Jabel (Lüchow), radial arrangement of gable-ended hall houses and farm buildings (photo: Kerstin Duncker)

Hall Houses of the *Rundling* Villages in the Wendland

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Summary

Hall houses were built in most parts of North Germany, but it is only in the Wendland that these impressive buildings can be found in *Rundling* villages. Seen from the green in the middle of such a *Rundling*, the houses show a wealth of decoration reflecting pride and relative prosperity. There are about 1300 of these traditional half-timbered hall houses from former centuries left in the Wendland. They always had a working and a living area under the same roof. Although a lot of rebuilding took place, it is still possible to see the past changes in the current buildings. This article shows how the ground plans and constructions changed and how these houses were used for living by the farmers from around 1600 to 1900.

Hall houses in general

We find hall houses all across the north of Germany, from the west to the northeast. In Fig. 1 I have marked the Wendland with its circular *Rundling* villages. There are about 1300 hall houses that have survived until now in the Wendland, far more than in other regions of North Germany. This provides us with a lot of material to investigate the details of these houses and how people lived there in former centuries.

Fig. 1 Area of northern Germany where hall houses can be found today

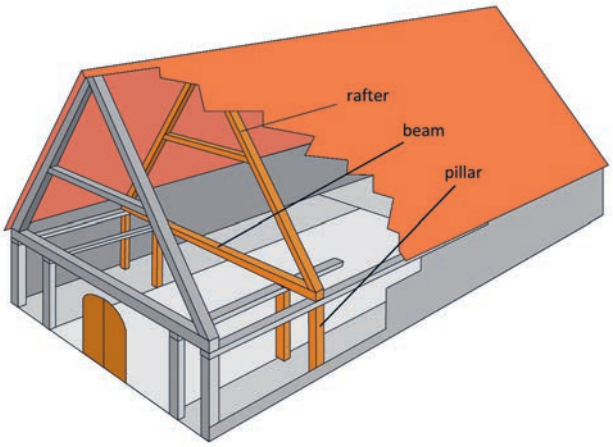


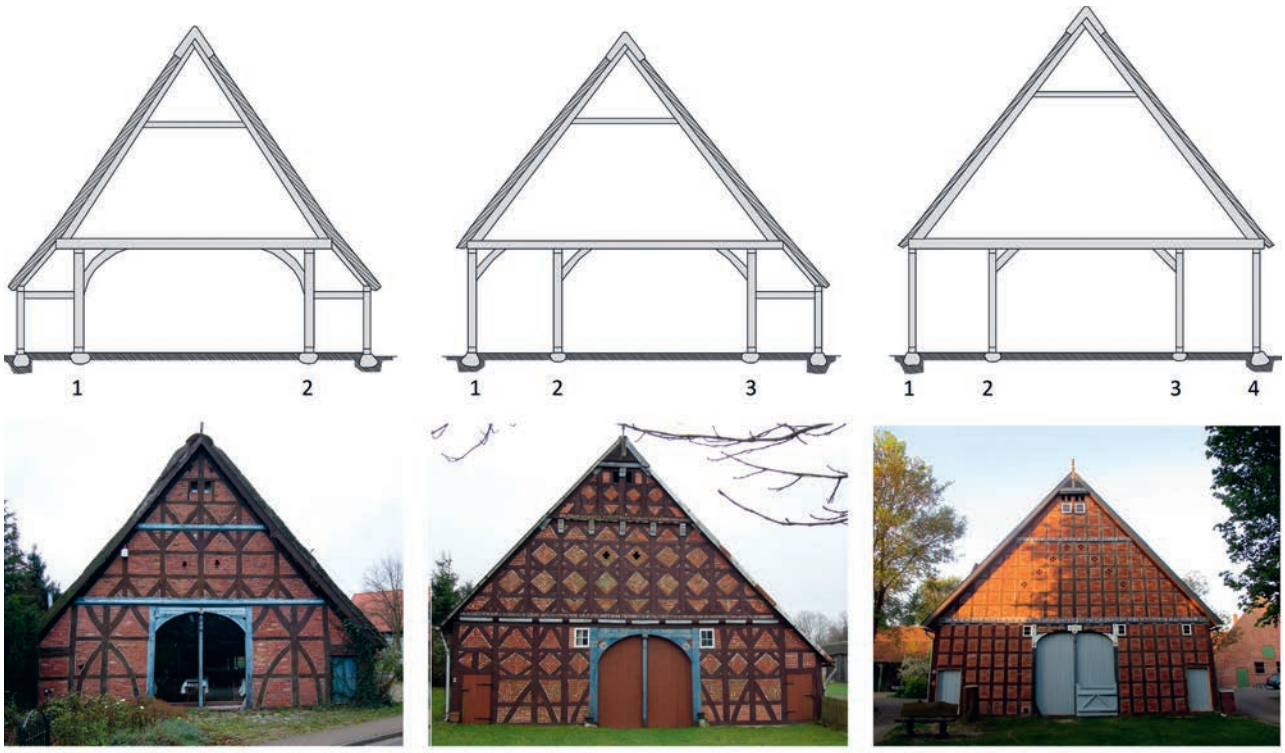
Fig. 2 Basic construction of a hall house

