HISTORY AND VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

By Christopher Dyer

History could be defined as the study of the past through the evidence of written sources, and it would be a relatively easy task to write about the combined study of buildings and documents. There is little novelty in advocating the use of documentary evidence in conjunction with the standing buildings in view of the almost routine use of sources such as probate inventories by those studying vernacular architecture.

The theme to be explored here is therefore the more complicated and difficult relationship between those who practise history as a discipline and a profession, and those who study standing buildings. I am concerned with the contribution that vernacular architecture can make to broad interpretations of the past, and hope to indicate some ways in which research into buildings might have a greater impact on history. The work of specialists in architecture would be further assisted by greater awareness of the general historical picture. One tends to discuss the interaction of the disciplines in the future tense because most historians have given limited attention to vernacular architecture. The majority of final year history students would not have heard the phrase, and books offering overviews of the medieval or early modern periods often make scant reference to buildings. If architecture is mentioned, it is often tucked away in a section devoted to art and education, and even there the main subjects are the polite buildings erected by the elite.

The ignorance of vernacular architecture among historians impoverishes their understanding of the past. Their loss is to be unaware of an important type of evidence which provides insights into the economy , society and mentality of every period from the thirteenth century onwards. Their neglect of this useful body of source material may in part be attributed to problems of communication. Work in vernacular architecture are often expressed in a technical language, and published in unaccessible places. Those who write about buildings do not always relate their detailed findings to wider issues. It is no accident that the aspect of the subject best known among historians is the 'great rebuilding', because articles inventing and revising that idea were published in a mainstream historical journal, and because the central concept is readily grasped, and can be linked with other trends of the period.(Footnote 1) A further obstacle to awareness of vernacular architecture among conventional historians lies in the scarcity of professional scholars working on the subject in universities. But these are really just excuses, and we cannot avoid the feeling that if there was a will, historians would find their way into the subject, and that there are more complex and deeply rooted barriers to the acceptance of non-written evidence, going back to the origins of the discipline.

Whatever the explanation of the problem, the end product of these subdivisions of knowledge is that there are groups of people engaged in the investigation of pre-industrial society, some interpreting documents, and others using mainly material evidence, but they do not talk to each other or read each other's publications as much as they should, and therefore they fail to make the connections which would enrich the whole subject.

Vernacular buildings have a great historical potential. The structures can be seen as feats of skill and craftsmanship, telling us about the training, specialisation, mobility and organisation of carpenters, and their links with other crafts and relationships with employers. The construction of the buildings also demonstrates the achievements and limitations of early technology. The buildings were the product of an economy, which gave their owners the resources to pay for the work, and which could deliver to the site the materials and labour. The buildings may themselves have had economic functions, in agriculture or industry. They can also be viewed as items of consumption, because a house, then as now, was the single most expensive item its owner acquired. Here is evidence for wealth, and choices between consumption, investment or saving. Perhaps the cost of buildings could be afforded because credit was available, so building activity can be related to the organisation of the wider economy. A house provided space for a home, and its size and layout was presumably appropriate for a family and its servants and guests. The rooms needed to be assigned to different domestic uses, and these tell us about conceptions of space and privacy. The size, design, layout and decoration of buildings resulted from decisions which were influenced by local traditions, changing styles and fashions, and ideas about the social standing of the builders and owners. The building should be viewed in the broadest perspective, in relation to its neighbours as part of a pattern of settlement, and within the landscape. We need to investigate the agricultural land to which it was attached, and its economic and social region. If the date of building and rebuilding is known, the house can be set in the context of its period. In a perfect world all of these aspects of buildings would be considered in order to gain the most value from their evidence for past societies, and to interpret them in a broad historical light. The current vogue for emphasising the cultural dimension, while disparaging practical, functional and economic considerations, may serve a useful purpose in redressing an earlier imbalance which neglected 'housing culture', but is in danger of itself preventing a properly rounded view of the subject.

Let us look at some of those interactions between history and vernacular architecture - and these derive partly from questions from historical thinking that have implications for those studying the buildings, and partly problems thrown up by building research which deserve consideration by historians. These are grouped here under the headings of economy, society and mentality. The choice of themes will inevitably reflect my knowledge of the period before the mid-sixteenth century, but not all of them are specific to the medieval period.

