal and nightfall. At the table they sat next to their respective ploughman at the lower end of the long trestle table that filled the farmhouse main room and kitchen. To keep out the chill, all shutters had been secured, closing the ‘wind-eyes’, primitive open slots between the timber wall studs, for light and ventilation (glass was not yet in common use), and all was now dim, if a little warmer within. The glow from the ingle nook and the flickering rush lights were the only illumination.

The low oak-beamed ceiling seemed to press down, festooned as it was with smoked sides of pork and fish, recently taken from the special half of the kitchen flue reserved for that purpose.

Also great cheeses in nets hung beside bunches of herbs, helping to counter their aggressive aroma.

The farm workers hunched in concentration over this, their main meal of the day, using personal knife and fingers between mouth and wooden trencher, or wooden spoon and bowl, picking bones clean and throwing any remainders down to be quickly consumed by the hungry household animals. Forks had not yet come into general use, and anyway were thought to be very 'cissy'. The children of the household ran backwards and forwards, bare-foot serving at the table, while their mothers and aunts worked at the preparation and cooking of the food.

A stockpot of gruel was ladled out into bowls from one of the two great iron pots hanging bubbling above the fire. At the table, hands reached out and hacked off chunks from the fresh-baked rye loaves circulating. There were few vegetables in those days and all meats were highly spiced to disguise their age and lack of freshness. The eels had been caught by the shepherd in the Wantsome River towards Reculver. He was a sharp young man, and his speed and aim with a trident were deadly, as well as his skill with a crook. Both the tools of his trade now leant against the wall beside the back door, the former with its long wooden shaft and 'fork-like' end with three barbed prongs.

Local fishermen eating with the farm workers, had provided the seafood, and all were very glad of its variety and freshness. The shepherd's two dogs lay at his feet under the table, and wagged their tails as tit-bits were passed down, and then turned and scratched as any stirring up of the rush-strewn floor on which they lay provoked the fleas and general detritus dropped and trodden in by the occupants of a busy principal room. The litter was seldom changed and harboured pests that attacked both animals and man.

This floor had been made, compounded of a mixture of ox blood and fine wood ash from the fire, mixed with earth, well rammed and levelled and was so hard wearing it could be polished!

The yeoman farmer and his lady sat at the head of the table, on hard wooden benches, like everybody else. Next down the length of the table sat his foreman and the older and more skilled farm workers, the carpenter and smith, then guests, and finally hired labourers, well 'below the salt'. The family provided most of the workforce, the farmer and his 5 sons and 4 daughters, and most important of all was the part played by his wife and her sisters. The women's tasks were many and various and included helping in the winnowing of all manner of corn, haymaking, making malt for producing the main drink of the household, small beer – drunk even by the children as the water from the well was not good enough to drink.

The wife would go to market to sell their excess produce, butter or pigs or fowls – these latter were scraggy things, seldom being fed and having to subsist by foraging around the farmyard. The womenfolk also had to prepare the wool, hemp and flax ready for the weaver, carding and then spinning at their wheels. Make, mend and wash all the clothes, milk and make butter (terrible stuff, mostly liquid and rancid) and cheese, obtained from the scrawny cattle, which were used mainly for draught purposes. The women

had to carry timber and water, tend the fire, as well as prepare and cook all the food. They also had to wash up and scour – with sand – all metal utensils and polish afterwards.

Even in this dim light, the farmer and his lady looked every inch the heads of the household – almost regal as they sat there presiding. The farmer was in a fine jerkin made of buffe (oiled ox hide) worn over a belted doublet tucked into plain cloth britches, reaching to, and loose about his knees. Thick woollen stockings and startups (short boots with wooden pegs in their soles), plus a hooded cloak topped by a sugar-loaf felt hat, completed his ensemble. Conditions were so bleak and the protection against the elements given by this poor farmhouse, so meagre, that the same clothes were often worn inside as for outdoors.

His wife, as a sign of a married lady, wore a white linen headdress, over her hair bunched in plaits above her ears, and secured by a coarse net – like a working woman. Over a long russet kirtle, she wore an open-sided surcoat, embroidered at the breast, the long sleeves of her kirtle keeping her arms warm and the hem trailing on the floor, as she walked. Underneath this was a coarse linen shift – later to become known as a chemise – and equally coarse blanket hose, held up by garters. On her feet she wore heel-less slippers (the mules of our present day). Many country women went bare foot all the year round.

They had been discussing preparations for the coming Christmas festival, but her husband was now leaning forward, interrogating his shepherd as to the prospects of the next year's lambing season, and then turning to his foreman, as to the state of the drainage channels and bridges on the stretch of his land nearest the sea. His wife had turned away and was discussing the purchase of some more dress material from the Canterbury weavers, with her eldest daughter, a buxom lass of nearly 17 summers.