At the front of a hall house we see a big barn door. In the Wendland, it always faces the village green. The door leads to the hall, a working area called "Diele" in German. The livestock in the stables on both sides of the hall were fed here, the harvest was brought in to be stored under the roof and the threshing also took place here. This working area covers more than half of the length of the house.

The framework is made of wooden elements called "Gebinde", consisting of beams, rafters and pillars (Fig. 2). The older houses usually have 7 to 9 of these elements while in the more recent ones there is less distance between them so that we find 12 to 16 beams in houses of the same length (usually about 18 to 24 metres).

If two pillars carry each beam, we call it a two-pillar house. Four pillars under one beam make a four-pillar house, and in the Wendland we also find the three-pillar house (Fig. 3). This is a strange construction, half two-pillar, half four-pillar, and is rare in North Germany. In the Wendland, we have all three kinds of hall houses.

Some regional variations are obvious: In the area near the river Elbe in the north, houses tend to have a hipped gable while in the southern area we find vertical gables (Fig. 4). The houses also differ somewhat in their inner structure.



Jameln 1681 *Dünsche 1734* *Groß Sachau 1849*

Fig. 3 Three different kinds of hall houses: two-, three- and four-pillar-house

We will now take a closer look at the houses in the Lower Drawehn between Clenze and Lüchow in the southern area where the best-preserved *Rundling* villages are to be found. The dominant type today in these villages is the four-pillar house. Most were built in the middle of the 19th century. In these years of relative prosperity, many older buildings were replaced. Smaller numbers of two- and three-pillar houses have survived from the 17th and 18th centuries (Fig. 5).

Decorated front gables

The houses from the different centuries show typical half-timbering styles. The examples from the 17th century shown in Fig. 6a belong to the oldest front gables in the Wendland. The half-timbering was made of oak wood. The style was not a matter of stability but rather of decoration. The more wood one used the wealthier one was.

In the 18th century, the carpenters used diamond shapes (Fig. 6b). These gables needed much more wood and were more complicated to design. Compared to these rich front gables the half-timbering of the other walls is simpler. Later in the 19th century, pinewood was used for the beams and rafters. Also the decoration was concentrated more on the beams themselves, using inscriptions, ornaments and strong colours (Fig. 6c).

Altogether we find about 1800 inscriptions on the farm houses in the Wendland (Fig 7). About 75 percent are quotations from hymn books and 25 percent are poems, proverbs and quotations from the Bible. There are only very few inscriptions showing individuality.

