

Drakes House, Gatcombe, Blakeney

Heritage Statement.



Drakes House – coloured photograph, now in Library of Congress, taken around 1890

1. Location

Drakes House forms part of cluster of six dwellings in the small hamlet and former Severnside port of Gatcombe. All date substantially to the 16th century, with the exception of Riverside Cottage that has its origin as the Birmingham Copper Co. warehouse in the 1790's. While the hamlet was partially cut off from the river with the construction of the South Wales Railway in 1851, and the pill infilled, nonetheless at very high tides, the hamlet is flooded and retains its historic character and shape. Drakes House is the only dwelling on the east side of the pill, and has a prominent position facing south west towards Lydney, Berkeley and Oldbury. Fragments of quayside walls front the house, with steps leading down to the water's edge.

Gatcombe's history as a port dates back until at least the late 15th century, when it became important as the outport for Gloucester, and the practical limit for larger ships to reach the city on the Severn.¹ An Exchequer Commission of 1582 examined the role of Gatcombe in the Severn Trade, and recorded 6 dwellings there, with diverse store houses, while ships of

¹ <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/glos/vol5/pp14-46>. The earliest reference to Gatcombe as a port dates to 1479, recording a vessel from Gatcombe trading in fish to Ireland.



up to 60 tonnes could berth there.² Fragments of a well-constructed seawall, along the west side of the pill may date to this period. Shipbuilding replaced commerce in the early 17th century, and vessels of up to 200 tonnes were constructed here up until the late 18th century.³ Salmon fishing was also important, with a 19th century engine on the foreshore. Gatcombe was particularly famous for stop-net fishing, which operated in the hamlet until the 1990's. Three stop-net boats survive where they were last laid-up on the quayside.⁴ Gatcombe was part of the Hagloe and Poulton estate, which was sold to the Crown in 1853, including Drakes House, described as a 'well frequented inn'.⁵ The estate, was sold into private ownership in 1950's.

Drone image of Gatcombe Pill at high tide; Drakes House is on the left side.

2. Drakes House: ownership and occupation history.

Drakes house is a well preserved late 15th or early 16th century hall and probably the earliest in the hamlet, and possibly constructed by the earliest recorded inhabitant, customs collector and 'royal servant' John Laurence the Younger in 1485. His presumed son Richard Laurence was assessed at Gatcombe at 12s in 1523.⁶ Later in the 16th century we have record of a Richard Barrow (d. 1563) 'the only wealthy person living in Gatcombe', whose father John (b. 1508) was described lord of Blakeney in 1547, and a Mr Borough living here in 1577-81. He may have been from the same family (living in Northan, Appledore, North Devon) as Stephen Borough, the famous artic explorer and navigator, and Chief Pilot of the Royal Ships 1563. His brother, William, was appointed Comptroller of the Navy in 1580, and accompanied Drake to Cadiz in 1587.

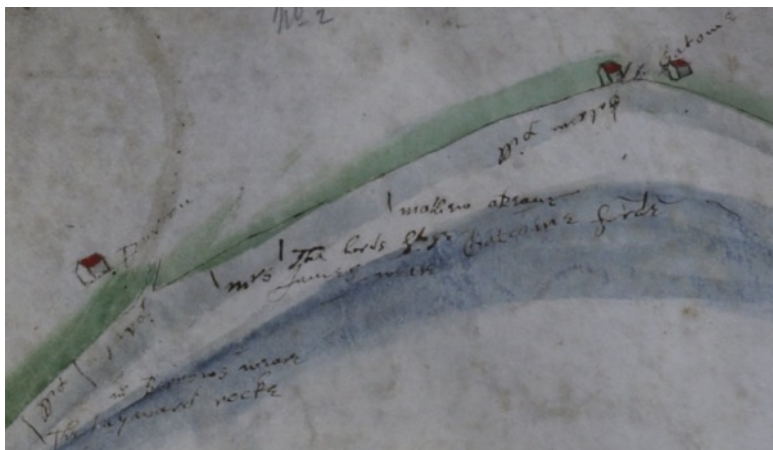
² Alexander Higgins 'The Establishment of the head port of Gloucester 1565-1584' MPhil Thesis, University of Bristol 2012. The thesis contains a full transcription of the Commission, original mss located at The National Archives: Public Record Office, UK [TNA:PRO], E 134/25Eliz/Hil3 and E 134/25Eliz/East14. The testimony of William Tyler, the owner of several barks, stated, 'and that a shipp of lx tonnes in his opinion may verie well rest and lye allwaies at Gatcombe and that such a shipp may within iij or iiij houres come from kingrode to gatcombe assome as the like may come from kingroade to Bristoll'. Another less flattering account by Patrick Carter, a Brisotl mariner observed that 'sayeth that in Gatcombe there are the howse of one master Baring (whoe is verie seldome or not at all there dwellinge) and fyve other howses inhabited by verie poore people and the men inhabitinge there beinge verie fewe are all such as twoe excepted are abrode. Master Baring may be a corruption for Mr Borough, recorded as living here is 1577-81.