Jugs of small beer and ale, quenched thirsts, and the farmer, as a special treat, had his ale mulled by the infusion of cinnamon sticks, and the insertion of a red-hot poker into his tankard. It was a relaxed, mixed gathering, all pleasantly tired after a hard day's toil. The little port had contributed its quota of seamen, and travellers by road and sea, even the one or two local smugglers and wreckers, keeping well in the background – this was an ideal lonely flat coast for such operations. A dark night, a mule with a lantern roped to its saddle, driven slowly along the top of the causeway to simulate another ship close in or perhaps harbour lights, and the poor victim is lured onto a lee shore with the tide receding to become hopelessly stranded, left high and dry and easy meat for the local villagers to set upon and plunder.

Or the landing of contraband, wines and Geneva gin, silks from a small pulling boat rowed in from a larger ship on the same flat beaches, and Willow-the-Wisping away over devious paths across the marshes, known only to locals.

The evening meal over, table dismantled, and propped against the far wall, all could gather round the dying embers of the fire for a final warm up before retiring. First greasy hands had to be washed at the stone sink in the corner, locally made soap was now available for this purpose, and ewers of water. The farmer had the only chair with a back in the house, and the rest had to do with rough stools and benches, made on the farm, and the children and youngsters squatted with backs against the walls for support.

The farmer supped his nightcap, while his ploughmen got on with mending harness, strung across their laps, and re-padding a yoke. One of the drivers was finishing off a pair of shoes he was making for himself. The women talked quietly amongst themselves, as they patched clothes, and one carded wool. The oldest, the granny, was repeating a folk tale to a group of the youngest children, and little eyes conjured up strange worlds in the glowing embers, fiery caverns with dragons

All was now quiet, as the wind had dropped with nightfall, and only the squeaks and scuffles of mice and rats as they fought for crumbs in the litter, broke the silence. The two farm cats sat statuesque on each side of the hearth and pretended to eye this activity with indifference, pending the usual lethal pounce. It was time for bed, and to rest weary bodies in preparation for another days toil. 'Toilet' was simple, a quick visit across the slushy farmyard with flickering lantern to the privy, adjoining the farm dung heap, a rickety roofed structure balanced over a shallow cess-pit.

Bodily washing was considered unhealthy and baths unheard of, clothes were worn most of the time, indoors and out, and even in sleep, and seldom changed. The farmer and his wife and 3 youngest children retired to the great four-poster bed in the corner of the main room. This was the family's most prized possession, handed down from generation to generation. Too big and bulky to go upstairs in the principal bedchamber above it just fitted in under the low beams. As became the heads of the household, it was fully curtained for privacy and draught proofing, and had a feather mattress and down bolster, luxuries unknown up to a few years ago, before a wave of agriculture prosperity gave incentive to add a few more household comforts. For further pampering, a hot flat stone was fetched from beside the fire, wrapped in a cloth and placed in the bed to warm up cold feet.

As this was the warmest part of the farmhouse, the occupants of the four-poster had taken off most of their clothes to sleep. Not so, the rest of the household bedding down above. This bedchamber was the same size as the main room under, some 20ft by 15ft, and was reached by going outside and climbing up a wide ladder to a door in the gable end wall, and this in all weathers. Here they had to make shift as best they could, on straw pallets on the oak floor, with, perhaps a winnowing sheet over, and the lucky ones, under, to safe chaffing from straws sticking through.

With male and female in these close confines, and no privacy, even with most clothes kept on, promiscuity was common. The only 'furnishings' were two chests and a stool. It was better to sleep in the barn with the livestock, if colder and draughtier, it was more private.

Before daybreak, the birds sheltering in the eaves set up such a chattering and scuffling, that all were soon roused. It only needed the rooster on the dung heap to add his voice for good measure. The womenfolk had to brave the thin coat of snow that now covered all, to fetch water from the well, and bring in more logs for the kitchen and oven fires. The couvre feu was removed from the main fire and bellows vigorously applied, soon had a good blaze going.

Breakfast was usually slices of bread and butter and a mug of beer to start the day with. If the weather was very severe, then a hot 'porridge' was served, comprising a mixture of oatmeal with meat broth, vegetables and scraps of meat. Now we reluctantly leave our busy Tudor farmstead and its

workers, and jump ahead 340 years, to the summer of 1921. The farmhouse had now been added to almost beyond recognition, and was at least 3 times its original length. My father bought the timber-framed section this setup, having a little inkling that the original wooden 'hall' now sandwiched between two 18th century brick extensions, was all of 900 years old. The small brick section to the north of original house must have been added in about 1610, possibly to replace a badly aging wooden-framed piece. A new staircase was inserted at this end of the house, supplementing the narrow ladder that had been built from the main living area to the solar above, to replace the outside ladder of former times.