Especially in the 19th century many of the circular villages burned down. Fires could start from an unguarded kitchen fire

Fig. 4 Hall houses with vertical and hipped gable in the Wendland

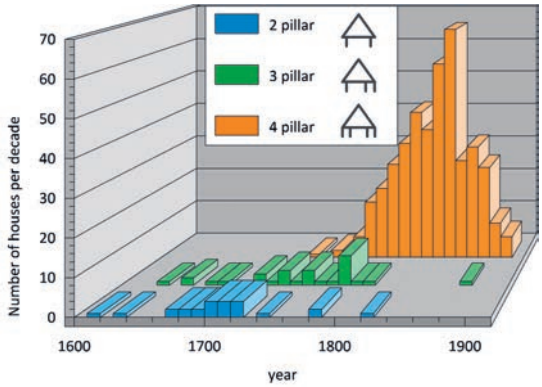


Fig 5. Hall houses from the last centuries in the Wendland

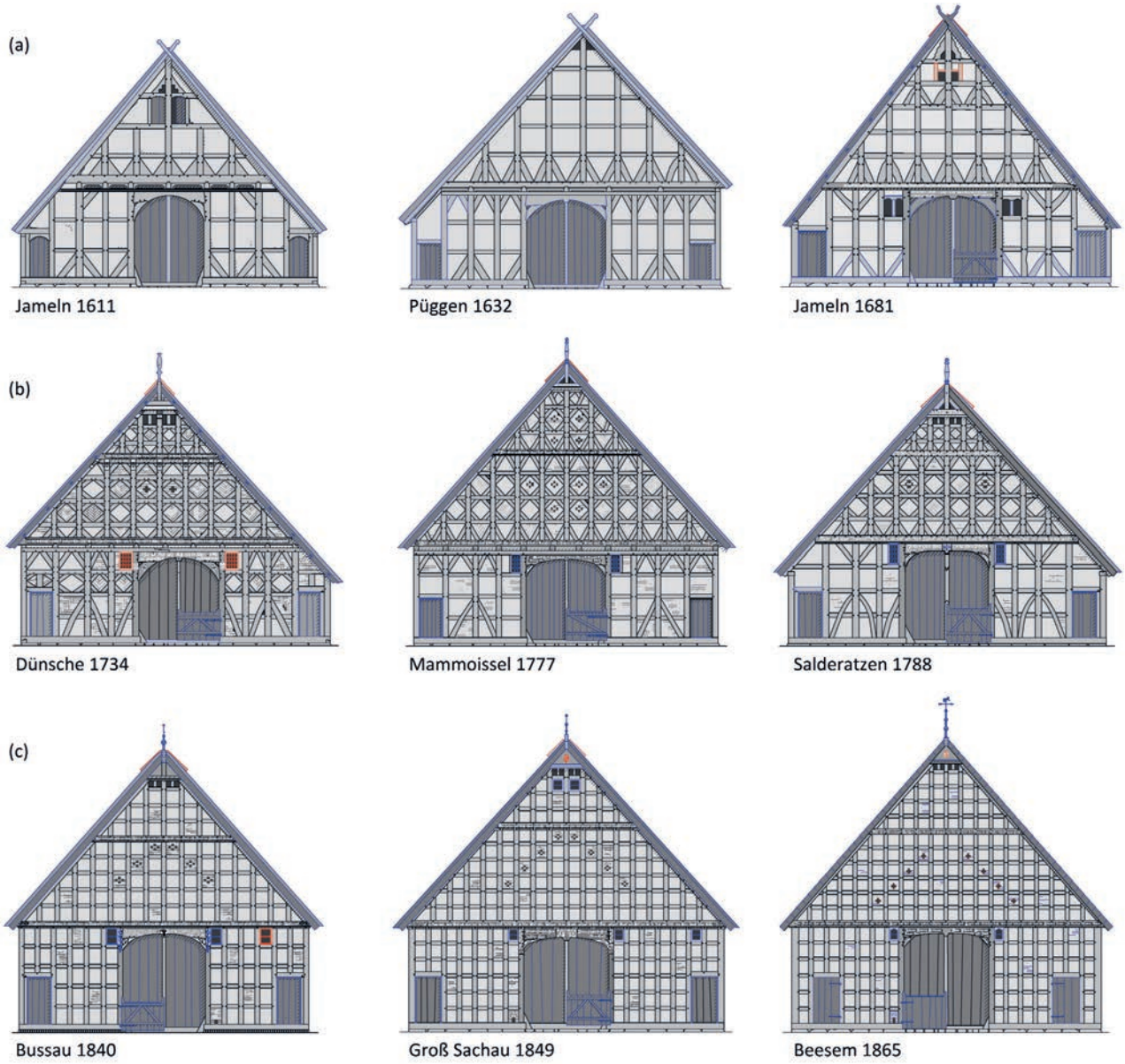


Fig. 6 Half timbering of vertical gables between 1600 and 1900

or by a stroke of lightning, the wind carrying the fire from one thatched roof to another. About one third of the inscriptions on the newly built houses refer to such fires. Although for sure it was a tragedy for each house owner, it should be mentioned that fire insurances were established at the end of the 18th century and the new houses were always better than the old ones. On the front gable near the door, there are ornaments often using the wild orange fire lily (*Lilium bulbiferum*) which in the past was a common and eye-catching flower in the cornfields in the Wendland. It still grows in some places here. Local carpenters used their own specific ornaments.

Another typical element is the decorated pole on top of the gable. These wooden poles did not survive the centuries so we don't know much about their earliest appearance. During the 19th century different types of them were designed (Fig. 8). The oldest types we know about were made of carved and turned oak (a). They are about two metres long and often topped by lily blossoms. The next type was built only for a short period. These poles were much bigger and they looked like a vase and had a metal weather vane at the top (b). All of these have now disappeared. Maybe they were just too big and heavy to cope with the wind and weather. The most recent ones were made of wood encased in tin (c). Most of them consist of two or three bowls with a small weather vane or a flower on top and some original ones can still be seen on the old houses.

The kitchen fire

