ENGLISH HOUSES 1300–1800

Vernacular Architecture, Social Life

MATTHEW JOHNSON

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Matthew Johnson

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This book is for little David

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1

Introduction: The Study of Vernacular Architecture

Every weekend, thousands of people, mostly from the towns and suburbs of England, engage in the most innocent of pursuits – a visit to the countryside. Picturesque villages and country landscapes within convenient driving distance of a major city are the destination of families and individuals seeking a few hours' respite from the stresses of urban living.

Visitors, driving and walking around the regions of England, see that not all English houses are the same. The houses and other buildings that make up rural landscapes vary in obvious ways in their choice of building materials, and also more subtly in their style and decoration, and their size and form. Observers soon recognise that this variation is not just a random jumble, with each house varying from the next in a merely haphazard way. Rather, there are certain patterns to be discerned in the local landscape and architecture: concentrations of different kinds of building in particular areas, use of particular roofing and walling materials, different architectural styles. These patterns must surely mean something; they must surely tell us something about the history of the household, community and region.

If our visitors look more carefully at the facades of houses as they walk past, they can begin to speculate about the stories they have to tell (Plates 1 to 4). This house has a steeply pitched roof – it may have been thatched before the thatch was replaced with ceramic tiles, the steep pitch being needed in earlier times to facilitate rainwater running off the thatch. That house has one end much higher than the other end. Could one end have been rebuilt, and if so why? This next house has a date and initials above the door. Does this date mark the initial construction of the house or does it date from a later improvement? And why is there a pair of initials, or maybe two Christian names, either side of a surname – what does this tell us about relations between the married couple? Taken together, these differences may proffer stories: the timber-framed and plastered fronts of irregular houses may give way, over time, to more strikingly regular and symmetrical Georgian brick facades.

Our visitor stands back and surveys the scene as a whole. Perhaps the houses are clustered tightly round a green, a church in their midst; perhaps they are more dispersed, isolated even. In much of England, the countryside does not conform to the stereotype of the classic 'English village' familiar from Agatha Christie novels

and TV adaptations, with a church, manor and village houses in a cluster surrounded by arable fields; rather, it is a dispersed scatter of small hamlets or isolated farmsteads. And this difference in settlement form between this and that region is not random or trivial – it is linked to very deep differences between local communities, and to subtle variations in the history of human settlement, variations whose origins are often at least a thousand years old. The location of houses in the landscape, then, has as much to tell us as their form and decoration.

Clearly, our visitor rapidly recognises that the story of the houses that make up the village is not one of an unchanging rural idyll. The village, and the individual houses within it, have been transformed through the centuries. Non-local building materials could not have arrived before the transport revolution of the eighteenth century. Houses bear marks of alteration and updating in line with contemporary tastes and standards.

Different patterns can also be seen at a regional level. To travel between different regions of England is to traverse different zones of building styles, different forms of houses, set within different kinds of landscape. These differences between regions are partly conditioned by material factors – the underlying variations in geology conditioning the availability of good building stone, or proximity to woodland. Others relate to human geography – the proximity of London or a major regional centre, ease of access to major routeways. Still others, however, are the products of local choice: ordinary people, whether acting as individuals, or as part of households or communities, choosing to do things differently.

Many of these differences between houses are not immediately obvious to the casual visitor, but become apparent on close inspection. Live in a region of England for even a few months and look at local buildings closely and critically, and the visitor will quickly come to see differences between this dale and the next, this county and the next, in features that are often, at a first and superficial glance, arbitrary choices – decorative schemes, the manner of laying stone or bricks, the panel infills of timber frames.

Houses and People

This book is aimed in part at those who perhaps on casual visits to the countryside have already seen different patterns of traditional houses, and who want to know more about old houses, what these patterns might mean, what they might tell us about the history of the English landscape and the men, women and children who dwelt in that landscape.

The book has a very simple message: houses are about human beings. Architecture is a human creation, the medium and outcome of people acting on their surroundings. The form of smaller houses, then, can tell us about the lives of the ordinary people who built them and who lived in them. They are artefacts that should be understood as part of the way ordinary people lived and thought. They tell us about those lives and thoughts in often very profound and complex ways.

Many books on houses concentrate on changing architectural styles – Perpendicular, Renaissance, Palladian. This story is a fascinating one, and aspects of it will be retold in the pages that follow. However, somewhere in this cascading narrative of styles and influences the people seem to be forgotten. Such books often also concentrate on the houses of those at the very top of the social structure – the gentry and aristocracy. Where the houses of the middle classes are considered, the concentration is on the cities and towns rather than the countryside. Again, it is often forgotten that, before the Industrial Revolution, over four-fifths of the English lived in the countryside, and were not of such elevated social status.