³ <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/glos/vol5/pp14-46>

⁴ Mike Smylie (2021) *Voices from the Seashore*. Cheltenham: History Press, p 89-95.

⁵ Sale particulars in Gloucester Heritage Hub

⁶ C.R. Elringham, (2021) *The Forced Loan and Men to Fit to Serve as Soldiers, 1523*. BGAS / GRS 36, pp. 126.



Earliest depiction of Gatcombe, showing Drakes House, late 16th century. Extract of Map of Fisheries (Berkeley Castle Archives). It also mentions Mr Barrow's wrock (fishery)

The association with Francis Drake is a traditional one, first recorded in c. 1880 by local author, John Beddows.⁷ Whilst

unproven as his residence, the connection between Drake and the local landowner, and prominent Elizabethan admiral Sir William Winter of Lydney is well known.⁸ Winter supported many of his voyages between 1570 to 1589, and Drake might well have been a frequent visitor to the area.

In 1608, James and Thomas Shaw commenced shipbuilding in Gatcombe, and several large vessels are known to have been built here, including one vessel that supplied the Berkeley Company in Virginia. In 1720 William Cubit 'mariner' was living in the house, and 1737, the house is owned by the Thomas family, of Oatfield Farm. In 1761 James Cubit was living in the house, and around 1763, the house is named as the 'Gatcombe Boat' inn, with Richard Caple as landlord, although James Thomas (d.1780) continued to own the house. In the top floor of the house is graffiti "1788 FT". In 1792, the Inn is renamed the Sloop Inn. In 1827, the house is owned by Mary Adean, a prominent local family. The landlord in the late 18th / early 19th century was John Mathews, whose will was proven in 1829 and he left his estate to his three children, James - blacksmiths items, Thomas Gadd Matthews - £20 (who became one of the wealthiest merchants in Bristol whose tomb at Arnos Vale is the largest in the cemetery) and Mary - 'brewing utensils, casks, spirits, malt, cider beer and £100. In 1841, the Wiggell family were living in the house, and continue to do until at least 1911 according to the census returns.

⁷ John Beddows (c. 1880) *A week's holiday in the Forest of Dean*. Gloucester: Beddows, p. 10-11: 'On our left and separated from the rest of the hamlet by the Gatcombe Pill was a deserted house, with its windows boarded up and a fishing boat, keel uppermost lying before the door. This was the place the great Admiral had once made his temporary quarters'. A childhood memory of Drake and Raleigh living at Gatcombe and Purton was employed by a local author as a plot for a 'boys own' historical novel; Tom Bevan (1906) *Sea Dogs All*. London: Thomas Nelson.

⁸ There are no modern biographies of Winter, but a good entry in the DNB: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29769>. He invested in Drake's trading voyages in 1570, in the Panama expedition of 1572-3 and the Circumnavigation of 1577-80. Two of Winter's sons Edward and Nicholas (who died) were on his Spanish Expedition of 1585-86. Winter died in 1589, and Drake in 1595 in Panama; the Foresight was commanded by Winter's son William. According to the Commission of 1582, a ship called the *Mary Fortune* was completed at Gatcombe. This may be the same vessel, owned by Winter, and captured by the Portuguese off the Guinea Coast in 1565, while involved in the Hawkins /Drake slaving expeditions.



Drakes House in c. 1880, shortly after its closure as the Sloop Inn.

In 1843 the Hagloe and Poulton Court estate sells the Sloop, and it is purchased by Nathaniel Morgan. In 1851 the Sloop Inn 'closed' with the construction of the railway. In 1853, the house was sold to the Crown, and public house was reopened. In 1880, the Sloop was closed again with Martha Wiggell as landlady. In 1881 she is listed as widow and former innkeeper. Her daughter, Emma

Wiggell married Henry Inman, the bridge keeper for the nearby railway bridge, and they continued to live in the house until at least 1911, along with his niece. During this period the house was often visited by tourists to the Forest, and as a result there is a rich survival of photographs from the 1890's to early 20th century. It probably gained the name Drakes House after the closure of the Sloop Inn, as a result of this tourist interest. The house was

auctioned in 1965 for £4500. In 1972, Mr and Mrs AFW Smith bought the house and engaged Robert Wallis Peterson Architects for the restoration.

