

Eighteenth Century Chimneys

After our distinctive stone roofs, nothing is more characteristic of Bermuda architecture than our sturdy elegant chimneys. Nor is anything more difficult to categorise.

Throughout the eighteenth century and probably well back into the seventeenth, the solid stepped tapering chimneys, frequently very wide at the base, strengthened the gables of houses while providing cooking facilities and warmth. As a rule of thumb, the broader the base and the more solidly built the chimney, the earlier it is likely to be. This is not, however, more than a generalisation. Kitchen fireplaces were usually wide throughout the century. The grander houses encased their chimneys within gables right from the start or, a little later, positioned them at the peaks of hipped roofs, thereby providing a fireplace in two rooms for the price of one

chimney.

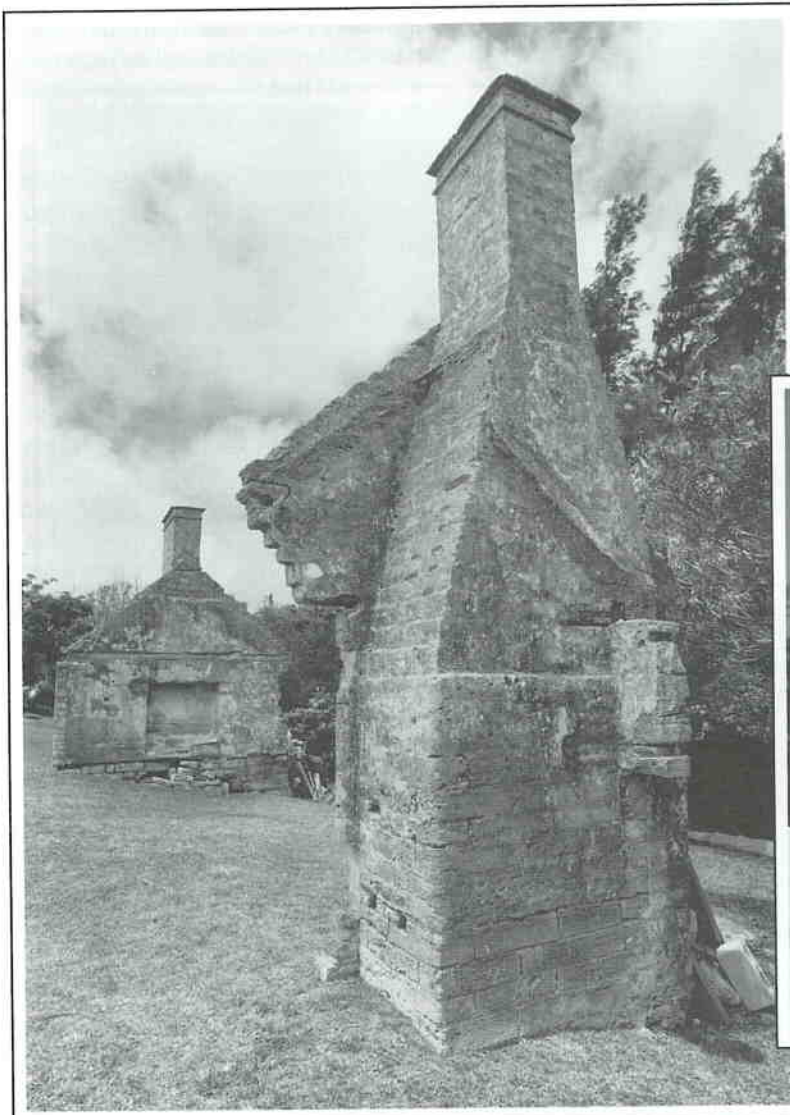
Mouldings around the tops of these chimneys became more sophisticated as time wore on, but there were always conservative builders who stuck by the old styles and the only sure way to date a chimney is from the house to which it belongs.

After the mid century, stepped construction tended to give way to smooth sided chimneys. Chimneys with adjacent ovens usually accommodated the oven flue in a symmetrically tapered rise rather than an asymmetrical one.