Other books do concentrate on the ordinary houses of lesser people, but wax lyrical on changing building materials and technologies – brickwork, cruck types, scarf joints, ashlar coursing. Still others discuss economic factors behind housebuilding – changing farming practices, agricultural improvement, dairy production, the cloth and iron industries. All these themes are important, and all will be explored in the pages that follow, but in the end they are only a means to an end. *The one true end of the study of old houses is to understand something of the ways of life and systems of thought of their builders, owners and users.*

Those ways of life were very different from our own. The houses we see today appear quite familiar; the descriptive words we use often have an Anglo-Saxon plainness to them – farmhouse, stable, kitchen, barn, byre. The past, however, is a foreign country, and this apparent plainness conceals just how very different that past was. These houses were built to accommodate ways of living very different from those of the twenty-first century. These different ways of living related to very different systems of belief in terms of how a household was ordered, the different roles of women, men, children and servants, the husbandry of the fields beyond. Houses, then, relate to different cultural attitudes. The everyday movement from house to barn and byre and back again, the milking of cows and labour in the fields, the daily gathering around the table for mealtimes – all these very simple and everyday actions expressed a deep understanding of the world.

This book will ask questions about those past men, women and children who lived in houses that survive today in the English countryside. I have already shown that we can already begin to make guesses about these people by wandering around villages and landscapes with an observing eye and an enquiring mind. In the chapters that follow, I will begin to flesh out some of these guesses about what houses meant into firmer ideas. I will set these casual observations against a closer inspection of the houses themselves, against other documentary and archaeological evidence for past people, and against a wider picture of historical change at regional, national and international scales.

The Study of Vernacular Houses

The study of smaller traditional buildings is not new. Though the term 'vernacular' as applied to buildings dates to the later nineteenth century, the origins of the

historical study of buildings can be sought in the perceived loss of 'tradition' itself, at the end of the eighteenth century. Many writers and intellectuals of the time, both radical and conservative, reacted with horror to the rapid changes in the world around them: the Industrial Revolution, the enclosure and privatisation of the formerly open fields, the 'dark satanic mills', and the mass migration from countryside to the growing urban centres.

This horrified reaction expressed itself in a sense of loss: that an older, pre-industrial way of life was passing away, and that the advance of industry was destroying something valuable and authentic, something that needed to be preserved. It thus led to the desire of nineteenth-century antiquarians to study what was being lost, and to the birth of the conservation movement. One of the earliest examples was the 1830s protest of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth against what he saw as the deformation of the Lake District by over-grand building, follies, and white roughcast, together with conifers and exotics: '*Singula de nobis anni praedantur euntes*. This is in the course of things; but why should the genius that directed the ancient architecture of the vales have deserted them? For the bridges, churches, mansions, cottages, and their richly fringed and flat-roofed outhouses, venerable as the grange of some old abbey, have been substituted structures, in which baldness only seems to have been studied, or plans of the most vulgar utility' (de Selincourt ed. 1906, 65). Romanticism as an intellectual and literary movement expressed a powerful sense of loss, and of opposition to modern ways of 'vulgar utility'. This opposition between aesthetics on the one hand and utility on the other went on to constitute a central formative influence on the study of vernacular architecture.

Early nineteenth-century Romanticism fed into Victorian thinking on architecture, the arts, design and material culture. Such thinking took both conservative and radical forms, and could be found equally on the political Left as on the Right. A powerful link was argued between a 'medieval' or pre-industrial way of life that involved a sense of community and closeness to Nature on the one hand and the technical and aesthetic principles of hand-made 'medieval' art and individually designed architecture on the other. Both were seen by many Victorians to relate to a sense of community and a more human, less alienated way of ordering human affairs that had been lost with industrialisation. The study of earlier forms of art and architecture, then, became for the Victorian mind a moral and political, as much as an historical, exercise. To contemplate a medieval building was not simply to look at something beautiful, it was also to contemplate a way of living, an ordering of human communities, whose passing was to be mourned. This moral imperative lay behind, for example, A.W.N. Pugin's Gothic designs (Hill 2007), John Ruskin's patient recording and explication of Gothic architecture in his great work *The Stones of Venice* (Ruskin 1884) and behind the Victorian 'restoration' of so many medieval churches, both great and small. The Oxford Movement linked veneration of the values of medieval Catholic religion, of architectural forms, and of a sense of tradition and community, in a single conservative political vision.