Usually the fire place in a hall house was located at the end of the working area. But in the Wendland and especially in the lower Drawehn it was located at the back of the house where the farmer and his family lived. In the big kitchen the ceiling was about 4.5 m high to cope with the smoke. Since there was no chimney the smoke escaped through the back gable and under the roof to the front side (Fig. 9a).

Not until the second half of the 18th century smoke-free livingrooms were built. The kitchen became smaller as the living room was located next to the kitchen (Fig. 9b). These rooms

Fig. 7 Inscriptions and ornaments above the barn doors of two hall houses from 1849 and 1721

were heated with a stove filled with wood from the kitchen side of the wall. The smoke returned to the kitchen.
The livingroom was used for spinning flax, weaving and making linen. The people spent the winter evenings here working together. It is likely that there was no need for a room like this before trading linen became important for farmers in the Wendland.
Still there was no chimney in the kitchen. Sausages and meat were cured in the smoke under the ceiling. This changed around 1820 when farmhouses started to have chimneys with a chimney hood and a smokehouse above the kitchen (Fig. 10a). Some of these smokehouses were used until the second half of the 20th century. About 50 years later, around 1870, the newly built houses had chimneys without a hood. The open fire was replaced by a kitchen stove (Fig. 10b).

Living in a hall house

It may be hard to believe, but the houses of the 17th and early 18th centuries did not have a heated and smoke-free living room. The farming family lived in the big smoky kitchen. In these oldest houses, the big kitchen was in the middle of the living area between the rows of pillars. On both sides were small rooms for sleeping (Fig. 11a). Later the size of the kitchen was reduced and one of the small rooms for sleeping vanished. There were always small rooms next to the stables and this was where the farmhands probably slept (Fig. 11b).
Cellars or half-cellars began to be built around 1800. Their depth depended on the level of the ground water. The first cellars were built at the back of the house next to the

