

## Life in Porch House

Medieval life as described above must be a matter of conjecture. It is tempting to see the panelled parlour as evidence of gentrification in the seventeenth century, the rough-hewn beams as well as the small staircase beyond indicating that the gentrification was only comparative.

In the Thornbury Rent Roll for 1670 the house is recorded as belonging to 'the widow Attwell'. The Attwells were an important local family: Richard Attwell was the founder of Thornbury Grammar School and is buried in Gloucester Cathedral. There is a memorial tablet in St Mary's Church, Thornbury, to a Mrs Mary Attwell who died at the end of the seventeenth century aged ninety two.

The tithe map of 1840 shows that the hall was divided vertically just south of the porch entrance, and there were then two households living here. Thomas Gwynn, living in the south part of the house, is described as 'independent', while the occupation of his father Richard, aged 88 and living in the northern part, is given as 'cheese factor'. The occupation of Thomas' son John is given in the 1851 census as 'solicitor', giving us a nice example of social mobility over three generations.

There is plenty of material for study in the nineteenth century census entries for the house. In 1891 and 1901 Thomas Cox Smith and his family were living in the house. He was a tailor born in London at Bow, and an

advertisement in Brown's Almanac for 1904 is evidence of his confidence in that calling. In the 1901 census he is described as a 'master tailor'. Two of his four sons were killed in the First World War, the Smiths sharing the fate of so many families at the time.

In 1961 the house with its large garden was bought to provide a site for a church, priests' house and parish centre for the Roman Catholic parish of Christ the King. The hall was restored to its medieval configuration and used as the church until the new church was built. The parish is fortunate to possess this old and interesting building which provides much material for the study of the development of a medium-sized town house over the centuries.

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Further information about Porch House, its history and residents can be found on:

[www.ctk-thornbury.org.uk/PorchHouse](http://www.ctk-thornbury.org.uk/PorchHouse)

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## Porch House Castle Street Thornbury



One of the oldest and most interesting medieval buildings in Thornbury.



1840 Tithe Map  
Porch House Numbers 34 – 36  
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## Porch House

Porch House has not always been as you see it now. The porch which gives the house its name and the hall it leads to are the earliest parts dating from at the latest the fifteenth century, but there have been many additions and alterations since then.

Inside the hall itself we can see the exposed roof timbers of a typical medieval hall house, with wind braces between the rafters.

Originally there may well have been an open fire in the middle of the room, around which the family lived, cooked, ate and slept and which they would have shared with servants and small domestic animals. The family would not have been either particularly rich or particularly poor: they were on current evidence farmers or artisans. The large fireplace at the north end came later, and slots cut in the last rafter at this end as well as the large cupboards each side of the fireplace indicate that this end bay may at one time have been partitioned off as a 'smoke bay' for producing hams and other smoked foods for sale.

As we see from the remains of fireplaces and doors the hall was divided at some point into two storeys. At the south end we can see a reminder of those days where an upstairs room was left when the other partitions were removed in the early 1960s. The original door from the porch, said to bear the marks of axe blows made during the English Civil War, now hangs on the south wall. The archway opposite the porch entrance was originally over a

doorway leading out into the back courtyard. This kind of passage, leading from the street to the rear of a building, was usually screened off from the living accommodation, and so was known as a 'screens passage'. Berkeley Castle has a much grander example of a screens passage.

Leaving the hall, we go into the parlour, a handsome panelled room with deep-set windows with internal shutters, probably constructed during the seventeenth century, but still with traces of its medieval beginnings showing in the two rough-hewn beams in the ceiling.

From here we can go into the rest of the ground floor, stopping to notice the curiously small spiral staircase leading to the first floor. The small hall was made out of a larger room, which had French windows where the 1960s porch now is. The passage to the kitchen was a part of this room, as was the space now taken up with cupboards.

The kitchen has been much altered, and was originally two metres longer until that end of the house was removed to make room for the new entrance to the church. It still has an exposed beam, two deep-set casement windows and an inconveniently low door leading into the former courtyard.

