



The Court House, East Meon

East Meon was the largest of the Bishop of Winchester's manors in Hampshire, and the Pipe Rolls record the amount spent each year on maintenance and building works at the manor house, The Court House. About 20 years ago the architectural historian Edward Roberts identified the Pipe Rolls (those for 1395-6 and 1396-7) which record the building of the present house. From these building accounts we know where the materials used in its construction came from and how much they cost and the names of those who did the work and how much they were paid.

The building, consisting of a great hall and a two-storey wing, was a replacement for a similar building, almost certainly Norman, which had stood on the same site. It was commissioned by the

bishop, William of Wykeham, as lord of the manor, and his master mason was William Wynford, one of the greatest of 14th century architects, who had remodelled the nave of Winchester Cathedral and had designed Winchester College and New College, Oxford. It is Wynford's only surviving domestic building.

At the south end (where the present fireplace is) the hall was built on to a wing that was attached to the earlier building and contained the bishop's chamber and chapel. The doorway at the south-west corner, now blocked up, gave access to a staircase leading up to the chamber. The hall itself is 48 feet long and 26 feet wide and is over 40 feet up to the peak of the roof, which was covered with 35,500 tiles. There would have been an open fire in the middle, with the smoke finding its way upwards to louvres in the roof, as the blackened timbers of the roof show.

The walls are 4 feet thick and 20 feet high and are constructed mainly of white malmstone from Langrish and flints from the downs above the village. The roof, an independent structure that sits on the walls, was constructed during the same months as the great roof of Westminster Hall. The great tie beams came from Durford Wood to the east of Petersfield. The corbels, the heads of bishops and kings, were carved in Winchester, and those of

the bishops are probably a portrait of William of Wykeham, then in his 70s.

The hall is lit by four pairs of tall windows with cinquefoil heads. The windows were originally unglazed, but with shutters, the hinges of which remain. Glass, from Guildford, was inserted in 1440 by Cardinal Beaufort, Wykeham's successor as bishop, who also remodelled (and possibly rebuilt) the wing at the south end of the hall. The wing was demolished, probably in the early 17th century when the timber framed farmhouse wing that still stands on the east of the hall was built. The fireplace now in the hall is almost certainly that from Cardinal Beaufort's new chamber.

There would have been a dais at the south end of the hall with a high table of beechwood that the accounts record as having been made for the new building along with trestle tables for the body of the hall. The bases of the present tables were made in 1736 out of Baltic oak for Middle Temple Hall in London, where they remained until 2000, when they were brought here and new tops were added to them.

At the opposite, north, end of the hall from the fireplace two doors lead into, respectively, the buttery (or *bouteillerie*, where drink was prepared) and the pantry (or *painterie*, where food was prepared). The lath and plaster division between

these rooms has gone, but its location can be seen. The kitchen would, because of the fire hazard, have been a freestanding building to the east.

Above the buttery and pantry is the great chamber, 30 feet by 15, with a honey-coloured timber roof of similar construction to that of the great hall, and a large fireplace. Access is by a staircase, with original wood block stairs, through a door on the outside of the great hall. Off the great chamber is a small room, formerly the garde-robe, which had a drop down to a latrine below.

The works were carried out almost wholly in 1396, and the total cost was £109 15s 11d, at a time when a labourer's wage was 4d (1.6p). The names of those who constructed the building are commemorated on a board in the great hall. The building itself has survived virtually unaltered through 6 centuries of low-key existence. It was sensitively restored by the architect Morley Horder in the first half of the 20th century. He added a north wing joining the house to the 18th century thatched cottage on the roadside and, between the hall and the early 18th century thatched barn, on what had become a farmyard, he laid out a garden with lawns and borders divided by low stone walls and yew hedges.

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