A first problem is the mystery of the invisible cottage. Cottages were important features of the pre-industrial economy. They appear frequently in the documents, and historians have expended a great deal of effort in observing, counting and interpreting them. Contemporaries had very precise definitions of cottages. They appear in documents not just as buildings smaller than messuages, but associated with small holdings called cotlands, and held by tenants designated as cottars. The holdings usually contained 5 acres of arable land or less. They owed limited rents and services, though one sometimes notes that they paid more than their fair share. Their tenants had a low status in their village or town, for example by lacking full common rights. They were often under-tenants, and thereby were deprived of full participation in the government of their communities, and indeed could be exploited by their wealthier neighbours. The cottagers, lacking sufficient land to feed their families, formed an important part of the labour force, working sometimes full-time as ploughmen, carters

or shepherds, but more often accepting short-term agricultural employment on the lord's demesne, on the parson's glebe, or from their neighbours, or they found jobs in industries.

Recent research has shown how cottage holdings could have been formed in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when lords gave parcels of land to former slaves or servants, or when groups of migrants settled on newly colonised land or on the edge of towns (Footnote 2). One village study, of Halesowen in Worcestershire, demonstrates how in the period of rising population and land hunger in the period 1270-1349, tenants of larger holdings, anxious to provide for their children who under the rules of primogeniture were not able to inherit, set up younger sons and daughters with cottages on the edge of the main messuage. In this way a single holding, recorded in 1305, was supporting no less than six separate households (Footnote 3). In addition to these officially recorded cottages were the dwellings of the submerged army of wage workers who appear in some manorial records as *garciones*, non-tenants who worked mainly for their neighbours, and often no doubt lived in their employers' houses, but sometimes occupied small dwellings on the fringes of the village (Footnote 4). After the Black Death the numbers of cottagers were drastically reduced, but the remaining tenants were valued highly as a source of labour. Accordingly those with larger holdings would take over the tenancy of cottages, not for the sake of their land, but in order to sublet them to labourers who would be expected to work for the better-off peasant - tied cottages, in other words (Footnote 5).

So historians regard cottages as dwellings with great significance for the rural economy. They were very numerous, with at least a quarter million cottages in c. 1300, and 100,000 in the early sixteenth century. Yet the cottage seems rather elusive in the material remains. Archaeological excavation of rural sites has revealed relatively few foundations of small buildings that could be interpreted as cottages. A few structures of this type have been noted at West Whelpington in Northumberland, (Footnote 6) but these are exceptional; most villages that have been excavated seem to consist mainly of substantial houses belonging to the messuages of yardlands or oxgangs, or fractions of these standard units of tenancy - holdings of 30, 15 or 8 acres. We now call many standing rural timber-framed houses cottages, but this does not accurately reflect their earlier status. Ann Hathaway's 'Cottage', to take one of the most famous examples, with timbers dated to 1462-3, was apparently a house attached to a yardland holding (Footnote 7).

Occasionally cottages have been identified, notably a sixteenth-century house known to have been a cottage tenement, now 1-2 Coventry Road at Stoneleigh in Warwickshire. It consisted of three bays, which means that it was not much smaller than its neighbours belonging to holdings of a half or whole yardland (Footnote 8). Late medieval documents also suggest that smallholdings were provided with buildings of two or three bays, together with barns and other agricultural buildings, just like the messuages of the more substantial tenants (Footnote 9). This may be the clue to the apparent invisibility of some cottages - we should not be looking for tiny buildings, but for structures of standard size, but distinguished from the houses of the better-off by the quality and quantity of the materials used, or the standard of carpentry. These differences can only be detected by close analysis of the standing buildings.

