The Oast of the Town

By Kristen Ammerman

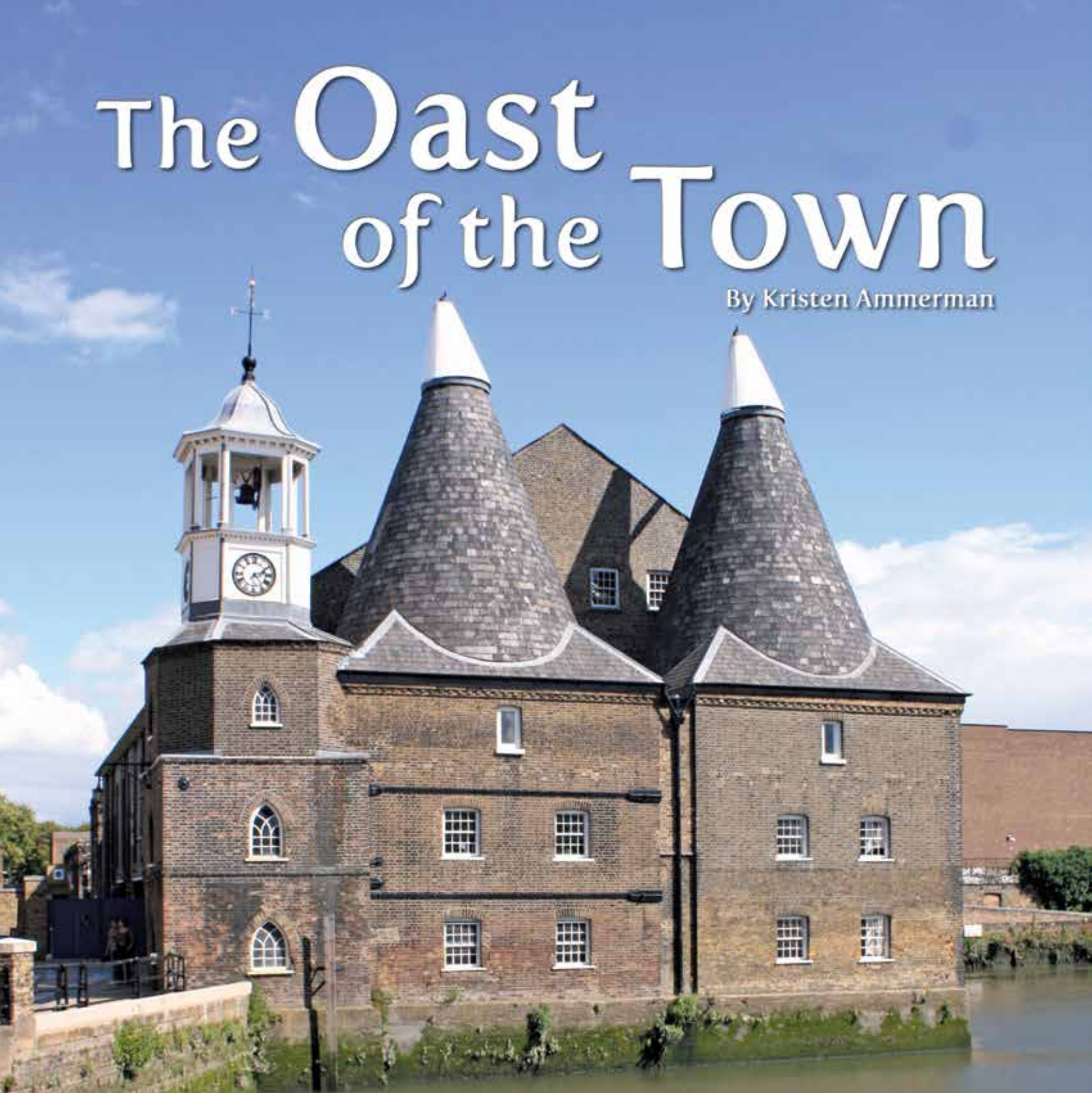


Photo 1 – The Three Mills are former working mills on the River Lea in the East End of London. At one time, gin was distilled here. The building now houses Three Mills Studios, which is London's largest film studio. Photo by John Marchant.

Developers in southeast England are now building "bespoken" (custom-made) homes that mimic the vernacular oast structures once common throughout that region. Oasts[1] were buildings used to dry or kiln fresh hops before they were sent to breweries to flavor beers. Freshly picked hops had a high moisture content of approximately 80%, which was reduced to 6% through the kilning process.[2] They had to be dried as soon as they were picked; thus, a proliferation of oasts.

Oast structures traditionally had two parts–the oast and the "stowage." The oast or kiln area was a plenum chamber fired by charcoal at ground level with the drying floor above it. The drying floor was thin and perforated to permit heat

Photo 2 – Chatham Youth Hostel in Capstone Valley is a converted oast house. Photo by Clem Rutter, Wikimedia Commons.