The classic example of such thinking and its application to architecture and material culture was the career of the socialist thinker and craftsman William Morris. Morris' understanding of socialism was expressed through his designs and his books. These celebrated the craft traditions and methods of production that, he felt, had been destroyed by capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. Morris developed a narrative of the rise and fall of the medieval craft traditions, a narrative that served as a condemnation of industrial patterns of production. He was the founder and the most prominent member of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, founded in 1877 (Miele ed. 1996, 37).

Much of this Victorian thinking concentrated on the great monuments and styles of the medieval period, most obviously the great cathedrals and churches, rather than focusing on vernacular architecture and culture as such. However, it is important to remember that nineteenth-century academic journals such as the *Archaeological Journal* and *Antiquaries Journal* grouped a wide range of objects of study under the term 'archaeology', including items of folk culture and other old artefacts (see Ebbatson 1994). In many ways, the bifurcation and academic division between different disciplines (archaeology, architectural history, folklife studies) occurred after this period; in bringing these strands back together in the modern study of vernacular architecture, scholars are going back to first principles.

Two great books, published at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, can be seen as laying the intellectual foundations of the systematic study of vernacular houses. S.O. Addy brought an understanding of that other great Victorian theme – evolution, as expressed in the thought of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin – to vernacular architecture in his *Evolution of the English House* (1898). Addy argued that the form of houses had evolved in parallel with the evolution of human societies, with, he believed, earlier circular houses characteristic of matrilineal societies giving way to more modern rectangular forms indicative of male-dominated societies. In so doing he was following earlier schema of social evolution proposed by Morgan and Maine and adopted by, among others, the associate of Marx, Friedrich Engels, in his classic *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). Addy also related the system of the structural division of early houses into bays to the need to stall pairs of oxen, one pair to each bay, and saw the stalling of oxen in this way as fundamental to the Germanic origins of 'Anglo-Saxon' ways of living. C.F. Innocent took as his theme different building techniques in his *Development of English Building Construction* (1916). Innocent drew on his observations of cruck-framed buildings to insist on the antiquity of vernacular buildings and the evidence for pre-industrial building techniques found within them.

The early twentieth-century development of interest in vernacular buildings in England was rather different from that in other countries. In much of continental Europe and Scandinavia, peasant culture, and with it rural and vernacular tradition, was seen as something living and ongoing rather than something that had been irrevocably lost with the Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions. Rural society and

culture, then, was studied as part of a living tradition, or at least as only having been eroded or threatened in the very recent past. As a result, a tradition of folklife study was often much stronger in these areas (Dorson 1972). A stronger tradition of folklife studies can also be seen in other areas of the British Isles, in Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

After the Second World War, there was a rapid expansion in England of interest in medieval and postmedieval archaeology, vernacular architecture and related themes. Much of this work must be seen in the context of postwar culture in general, in particular the Fabian reformist socialism of the postwar Labour government and an ideological commitment to the scholarly exploration of the lives of ordinary people in the past, rather than the kings, queens and princes of elite political history. Such an ideological commitment was seen most obviously at the Wharram Percy project on the Yorkshire Wolds, where from the 1950s onwards several of the peasant houses of the deserted medieval village were excavated (Johnson 2007, 104–8). The Vernacular Architecture Group was founded in 1952. This period also saw a marked expansion in extra-mural and other classes, and in amateur local history and archaeology societies. The study of vernacular buildings was perfect work for such groups. The recording and analysis of houses did not need the logistical support or have the constraints of an excavation; valuable work could be done on a Sunday afternoon, more often than not accompanied by the genial house owner's offer of a cup of tea, and, with luck, a biscuit.

Intellectual Foundations

Taken together, it could be argued that three scholars – an anthropologist, an archaeologist, and an historian – laid the foundations of the modern study of vernacular architecture. The historian W.G. Hoskins wrote a short but enormously influential article in the left-wing historical journal *Past and Present*, 'The Rebuilding of Rural England 1570–1640' (Hoskins 1953). Hoskins proposed that there had been a revolution in housing standards between these two dates, and tied this revolution in to contemporary economic and social changes. He gave potential students of vernacular architecture a narrative, a sense of how individual buildings related to a wider story about the English landscape, which he set out in lucid and passionate terms in his classic *The Making of the English Landscape* (Hoskins 1955). We shall see in Chapter 4 that Hoskins' vision is now partly out of date, but it has been enormously influential, particularly in its impact on historians' perception of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as being of rising affluence and assertiveness in the culture of the middling sort of people.