A second, similar, problem for anyone analysing the workings of the pre-industrial economy is defining the town-country divide. If we draw the line on the basis of population, say at the level of 2,000 people, we would include Carlisle, Lichfield and Maidstone but exclude hundreds of small market towns. Most historians would now regard the variety of non-agricultural occupations pursued by the inhabitants of a place as the decisive hall mark of an urban economy, so including places with a few hundred people like Newmarket, Thornbury, Leatherhead and Northallerton. This method of marking the difference between towns and villages is not easily applied as we often have only limited evidence for occupations, and there are many ambiguous places with both rural and urban characteristics. Topographical features, such as the density of building and the arrangement of plots in relation to streets, can help to draw a distinction, and one feels that the houses themselves should provide another means of approaching the problem. For example, in the western parts of England before 1400, while there is increasing evidence for rural houses with two storeys, towns would have stood out because the majority of houses were provided with upper floors. In addition, the larger towns could be identified by the types of house found in them, such as the various forms of house described by Pantin, so one could devise a typology of urban houses which was related to the hierarchy of towns (Footnote 10).

At present such an enquiry is frustrated because many studies of vernacular architecture do not make a strict distinction between the rural and urban location of the buildings, and there is a shortage of studies which set out explicitly to

investigate urban buildings. The opportunity undoubtedly exists because so many timber-framed buildings survive in towns, and there are many regions, such as the south-east, where there are sufficient buildings visible in town and country to make a comparison possible.

A third theme in recent historical thinking about the economy is to regard the period between about 1180 and 1320 as one of commercialisation, when markets proliferated, towns became larger and more numerous, and the countryside was geared to increased production for sale (Footnote 11). In a sense this is a familiar concept for those who have studied buildings, because even if they do not use the general term 'commercialisation', a number of developments can be observed that flowed from an increase in market activity. The handful of non-aristocratic rural buildings, concentrated in the south midlands, dated to the decades around 1300, could represent an accident of survival, but the fact that they are grouped in a locality suggests also that they were a product of a specific phase in craft specialisation and the emergence of acquisitive peasants with resources earned from the sale of surplus grain, livestock, wool, cheese and poultry. The great quantity of aristocratic building in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century must be connected with the profits earned from the sale of demesne produce, and the cash rents that could be demanded from peasants increasingly locked into market networks. The impressive number of utilitarian buildings, like the Great Coxwell barn, points to the willingness of lords to invest in structures that would pay for themselves by storing grain crops safe from thieves, vermine and damp, in order to sell the corn in good condition and at the most advantageous times.

Many aspects of the building industry at this time were related to the growth of commerce, such as the development of credit facilities, which allowed great lords to

borrow money from Italian bankers, and peasants to raise smaller loans from wealthier neighbours or in the local towns ([Footnote 12](#)). The materials came from distances, well attested for larger buildings in the costs of bringing trees by land and water from remote woods, and implied for the smaller structures by the markets in materials which developed in small towns, leading to complaints in the borough courts that public safety and convenience were threatened by the heaps of timber in the streets.

A final aspect of commercialisation concerns the land-market. The exchange of land between peasants clearly involved factors other than a simple market for property, because lordship, interests of families and village communities, and patron-client relations among the peasants all influenced the process ([Footnote 13](#)). A curiosity of the records of transfers of land is the great variation in the sums of money paid by one tenant to another, and by the new tenant to the lord as an entry fine. The level of both payments should have reflected market forces, changing over time with the shifts in supply and demand, and from one piece of land to another depending on the quantity and quality of the land. Historians have found it puzzling that equal holdings of land in the same village at about the same time should pay very different sums - in c. 1300, for example, when demand and prices reached very high levels, the transfer of a yardland (about 30 acres) might result in the incoming tenant, the purchaser, paying the lord in entry fine as much as £15 or as little as £2. The common assumption is that the less valuable holding had by ill-fortune been assigned less fertile sections of the village fields, or that a previous tenant had neglected its cultivation. Rarely have historians considered the state of the buildings as factor, but if the new tenant of a holding which had been neglected by his predecessor was faced with repair costs totalling as much as £5, he would understandably have expected to pay a reduced price to acquire the holding. The anxiety of lords to compel their tenants to maintain and renew buildings, mainly but not exclusively after the Black Death of 1348-9, suggests their sensitivity to the effect that decayed buildings would have on the value of holdings.