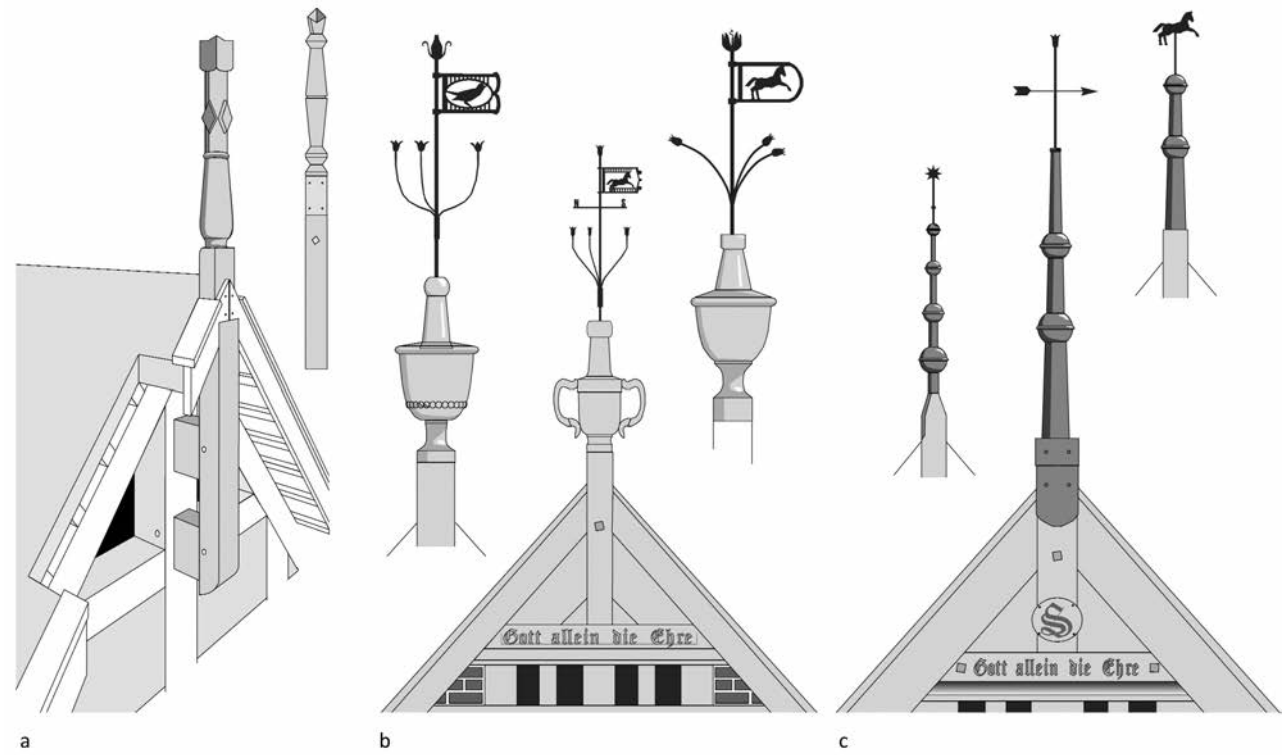


Fig. 8 Typical decorated poles on hall houses with vertical gables in the Wendland

