

THE ARCHITECTECTURAL TOPOGRAPHY OF SOUTH-EAST ENGLAND

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Of all our ancient monuments, buildings are the most articulate and also, regrettably, the most vulnerable. In this age of rapid development it is the buildings that give rise to most concern. Surely we should examine our heritage more closely, so that in accepting the inevitable losses we can at least be discriminating in the matter of what is retained.

The regionalised pattern of our architecture is well known and obvious to any traveller. The churches of East Anglia, the spectacular timber-framed mansions of Cheshire and south Lancashire, and the humble cruck cottages of the Welsh



Fig. 1. Downland village architecture; Bramber, Sussex. The house at extreme left is a single-aisled building of *circa* 1400. Its neighbour also is fifteenth century

Marches are among the better-known manifestations of a varied and complex whole. In certain regions political, economic, and social history could all be inferred from existing buildings even if no documentary evidence had survived.

Such a region is south-east England, comprising the counties of Kent, Sussex and Surrey, a roughly ovoid area of sandstones and clays enclosed by the Chalk of the North and South Downs. Its rock outcrops, comprising the Wealden Series, the Lower Greensand, Gault and Upper Greensand, yield a varied selection of building materials of pleasing texture and durable quality. There is an infinite supply of good brickmaking clay, flint and sandstone, and oak timber in abundance. All have been exploited, at least since Saxon times. Modern industrialisation has made all these materials redundant and bricks now used in the Weald are frequently mass-produced in Bedfordshire. Nevertheless, the Chalk is being used here and there for lime and in the manufacture of portland cement, and the extensive deposits of sea beach and river gravel supply the local demand for concrete aggregates. The Lower Greensand yields mortar sands of excellent quality and a diminished brick and tile industry caters for the occasional high-class building project.



Fig. 2. Wealden town architecture; High Street, East Grinstead, Sussex. The house on the right dates from the early fourteenth century

The ancient picture of a thickly forested Weald enclosed by a populous and well-cultivated Downland has often been attacked, but evidence suggests that it is a reasonably acceptable generalisation and, upon the whole, a fairly true statement of conditions up to (at least) the Norman Conquest. The Weald, viewed from any Downland vantage point appears still to be what it undoubtedly once was—a great forest.

At the mid-eleventh century many (probably most) of the more important Downland manors had sizeable outliers in the Weald, and this has complicated interpretation of the Domesday record, especially in the matter of woodland and pannage, and to some extent in regard to the distribution of population. However, it seems reasonable to assume that most of the recorded woodland lay in the Weald and for some allowance to be made for herdsmen and woodcutters who might be in temporary or even permanent residence there. Beyond that it seems unlikely that tenants holding by other service would be domiciled in the Weald unless cultivation had advanced much further than the evidence suggests. Those who prefer the idea of early settlement of the Weald sometimes draw support from the place names, almost exclusively of Saxon origin, but if generated as late, say, as *circa* 1200 they are hardly likely to be otherwise.

At some uncertain time before the Norman Conquest a start had been made upon colonisation of the Weald. Domesday records altogether about ninety estates which were clearly fully fledged and independent manors, but less than half of these were located in the inner Weald. The remainder lay in well-developed areas to the north of Hastings and adjacent to Romney Marsh. The process of colonisation of the inner Weald was clearly accelerated during the twelfth century both by the assarting of new land and by sub-infeudation. Sub-infeudation in such cases really meant no more than the economic separation from the parent manor of lands already geographically detached. It may be that the process was encouraged (if not actually initiated) by Norman magnates soon after the Conquest; there would presumably have been no shortage of dispossessed native landholders ready to develop the land.

It seems clear that by the end of the thirteenth century there had arisen a great number of Wealden manors the feudal origins of which had been forgotten, and the pattern of settlement



Fig. 3. Wealden timber-framed buildings at Chiddingstone, Kent



Fig. 4. "Wealden" house at Headcorn, Kent, fifteenth century. House of lesser yeoman class

for the next five hundred years had been established. The economic structure of these manors was completely different from that of their Downland parents. The latter retained their feudal character up to modern times and the typically nucleated group is still to be recognised in many Downland villages today.