Technology is a fourth problem. A common view of the whole pre-industrial period, but of the years between 1180 and 1320 in particular, is that sustained economic growth was prevented by a lack of major technical innovations. Recent work recognizes the limitations on medieval technology, but at the same time points to changes in transport, cultivation, land management, application of water and wind power, the design of implements and so on, which though in themselves small in scale and modest in their consequences, and often confined to specific regions, cumulatively added significantly to the productivity of farming ([Footnote 14](#)). Architectural historians have been fully aware of important changes in practical carpentry, which demonstrates the versatility and inventiveness of one group of medieval craftsmen. Developments in building technology played their part in improving agricultural methods, as farms of all sizes, from the granges of the great monasteries to the holdings of peasants, were equipped with structures able to shelter harvested crops, animals and implements. From about 1200 onwards farm buildings were more commonly provided with stone foundations and durable timber framing, and later sometimes with tiled or slated roofs. Reducing the wastage of corn, improving the health of animals, and prolonging the working life of implements could have made a larger contribution to the effectiveness of farming than measures designed to increase the yields of crops and animals.

The final point is that architectural studies can contribute to our understanding of the chronology of the pre-industrial economy. This has of course only become possible since the appearance of a significant number of precise tree-ring dates, and historians of the economy have not appreciated their significance. Mention has already been made of the number of peasant buildings dated around 1300, implying the existence of pockets of peasant prosperity at a time of hardship for much of the population. Another significant date seems to be 1380, when the series of scientifically dated buildings begins in earnest, in Kent as well as in the midlands (Footnote 15). The first Black Death epidemic of 1348-9 might be regarded as a great turning point, but its effects were felt most strongly in the long term, and it was only after 1375 that good harvests and higher real wages brought a sense of well-being to a large section of the population. But we cannot explain fully why 1380 should be an important date in building history. In the next century some historians would not expect to find much evidence for a 'feel-good factor' in the period 1440-1460, yet the tree ring dates suggest that a good number of peasants and artisans, or their landlords, decided to start new houses. Perhaps in this case we see individual prosperity contrasting with the overall shrinkage in the national economy, inviting comparison with the suburban building boom in parts of England during the slump of the 1930s. These are just preliminary observations based on a relatively small sample, but in the long term we can hope to devise a fuller picture of the building cycles between the thirteenth and the eighteenth century, supplementing the existing statistics based on buildings with date inscriptions, in which it might even be possible to identify variations between regions and social groups.

Houses are relevant to a number of questions in social history, and here we will consider their relationship with the family and household, and the light that they throw on social stratification. One view of the relationship between families and their holdings of land emphasises the close links which ensured that the land descended down the line of inheritance for generations. When the direct line of succession failed, more remote relatives came, often from a distance, to take up the land. People only gave up their family holdings with the greatest reluctance, and hoped to repossess them in the future. Another perspective puts more stress on the market for land, and suggests that the attachment to the holding was not an inherent feature of a peasant society, but was forced by the acute land hunger of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and reappeared with the growth in population in the sixteenth century (Footnote 16). Those who have argued on both sides of this debate have tended to focus on the holding of land, but people at the time saw the house (or the messuage, which would include the farm buildings, gardens, yards, etc.) at the heart of the holding, and indeed the family names that were attached to the holdings (Smithsplace, Elkyns and so on) referred to the houses in which generations of the same family had once lived. Unfortunately the study of the houses may not throw much light on the debate. For example, it might be argued that peasants built their houses sturdily to provide a secure home for future generations, or alternatively they calculated that a high quality house would add to the market value of the holding.

The precise use made of the house by the family involves another debate about the structure and size of the family group. The prevalent interpretation makes the nuclear family the normal pre-industrial social unit, so that houses would only occasionally and temporarily be expected to accommodate three generations of a family or more remote kin. On the other hand, many households would contain servants, who were