If Hoskins suggested a historical model, Sir Cyril Fox and Lord Raglan demonstrated the method: they showed how the study of vernacular houses could be undertaken in their three-volume study *Monmouthshire Houses* (Fox and Raglan 1951–4). Fox and Raglan looked at houses carefully within the county of Monmouthshire, utilising drawn and measured ground plans, and building a picture of vernacular architecture in a

given region. (Though now part of the county of Gwent in Wales, Monmouthshire sits on the border with England and enjoys an English as well as a Welsh heritage.) *Monmouthshire Houses* was, typically for the study of vernacular buildings, an interdisciplinary and a professional–amateur collaboration. Raglan was an unorthodox figure; he is classified in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* as an anthropologist. He was interested in the anthropological study of myth and its relationship to ritual. Dismissed by many as an eccentric amateur, a more charitable view is that he prefigured anthropology's structuralist turn by twenty years. Fox was an archaeologist and curator of the National Museum of Wales. He was central to the foundation of St Fagan's open-air museum near Cardiff, one of the finest collections of reconstructed vernacular buildings in the British Isles.

The success of Hoskins, Fox and Raglan can be judged by the proliferation of studies of particular regions of England and Wales after this date. One consequence of this proliferation after the 1950s is that it is more difficult to summarise the development of vernacular architectural studies between the 1950s and the present. Such regional studies are frequently done by local and amateur groups; others have been undertaken by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England (RCHME), now merged into English Heritage, and its Scottish and Welsh counterparts Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) and Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW). These bodies have produced a series of detailed scholarly studies, accompanied by meticulous plans and, indeed, reconstruction drawings of great beauty (for example, Pearson 1985 on Lancashire; Smith 1992 on Hertfordshire; Giles 1992 on west Yorkshire; Suggett 2005 on Radnorshire).

A survey of scholarship in vernacular architecture today reveals a plethora of regional studies, relating local form and traditions to the economic and social history of a given region. As factual depth and detail has accumulated, however, scholars have found it more and more difficult to pull these observations together into a national synthesis. It sometimes seems as if the more we know about English houses, the more buildings surveyed, the more studies of local forms and traditions are completed, the more difficult scholars have found it to stand back and draw a picture of English vernacular houses as a whole. Anthony Quiney has even called such a task a 'will 'o'th' wisp' (Quiney 1994, 238). Proper scholarly caution, combined with the nature of the subject, where individuals tend to know one area or region as 'their patch' first and foremost, means that individuals have a natural reluctance to venture outside their own area and propose a national or wider pattern.

The apparent reluctance to tell a wider story about vernacular buildings means that we have to go back to 1961 and 1975 for two great studies at a national level. In 1961 Maurice Barley, Professor of Archaeology at Nottingham, published *The English Farmhouse and Cottage*. Barley used the evidence both of the houses themselves and of probate inventories. He made reference to improvements in material comfort and to social processes such as emulation, but he primarily saw differences in region

as responses, in part, to different geographical conditions. In particular, Barley linked patterns in vernacular building to the Highland and Lowland Zones proposed by Sir Cyril Fox in *The Personality of Britain*, published and revised successively in the 1930s and discussed here in Chapter 3. Barley saw the south and east of England as more economically and socially 'progressive', owing to its physical geography and proximity to the Continent. To look at local differences, then, was to see one small element of a national pattern that was conditioned by physical geography.

In contrast, Eric Mercer's 1975 *English Vernacular Houses*, the result of his work as part of the Royal Commission, proposed that social and economic developments, rather than what he called 'geography', was the real driver of variation in vernacular architecture. Mercer suggested that all regions of England shared the same start and end points of development in house types. Regional differences in house form certainly existed, but the variation seen today between region and region was an artefact of different regions going through the same fundamental change at different paces and at different times:

> Regional peculiarities had not been wholly eliminated by the end of the eighteenth century . . . but they had become of minor importance against the background of national conformity brought about by a sequence of changes common to all parts. If the development in the South-East is regarded as the classic norm, then those in the rest of the country fall into place. The stages occurred in different regions at different times, occupied longer or shorter periods, or were even omitted altogether, but the same road was followed to the same end, and that early uniformity which began to break up in the later Middle Ages had re-established itself on a wholly different level by the early nineteenth century. . . . Looked at in this way the subject ceases to be a bundle of independent themes, connected only when one area happens to influence another, but becomes a national theme with local variations. Instead of giving a geographical account of vernacular houses in England it becomes possible to attempt a history of English vernacular houses which may perhaps be related to the history of English society (Mercer 1975, 33).