The Wealden manor seems to have consisted of a number of isolated farmsteads. The nucleated feudal group is not to be found. Consequently, there is generally no evidence of strip cultivation in the Weald and very little evidence of tenancy by service. There grew up as a result, a prosperous peasantry quickly rising to yeoman status. As for the Weald of Kent, it has been held that villeinage was unknown there and, if so, the same remarks may be applied to the Downland areas of that county.¹ The houses erected by these affluent farmers and by the traders in the towns who served them, remain by the hundred in all three counties—a great wealth of minor domestic architecture, mostly timber framed, and the region's most striking geographical feature. They seem to insist that, whatever was happening elsewhere in England, the South-east enjoyed except-



Fig. 5. Maypole Farmhouse. High Hurstwood, Sussex, fifteenth century.
Farmhouse of lesser yeoman class

ional prosperity right through the later Middle Ages. They survive in spite of the varying laws of inheritance, gavelkind in Kent, either Borough English or primogeniture in Sussex. They survive also in spite of social misfortunes such as periods of warfare and the plague years of the fourteenth century. The latter is now apt to be regarded in any case as only a short-term disaster, economically beneficial in the long term. The vast number of timber-framed farmhouses erected somewhere between about 1370 and 1500 seem to demand some such conclusion as an explanation of their presence. They are of high quality by any standards and frequently have mouldings and other architectural features which suggest a date towards the close of the fourteenth century.



Fig. 6. Doorway (eleventh century?) at Slaugham, Sussex

There may well be no surviving houses from the middle years of pestilence. We cannot tell, because not only was this a time of changing architectural style, but few observers would care to date vernacular buildings so precisely. Upon the other hand there are a number of small houses which, on the basis of stylistic criteria, quite clearly belong to the first half of the fourteenth century. The change from Decorated Gothic to Perpendicular is based just as firmly on differences in moulding profiles as it is upon tracery and the like. There is no possibility of confusing the large, complex, bowtells-with-fillets of the Decorated with the simple large cavetto and concomitant small rolls which followed them. These mouldings are well represented in south-eastern woodwork, cut with the accuracy of good masonry.

The occurrence, here and there, of the scroll moulding in association with a large cavetto with battlements ought to represent a transitional phase, lying nearer to the middle of the century than to the end. Sussex and Surrey are the wood-moulding counties. The mouldings are less common in Kent and unrivalled elsewhere except, possibly, in Herefordshire or Essex.

The uninitiated visitor of today may well see little of this richness. Admittedly the timber framing of East Kent is obtrusive, but his impression of the Weald may well be of brick, tile and weatherboarding of no great antiquity. The lavish use of claddings has obscured the early framing in so many buildings that the region now appears to have at least three architectural sub-regions: timber framing in east Kent, weatherboarding in east Sussex and tile hanging in the rest of Sussex and in Surrey. This explains why the timber framing of Kent has received more attention than that of Sussex and Surrey, an error which is gradually being corrected.

So the pattern of south-eastern architecture demonstrates well its historical causes. The picture of early Downland settlement enclosing a largely undeveloped Weald is reinforced. The rich pre-history of the Downland contrasts sharply with the sparse distribution of sites in the Weald. Roman occupation and Anglo Saxon colonisation did not materially affect this, in spite of the extensive exploitation by the former of the Wealden iron ore. The great slag-heaps which resulted from this enterprise have been well recorded and are now, in most cases, cleared

away and put to various uses. Even so many small Romano-British bloomery sites can still be found along the stream-beds, together with traces of an earlier nomadic industry.

The nation's Roman remains are on the whole modest, and particularly so in the south-east, although the great Saxon Shore forts of Pevensey and Richborough, in their way are as impressive as anything in Europe. Notable sites such as Bignor, Fishbourne and Lullingstone, give some idea of what has been lost.