Nature and man doing their best to obscure its humble Saxon origins, with a thick coating of ivy, lath and plaster, whitewash, and wooden casings that now hide its ancient wonders.

This half had most recently been in use as the kitchen quarters (still) of a large farmhouse, with 'new' opulent living quarters attached next door. Now it was sold as a separate property, doorways in the party wall being blocked up, and a fence added, back and front, to give separate gardens. Its only 'services' were a water tap and an earth closet in the yard behind.

Remnants of the old farm buildings were still there, but these were not part of the deal, just the half-house and a bit of a garden for us. A local builder had bought all the rest, land and buildings, and was busy demolishing the great barn and stacking the timbers in front of the cart sheds, behind us, to form a perfect rat haven.

The carter and his family still 'lived' in the vacant cart shed at the end. The smithy was also still in use to the delight of us kids, and we would stand in the doorway enveloped in acrid blue smoke of burnt hoof, watching horses being shod, and red hot cart tyres being rushed outside to be laid over the wooden wheel lying on its side on a round metal plate with a hole in the centre for the hub. Water from a can, liberally applied to the hot metal, soon shrank the band which went to a blue fleshy state, and the wheel was tight again. Another fascination for myself and twin brothers were the pigsties. They were full of piglets who never seemed to stop eating. The result of this was an almost continuous rod like extrusion from their rears

The non-existent services of our new home were soon put to rights. A lean-to attached to the back was converted into two rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom / w.c. The old well was pressed into service as a cesspool. Small-bore lead piping inconspicuously served incandescent gas lamps, brightening up the dim interior, and providing hot baths for us kids.

History may have been seeping out of every pore of the old timbers, but so were wood-boring beetles of every kind, death watch with their tick, tick, ticking, powder post with their large flight holes, you name it, and something had to be done about this, and quickly.

Our first job was to strip off the ivy that now reached up to the eaves. This revealed roughcast on lath and plaster, and when removed, exposed the original wall timbering, close spaced vertical oak studs, still packed between with mud and rushes from the local marshes.

The same treatment was accorded to the living room ceiling, another large mystery area, some 20ft by 15ft. This brought to light 5" square oak beams, chamfered on their bottom edges, and on the sides of each and every one, words and sentences in Latin and Greek chalked in neat capitals. To

decipher this early graffiti, the help of an antiquarian from Canterbury was enlisted. He pronounced it student's doggerel, with frequent references to one, William Zorgi, a local smuggler – this name even we could spot.

[He suggested that our house had once been an inn, frequented by students from Canterbury, possibly, in the 15-16th century.] (This is highly unlikely and nothing in the house can seriously back this up)

In the living room is an ingle-nook fireplace built of small, flat (2" thick) Elizabethan bricks, behind an innocuous looking little grate that completely masked it. These great chimneys were being inserted into the old hall-houses from about 1600 and almost every property had a 'proper fire place' – not an open hearth – by the end of the 17th century.

Careful investigation and demolition of the Victorian grate revealed an enormous double flue, surmounting an ingle-nook 3'.6" deep by 7'.6" wide by 4'.9" high under the oak supporting lintel, the back of this being cut away to match the flue taper.

On the left of the hearth was bread baking oven with an arched fire hole under. The floor of the oven was paved with large flat stones set in sand to conserve heat, a sort of thermal flywheel under a domed brick roof, all big enough for us kids to enter and crawl around in. The main flue was equally divided into two by a hanging brick partition, arched at the bottom and only 2" thick, extending up 10ft. or so, with a vented opening at the top into the main flue. Here, in this sort of annex, hams were hung on iron hooks, one above the other to be smoked and cured in the wood smoke. If you did not mind falling smuts, you could stand within the hearth at the bottom of the main flue, and look up 25ft. to the square of blue sky passing overhead.

I believe the time honoured way of sweeping these cavernous wood-soot encrusted flues, was by ladder, and reciprocation a stout holly bush in front of and above one, suitably dressed for the occasion! This complex, now fully explored, proved to be 10'.6" wide by 3'.10" deep at lintel height, tapering to 13½" square internally, in the tall chimney section. The rear wall of the ingle-nook began to round back at 4'.7" above hearth, and was fitted with a series of stout iron hooks, all of which exactly matched similar facilities at the Tudor Cottage in King Street, Margate.

Another feature of the living room was the main front-to-back support beam, 3ft. out from and parallel with the ingle-nook. Into the side of this half way along was a crudely adzed housing for the other main beam 8½" square, set at 90 and spanning the room width. The first beam was beautifully moulded with many closely spaced flutes and beads running down its length of 20ft. and was 14" deep by 12" wide. This was supposed to have originated as one of the pillars in a cliff-top church, possibly All Saints at Shuarts, now, owing to coast erosion, well out to sea! (This has since been proved untrue, as in the 1970s a team of archaeologists were able to excavate the whole of the footings of the old church which stood not far from Shuart Farmhouse, down Shuart Lane, north of St Nicholas-at-Wade.