Mercer's text does not state this explicitly, but as his obituaries made clear, the underlying model was Marxist in form: Mercer saw this fundamental 'history of English society' as being one from feudalism to capitalism: from a feudal, 'medieval' social and economic structure to a modern, capitalist one.

The tension between 'geographical' and 'social' models continues in studies of vernacular architecture to this day. When scholars disagree about how to explain different patterns of vernacular building, it often comes back to whether they think they are looking at differences between the particular qualities of regions on the one hand, or change through time on the other (see, for example, recent debates on the distribution of cruck-framed buildings in different areas of England: Mercer 1996, Alcock 1997, Mercer 1998). It is a theme we will come back to several times in the course of this book.

Two developments since 1980 are of pivotal importance. First, the development of dendrochronology or tree-ring dating has given scholars an independent, scientific

means of determining the age of the structural timbers in a building. Previously, scholars often had to rely on educated guesses about the date of a building, in the absence of documentary records or inscribed datestones, based on the changing form and style of decoration, framing or other elements. Such educated guesses can be subjective and unreliable, relying as they do on judgements about how fast architectural and decorative styles change and/or whether this building can be compared to that one. Other scientific techniques are generally too 'fuzzy' to be of much use; radiocarbon dating, for example, might have a 'plus' or 'minus' of at least fifty years. Tree-ring dates mean that, in principle and given the right sample, the precise date of the felling of many timbers can be determined. With caution and care, then, the construction of many buildings can be dated to within a year or two.

The second, and ongoing, development is the changing legislative and management framework surrounding old buildings (Pearson and Meeson 2001). There are currently over 350,000 buildings that are 'listed' and have statutory protection as being of 'special architectural or historical interest'. Listed buildings need statutory consent from the local authority before any alteration, either internal or external, can be made. Any building standing in reasonable condition dating before c.1700 should be listed. Though there are constant stories of damage to old buildings (the 'Nooks and Corners' section of the satirical magazine *Private Eye* always makes for interesting reading) the prevailing trend over the decades has been towards widening and deepening this protection. In the process, valuable resources for researchers have been created, most notably the house-by-house descriptions of listed buildings that are of varying but generally improving quality. Many of the leading figures in the study of vernacular architecture are employed by local authorities or by English Heritage, and their primary responsibility is in managing and caring for these buildings.

More broadly, interest in 'cultural heritage' has never been higher, and with it interest in restoring and caring for old buildings. Websites such as www.imagesofengland.org.uk, and TV programmes such as *Restoration*, reflect a very high level of public interest in historical buildings and landscapes, and moreover a level of affection for, and commitment to, their conservation.

The study of English vernacular buildings today is, then, an exceptionally vibrant and challenging field. Continuing themes and debates include the following: an interest in buildings as records of social developments, versus, or complementary to, an interest in the technical aspects of their construction; a tension between interest in regional particulars on the one hand, and the desire to tell a national story on the other; the participation of scholars from different disciplines in their study, without vernacular architecture really being central to any one discipline; the involvement of both professional and amateur; and the contested place of vernacular architecture – the thatched roof and half-timbering of the iconic 'Tudor' cottage – in a nostalgic vision of a regional and pre-industrial England, and the continuing cultural and political power of that vision, whether for better or worse.

Approaches to Vernacular Buildings

The study of vernacular buildings, then, has a very complex history, a history moreover that has always had a wider cultural and political resonance. The study of vernacular houses is consequently a field in which scholars from very different disciplines come together in what is often a sharp dialogue and debate. But this vibrancy and sharpness can also be a problem. As the Jesuits famously observed, the way a person has been educated in his or her youth moulds and conditions the way they see the world. A particular disciplinary training, as an architect, archaeologist, historian, or some other discipline, gives the scholar not just a set of spectacles but a set of blinkers as well. What the document-based historian sees as 'conclusive evidence' can be seen by the archaeologist as tentative or irrelevant, or vice versa. Scholars can end up 'talking past' each other, as their respective disciplines have very different understandings of what they are studying, how best to study it, and what criteria of evidence or proof might be. Cases where different disciplines are brought together in the study of a single traditional building are still quite rare (the study of Bowhill, a gentry house in Devon, is an exemplary study: Blaylock 2004). This difference in understanding between different disciplines is much deeper and more profound than grand, explicit visions: it extends to such apparently mundane points as how best to record a building (for example, the debate between Ferris 1989 and Ferris 1991 and others on 'objective' recording techniques), or what is architectural 'style', or how to write the history of houses (Arnold 2002 looks at a range of approaches).