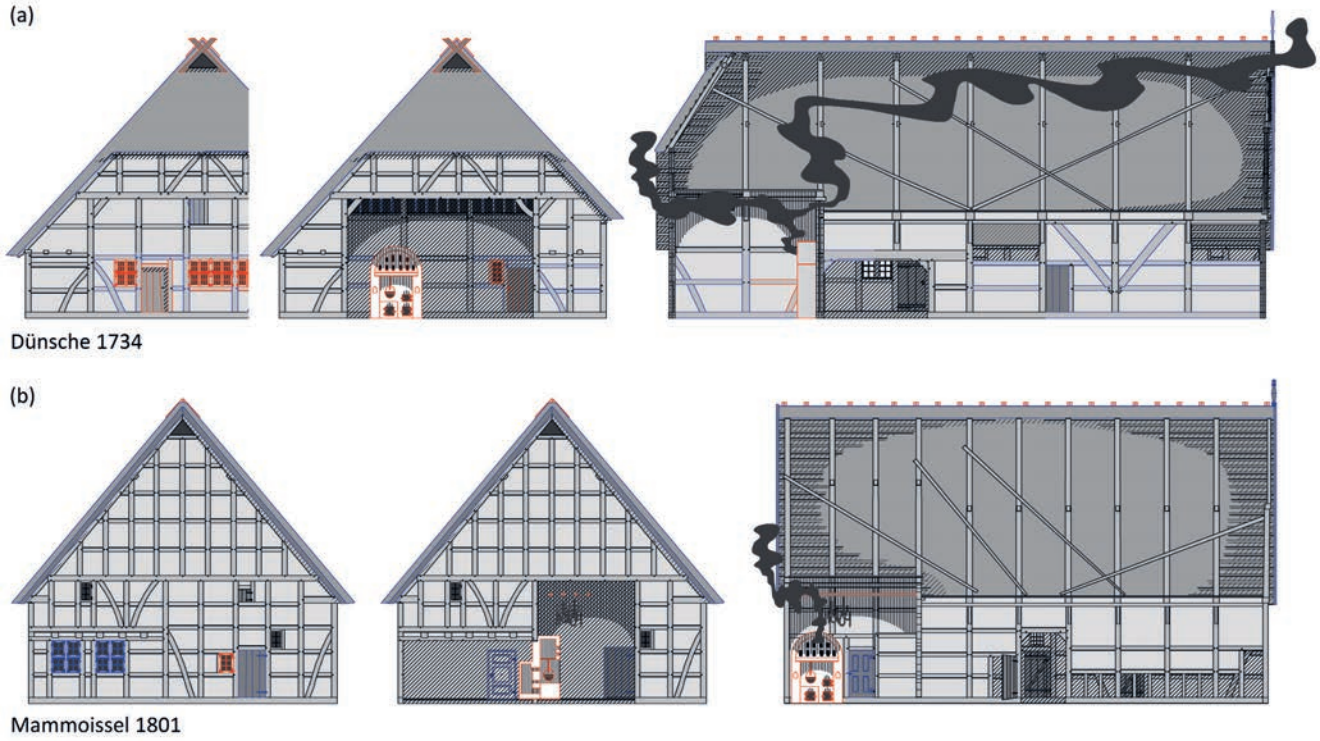


Fig. 9 Kitchen fire from the first half of the 18th century and around 1800

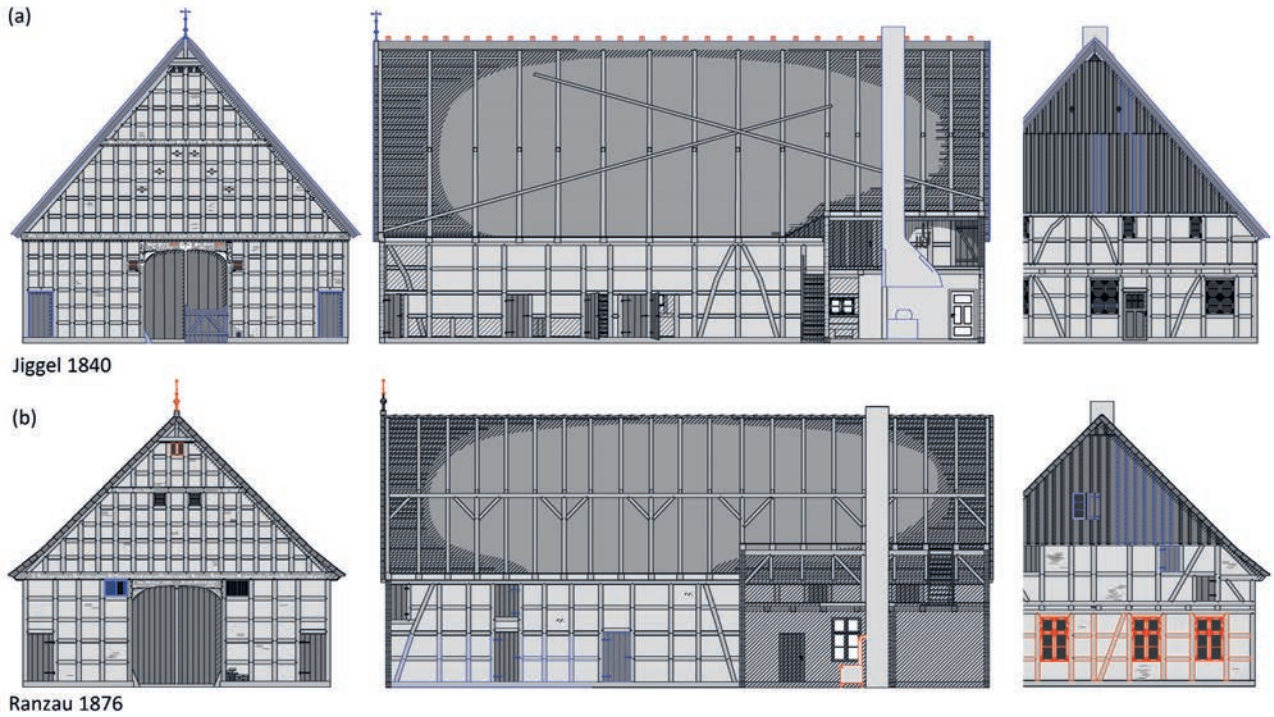


Fig. 10 Chimneys in hall houses of the 19th century

kitchen (Fig. 12). They were used for the storage of milk and vegetables.

In these houses we find more small rooms next to the working area. I believe that some of them were also used for sleeping by members of the farmer's family. For the farmer himself and for his wife there was always an alcove between the kitchen and the living room as a small but warm place for sleeping. The children and the older generation probably slept in the living room, especially in the winter. Privacy was less important than warmth.