Photo 3 – This former oast is now an inn—appropriately, near the town of Rye. Guests can stay in a roundel, sleep on a round bed, and relax in the beer garden. Photo by Celle Long.

Photo 4 – This is a new home built on the site of a former oast, mimicking one of the historic structures. Photo courtesy of Sandtoft Roof Tiles.

to rise. A steep-pitched roof channeled the hot air through the hops and then through cowls in the roof, which turned with the wind, drawing the air in a vacuum effect and stopping rain from entering.

The stowage was the barn section, where, after drying and raking, the hops were laid to cool and then packed with hop presses into large sacks.

The buildings themselves were built of brick, timber, ragstone, or sandstone, corrugated iron, or asbestos sheet. The roofs of the kilns, when external, were often built of brick and covered in coal tar pitch for weatherproofing.

Oast houses were built in the major hop-growing regions of England, with the majority of those (perhaps 65% of the remaining approximately 3,500)[3] in Kent. The oldest surviving oast in England is at Golford, Cranbrook, built in 1750. Oasts may also be found in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Australia, and other countries.

Hop picking peaked in England between 1860 and 1880, then went into decline as cheaper imports became available from other parts of Europe. Traditional oasts fell into disuse; and eventually, many of the old buildings were renovated into homes (*Photos 6* and *7*), inns, theaters, schools, offices, and even museums (*Photos 1-3*).

Photo 6 – There were six rounded kilns at Grey Ladies and Winfield Oast, in Crouch, Kent, built in 1840 and now converted to residential dwellings. Photo by John Marchant.

Photo 7 – This private residence was converted from an oast in Stonegate, Kent. Photo by Linda Spashett Storye, Wikimedia Commons.

The latest iterations of oasts are by private developers who are building new homes to mimic the historic structures. One such example is at Oast Court Farm development in East Malling, Kent (*Photo 4* and on the cover). There, Hillreed Homes recently built an oast house with three roundels topped with conical white cowls using Sandtoft's Alban clay plain tiles. The new structure is built on the site of a former working oast. The tiles are made from clay reserves formed out of the alluvial plain of the river Humber. They are sanded using recycled foundry sands that are pressed into the tile, creating a varied and rustic surface texture. Fired vertically, they adopted slightly different shapes, lending to the "heritage aesthetic of the tile," according to Sandtoft.

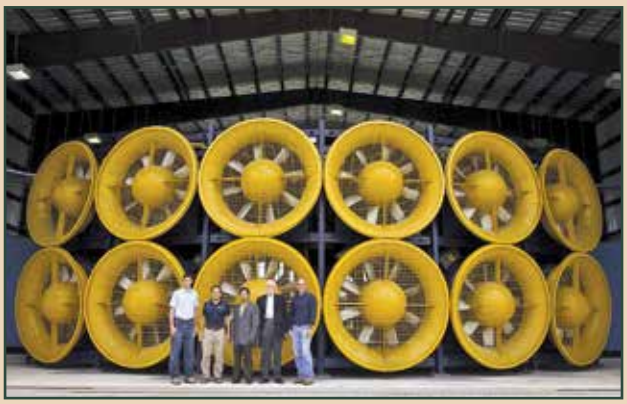
REFERENCES

1. Āst, in old English, originally meant "kiln," from the Indo-European root meaning "burn." (Oxford American Dictionary)
2. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oast_house
3. www.geograph.org.uk/article/Oast-Houses

Kristen Ammerman

Kristen Ammerman has been the publications director for RCI and executive editor of *Interface* journal since 1996. Prior to that, she was an editor and researcher for FMI, Corp. in Raleigh, NC; managing editor of *The Wayne Independent*, a daily newspaper in northeastern PA; and editor for the *Evidence Photographers International Council Journal*. She has a BA in writing and Asian studies from the University of Arizona and is a published novelist.

WoW Project Complete



The Wall of Wind (WoW) project, developed by Florida International University's International Hurricane Research Center, Miami, has been completed. The $8 million project began development in 2007 and was funded by state, federal, and private sources, as well as by the Roofing Industry Alliance for Progress (a part of the National Roofing Alliance of the National Roofing Contractors Association).

WoW is the first facility capable of performing controlled and repeatable testing of replicated Category 5 hurricane winds, accompanied by wind-driven rain and flying debris. It allows researchers, businesses, government agencies, and industries to test and analyze how structures and products perform in various hurricane conditions.

Powered by 12 6-ft.-tall, 700-HP electric fan-motor units, it can generate winds up to 157 mph and features a 15-ft.-high by 20-ft.-wide test section. To see a demonstration video, visit wow.fiu.edu.