Some description of disciplinary differences is therefore needed, but an exhaustive account would be tedious; many of the conceptual and theoretical issues at stake are abstruse and even dull when considered in the abstract, and are far better explored with reference to concrete examples in the chapters that follow. Here, then, for the benefit of the reader new to the study of traditional buildings, are a series of caricatures. As such, they are necessarily stereotypical, over-drawn, and over-simplified.

The *historian*, tweed-jacketed, bookish, and slightly rumpled, came to look at old buildings as part of a growing appreciation that getting immersed in the yellowing papers of the local record office was only part of the story. Looking at buildings is for such a scholar preferable to archaeological excavation, as one does not have to get one's knees or boots muddy. However, the old house is a problem as well as a source of evidence – the historian would like nothing better than to have a document giving the date of its construction and the names of those responsible, for then, and only then, it could be made to tell us something. Historians understand buildings as documents – pieces of evidence to be slotted in alongside this inventory and that survey, though they tend to trust the document rather more than the physical evidence of the building. The historian gets nervous when no corroborating documents are to be found, often equating the absence of documents to the absence of evidence.

The *architectural historian* spends most of the time on the outside rather than inside of the building, expressing deep grief over the modern Velux windows and

noisy appreciation of the outside decoration. The architectural historian is never happier than when contemplating some detail of design, preferably of Classical inspiration and 'correctly' executed. He or she spends very little time in the kitchen, the adjacent farm buildings or any of the other more mundane aspects of the building. Architectural historians understand buildings as examples of types, often 'good' or 'bad' examples according to often unspoken aesthetic rules (rules that anyone of a proper, correct education 'just knows'), and use the facades of the buildings as illustrative of a wider story about the succession of types.

The *folklife enthusiast* plunges straight in to the house, revelling in the little details of the surviving latches, the witchcraft precautions, the marks of craftsmanship of the adze and saw. For such an enthusiast, the house is silent but eloquent testament to an ancient way of life, a simpler, better way than that of the present. Folklife scholars view buildings in a romantic way, as testaments to a vanished way of life that was somehow more authentic than that of modern times, and whose passing is to be mourned.

Finally, the *archaeologist*, in stripy jumper, socks and sandals. Looking around the inside of the house is all very well, but what the archaeologist would really like to do is to knock the house down, recording it brick by brick as the structure was dismantled, and then excavate the foundations; only then, when the house is reduced to nothing more than an empty hole in the ground, will the archaeologist understand every last secret of the building, and thus be really happy. Archaeologists understand buildings as a form of archaeological site, a series of accreted layers – a rebuilding of this wing, an alteration of that hall. They can be vague about dates – after all, what is twenty-five years here or there when your prehistorian colleagues study a period of several million years?

Definitions

These very different disciplinary backgrounds lead to very different views and definitions of the nature of vernacular houses, and the appropriate way to study them. Let us try to tie these different views together with some definitions.

Eric Mercer sees the term 'vernacular' when applied to houses as having 'three distinct but related meanings: first, vernacular houses are of traditional form, are built in traditional ways with traditional materials, and use traditional ornament; secondly, they are common within, and peculiar to, one or more limited parts of the country; thirdly they are small and mean in comparison with some of their neighbours'. Vernacular is thus a closely related term to 'traditional'. For Mercer, vernacular buildings are 'those which belong to a type which is common in a given area at a given time' (Mercer 1975, 1). An implicit contrast is drawn here with 'polite' architecture. 'Polite' buildings are designed by individuals with professional training, often termed 'architects' and often named. The form and ornament reflects and draws upon national and international models. Of course, the contrasted terms

'polite' and 'vernacular' here have social as well as architectural connotations. We shall see in future chapters how the term 'vernacular' raises real difficulties, but it will serve as an introduction for the time being, with the proviso that its definition will be revisited in the Conclusions.

The word 'architecture' is more familiar to the reader, but close examination shows that it has just as many difficulties. For some writers, particularly architectural historians such as the great Nikolaus Pevsner (Games ed. 2002) and Alec Clifton-Taylor (1972), and even the architectural critic and Poet Laureate John Betjeman (1970, 16), architecture is different from mere building. For a building to become architecture, it must be evident that it was designed with some sort of conscious aesthetic effect in mind. In this view, Pevsner wrote, 'a bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture' (Pevsner 1963, 15). It is possible to extend this view to argue that farm buildings and even farmhouses, being functional buildings whose form (in this view) is governed by an utilitarian view of their everyday uses, are also not architecture.