Fortunately, the architects kept detailed records of what they did to the house, as well as taking numerous 'before' photographs; this archive has been lodged in the Gloucester Record Office.⁹



Drakes House, c. 1900, showing external limewash, blocked window and chimney (removed in 1960's). Note also the external quayside wall, parts of which survive.

The Smiths sold the house to Mr and Mrs M Thomas in 1980. On December 19th 1981 there was a flood, that overtopped the quayside walls that filled the downstairs to a depth of several feet requiring extensive restoration and repair. The house was listed as Grade 2* on 25th January 1985. Professor and Mrs Horton purchased the house from the Thomas' in June 2019.

⁹ Gloucester Heritage hub, 'R W Paterson of Gloucester and Cheltenham, architect, 1926-1977' D3867.

3. Building Archaeology

Phase 1 (c. 1500)

The building is originally built as an open hall, without internal floors. The walls are built of neatly squared blocks of blue lias carboniferous limestone, likely from the Chepstow area, which could have been carried to Gatcombe by boat. It is a rectangular block, 17.25m x 7.5m, with walls 750-800mm, with the original two large primary roof trusses surviving, each with a collar and a tie, with slots for massive purlins, each around 5m in length, but these have been removed. The two ties are neatly finished with end-stops, suggesting that they were meant to be seen from below. On the ground floor there were three original windows on the west side and two on the east wall. There is no evidence at this stage of intermediate floors. The entrance is in the centre of the west wall. There was a small entrance in the south east corner that would have led to the quay – trace of which were found on the east side. In the south wall, there was a further entrance, 2m wide, that would have led directly to the river, which was blocked up early in the life of the building. There is a record of a cellar (filled in 1970's) in the south end of the hall, and this entrance may have facilitated loading directly to a moored vessel alongside the gable wall. The building was apparently unheated.

The building is an outstanding and rare survival of late medieval portside installation – likely jutting out into the river – with multiple functions as a storage / warehouse and as a living space. The quality of the stonework is also exceptional for the Forest of Dean, where local sandstone is normally employed.

Original Roof Truss, with ties cut through to accommodate plank-and-muntin partition.



Phase 2 (c. 1570)

This phase represents the conversion of the hall to a more typical early modern domestic dwelling, through the insertion of two floors. This was achieved by cutting through the ties of the primary trusses, and the insertion of three new trusses of much slighter construction, with collars. The roof line was flattened in the process. These changes to the roof enabled the insertion of internal floors on the first and second levels, with rooms reflecting the original tripartite division of the primary trusses. The internal timberwork remains intact (although slightly rearranged in 1972), preserving the altered plan, with partitions made from oak plank-and-muntin screens, as well as five original doors.

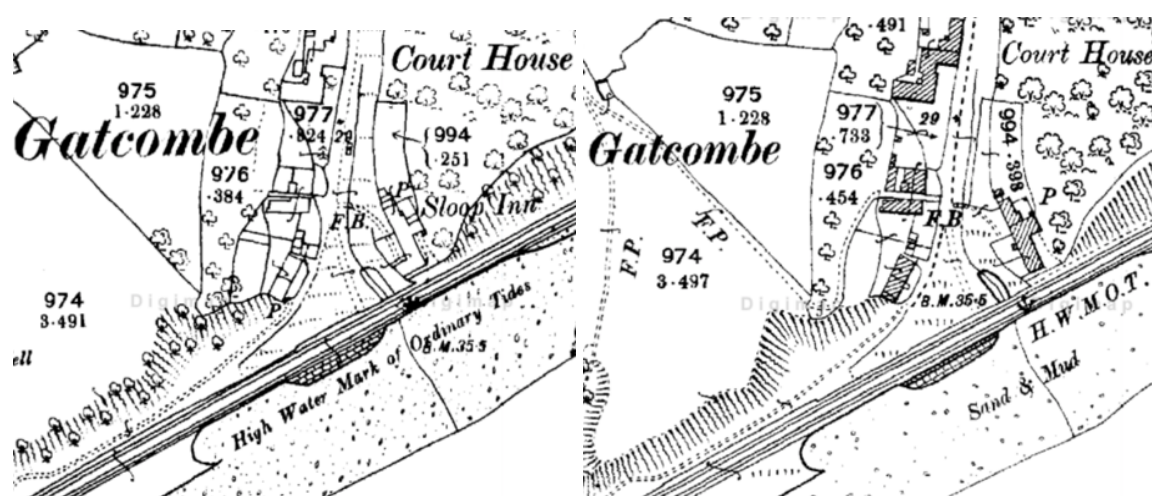
The second floor has four rooms opening out from a large landing. These may well have been lodgings for mariners or shipowners. The first-floor tripartite division was retained,

and the on the south wall, a fireplace, with limestone uprights inserted. The newel stair was added to connect the floors. Evidence for the insertion of these floors is evident on the ground floor, with a single longitudinal timber spanning the centre of the hall from the stone corbel, supported 2/3 along its length on a reused cross beam (mostly likely from another building as it has slots for joists), too short to be keyed into the wall, but was supported on two timber posts (which are now replaced by steel columns).