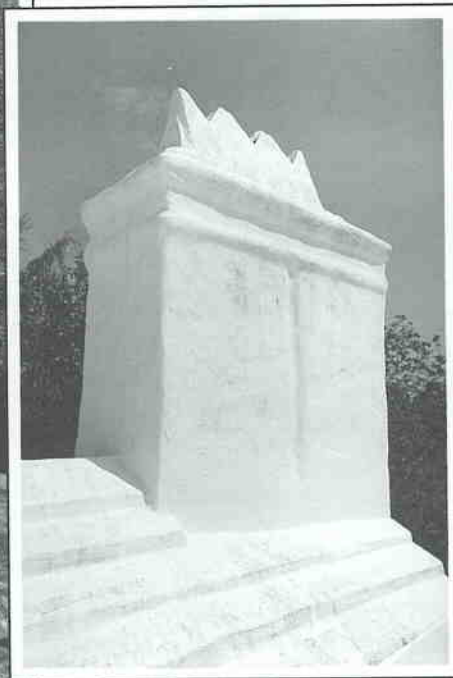
Some of the more complicated early chimneys accommodated several flues into their mass, a notable example being on the kitchen wing of Stewart Hall in St. George's. Some chimneys accommodated fireplaces on two levels with two separate flues in double chimneys as at Palm

Vale. There seems to have been at least one example of a triple chimney (*Bermuda Houses*, John S. Humphreys, plate 104), but since the house has been demolished this cannot be verified. Towards the end of the century chimneys became narrower and finally more angular.

With the vernacular revival in this century some extremely fine interpretations of the eighteenth century chimney have been built. A few of them, more delicately constructed than their sturdy predecessors, are remarkably beautiful.



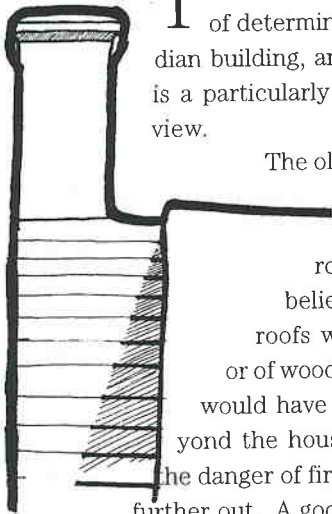
▲ The two gable ends are all that remain of The Old Chimneys. The powerful great chimneys with their simple mouldings and the steep pitch of the roof are from the first half of the eighteenth century.



▲ Double chimneys like this one at Palm Vale served two fireplaces, often on two separate levels, with dedicated flues. Usually it was a basement and ground floor, but sometimes, as here, it served ground floor and second floor fireplaces.

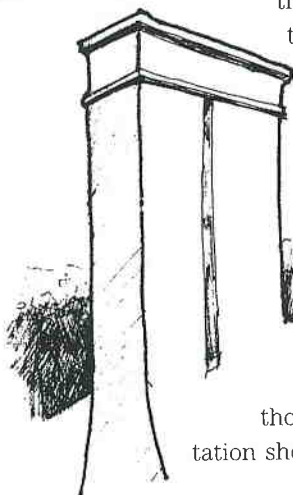
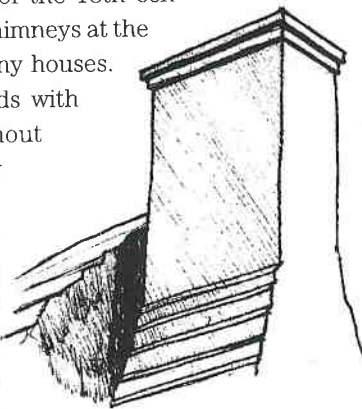
Chimneys as a Dating Tool

The chimney is one of the best ways of determining the age of a Bermudian building, and in St. George's there is a particularly wonderful selection to view.



The oldest chimneys are characterised by separation from the gable roofs they adjoin. This is believed to be because the roofs were originally thatched or of wooden shingles. The thatch would have tended to protrude beyond the house wall, and because of the danger of fire the chimney had to be further out. A good example is the one at the eastern end of the Old Rectory.

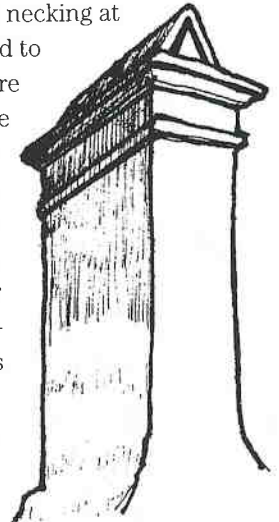
Most typical of the 18th century are the huge chimneys at the gable end of so many houses. St. George's abounds with them, and throughout Bermuda they stand out. Sometimes the only remaining sign of age in a building is a massive chimney. Their shape in section is what characterises them most clearly - they are much longer than they are wide. The blocks of stone used must have been thin, but they are of enormous strength, as proved by their durability. All chimneys of this period had stepped shoulders. The earliest ones had a simple band of necking at the very top.



