Town Houses of Medieval Britain

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How do you write the history of buildings? This is not merely a rhetorical question, but a very real problem for anyone whose primary source material is timber or stone structures. The difficulty is that it is necessary to infer intent and function from objects which cannot speak and for which there is little written evidence. That problem, of course, is not particular to building history. It is general to all archaeological studies, and building history is effectively archaeology with more than usually big artefacts. During the course of the past decade archaeologists have taken a renewed interest in finding ways to insert people back into their studies of artefacts. The aims of people in the past, their perceptions and their social intentions are now all more central preoccupations for archaeology than are typologies and dates of flints and pottery. It is unfortunate, but perhaps inevitable, that much of this interest has passed by those working on the history of buildings.

The study of building history remains a minority interest and, although the subject is taught in a few universities, most practitioners have learnt their craft by examining buildings and meeting with others. The former Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England, now absorbed into English Heritage, was one of the few bodies which employed staff who were encouraged to study buildings, not merely record them. But the drive for efficiency has not encouraged the continued pursuit of such reflective work. Building history remains very largely the preserve of the enthusiastic amateur and a small number of professionals who undertake contract recording work required as a condition of planning permission. The consequence is that there are a limited number of people undertaking the recording of buildings, but very few who are thinking their development and interpretation.

There remain some very substantial problems about how we should go about writing building history. One approach is to treat the study of buildings as an adjunct to the central task of social history. According to that
view, buildings are there to provide a little colour and fill in the gaps in the written record. The task of the buildings expert is to provide a date and, ideally, to link the surviving structures with the owner or builder. This was the approach adopted by Colin Platt in an earlier book published by Yale. Buildings were objects to be set in the context of the social and economic history of the middle ages, and provided another way of telling a familiar story. An alternative approach has been to use buildings as a guide to the history of technology. A version of building history can be written which describes it in terms of the developments in carpentry, such as the types of joints used and the means of ensuring the rigidity of the roof. Viewed in this way, buildings were simply functional structures constructed to perform various domestic, agricultural or commercial roles. But only a few moments of reflection show that this approach provides a very partial perspective. It hardly explains the medieval enthusiasm for jetting (the projection of the first or upper floors out beyond the width of the ground or lower floors). It may have gained a few extra square feet of space on the jettied floors and space may have been at a premium in towns, but why was it also employed in rural buildings?

Building history has tended to avoid some very significant problems which need to be addressed before we can begin to provide a persuasive account of the development of houses. There are two in particular which seem to be particularly urgent and which are to some degree interrelated. The first is the question of the nature of the evidence. Put briefly, the issue is whether the buildings which survive are representative of all those which were once constructed. Or are they a very skewed sample which have survived because, over the centuries, people have thought it worthwhile investing time and money in the continuing repairs which every house-owner knows are necessary to maintain the property? We might guess that as we go further back in time the sample of standing houses is less and less typical of the total once built. The earliest surviving timber building in England by almost a century is the church at Greenstead in Essex. It was constructed in the late eleventh century of tree trunks split in half up their length and placed one next to the other. It was vastly extravagant in its use of timber and was recognized as unusual from the early days of the study of buildings. It is now apparent from excavation that few other buildings were built in the same way. The earliest group of timber houses constructed at the end of the twelfth century seems to be no more typical. They are all rather elaborate aisled halls built at a time when most buildings were not constructed on that scale.

It seems that we can assume that if there are only a few examples surviving, they are unlikely to be representative of the total number once constructed. Various processes will have operated to select the survivors and these will create an inbuilt bias in the sample. So how many buildings are enough to provide a sufficient sample? The question is a statistical one, but one simple way of answering it is to look at the character of churches surviving from before the Norman Conquest. Taylor and Taylor list about 420 churches with a substantial proportion of surviving masonry, and Morris has estimated that there were between six and seven thousand parishes at AD 1100. The number surviving, therefore, represents a significant proportion of the total, but it is not only that which encourages us to think that the sample should be fairly representative. The sample includes an immense variety of church buildings, from the most humble to some elaborate structures, such as the tower at Earls Barton with its complex decoration. There is a problem of the complete destruction of Anglo-Saxon cathedrals. Bishops had the money and the incentive to undertake re-building programmes, often many times, after the Conquest. The reasons that other lesser Anglo-Saxon churches were destroyed were similar – money, means and motivation. The more a parish prospered and the population grew, the more likely it was to sweep away the old fabric and construct something new in its place. Some of the clearest examples of this are in the West Country where the wealth generated by cloth manufacture in the fifteenth century allowed the total reconstruction of parish churches.

We can apply the same type of arguments to secular buildings, although our knowledge is much less adequate. We do not know the total number of buildings constructed in any town, let alone throughout England, although it would be instructive for an estimate to be attempted. Neither do we know the total number of surviving late-medieval buildings, since some areas of England remain poorly surveyed. What is clear, however, is that there were distinct regional differences, which make it very difficult to generalize. The smaller buildings in Norwich in the late middle ages were constructed from cob (or mud) walling, but
this fell out of favour in the mid sixteenth century. As a result, cob buildings were removed and our knowledge of these buildings is now entirely dependent on those discovered from excavation. (3) Conversely, we have an unusually large number of surviving twelfth-century stone buildings from Lincoln. The reason is that the city was unusually prosperous in this period and had a degree of wealth which was rarely equated in later centuries. The larger buildings constructed at this time were preserved as subsequent owners could not usually hope to afford houses of an equivalent standard. We should be cautious about pushing our comparison of churches and houses too far. There were significant differences. The naves of the first were the product of communal decision and investment; houses were largely built or rebuilt by individuals. Churches had an essential consistency of use, notwithstanding changes in the liturgy; the organisation of domestic space within houses has been altered radically on a number of occasions since the late medieval period, requiring considerable alteration in rooms and their use.