In addition to the plank-and-muntin panels, other surviving 16th century features include the main front door and door frame, two mullion windows (unusually one of timber), a newel stair, a large kitchen fireplace with bread oven or fish smokery, and a first floor fireplace made from Cotswold limestone, with a stone overmantel. Some of the beams in the ground floor hall have deep ovolo mouldings, suggesting that the space continued to be used as an open hall. There was a single fireplace midway along the east wall of the hall. This fireplace continued in use until the 19th century (evident from the charred floor joists), then converted to a window. However, the two large limestone uprights survive, with a span off over 2m.

In a survey of graffiti, dating to the early modern period, over 50 examples have been located, to include protection marks, M's and taper marks. There is also an official 17th stamp on the dining room door frame, and a broad arrow on the main front door frame.¹⁰

Phase 3: (18th century)



Drakes House in 1882 and 1904 (First and Second Edition 25' OS Map). It is marked as the Sloop Inn as it closed around 1880.

The basic block had a number of extensions added, visible in the early editions of the OS Map. One to the east side was removed by 1970, although fragments of the wall are still

¹⁰ The broad arrow is inverted, so may be from a reused / stolen timber. Used to mark official property up until the 20th century, its origin may have been in marking naval timber, connected to the shape of an anchor, as this report of 1609 suggests: "the sayde Commissioners to marke the same [selected trees] with an axe bearing His Maj[esty's] letters and an anker to distinguishe them from the rest as appropriated to His Majestys Navye lest in the general sale they should bee soulede away"; Fairbrother, E. H. (1914). "'The Broad Arrow': the King's mark". *Notes and Queries*. 11th ser. 9 (234): 481–483. doi:10.1093/nq/s11-IX.234.481.

extant. In the north side, stables were built with an upper floor. On photographs, this is shown first with a tiled roof, then a tin roof, but it was in such a poor condition that the roof and east wall taken down in 1972 and replaced with a flat steel roof and realigned wall. although the gable line remains visible on the side of the house. Beyond this were further buildings in a very ruined condition even in 1880; these were rebuilt in 1972 as garages. A



further addition (possibly of timber) was added to the south west corner and is visible in the 1880 sketch, but has disappeared by 1900, and all known photographs.

Postcard of c. 1900, showing Gatcombe Pill and Drakes House, with the stop-net boats in the foreground.

The hall served as a main reception area for the public house. It seems that this is the time when the floor was lowered 500mm (maybe 1853 when the pub reopened?) to provide more space, and the original fireplace blocked (as the hearth was now too high). The corner became an internal toilet. An extra chimney was added to west side, that served a stove within the bar. The rails, reusing muntin timber uprights, were added, with cast iron decorative infill on a stone plinth. These are typical of 19th century pubic house fittings.

Phase 4 (20th Century)

When the Smith's purchased the house in 1972, some further changes had already taken place to the house, most likely in the 1960's. This included the removal of the stove and chimney, and the construction of a fireplace made of cinder-blocks and cement on the south wall. A flue was inserted to connect it to the first-floor chimney. A rather crude 'Tudor' style;



wooden fireplace was added to this inserted chimney.¹¹ Two or three garages were built in modern materials. The downstairs toilet seems also to have been removed. Otherwise the house was in a pretty derelict state, with much evidence for beetle infestation.

Drakes House, when the Smiths purchased the property in 1972. The outhouses have a tin roof, the garages were already built.

¹¹ The architect in 1972 suggested it might be 1860's. The photos are no clear enough to date it, but it seems to be in the 'Old Charm style'. It was in removed by the Smiths, and its present whereabouts in unknown.