usually young people working and living away from their own homes, acquiring skills and savings preparatory to setting up their own household in their mid or late twenties. Most of the research on which this reconstruction of families and households relates to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but some historians have argued that the same type of 'north-west European family' can be traced back as early as the fourteenth century (Footnote 17). Very little attempt has been made to correlate these ideas with the evolution of actual houses. Indeed the known changes in houses, with the proliferation of smaller rooms, the new emphasis on private accommodation and the separation of servants from the family, suggests profound shifts in family attitudes if not in family structures in the early modern period, perhaps beginning before 1500. This trend does not accord with the view that there was an essential continuity in the 'immutable English family' over the centuries (Footnote 18). Architectural historians and archaeologists can contribute further to these enquiries by advancing work already begun on the use of space and rooms within houses. We need to adjust to the particular mind set of our ancestors which did not categorise rooms into spaces for living, cooking, eating and sleeping, and to solve such problems as locating the sleeping space for the servants. An example of a dilemma facing medieval families, not entirely dissimilar from the contemporary situation, is whether to accommodate an elderly relative with the rest of the family, or in separate space within the house, or in a freestanding building - or indeed to keep the old person out of the family home. The documents are often ambiguous or inconsistent on this point, and sometimes the material evidence provides a clearer indication, for example for the construction of separate chambers near the house, or the subdivision of the building.

The other social dimension of housing relates to the definition of classes and their material circumstances. We tend to categorise people in the countryside as peasants and lords, or peasants and gentry, but in fact when looking at their houses the distinction is not so clear cut, and many architectural historians understandably avoid the issue and make no estimate of the social status of the builders and owners of houses.

The lower ranks of the gentry, especially the parish gentry who emerged in great numbers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were not very rich, while some yeomen and farmers were accumulating considerable quantities of land after c.1400. A recent identification of a house built for a farmer, that is the non-aristocratic lessee of a lord's demesne, at Overton in Hampshire in 1506-7 is a striking new example of a precise combination of documentary and architectural evidence (Footnote 19). We need to accumulate a checklist of such houses which are firmly attributed to individuals or people of a particular social category, which can then provide a typology capable of removing some of the guesswork involved in dealing with the great majority of buildings without clear evidence for their builders or original inhabitants. As well as helping us to distinguish between gentry and peasant houses, such a study ought to give us an indication of the housing of the 'middling sort' - the yeomen, farmers and other prospering groups who emerged out of village society during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We should also be helped in resolving the problem of the 'invisible cottage' by such an approach.

The discussion of aspects of 'mentality' on which buildings can throw light should be brief because economic confidence, loyalty to family and other contemporary ideas

and attitudes have already entered into the discussions above. Here the earlier references to privacy and social status will be expanded, and some attention paid to questions of regional and national identity. The conventional view sees the extension of privacy in houses of all kinds throughout the period 1300-1800 as one of the clearly defined trends. Behind the generalisation lies the assumption that medieval people had a collective outlook in relation to their families and wider society, but that with the advent of commerce and a stronger sense of private property space was defined more strictly both on the land (where enclosures destroyed the common fields) and in the home. Distinctions of rank became more important, and while the great medieval lord ate in the same hall as his servants, through the centuries the private dining room and ultimately the social segregation of 'below stairs' and the 'servants' hall' prevailed. There is also talk of a civilising process, in which people of all social ranks became more sensitive to the feelings of others - husbands and wives, and parents and children, enjoyed relationships based on mutual affection rather than discipline and subordination. These fine sentiments were not easily compatible with families sleeping in a single room.

But the story of the growth of privacy is perhaps a little too simple to be entirely credible. In the last century continuous improvement could be regarded as a great theme of history, but many examples of this reassuring and optimistic trend can be shown to be mistaken. Just as the middle classes apparently 'rose' in every century in the last millennium but took a remarkably long time to arrive, so we can collect complaints that lords were failing to observe the good old custom of eating in the hall with their households from as early as 1240 (Footnote 20). We should not ignore the early evidence for upper rooms in quite small rural buildings, certainly by the early fourteenth century, suggesting that some peasant houses were acquiring 'private' accommodation long before the supposed 'modernisation' of the economy or family sensibilities. From much earlier times many peasant communities consisted of farmsteads set at some distance from their neighbours in a dispersed settlement pattern quite distinct from the large groupings of houses in nucleated villages, so over different regions there were varied experiences of private and collective styles of life. A strong urge for privacy is demonstrated in the archaeological evidence in the thirteenth century by peasant houses surrounded by ditches (and presumably also hedges and fences), with locked doors, and goods kept in the chamber in locked chests (Footnote 21). Peasants' collective sense, which undoubtedly played an important part in their farming and religious activities, could be combined with a defence of private property against not just strangers, but also their neighbours. Similarly in the century before the Reformation we see wealthier villagers behaving selfishly in their farming, and threatening not just the cohesion of the village community, but its very survival. Rampant individualism seems to be triumphing over collective values. Yet the building of church houses, village guild halls, poor houses and other community facilities, not to speak of the renewal and adornment of the church itself, absorbed a considerable proportion of the wealth of the peasantry, and suggest a vibrant community spirit when it is supposed to be dying (Footnote 22).