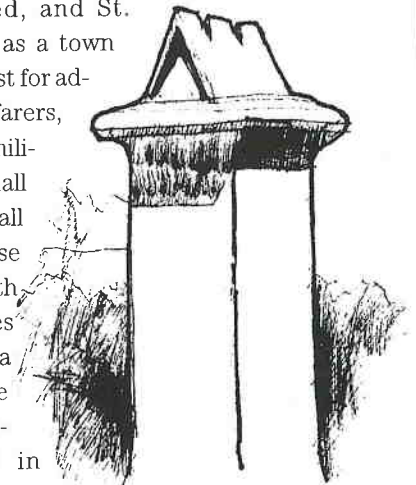
Such chimneys always had two flues, normally one serving a fireplace in each storey. Usually the space between the flues was filled in, though sometimes a faint indentation shows between the two. But at

Bridge House a gap has actually been left between the two flues, even though there is a common top.

As time progressed the necking at the top of the chimney tended to get more elaborate. First there were two rings of necking, one at the very top, the lower one a few inches below. Chimneys built later might have had several rows of necking, or necking rows further apart, or even dentil moulding or other decorative details at the top.



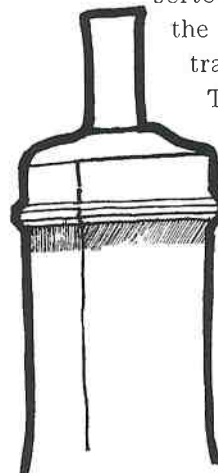
During this period single flued chimneys were also built. These followed the general pattern of their larger contemporaries but are far less characteristic. As time progressed, and St. George's developed as a town providing services first for administrators and seafarers, then for the British military forces, many small chimneys were built all over the town. These are mostly short, with many different styles of top. Some have a British military style clay chimney pot inserted in



the top of a traditional Bermuda chimney.

They have all different styles of shoulder. Sometimes they are clustered two or three together on a building. Along the northern part of the Taylor House is a wonderful collection of these little chimneys. Nearby Stewart Hall has no fewer than seven chimneys.

Latest of all came the hexagonal and octagonal chimneys of the late 19th century.





The fireplace in the dining room at Vermont has a raised hearth for warming food cooked in the detached kitchen. This fireplace remains as it was when the house was built and has not been made fashionably smaller like many of the others within the house.

bedroom, was simply called “the store-room over the parlour” in John Dickinson’s time although it did contain one “high bedstead bed” but otherwise it held a variety of possessions ranging from “a halfe barrell flowr” to “parcell silver fringe”.

It is difficult to know in which room the two girls Elizabeth and Mary slept. The “chamber over the dining room” contained the second most valuable bed along with a warming pan. There was also a “low bedstead” in the garret which may have been occupied by a servant.

Livestock were listed “in the field” in Dickinson’s inventory. There were three horses, the most expensive described as a black horse was presumably Dickinson’s. An unusual and highly valued animal was a “stagg”, which must have added considerable class to his country estate and astounded the neighbours.

John Dickinson did not enjoy his fine home for long. In his will written on August 4, 1714, soon be-

fore his death, he left a life interest in his property to his wife Elizabeth Dickinson.

Elizabeth Dickinson was to spend a long widowhood in the house and although her precise date of death is not known, she outlived her oldest daughter Elizabeth. She lived in Vermont along with her sister-in-law Alice, Elizabeth and her husband Perient Spofferth and their two children and, until her marriage, her youngest daughter Mary.

John Dickinson left his sister Alice “the room or chamber she now useth, with suitable conveniences, clothing, meat, drink, lodging and washing during her natural life”. He also left instructions for the “necessary accommodation for her negro Bess so long as she continues serviceable in the family” and he specified that his property was to be divided between his two daughters on his wife’s death. Elizabeth was to get his house and 50 acres south to the sea and Mary (died 1789) the northern share on which Hinson Hall (*see chapter 4*) was to be built.

His daughter Elizabeth Dickinson (died 1733) married Perient Spofferth in the same year as her father died. The couple had two children Dickinson and Elizabeth Spofferth. Mariner Perient Spofferth (died 1727) was the son of Samuel Spofferth Sr. and his brother Samuel Spofferth Jr. was prominent in local affairs.