This view has been very influential in architectural history, in part because it was inscribed into the intellectual foundations of the discipline by the great German art historians; but it is one that I oppose with great passion. A central and guiding theme in what follows in this book is that *even the smallest house, built and dwelt in by a household of the most humble status and of the most limited economic means, is a statement about the world, and a chosen way of living in it*. That way of living may be heavily constrained by external factors such as the availability of building materials, poverty or economic necessity, the demands of a higher political authority, or the wishes and desires of the landlord who built the cottage, but it is a carefully ordered and thought-through expression of a view of the world nevertheless. Moreover, that expression is thought through actively. As Upton and Vlach rightly insist (1986, xxiii), the story of houses is one of ordinary people making their own history. I therefore retain the term 'architecture' to refer to vernacular buildings such as farmhouses and barns and byres and even bicycle sheds, as I want to insist on these buildings being ordered, their design being carefully thought through by the builder and owner, and in their own way their being just as complex or profound a statement about the world as the greatest Elizabethan house or medieval cathedral.

Five Myths About Traditional Buildings

Seeing vernacular architecture in terms of people making their own history can be difficult for the modern observer, in part because, as we have seen, traditional houses carry a strong cultural and emotional baggage, a baggage placed on our backs by the Romantic tradition. Unlike prehistoric remains such as Neolithic chambered tombs or Palaeolithic handaxes, these houses occupy a very special place in the formation of contemporary views of and prejudices about the English countryside. As such, they are subject to a Romantic view that goes back to Wordsworth's and others' views

of vernacular buildings as reflecting a *genius loci*: they are immediately classified as authentic, closer to the earth, more functional, timeless even, to be contrasted with a faceless, placeless modernity of 'vulgar utility' in whatever guise. Here, then, are five assertions about traditional buildings that I want to examine in the course of this book. They are myths, in the sense that they are stories that are told over and over again: this does not mean that they are necessarily right or wrong, but they can and do bear further examination.

Vernacular building was necessarily functional, as opposed to decorative. This view was expressed most eloquently by Maurice Barley, who wrote that 'Till the eighteenth century [farmhouses and cottages] remained in essence functional building [*sic*], in which purpose determined plan and form, and ornament was subordinated to them. That the builder often achieved what an architect now consciously strives for – a satisfactory relation of forms, a harmony of structure and environment, a pleasing variety of finish and ornament – was incidental to his purpose of making a machine for living in. The archaeological approach, as distinct from the aesthetic, makes it easier to relate the form of an artefact, whether it is a flint implement, a pot or a house, to the culture which evolved it and the purpose for which it was made' (Barley 1961, xix). It is closely related to the traditions of German art history and of architectural modernism that so influenced Pevsner. My response is not to deny that architecture is functional, but to question the either/or nature of this divide. 'Function or aesthetics' is a false choice. Traditional builders and owners placed decoration on their buildings, as we shall see, and it is often impossible to say where 'function' ends and the 'aesthetic' begins. Perhaps builders and owners lived their lives and built their houses in ways that made sense to them, according to a rhythm and tempo that related to a sense of tradition and memory on their part. As such, perhaps it was both deeply meaningful to them, and also a material way of making a living. Scholars should not force themselves into a position where they have to make a false choice between functional and aesthetic interpretations.

People were trying to imitate those above them on the social scale. It is often thought that changes in buildings start at the very top of the social scale, and then 'filter down' to lower levels. The underlying assumption here is that, in a deeply status-conscious society such as pre-industrial England, people habitually attempted to copy or emulate their social superiors. But the evidence for such an assumption is questionable. Very often, when historians cite 'evidence' for social emulation, they quote documents written by the elite, expounding the fear that their social inferiors are getting uppity. Such fears tell us a lot about the anxieties of the ruling classes, but are not direct, unproblematic evidence of whether the lower orders were really attempting social emulation.