Houses clearly expressed the builders' and owners' social position, even when we are considering the subtle gradations of status among villagers. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the largest landholder cultivated perhaps 80 acres, and the main distinctions lay between those with 30, 15 and 5 acres each. This was more than just a matter of wealth, reflecte Houses clearly expressed the builders' and owners' social

position, even when we are considering the subtle gradations of status among villagers. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the largest landholder cultivated perhaps 80 acres, and the main distinctions lay between those with 30, 15 and 5 acres each. This was more than just a matter of wealth, reflected in the size and the quality of the materials and construction of buildings. We are already sensitive to the signals that were conveyed by lavish displays of materials in close studding, and the use of decorative elements in the timbers. On the interior, even quite modest houses would have a hall which was designed to provide a formal setting for a meal. Visitors would be impressed by decorative features such as carved timbers. Inventories of the fifteenth century show that painted cloths could be hung on the walls, and the furniture often consisted of a table and forms, with a single chair that would draw attention to the position of the householder seated at the head of the table, who was superior to the women folk and young people (his own children and perhaps a servant or two) and would expect to be served food and drink by them. Peasants on such occasions enjoyed the refinements of table cloths and owned a basin, ewer and towels for the washing of hands (Footnote 23). In addition to these meals for the household, the hall might be the setting for quasi-public occasions, like the witnessing of a deed or the agreement of a marriage contract (Footnote 24).

The arrangement of the peasant house with its hall and chamber or chambers, and sometimes a separate kitchen or bakehouse resembles a small-scale version of an aristocratic residence. The inclusion in the peasant house of a miniature version of a lord's hall, as a space for a low key version of the great household's hierarchy and ceremonial, raises difficult problems about the peasants' perception of their place in society. There are plenty of examples of antagonistic relations between lord and peasant, but does the pale imitation of aristocratic models show that the peasants really admired and imitated the lords' style, and the ideas of hierarchy that lay behind the planning of the buildings ? Or perhaps the aristocratic way of living permeated every social corner so completely - it was after all followed by institutions such as monasteries, colleges and hospitals- that even peasants with their own economic and social interests, and their distinctive ideas about the nature of society, had no choice in their living arrangements but to use the models set by the upper class.

Finally, we have conventionally expected that different styles of vernacular architecture will tell us about regional differences. It was once believed that the frontiers of cruck construction, or the distribution of building techniques and materials, or of different types of roof structure and wall framing, could be explained in terms of the local terrain, resources or social structure. As explanation of the differences has proved more difficult, and this is true of many other features of the social and material world, we can subscribe more readily to the notion that there were regional cultures, no doubt influenced by the various social, economic and geographical circumstances, but ultimately moulded by traditions and practices that are not always capable of rational analysis. While most of us ponder the local types in buildings in England, and attempt to correlate regional differences with other variable factors such as inheritance customs, settlement forms or dialects, bolder spirits are attempting to crack the equally impenetrable codes which define the building styles of England or Wales in relation to those of continental Europe. This venture has its significance for historians who are developing an interest in the once deeply unfashionable fields of ethnicity and nationality, by exploring the relationships between the different parts of Britain, and recognising that as early as c1300

'Englishness' was being defined in relation to the French influences on society and culture.

I hope that this brief survey of the interconnections between history and architectural history will stimulate further discussion among those who study vernacular buildings. There are more questions and unsolved problems than answers, and perhaps in the future it may be possible to pursue some of them in multi-disciplinary research programmes. Our aim must be to ensure that vernacular architecture makes its proper contribution to history, and to make the historians take notice of an important field of study.

Footnotes

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18. Razi, 'Immutable English Family'.

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