This touches upon the second significant problem in the study of building history which needs to be faced, that of agency. Who made the decisions about the form, character and methods of construction to be used in a building? This is not simply a question about whether it was the lord on behalf of his villeins or his free tenants who commissioned a building, although that may be relevant. It is a matter of how far the form of a building was dictated by the builder or by the person for whom the building was constructed. Surviving medieval building contracts, most of which were brought together by Salzman, are not terribly informative about this matter. (4) They indicate the size of buildings and payment, but rarely, except in the largest of houses, do they dictate its form or other matters. The reference in a contract of 1436 to the construction of a house in Winchester according to a ‘tracing … on a parchment skin’ is exceptional, as Quiney notes, and the earliest surviving drawing of a building elevation is dated to the sixteenth century. This does not preclude the possibility that detailed decisions were made by the client in consultation with the carpenter or master mason, but there are reasons for doubting that was the case. One of the curious features of English vernacular architecture is a sharply defined boundary running north-south through England. It marks the eastern limit of the distribution of cruck buildings. These were constructed with single timbers which ran from near ground level up into the rafters, or even to the apex of the roof. A lease of 1373 requiring the construction of eight houses at Pleasley in Derbyshire, near the cruck boundary, significantly leaves the question of whether the construction was to be post or cruck open. (5) It seems to indicate that, even in such locations, structural matters were left to the carpenter.

Many years ago Smith sketched the outline of ‘schools of carpentry’ in the north, west and south-east of England. (6) We might re-interpret these schools in terms of regional building traditions which are now well recognized in vernacular architecture. These traditions are reflected not only in more significant and highly visible matters of construction, such as the use of close studding (a conspicuous use of vertical timbers, often only on the façade, to support the daub-and-wattle infill of the walls), but also less apparent matters relating to the construction, including the employment of the interrupted sill. The latter is a structural matter which would barely concern the client, but is likely to reflect the usual practice of the carpenter. We may wonder if numerous other matters were not determined by the carpenter too.

It follows that because buildings historians have not considered agency, they also have not considered the potential agents in the building process. Master masons have received attention, but carpenters have been very largely ignored. In truth, it is difficult to identify the individuals responsible for surviving buildings, but as Swanson has shown in York, it is not impossible. (7) She has recovered a considerable amount of evidence for the social standing and wealth of carpenters, but her work has been almost entirely ignored by those interested in buildings. It is surely time that we thought about the people behind the buildings and did not treat the buildings just as artefacts. The aim of the study of buildings must be to seek common ground with their fellow archaeologists and historians to construct a fuller view of the past.

The present book is a step along that road, although as I have indicated, there are a good few miles more before we might hope to approach the object. Perhaps one of the signs of the difficulties of integration is that historians and students of buildings do not yet share a common view of the past. Historians will be discouraged to see that the account of urban development which forms the first seven chapters of this book does not reflect recent scholarship. It seems to have missed the work by Richard Britnell and Christopher
Dyer on commercialisation and the important essays in the first volume of the Cambridge Urban History.\(^8\)

But after this shaky start, the study moves on to firmer ground with an examination of the building materials. The account of development of timber construction is particularly lucid; in so many other accounts the subject has been made impenetrable by the use of architectural terminology. Here, any necessary terms are explained and the development of buildings styles made clear through well-judged illustrations. The last eight chapters examine specific features of buildings, such as undercrofts and terraces, different types of buildings, including the houses of nobility and gentry, and the different nature of buildings in Scotland. There is much familiar material, and anyone who has followed the development of medieval building history over the last few decades will find their favourite examples here. The story is well presented, even if it is not novel, and by drawing all the evidence together Anthony Quiney has presented for the first time a continuous narrative of urban building assembled from numerous sources. The chapter on terrace houses goes beyond this and presents an entirely new account of the construction of rows of identical buildings. Ecclesiastical bodies played a prominent role in this new type of building, which Quiney attributes to the fact that they could take land from the edge of churchyards for the sites of the rows. This is true, but the entrepreneurial ability of ecclesiastical foundations and the access to capital necessary for these large-scale works were quite as important. The terrace of identical houses was a remarkable innovation of early-fourteenth-century England, which was taken up to solve the problems of urban housing in later centuries and also adopted in continental Europe.

The critical test for building history will be when it no longer just provides the illustrations to historical studies, but begins to be recognised as a type of evidence which deserves to stand besides documentary sources. It is not a criticism of the present work, but rather a reflection on the development of the subject, to realise that this is still an aspiration. Through the insightful examination of terrace housing, Quiney has shown the way in which the study might develop. We still need to set the rise of this building type into the context of the economic development of towns, and consider the lives of people within the cramped conditions the terrace houses provided. At that point building history will begin to deserve the attention of all historians.

**Notes**


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