

What do you consider to be the most interesting and useful approaches to the analysis and interpretation of medieval peasant houses in England (c.1200-1640)?

Phases of building reflect approaches to divisions of social strata, existence in the landscape, family dynamics and periods of economic stability on wider societal levels. Whilst these variables often affected people as overarching changes, in terms of access to land ownership for example, smaller and more frequent change occurred in everyday life shaped by more intangible aspects of everyday life. The relationship between the home and its inhabitants is often viewed in terms of a rigid structure and interpretation that places the house as the determinant in how people functioned, yet the home remains flexible in how space is used creatively, and special analysis of medieval peasant houses of this period may enlighten an interpretation more fluid. Differentiating between house and home immediately creates opportunities to include elements of taste and experimentation in the discussion, alongside a comparison with wider changes in the societal fabric at the time. The construction method of such structures also allows for the human hand and its preferences to be seen in the buildings themselves.

Evidence that enables a view of the everyday lives of peasants of the period exists as either artefact or artistry, with both open to interpretation and therefore subjectivity (Alcock, 2003, 449). Artistic renderings can be produced outside of the confines of truth, after all its primary purpose is not to aid research, and their best use is in affirming certain ideas generated from interpretations created from artefact. The uncertainty in artistic evidence opposes the reliability of artefact. Artefact seen in timber construction methods enabled a step from cob and earth built structures to buildings of greater permanence, and followed building plans that are seen in many such buildings. The internal layout of the later medieval period was enabled by the bays created by the timber framed design. Tripartite in plan with a central hall in the centre of divided ends, this plan remained in type until the period of the Great Rebuilding. Apart from minute changes in approaches to construction, the endurance of a singular type form for such a period must be considered further (Gardiner, 2000, 159/160).

The permanence of the cruck or post-and-truss framed house structure could be attributable to the means in which carpentry was taught. The language used to describe components and how they are formed is both part of the wider national language and the specific tongue used by carpenters themselves (Sayers, 2010). The information required to gain tacit understanding is passed from generation to generation, with the same joints used in the same places for hundreds of years. If techniques such as the dovetailed-lap joint have been used to connect the tie beam for many years prior to the construction of a new building, there would be little incentive to experiment with the method. The joint houses beams running in four directions therefore the complexity of the joint would be prohibitive to ingenuity (Harris,1989). With a structure so simple there would be little intrigue in finding a new means of building, and this can be seen in the value of cruck blades which are found as reused materials in many cases (Meeson,2012,70). The only major recorded change is in response to the external environment, with a plinth or wall constructed under the vertical posts to prevent rot. The success of the frame design when tied to the use of a tripartite internal layout was so theoretically sensible and easy to work within, the conditions for living in the interior followed a pattern dictated by the space.

The bay system and the use of the hall is considered central to the demarcation and importance of the spaces at either end. The division created by a cross entrance placed one or more commonly two rooms away from the hall, and it is widely accepted that such rooms were for services and the storage of provisions with the entrance passage preventing often dirty jobs from entering the space of the hall. At the other end of the hall is a room referred to as the 'soler' or 'solar', which was the more private space of the home owner. This creates a hierarchy of the internal layout separating life from work. In the case of two storey dwellings, the ends of the house maintained the same connotations with chambers for services and privacy above the respective ground floor rooms split by a double height hall. (Tankard,2014, 164). The hall itself is considered hierarchal with the table and settings at the solar end, occasionally beneath a dais canopy in a two-storeyed structure. Furniture can be used for insight into the movements of inhabitants, for the kitchen and table would be linked through eating and the services would be linked to the proximity to water for instance. Whether these uses and actions would have regularly crossed paths is unlikely and is seemingly ignored in access analysis diagrams (Johnson,

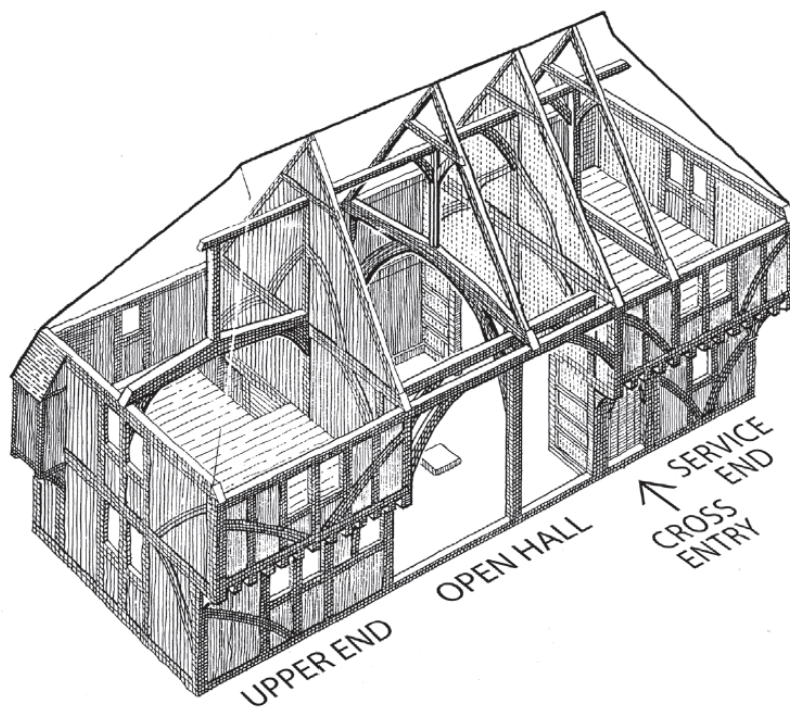
2013, 383). The location of furniture is considered to enlighten an internal social hierarchy that reflected the wider social setting. The farming peasant was at the will of the Lord until the Black Death of 1348, without land ownership or rights to enable social mobility, and such a clear hierarchy is thought to be reflected in the division between peasant home owner and those who worked for them. Such application of hierarchy ignores the possibility of the social setting itself dictating the uses of space. Accounts of eavesdropping and breaches of privacy suggest that the rites of the house existed outside of the four walls, and such cases allowed for power and leverage to be gained by those further down the 'order' (Dyer, 2013, 14).