A 1733 inventory (*see appendix 2*) of Elizabeth and Perient Spofferth reveals the couple had a fairly modest list of household possessions, presumably because they lived along with her mother although Elizabeth was due to receive upon her marriage, under the terms of her father’s will, a quarter of the possessions listed on his inventory.

Her mother, Elizabeth Dickinson, outlived her. The fate of Dickinson Spofferth is not known but the estate passed to John Dickinson’s granddaughter Elizabeth Spofferth.

Elizabeth Spofferth married first Robert Brown, a merchant of St. George’s. He died in 1752 and in September 1755 she married widower Thomas Smith.

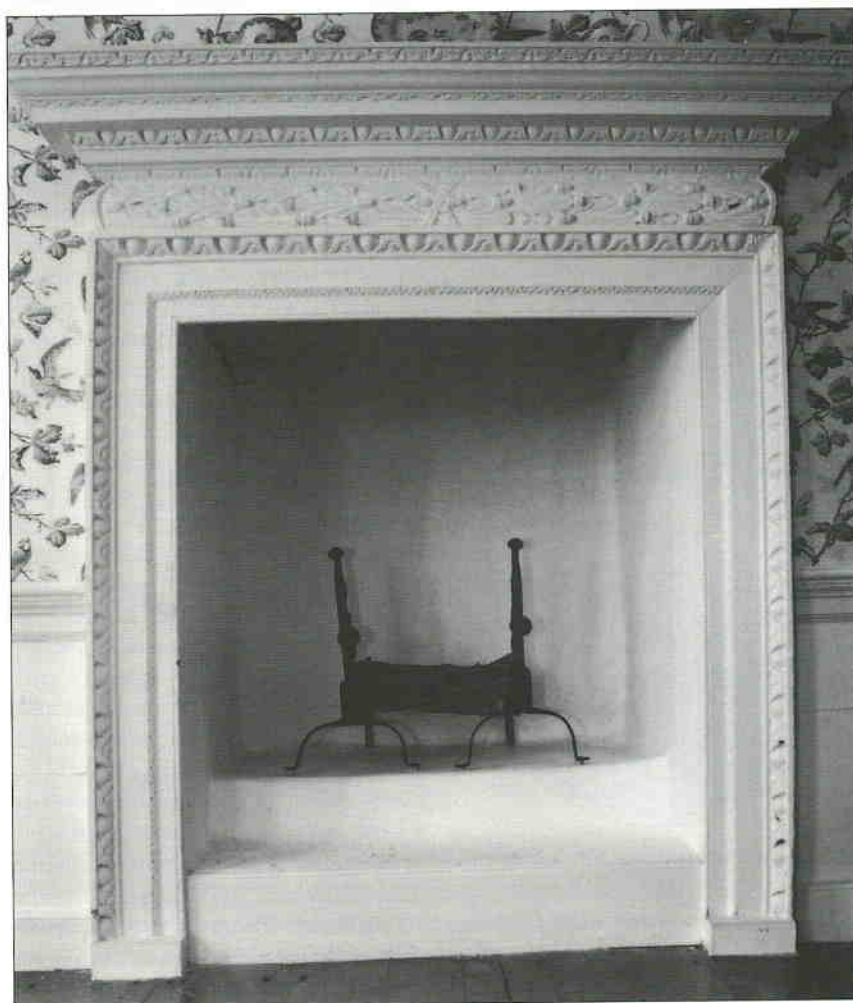


As the husband of Elizabeth, Collector of Customs Thomas Smith (died 1781) was to become the next influential owner of Vermont. He had four daughters from a previous marriage. They were Elizabeth, known as Betty, Mary, known as Polly, Honora, known as Peggy, and Catherine. There were no children from the marriage of Thomas and Elizabeth. His daughters were to inherit the property thus breaking the direct line of Dickinson descent.

It was not possible to trace the ancestry of Thomas Smith. It is difficult to know whether he was a Bermudian or had been appointed from London. He had an important position as Collector of Customs and was a representative of the British Crown in Bermuda

Above: The double doors at Vermont lead between the two front rooms and may have been installed by the Smiths. They are probably the earliest set of such doors in Bermuda and may be earlier than any known in America. *Courtesy Willie Graham, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation of Virginia.*

Right: This ornate carved and painted mantel in the southwest chamber was probably installed during the time when Elizabeth and Thomas Smith owned Vermont.





Leamington Ruin, off Harrington Sound Road, consists of two chimneys and the remains of a wall. There is a doorway to a closet between the two fireplaces. A privy outhouse is at the rear of the building.