Around 1850 we find an unheated livingroom next to the heated one (Fig. 13a). Reports from these years tell us that these rooms were used for guests. They had wallpaper and the best furniture was put in there. There is another un-

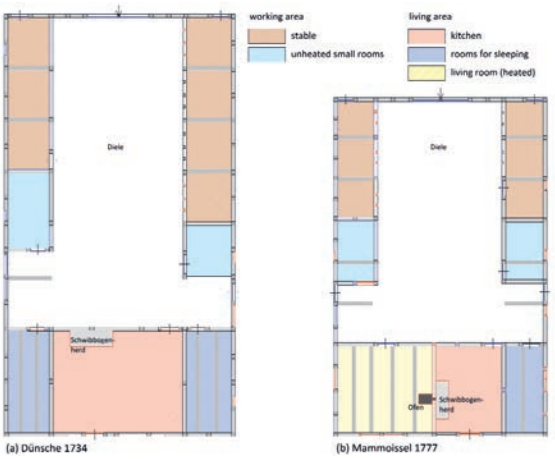


Fig. 11 Ground plan of a house without a living room compared to one with a heated living room

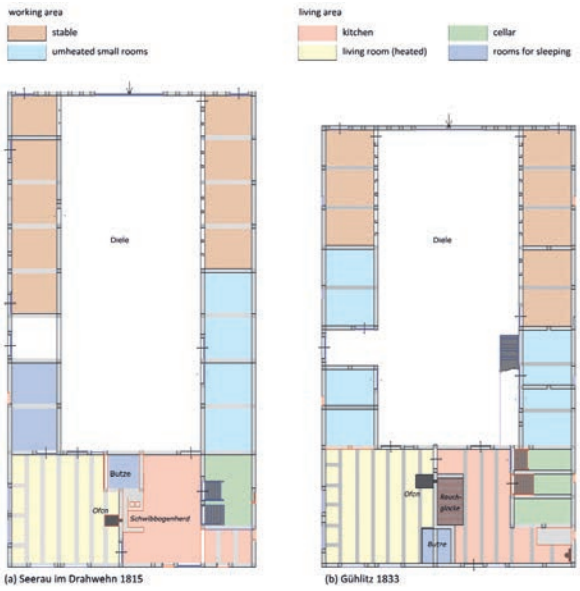


Fig. 12 Ground plans of two houses with cellars: the one from Seerau had a high kitchen. A few years later the house in Gühlitz was built with a chimney hood.