We have a detailed record of what the Smith's did to the house, as the architect's records survive. Work to the outbuildings has already been described. On the first and second floors, plank-and-muntin walls were exposed, and a slight re-arrangement to facilitate the insertion of an en-suite bathroom. The blocked stone mullion window was unblocked. Two further bathrooms were inserted into one of the second-floor rooms with a modern partition wall and fitted cupboard. On the ground floor, the cellar was dug out, and then re-



filled (?concrete or aggregate), and a poured concrete floor placed in the hall; horizontal floor joists were placed over this, with thin oak floor boards. They removed the fake Tudor fireplace and added their own 'Adam' style one, trimming the ceiling beam in the process, leaving it unsupported.

The Hall in 1972, with walls supporting the medial beam, the 'Georgian' window, and the 'Tudor' fireplace.

They also raised the sill of the south east window (which was a Georgian style window). The walls were then hacked off and rendered internally in cement – which was up to 200mm thick. Two short walls, that supported the medial beam were replaced by steel columns set into the floor



Dining room in 1972, before the oven was revealed, with original slab floor

In the dining room, the Smiths' removed a flag stone floor, and dug out the floor, so it could also have a poured cement floor, which they covered in red earthenware tiles. Close to the original floor level. They

also replaced two internal timber partition walls, where they had failed, in cinder-block, and revealed the bread oven or smokery.

Externally, they hacked off and re-rendered the west wall in cement but seem to have left the other elevations intact with earlier ?20th century concrete 'pebble-dash' render. They also added a deck to the south elevation, entered through two large plate glass windows. Curiously they did very little to the drainage system, which dated to the 1960's

During the Thomas's ownership, the windows were renewed (with LBC applied for). The 1981 flood required a complete renewal of the ground floor, that included a new floor in the hall, made of American oak, and the insertion of new 'Drywall' covering throughout,

mounted on softwood battens, with a thin polythene membrane to stop damp penetration. They removed the Adam fireplace, and replaced it with a crude fake timber construction. Wood-burners were added to the three fireplaces. Three UPVC windows were replaced in the east wall, although most likely prior to the 1985 listing. A gardener's toilet was inserted into the workshop.

4. Special Architectural and Historical Interest of Drakes House

1. Setting of the House

A key significance of Drakes House lies in its setting on the banks of the tidal River Severn, at the point where ocean-going vessels of the past could safely navigate, and where large ships could be built with forest timber. It is a visible landmark building, viewed from Sharpness, Purton, Lydney Docks and Slimbridge and makes a major contribution to the maritime cultural landscape of the Severn estuary.

Significance: High

2. A late medieval warehouse, in a maritime context.

The house is part of a small group surviving of warehouses /quayside buildings from the 15th century, most of which are Grade 1 listed (Wool House Southampton. Local History Centre, Poole, both constructed for the export of wool), Marriot's Warehouse, Kings Lynn, TS Hazard, Faversham. Its location, adjacent to the tidal river, with a large opening to the sea (if this interpretation is correct) probably represents a rare survival in the west of England.

Significance: Very high

3. Conversion of medieval hall to Tudor domestic building

The changes in the layout of the building, with the insertion of two floors can be easily read in the fabric. This is an important demonstration of the changes in vernacular architecture during the 16th century, transforming a warehouse into a mercantile dwelling. The provision of 'lodgings' is important evidence of social history and how seafarers might have been accommodated in the 16th century. The largely unaltered nature of the interior is important and should be retained.

Significance: High

4. Surviving 16th century fittings and layout.

The survival of plank-and-muntin partition is uncommon in Gloucestershire, and Drakes House probably represents one the best examples in the region – of a style of panelling more common in Devon. In addition, the single mullion window of oak, the newel stair, doors and door furniture, including the 16th century front door is rare

Significance High

5. Surviving Graffiti

The house has extensive graffiti cut into the timber screens and doors. These include protection marks, M's and taper marks. In a recent survey over 50 have been documented. This also contributes to the social history, and superstitions within a coastal community. The broad arrow on the door frame may be the earliest extant example of the use of this device.

Significance: High

6. Historical Associations

While the connection with Sir Francis Drake will likely remain unproven, it was widely believed in the late 19th century onwards, and so contributes to the local history and interest of the district. The association with the Borough Family – also important Elizabethan seafarers – is better documented and suggests a link in the 16th century between Gatcombe and North Devon. The house was also the birthplace of Thomas Gadd Matthews, an important figure in the 19th century commercial history of Bristol.

Significance: Medium.

7. Evidence for a public house

The building was a public house (the Gatcombe Boat, later the Sloop) between c. 1763 and 1880. There remain few traces of how the interior was laid out during this period – it is presumed the hall was the main bar area, probably extending into the dining room, and that at some point the floor was lowered. Ale was likely served by jugs. The only material trace left is the rails at the entrance to the hall, which are mid-19th century.

Significance: Low.

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