

# OLD SOAR MANOR, PLAXTOL, KENT

*Old Soar is a rare survival of an early medieval manor house. As well as offering a good introduction to medieval life and the manorial system, it would be an ideal subject for building interpretation.*

## Historical Description

Old Soar is a fine example of an early medieval manor house. It was built around 1290, and such domestic buildings from this date are not common.

The manor belonged to the Colepepper family who became one of the largest landowning families in Kent and Sussex, reputedly through a policy of kidnapping heiresses and marrying them. Only the two-storey solar end, which was the lord's private apartment, remains. There was originally an aisled hall adjoining it which was where the main business of the manor took place but this has since been rebuilt and now forms a separate dwelling not open to the public.

The solar has a privy chamber opening off it with a garderobe. The arched opening visible at ground level on the outside is where the garderobe pit was cleaned out. The lord's chapel is set into the angle of the east side of the solar and was originally accessible by an external stair. Below the solar is a stone vaulted room that provided safe storage space. In later manor houses this ground floor space became used as a parlour opening off the hall. Access to the solar was through a door from the hall that opened into a spiral staircase set in the thickness of the wall. The solar was heated by a large fire although the hood is today missing from the chimneypiece.

Part of the original kingpost roof remains and there is evidence that the windows, with the exception of the chapel window, were originally shuttered, not glazed. Hinge pins for the shutters can be seen together with the pointed recesses into which the shutters opened.

## Learning Opportunities

Old Soar offers the chance of looking at a complete domestic building of the early medieval period. Key Stage 3 pupils studying Medieval Realms would find it a source of evidence for some of the details of domestic buildings of the time and a good opportunity for some architectural detective work.

As preparation to a visit, pupils should become familiar with the materials and methods of construction of typical medieval buildings. If they were familiar with some of the architectural terms such as **undercroft**, **vaulting corbel** and **kingpost** they could study the on-site evidence with more understanding. Pupils could record their observations of the building on a form designed to include building materials, the roof structure, the shape and distribution of windows etc. They could look for the detail in the design and technology required in the structure and make drawings and measured ground plans, developing some of these into elevations drawn to scale or accurate models.

Pupils should also be encouraged to realise that buildings are about people, and represent people's needs, tastes, skills, economic situations and way of life. For pupils who understand a little of the structure of medieval society, they could interpret the building and work out what kind of people built and lived in Old Soar Manor. Key questions could include: Why build here? Why is it this size, shape and layout? Why did they use this building material and style of architecture and decoration? Why are the windows and doors designed as they are? What type of heating, lighting and water supply was in place when it was built? For pupils studying the inhabitants in more detail, it might be possible to trace some documentary evidence of the Colepepper family who lived there, through wills or inventories of goods, and they could visit to West Peckham church to see a memorial brass of 1457 to Lady Elizabeth Colepepper who is wearing a fine butterfly head-dress.

## Location

1 mile east of Plaxtol village. 10 miles east of Sevenoaks.  
Grid Ref: Q 619541. OS Map 188.

## How to get there

**Road:** 3 miles south of the A25. Turn off the A227 8 miles north of Tonbridge. The site is situated in a maze of small lanes east of Plaxtol. It is not suitable for coaches.

**Train:** Borough Green Station is 2 ½ miles to the north. Enquiries. Tel: 08457 484950.

**Bus:** Wealden Beeline 222 East Surrey 404.  
For timetable information, Tel: 01634 281100

## Facilities

**Access for disabled visitors:** limited to the grounds only.

**Parking:** Limited parking for cars or transits. No coach parking near the site.

**Toilets:** none on site.

Picnics permissible in the grounds. There is a small exhibition of old photographs of the area inside.

## Free Educational Visits

**Please remember you are responsible for carrying out your own risk assessment.**

Visits are free to this site and teachers are advised to contact the National Trust at Ightham Mote before their visit. (Tel: 01732 810378). We strongly recommend that teachers make a preliminary visit to explore the possibilities of the site before bringing their groups.

**Limit on party numbers:** 50

**Staff/pupil ratio:** at least 1 to 15

**Safety:** Teachers are advised to bring their own first aid kit, and to ensure that pupils are adequately supervised at all times.

## Contacts

**National Trust:** Local contact at Ightham Mote near Sevenoaks Tel: 01732 810378

**The Kent Archives office at Maidstone:** offer advice on records of the Colepepper family Tel: 01622 671411 Ext. 3363.

**English Heritage Regional Education Officer:** Jennie Fordham, English Heritage, Eastgate Court, 195-205 High Street, Guildford, GU1 3EH. Tel: 01483 252013.

## Related or Nearby Sites

**Ightham Mote**, near Sevenoaks. A moated Medieval manor house with a Great Hall and chapel of the thirteenth century. The National Trust. Admission charged.

**Penshurst Place**, near Tunbridge wells. A grand version of an early house with a thirteenth century Great Hall. Privately owned. Admission charged.

**Sevenoaks Museum** has displays on the history of the neighbourhood.

**Maidstone Museum and Art Gallery** has displays of Kentish archaeology and local history.

## A Guide to Resources

Ridgard, J. Dame Alice de Bryene: Life in a Medieval Household. Chambers. (The Way It Was: The Middle Ages) 1977.

Black, M. Food and Cooking in Medieval Britain. History and Recipes. English Heritage 1985.

McDowall, R.W. Recording Old Houses. Council for British Archaeology booklet. Gives guidance on how to recognise and record historical buildings.

Iredale, David. Discovering Your Old House. Shire Publications (14). 1987. A good introduction to looking at buildings, noting significant features and dating from the evidence. Also a good source book for documentary evidence for the study of old buildings.

Barnes J, Design and Technology and the Historic Environment, English Heritage, 1999, ISBN 1-85074-399-1.

Lockey M, Walmsley D, Art and the Historic Environment, English Heritage, 1999, ISBN 1-85074-651-6.

**All English Heritage resources are available from English Heritage, c/o Gillards, Trident Works, Temple Cloud, Bristol, BS39 5AZ**

**Tel: 01761 452966 Fax: 01761 453408**

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