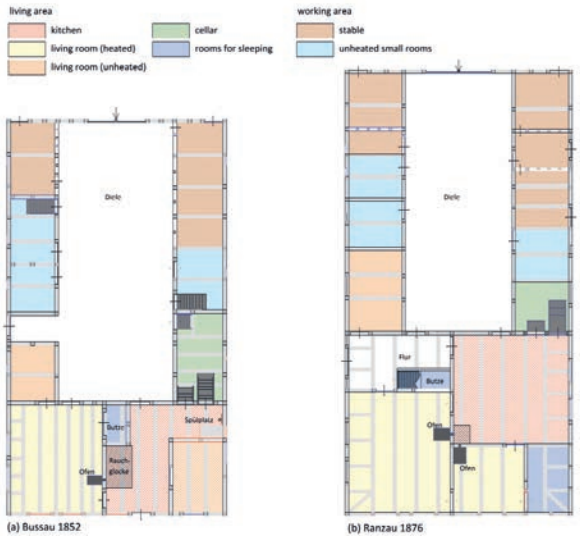


Fig. 13 Ground plans of houses from the middle and the second half of the 19th century. These houses had more space for living than the older ones

Fig. 14 Ground plans of the first and second floors from one of the last hall houses built in the Wendland

heated livingroom in these houses and it is likely that this was used by the older generation. Due to the expansion of the space for living the cellar moved more to the front of the house.

In the second half of the 19th century, this additional livingroom was expanded and could also be heated with a stove (Fig. 13b). Being old became more comfortable and cosy.

Around 1900 the last hall houses were built in the Wendland. Here, the proportions between the living and working areas changed in favour of the living area (Fig. 14). These houses have a corridor and there were a couple of smaller rooms next to the kitchen and living room. At that time, the farmers still kept the tradition of having a small sleeping alcove next to the stove. Some houses had two floors for the different generations of the farmer's family. Seen from the village green, these houses look very similar to those built a hundred years earlier, but inside they were modern and much more comfortable, resembling houses in the towns. Today a family can live in such a house without converting the former working area into living space.

Modifying and rebuilding

Of course, the owners of older houses have had to modify their homes to gain modern comforts. To have enough space for two living areas for two generations, the kitchen fire was moved from the living to the working area of the house and in some cases there are two ovens (Fig. 15). This new situation has often been misinterpreted as being original, but a closer look at the old beams often shows an older construction.

Other outbuildings

From the green in the middle of the *Rundling*, we see the hall houses with their decorated gables and big barn doors. Behind these houses, however, are a series of other farm buildings (Fig. 16). Although the hall houses included space for the livestock and the storage of the harvest, there were always barns, pigsties and other outhouses belonging to a *Rundling* farmstead. They can still be found in their typical variations. There are a lot of farmsteads left that still illustrate the architecture of the 19th or early 20th centuries.

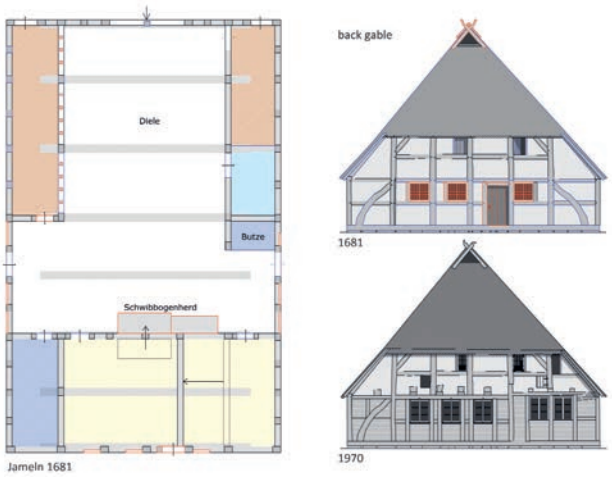


Fig. 15 In the older houses, the former high kitchens were often converted into heated living rooms and therefore the kitchen fire moved to the former working area.

[1] IGB Wendland.

Fig. 16 Ground plan of a typical Rundling village with hall houses, pigsties, barns and other outbuildings