Saxon and Saxo-Norman churches are numerous in Sussex and, as might be expected, are confined to the Downland areas, with the solitary exception of the pre-Conquest church of Worth. The origins of which seem to defy even conjecture since it lies in the very heart of the old forest region.

Accepting the idea of Wealden colonisation in the late eleventh century and throughout the twelfth we may expect, and do indeed find, late Norman work in many Wealden churches. Following the same line of thought it is not surprising that such remains as there are of Norman domestic architecture are confined, like the pre-Conquest churches to the Downs. This phase is represented in the Weald by a sprinkling of motte-and-bailey sites and, on the Weald Clay, a large number of medieval moats, some still enclosing buildings. The coastal and Downland areas are noted for their rich Norman Churches, many built under Continental monastic patronage. The work at Steyning, Shoreham (Sussex), Patricbourne, and Barfreton is some of the best parish church architecture of its kind in England. On the other hand the small Downland churches and also those of the Weald, though frequently of very ancient foundation, are a jumble of all known styles and each affords an exercise in chronological interpretation.

The domestic architecture of the thirteenth century is still generally confined to the Downs. A few rare survivals of timber-framed houses from this period survive at Chiddingfold and Limpsfield in Surrey² and at Horsham³ and Sullington in Sussex. Recent investigations into the typology of early carpentry have made it possible to recognise their early date along with that of a number of other English buildings, and established a relationship between thirteenth-century woodwork in this country and that of a somewhat earlier period in France.⁴

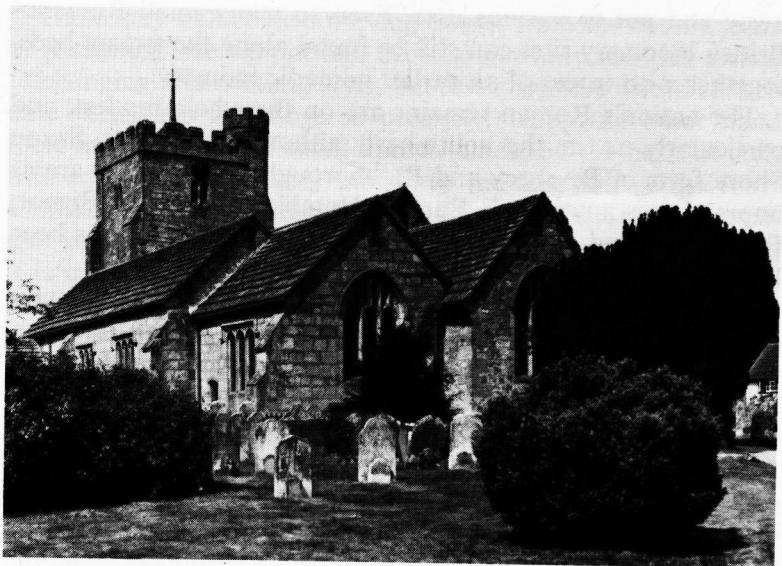


Fig. 7. Fifteenth century church at Cowfold, Sussex. There is some thirteenth-century work not visible in the photograph



Fig. 8. Camouflage. Fifteenth century hall with Jacobean wing, all concealed by later claddings. Spicer's, Balcombe, Sussex

Notably absent from south-east England is the cruck-built cottage, a phenomenon first noted by C. F. Innocent in 1912. However, crucks do appear as far east as the Farnham area and are quite numerous farther west. Their pattern of distribution poses a problem much discussed but still unsolved. There are, however, numerous examples of a hybridised form of cruck building in which large bent trees are wrought as "knee-pieces" performing something of the function of crucks. They are a development of the aisled hall and were clearly intended to permit removal of its arcade posts by forming a single-span truss extending over both hall and aisles. They have a fairly wide distribution extending through the south-east to the Midlands and along the Welsh Marches.⁵ They were evidently a thirteenth-century innovation; but most examples, where datable by other features, belong fairly firmly to the fourteenth century. They also quite clearly offer implications of status, belonging to the small manor house and parsonage class, but in at least one case a carpenter, clearly affluent, used them in a house built for his own occupation.