Vernacular builders were inherently conservative: vernacular architecture is unchanging. One of the words associated with ordinary buildings is 'traditional', which can be taken to imply unchanging or changing very slowly. The implied comparison is with metropolitan, urban and elite buildings; by contrast, it is implied, rural dwellings

were open to a narrower range of 'influences'. Behind such a notion is an image of the countryside as a rural retreat, more insular, slower to change, with a more conservative social pattern and way of life. It is certainly the case that the idea of 'traditional builders' has a very strong notion of a craft tradition, and I will look at evidence in Chapter 5 that while owners were attempting to innovate, they were often held back by builders' reluctance to part with traditional methods. But this view is not necessarily borne out by the evidence in all cases. At certain periods, as we shall see, vernacular buildings could change very quickly. Such notions of an unchanging rural retreat again go back to Romanticism and beyond to the Classical legacy of poets like Virgil, and are often ideological preconceptions of urbanites. The great cultural critic Raymond Williams showed many years ago that images of the countryside of this kind are ideological photo-negatives of life in the city (Williams 1973). Anyone who has actually lived in a rural community knows very well that, alongside deep continuities, change in such communities can be very fast and very wide-ranging.

The domestic/private was divided from the agrarian/public. It is natural for the modern reader to conceive of 'home' as a private retreat, away from the place of work, of the cares of public and professional life. But the pre-industrial farmhouse was not like this at all: rather, as Marshall Sahlins insists, households before the Industrial Revolution were 'charged with production' (Sahlins 1972, 76). Activities such as brewing, dairying, rural industry such as the spinning and weaving of cloth, took place within the structures of the home. Relations between husband and wife, then, were economic as well as domestic. And they were also political: in a patriarchal world where the husband was head of the household, and where the king was held to rule over his people just as the husband ruled over his family, the courts routinely interfered with household relations, for example, through public prosecution and punishment of women they categorised as 'scolds' or nagging wives.

If they didn't have names, they didn't have agency or culture. This is perhaps the most difficult myth to identify as such, but also the most pervasive myth of all. Very often, we do not have direct historical evidence for the names of people who built and dwelt in vernacular houses. We know that such-and-such a house was built in the later sixteenth century, and that its size and appearance suggest that it housed a yeoman or husbandman household; but the names of its occupants elude us. However, this does not mean that we do not have evidence for who they were, their view of their world, and the way they acted upon it. That evidence is there, in the form and use of the building. The addition of a wing to a building, the everyday activities of cooking, the sweeping of the floor – these were all human actions that can be seen in the archaeological record of houses, and which tell us about the human beings who dwelt there.

All these myths are not necessarily untrue. Some had particular currency at particular times and places. We will see, for example, how the eighteenth century saw a widening separation of the world of work from that of the domestic environment, and how, at specific historical periods, some people may well have presented their houses and belongings with the intention of emulating their social superiors.

However, their truth cannot be assumed for all times and for all places. If we are to look objectively at houses, and explore their full potential for telling us about people in the past, we have to start from the position that we cannot make any initial assumptions about them. Perhaps, in some periods, socially middling people did attempt to emulate those above them on the social scale; perhaps, in some periods, a division between private and public domains of the house can be demonstrated. Some of these issues will be explored in this book.

Performance, Materiality and Agency

Instead of relying on such myths, I want to introduce three ideas to help the reader understand traditional buildings: performance, materiality and agency. All three ideas have been discussed extensively and elaborately by writers on social and material life, but all three are in essence very simple.

Performance is about the way all social action, for example, the everyday actions of building and living in a house takes place in front of an audience, even if the audience numbers one, the self. (Even when humans are on their own they observe cultural conventions, for example, sweeping the floor or setting the table for a meal.) Who people are, then, is defined by the performance they put on. All actions are performance, though some actions can be more performative than others. Everyday activity is a particularly important kind of performance, as by repeating actions over and over again identities are produced and reproduced. Think of a very simple set of actions involved in and around the vernacular house: that of preparing, cooking and eating a meal. The housewife, family members and servants cooperate in bringing the food to the kitchen, out of service and farmyard areas. Preparation and cooking is a sequence of actions. At a certain time, say midday, the men return to the house from the fields, perhaps taking their turn in washing their hands before being seated in a particular order at the table, the master of the house sitting at the head of the table. Perhaps a prayer or blessing is said, either by the master or someone invited by him. Guests are defined and honoured by being offered food first. At the end of the meal, the household members rise in a particular order, and the men leave for the afternoon's work; the women then wash up and turn to other tasks.

The point here is that performance is much, much more than 'good manners'. Precisely because it is implicit and unspoken, 'what everyone knows', performance defines at a very basic level who someone is. In the example I have given, performance refers to ideas of gender, of social status, of religious belief, and of values of hospitality – that is, an understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman, master or servant, guest or host, is defined and asserted through everyday actions. Further, the rhythms of everyday action were particularly important in the pre-industrial world. Where people interacted on a face-to-face level, and where many or even more than half the inhabitants were illiterate, the importance of visual representation and performance cannot be overstressed.