I am jumping ahead. Our antiquarian friend had, meanwhile been upstairs and also in our vast blackened roof space, examining the work of ancient craftsmen. He noted the axe-hewn beams, slightly cambered, with their central king posts soaring up through the ceiling and sprouting 4 curved braces in the roof space above to pick up the ridge beam and collars respectively. The typically Saxon 'club' top ends to the main support posts,

where they were morticed and tenoned to the ends of the tie beams and each secured with 3 treenails. Each could have been a tree upside down?

Everywhere curved braces, sawn from the naturally growing tree shapes, in the extensive oak woods of Kent, now long used up. All joints whether mortice and tenon in the main structural members, or just halved together as rafters, at ridge and in pairs to collars (the bar of an 'A' frame) were secured by treenails. These were of very hard wood, roughly rounded, and sharpened to a long point, $\frac{3}{4}$ " diameter by about 12" long overall. If the holes in the joining members were bored slightly off centre respective to each other, then driving the 'peg' would pull the joint up very tight. Where they were high up and could not be seen the builders did not bother to cut off the projecting spikes, but just left them, as driven - sounds almost like today's approach.

This was a rather mean two bay house, 26ft. long by 21ft. wide, and the then new chimney and ingle-nook occupied most of the shorter bay, leaving the longer bay to provide just a living room with bed chamber over. There were no internal stairs, and only a long entrance hall behind the ingle-nook, with another passage at 90 through beside it. In the roof could be seen a lattice of little square peg-tiles, no bibs each hung from tiling battens by 2 square oak pegs inserted at the top end. This steeply pitched roof, extended down to within 4ft. of the 1st level, and never leaked.

He explained to us, that our house originated as a simple timber-framed Saxon 'hall' structure. The 3 main frames were probably pre-fabricated on the ground, and then hoisted into position by the combined efforts of a team from the local village, with ropes and ladders and props, and temporally secured while the longitudinal members were fitted, and pegged in place. The structure was founded on large chalk blocks, as repairs to the foundations subsequently revealed. The end frames were complete panels with ground cills, (locked frames) but the middle one was of open 'goal-post' construction so as to give a central area free of obstruction, and was weaker in consequence.

The floor was only beaten earth, rush-strewn, with a central open wood fire on a raised platform. The smoke found its way out as best it could through triangular openings at the apex of each gable end, known as gablets.. This accounted for our soot-encrusted and therefore well preserved roof timbers. In the newer brick addition the roof timbers were very rotten by comparison.

Perhaps the 'piece de resistance' of the ancient carpenter's craft is best seen in the two carved doorways on one side of the entrance hall - perhaps the original access? These were only discovered when black painted boxings were striped off. The pointed arches had been brutally notched out each side to give square door openings, and it took a skilled joiner a week to restore this 17th century vandalism.

There is now not a trace left of the busy port of Gore-end, a name incidentally, that has nothing to do with blood, and everything to do with dressmaking. A gore being a long, wedge-shaped piece of cloth inserted to give flare to a skirt or sleeve. Up to the 1880's, large scale Ordnance Survey maps still shown an inlet albeit much truncated, where the Gore Channel was, and the area was known locally as the 'Lagoon', was marshy and at certain tides, flooded. It can be seen clearly on the 1840 Tithe map.

First an earth, then a stone embankment, constructed in 1879-80, finally closed off this area, and the coastline became much as Minnis Bay is today, just a wide flattish bay embracing a long stretch of sand. Still nobody else inhabited this lonely, desolate stretch of coast, save the residents of Lower Gore-end farm and their livestock.

The nearest other buildings to go up, were to do with the Coast Blockade, shore bases set up to combat and suppress the gigantic system of 'Free Trade' that had grown unchecked during the long wars with France. A station was to be built every 3 miles along the coast, manned by a midshipman and 8 seamen. The nearest to Gore-end was opposite Plum Pudding Island, and built in 1840, about 1½ miles away. I can just remember the back wall of this with plumbing still attached, preparing to slide down the crumbling cliff on to the beach, on my first visit to Minnis Bay in 1919.

Next to go up were a row of coastguard cottages and a boson's house, 100yds. Away up on high ground, opposite Lower Gore-end farm in 1880. Today what remains of this isolated and lonely farmstead dating back to Saxon times, is totally engulfed by commuter and retired peoples housing and facilities. A dense spec.-builder sprawls as far as the eye can see on all sides, and a railway thunders past behind. A petrol station opposite, rows of shops and lock-up garages, now completely swamp its unique and all but obliterated presence down in its hollow where the old cart track to the Bay once ran.



Showing the two N. sections + with the S. thatched end visible on the far left.