Throughout the area there is also a noticeable dearth of high-quality fourteenth-century stone architecture. Although the majority of village churches contain some work of this period it is usually plain and simple. The ball-flower, that familiar emblem of the Decorated style, is extremely rare, and expressions of the more adventurous forms of window tracery are not common. The church at Winchelsea, Sussex, incomplete though it is, is the most impressive example of full-blown Decorated in the region. Along the coastal portions of Kent and Sussex occasional intrusions of the French Flamboyant may be noted, generally expressed in tracery, but there is a good fragment of screenwork to be seen in the little village church at Playden near Rye.

The fifteenth century must have been (to judge from surviving buildings) a time of considerable prosperity. Apart from the vast number of excellent small houses built during this period, village churches received their share of the available wealth, a favoured enterprise being the reconstruction of west towers. These, with their embattled parapets, flat roofs, and stair turrets look a little foreign by comparison with typical earlier survivals capped as they are by the traditional shingled broach



Fig. 9. French influence near coast. Screen at Playden Church, Sussex

spire. There are excellent complete churches of this period at Lingfield, Surrey; Arundel, Sussex; and Cranbrook, Kent; but the small Perpendicular church at Cowfold in Sussex, built in the local Wealden sandstone, is one of the most pleasing in the whole of the south-east.

In considering the sixteenth century one is immediately conscious of a disturbing gap, up to say, 1560 to which very few buildings may confidently be dated. The paucity of new church architecture at this time is understandable but no explanation for the shortage of domestic comes readily to mind, unless, as has been suggested, many of the houses now placed in the fifteenth century belong more properly to the first half of the sixteenth. If we really are guilty of such imprecision a means of correction would be difficult to find, but might ultimately lie in a detailed study of Perpendicular mouldings as found in the domestic buildings, coupled with a study of changes in the typography of roof carpentry.

Towards the close of the century there begins a fashion of recording the year of construction by means of stone tablets and the like. Also documentary evidence becomes more plentiful and the problems associated with dating are somewhat

lessened. Until about 1630 was a period of phenomenal building activity, virtually confined to domestic building but nationwide in extent. In the south-east the rapid development of the large estate, hitherto rather scarce, is accompanied by the construction of pleasant stone and brick houses of commensurate size. The modernisation and improvement of small houses and the building of new gave the region a patina which still survives and may be described as "Jacobethan". From then on the gradual concealment of the local timber framing by tiles and weatherboards, and the replacement of the local thatch by tiles or Horsham stone brought about the deceptive picture previously referred to.

At this time, in common with the rest of England, regional styles of vernacular architecture disappeared. The outstanding



Fig. 10. Gullege. E. Grinstead. Post-medieval Standardisation. The Cotswold-type façade covers a sixteenth-century jettied house

success of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century builders in applying Classic principles to the small house brought about a standardisation of design which had always been general in church architecture. The small south-eastern house of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is distinguished only by texture from its counterpart elsewhere. Timber framing apparently ceased quite early in the eighteenth century, at least as regards the tradition of "post and truss" or "boxframe" construction which had developed in the thirteenth century. It was replaced by rough studding concealed by weatherboards and a treatment recognisably Georgian—double-hung sash windows, dentilled eaves, and Classic doorcases.

Thus, with the construction of a few churches in the late Renaissance manner, as at Tunbridge Wells (King Charles the Martyr), at Mereworth and a pleasant flint-built church at Glynde in Sussex, the story of indigenous south-eastern architecture ends.

Notes and references

- ¹ See discussion by M. T. Pearman, *Archaeologia Cantiana*, XII. 283–8.
- ² Old Court Cottage, Limpsfield. See *Surrey A.C.*, LXIII, 130–7.
- ³ Chennels Brook Farm, Horsham. See *Sussex A.C.* CI. 40–7.
- ⁴ C. A. Hewitt, *Trans. of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 16 new series, 90–108.
- ⁵ See N. W. Alcock and M. W. Barley, *Antiquaries Journal*, LII, 132.