

Guernsey Museum Tudor Project – Domestic interiors

Although open hall houses may have existed in Guernsey in the early Middle Ages, the evidence on the ground seems to suggest that the homes of the ordinary Guernsey farmer and fisherman were quite low-ceilinged, and that by the 16th century most farmers had built separate accommodation for their animals.[1]

The house usually consisted of two rooms with a hallway between them. One room was used as a kitchen/living room, and the other room might be used as a dairy cum storeroom, and as a place for young animals to live for a little while until they were old enough to go outside.

The low loft, which was reached by a ladder straight up the side of the wall, was where most of the family slept. It was heated by the warmth from the chimney breast.

Kitchen – living room

The main feature of the kitchen was a large open fireplace. It had perhaps two or three terpieds, metal three-footed stands which were placed over the fire and on which the cooking pots were placed. The kettle was also placed on a terpied, but the crock which was used to cook the beanjar would have been placed beside the fire, within the fireplace.

Other cooking implements could have included various rakes to remove ash, and pokers to stir the fire up. A metal beam was sometimes fitted across the chimney, inside, and a chain came down from it on which a pot or kettle could be hung.

There is no record of spits in ordinary houses, on which to roast meat, as what meat was available would have been cooked more economically in a 'stew' or 'soup'.

The bread ovens beside many fireplaces nowadays had not yet appeared, so bread would have been baked beside the fire, possibly on a hot stone, but not necessarily.

There was often a stone lined niche beside the fireplace, often called a 'cabinet', in which a jar of salt was kept, together with tapers to light the candles or the wick in the crasset lamp, and if the man had a clay pipe it would have been kept there also.

Les Lattes

This is the local Guernsey French name for a bacon rack. This was fixed to the ceiling near to the fireplace and a side of bacon was placed on it to be preserved by the smoke from the fire[2]. Many other items were also put on, or hung from les lattes, baskets, bread, clothes to dry, and so forth.

The Green Bed

This was another fixture in the kitchen. Built into the corner between the fireplace and the window, it was the medieval equivalent of a settee, although a lot less comfortable. A wooden frame was built to contain a mattress which was usually stuffed with bracken or reeds, or sometimes pea-haulms, and covered with a green material.

In the upper island parishes bracken was used, and the bed was called a lit d'fouaille, in the lower parishes reeds were used and it was called a joncquiere. It was considered an integral part of the house, and if one moved, the green bed was left behind and another one made for the new house. They are thought to have originated from Norway, and to have been brought to northern France before coming to the Channel Islands.

They were used to sit on, and the elderly and the very young often used them as beds. Fuel for the fire was often stored underneath them.[3]

Other items of furniture

There was a table in the living room, and there may have been a chair for the head of the household, but everyone else sat on benches, or on small stools, scabets, which sometimes had small cupboards built into them.

The large dresser came later, when people had more money to spend on fancy pottery and glassware.

Lighting

This was by candles, or a crasset lamp. This lamp consisted of two bowls, one above the other, with a wick in the upper bowl. The oil used was usually fish oil, and the wick could have come from the inner pith of reeds. There was also the light of the fire, of course. The crasset lamp was often hung over the green bed, and the family would all sit round the edge of the green bed to knit of an evening, making use of the little light available.

China, glass and cutlery

China was usually items made of earthenware. Glass was used in upper class homes but not by ordinary people. Cutlery was usually a knife and fingers. Spoons were used to feed children, but adults mopped up gravy, soup etc. with pieces of bread.

Beds

Beds were usually what were called truckle beds, a smallish bed with a wooden frame with rope strung across from side to side to support the mattress, which could have been stuffed with bracken or straw, rather like a paliasse. Sometimes the mattress was filled with feathers, but this was considered a great luxury by the ordinary people. Bed covers often consisted merely of a large garment which could also be worn as a cloak. Knitted covers, similar to what we would call a blanket, were also used.

A large “4-poster” type bed would have had a feather mattress, perhaps a bolster pillow of some kind, curtains behind and at the sides of the bed, and a canopy over it, and woollen covers.

There is some evidence at Hantonne, in Jersey, of a bed of this kind being in the upstairs living area, and box beds, which were built into a corner of the living room were known in England. However since the sleeping accommodation for ordinary Guernsey people was usually in a not too lofty attic, it would have been difficult to have had a bed of this size and height in such an attic.

Flooring

Beaten earth floors were usual in cottages and barns, and some of them survived until the 1970s in country farmhouses. They were sanded and swept regularly, but there is no record of cottage floors being “strewn with sweet smelling herbs”. It is possible that the herbs were too useful in the pot, or as medicine, to waste them on the floor.

Homes of the better off

The homes of the better off were also quite simply furnished, and although the houses themselves were still quite low-ceilinged, there were more rooms, the attic had become a proper storey, and if the site was suitable there was sometimes a cellar in which wine and other items were kept.

The floors were wooden, the beds would have had feather mattresses and curtains to keep out the draught, window glass was known although it was expensive, and the wealthy families would have had servants to do the cooking and cleaning for them.

1. House at Les Adams, which shows original roof level, and 16th century barn in garden for animals.
2. see the Kitchen display at the Folk Museum.
3. The Guernsey Green Bed. J H Lenfestey. The Channel Islands Annual Anthology, 1972/3. p. 69.