

COWDRAY

The event that had the greatest effect on the town was the rebuilding of the old manor house of Coudreye, half a mile away on the river bank. With the injection of vast sums of money by noblemen from the Courts of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, this property became the mansion of Cowdray. It transformed the local economy. Enormous amounts of food were required to feed some 50 servants, to say nothing of the lord, his family and guests. Catering was now on a scale previously unimagined, with about 30 different dishes being served on ceremonial occasions.



Cowdray was the greatest early Tudor courtier house in Sussex

Architecturally also, Cowdray was very different from the timber-framed houses of Midhurst. Grandly built in brick and stone, it was the work of sophisticated craftsmen skilled in the Renaissance splendours of France and Italy.

Other effects were felt. The neighbourhood labour market suffered from the diversion of workers both as house attendants and as building or maintenance men. Furthermore, the merchants who had lived happily in the Old Town were now drawn by the magnet of Cowdray. The previous country lane to Easebourne became the North Street

of a new suburb. This is why all the Tudor properties were built there.

THE MARKET HOUSE

For hundreds of years, Midhurst had been a tight-knit community at the top of the hill. The medieval guild still controlled the trading activities and administered local affairs. The pull towards Cowdray created a problem. Was the town to be re-sited or would its focus remain around the market? In an attempt to prevent it moving, a group of senior officials petitioned the lord of the manor to give them a plot of land on which to have a market house, near the church. This was built in 1551 and still remains in the centre of the Old Town. It is now unrecognisable as being Tudor because its open aisles were closed-in when the building became the Town Hall in 1760.

WALL PAINTINGS

Midhurst has several examples of Tudor wall paintings, mostly in private houses. The most elaborate, however, can be seen in a restaurant in North Street. This tells the Old Testament story of King Ahab robbing Nathan of his family's vineyard. Dating from the religious persecutions of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, it reflects the despair of the mostly Catholic population of the town in being deprived of the heritage of their faith.



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TUDOR MIDHURST

Midhurst is predominantly a Tudor town. Both Henry VIII and Elizabeth I came here and much of what they saw then is still clearly visible today.



The Spread Eagle Hotel
at the corner of today's
West and South Streets

Old buildings are everywhere. Some conceal their early origins, but the tell-tale sign is often an uneven roof line. The frontage may have been rebuilt, but the timber studing remains at the sides or rear. Even the apparently modern North Street is lined by Tudor properties. From here, Knockhundred Row leads to the Old Town in whose maze of streets almost every house dates back to the 16th century. Despite the disturbance of traffic, Midhurst remains a Tudor town.

THE MARKET SQUARE

Midhurst developed around its medieval market. Many of the buildings were shops

facing this central area. Because space was limited, the houses had narrow frontages (usually only a perch, say 16½ft or c.5m, wide), but with long gardens opening onto a back lane. The principal trades involved turning wool into cloth and hides into leather goods. Country people brought produce to sell at the weekly market and had stalls in the open air. The little town was busy, noisy and, above all, smelly with animal and human ordure.

A timber-framed Tudor house is at the top left of Knockhundred Row. This was the home of the Marner family who were the only silk weavers in Midhurst and were therefore very prosperous. Various of them lived in the five cottages that made up the building and shared the back yard with the 'house of office' (outside privy) and their well. All the internal walls have now been removed and their houses are now one property.

Going down Church Hill towards the church, on the left hand side and in Sheep Lane behind, are what seem to be small Georgian terraces. However, a peep at the side of the lowest house reveals that these also are Tudor in origin, refronted as 18th century modernisation. On the opposite side of the road is another row of ancient properties, interrupted by a pair of Georgian houses.



Admire the roof structure in the Marner family's five cottages, once a Working Men's Club

Here, as elsewhere, many of what were then single plots have become double. Their origins can be seen from the roof lines and from the perch-wide frontages, each of which once had a door and a window. The lower shops have the remains of the projecting jetties where the first floor beams overhung the ground level room. During the night a wooden vertical shutter would have covered the lower window; by day, let down on hinges, it provided a counter for the sale of goods.

TIMBER FRAMING

Each house was constructed as a rigid box-like timber frame to which non-load-bearing walls were attached. These buildings are very different from those put together by piling bricks or stones one on top of another. A timber-framed property is held together by mortice and tenon joints and by wooden pegs. It is a complete entity which a giant could pick up and move all in one piece to another location.

The foundation is a wooden frame, the sill beams, that lies flat on the ground. Uprights from each corner, known as the principal posts, are connected at their tops, transversally by tie beams and laterally by wall plates. The roof, in various forms, is jointed onto this framing. The space between one pair of principal posts and the next is called a bay. It is the building block of these Tudor houses and the basis of a flexible system which could be extended, either end-on or sideways, depending on the land available and the owner's wealth.

Walls are formed by horizontal rails and by vertical studs. The traditional filling between them was wattle and daub – hazel twigs plastered with mud and straw. By Tudor times bricks were being used, as replacement or substitution, and arranged in decorative patterns.



The magnificent skeleton of a Tudor house in Church Hill

TUDOR BUILDING METHODS

The construction details can be seen on the timber and red brick annex to the Spread Eagle Hotel. Every piece of wood was cut to exact size in the carpenter's yard and marked to ensure that it would be correctly positioned on site. This marking took the form of the Roman numerals which are still there today. Some but not all of the original small Tudor bricks remain and at the rear are the roughly adzed tree trunks that were cut down at least half a millennium ago.

Before the late 15th century few yeomen could afford to build permanent dwellings. Their homes were not expected to last longer than a lifetime: replacements were built on the same site. Most of the houses that we see today reflect the prosperity of the town in Tudor times and the increasing complexity of construction techniques.