

## Recorders of Uttlesford History Visit to Tiptofts

A group of fifteen Recorders attended the visit to Tiptofts, a late 13<sup>th</sup> to early 14<sup>th</sup> century Grade I listed building in Cole End, Wimbish on March 17<sup>th</sup> 2012. The house sits in a rural position overlooking open farmland. Alongside the house is a range of 19<sup>th</sup> century barns which serviced the 200 acre farm which until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century belonged to the former manor house. The house is entirely surrounded by a substantial water filled moat which was designed as a display of status and for defensive purposes.



Front view of Tiptofts across the moat

The house at first appears to be a 19<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse with typically Edwardian features including soft red brick facia, large symmetrical windows and porch entrance. The group toured the gardens and crossed the moat bridges to look at the rear of the house which has a long sloping roof more characteristic of early buildings. We learned from the homeowner that the house was originally an aisled hall with small flanking wings on one side, making the building half H shaped.



Rear view noting the steep roof

Our tour entered the house through a long passageway and a rather ancient arched oak door. It took a moment for our eyes to adjust to the dark interior and to take in the remarkable view. We had entered a large hall, open perhaps 30 feet to the rafters and without ceilings or plastered walls with all the early timbers exposed. The floor, although a later replacement, made up of patterned brickwork is uneven and undoubtedly early.



Brick floors support the timber frame and aisle pillars

According to historical records, the hall (37 x 19 ft with a 4½ ft aisle) was of 3 unequal bays with the narrow screens bay at the south end. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the ceiling of the south half was removed and the great timbers exposed, and the remaining original doorway from the screens to the buttery wing uncovered. The timbers are remarkable for their enormous size. Quatrefoil columns with chamfered base and moulded capitals support the south bay and hammerbeams with curved braces and cusped spandrels are exposed and even charred in places. The king post roof is exposed. The main timbers have been dated c.1280 – c.1320 by tree-ring analysis.



Massive scalloped edge hammerbeam

The original central fireplace, once open to the roof was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century encased by a massive chimney stack which takes up a great part of one side of the hall. The builders were however careful to position the top of the chimney to the side of the original open vent and the king post roof support which remain intact and heavily sooted.



Exposed roof timbers surround the 16<sup>th</sup> century chimney stack

There can be few buildings in Uttlesford in which the original framework survives so intact that we can appreciate the historical significance of how medieval manorial halls functioned. One small but telling feature at Tiptofts is the small metal bracket attached to the massive trefoil support nearest the fireplace which served to support and dry the wet saddle of the lord after riding his horse.

Although a great deal of the Recorders tour was spent viewing the hall, we also looked at the buttery, brewhouse and rooms above which made up the H shape end of the hall. Afterwards we congregated in the kitchen to look at the wealth of historical research collected by the owners and chat to them about their many years in residence.

One fascinating feature of the kitchen is the timber beam above the cooking range where ‘witch marks’ have been inscribed into the timber. The term ritual protection mark is often preferred to the description ‘witch marks’ used in some references in order to avoid confusion with the same term which is used in many writings to refer to the marks left on a witch's body by its familiar. Inscriptions in the beam at Tiptofts are of the usual format; a delicately hand-scribed double, overlapping V which forms a W. At Tiptofts, a more boldly inscribed small capital T is found, interspaced with a small, bold, capital S. There are a good many of these inscriptions which reveals something of the superstition of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and the isolation afforded by the location.

