

The Abbot's Kitchen, Glastonbury Abbey



The Abbot's Kitchen at Glastonbury is one of the best preserved medieval kitchens in Europe. It dates from the early 14th century and is a square structure with an octagonal stone tiled roof rising to a two-stage octagonal lantern louvre which let out the heat. It has unusual round buttresses on all four sides.

The lantern has two tiers of window-like vents, each with a crenelated parapet. The vents originally had vertical iron window bars in them. Inside, it has an arched fireplace in each of its four corners. The chimney breasts over fireplaces extend diagonally across the corners such that the internal space above this level is also octagonal.

The chimney breasts are flanked by tall ribs supporting the stone roof. Sockets for timber scaffolding used during the kitchen's construction can still be seen to each side of the ribs about halfway up. One fireplace has an oven at its rear. Above each fireplace is a round chimney flue. These originally led into tall chimneys at each corner of the roof, now lost. The 8 ribs supporting the roof rise to a circular flue with smaller compartments around its outside. The flue continues upward to the top stage of the louvre, whilst the smaller compartments reach only to the height of the lower vents. Whether the two-staged arrangement provided some functional advantage is uncertain and a topic of debate. A sump pit which survives in one corner was used to carry away waste liquids. Drains leading to the pit would have brought running water to flush it clean. There are remains from a gallery, a secondary feature inserted into the kitchen in the later medieval period.



An example: the South elevation. The archaeological work includes recording building stone types, which are shown here by different colours. The pale colour is Douling stone, which was worked into beautifully squared and faced blocks forming high quality ashlar masonry. The abbey had its own quarry at Douling. The blue-coloured stone is local blue lias limestone. The orange-coloured stone is local sandstone known as Tor burr. These were cut into smaller, less-well finished blocks and used for walling which was going

to be rendered over. A mixture of stones has been used in later times to consolidate the ruins, especially in the broken-off walls to each side.

The kitchen is now an isolated building standing 80m to the SW of the church, but was originally part of the abbot's house. All but one corner of the abbot's house, seen in the top picture standing next to the kitchen, has been lost above ground. The abbot was not only the spiritual superior of the Benedictine monastery but also the lord of a great estate with responsibilities for economic administration as well as social duties comparable with those of important nobles. He had to be able to entertain guests and visitors on a grand scale up to the level of royalty.

We don't know precisely how the abbot's house was laid out but excavations in the past and modern geophysics can help us put together an outline plan. The abbot's house was a grand residence almost as large as the monks' quarters and comparable with the houses of great nobles. The house faced south, away from the church. At the centre of the house was the abbot's hall, a great dining hall, said to have been 80 foot high. The main entrance to the hall was covered by a porch, with a room above it reached by a stair. Ruins from the porch still survive attached to the SW corner of the hall. By the time Stukeley arrived at the site, the building had recently fallen into ruin after having passed through a succession of owners following the closure of the abbey in 1539. Stukeley had to

rely on a friend's drawing for how it used to look.



The excavation has been very rewarding and we have learnt a lot about the Abbot's Kitchen. A timber building stood on the site in Saxon or Norman times which probably bore no relation to later structures.

Excavation of the present 14th-century kitchen's interior also uncovered floors and hearths, dating from the first stone kitchen.

The early stone kitchen, dating perhaps from the 12th century, followed precisely the same plan as the present one. The hearths were set directly on a poor quality floor strewn with rake-out from the fires and food waste. It probably had a timber roof. The present kitchen was built directly on the footings of the previous one in the early 14th century. Its fine original Doulling flagged floor has been lost, but it remains a truly splendid structure and an outstanding feat of engineering designed to impress. It is a remarkable survival from medieval times.

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