After the Black Death, those who had survived had acquired greater autonomy. Lords had previously been *the* land owners, but the diminished work force and gentry allowed for farming peasants to become part of the Yeomanry which allowed for the building of structures on their newly acquired land to accommodate more freedom. Retirement agreements and probate inventories show that it was rare for three generations to be under the same roof and that agreements were arranged surrounding the transition of objects, money and provisions (Alcock,p449). The ability to exercise agency born from the instantaneous societal change would have been reflected in building as well as in everyday practice. The change from the nuclear family to a satellite arrangement would surely indicate a greater flexibility to how interior space was used with two generations under the same roof. The need for social hierarchy dissipates with the removal of working hands or servants from the nuclear house, and the ability to house those who might help with services on one's own land enabled greater affluence. (appendix)

An exemplary study of the tripartite layout can be found at the Weald and Downland Museum. Bayleaf, originally located in Chiddingstone, Kent, shows the original plan and developments that occurred in buildings pre-dating 1570. Dendrochronology of the structure reveals the earliest timbers to have been felled between 1405 and 1430, with a development tree-ring dated to 1505-1510 (Tankard,163). A 'Wealden' house with a jettied first floor and recessed central bay on the front elevation, the archetypal structure is likely to have been inhabited by an owner of middling to high wealth, for the chamber and service ends are two-storey, and the size of the building footprint is large. The building as seen in fig.1, is divided into six rooms with two chambers at the solar end and three rooms at the services end, following a hierarchy that can be justified through an analysis of the

timber frame (Johnson, 2010, 67). The milling process of timber produced a fair face, one that would have produced a right angle for ease of measurement, which was framed to face the solar end of the house. Seen in a multitude of buildings (Harris, 1989) this deliberate action aids the theory that this end of the house was considered more significant. The development of this end in favour of increased space suggests the same. The smoke blackened hall shows that the common associated uses of the space hold true, with a small open hearth placed in the centre of the space accommodating cooking and food processing and a long table to the solar end for sitting and eating.

The interior of has been dressed in conformity with the accepted idea of the service end being less significant with period correct reconstructions of internal fittings and furniture placed in the appropriate positions. The dressing of chambers, hall and services seems to be considered to provide further evidence that this is *the* way that its inhabitants lived. Such an approach at Bayleaf has two flaws, both linked to affluence. Firstly, the likely affluence of the inhabitants is bound to inform the means in which they lived. Access analysis of in building forms such as manor houses, castles, and stately homes provides information regarding how the seigneurial classes lived, and to project this onto the peasant dwelling would be deemed inappropriate (Fairclough). Where the lines are drawn regarding affluence is a perennial grey area but the distinction between a socially mobile landowning yeoman and a struggling husbandman would likely show differing lifestyles. Secondly, the association between Bayleaf and affluence blurs the past distinction further. The house shows few, if any, signs regarding material changes associated with financial freedom. The rebuild to the solar end would suggest there was money to spend at a point, but the house shows no signs of the integration of glass panes in the window frames, opening the hall to drafts and cold when the shutters were left open. The height and volume of the hall is impressive, fitting with the idea of the hall as a hosting space seen more often than other rooms by potential guests, but few fittings can be seen with a lack of marks from free standing furniture. (Johnson, 2010, 68). Perhaps the owner was spending on features associated with aspirations of greater wealth, which might align with analysis of Wealden houses that specifies their origins in the urban environment (Pearson, 2012, 120). In any scenario, the owner's financial standing would differentiate their daily lives from another household of different income.



Above: (1) A cutaway drawing of the structure of Bayleaf. c/o Richard Harris.

Below: (2) The dressed interior of Bayleaf, as is shown for visitor display at the Weald and Downland Museum



Those who failed to increase their stock in the ilk of a rise from peasant to yeoman will have been working in a multitude of different ways, most importantly using space creatively. The strength of argument for set locations for furniture and everyday tasks assumes that there were few or no changes in habit in response to environmental and societal factors. An extreme example is the byre-house, more often seen in stone buildings with the same floor plan. The services and entrance passage remain to split the hall from the workspaces, but the solar/parlour is divided from the hall for the storage of cattle. The need to maintain animals in the same building as is inhabited may suggest a level of poverty where the cost of an outbuilding is too great, but it is as feasible that the ingenious use of the cattle as a heat source is a reason for conceding the lack of living space. It must be noted that few examples of a byre-house transitioning into a dwelling are rare, suggesting that these living conditions were maintained by those in relative poverty. (Alcock,459/460) (Gardiner,2000,163-167).

In a scenario in which the tripartite plan simply cannot allow for the common interpretations of function to exist, we are left with questions around how the two or three remaining spaces were used. Would all comforts be accommodated by the hall, with eating, sleeping and goods storage taking place in the same space, or might the rooms divided from the hall by the entrance passage drop any associated meanings and be viewed as more flexible spaces? Several clues can be deduced from a sample of yeoman and husbandmen, for workers and cottagers had so little, found in Diocese records taken for the benefit of taxation show the location of common objects and their location in the house. In built fittings and furnishings were excluded, but anything free standing or of value is often included in records (Dyer, 2013, 21). The records from the York Diocese between 1427 and 1507 show the potential variations in the location of various everyday actions through their common association. The hall is most commonly used for seating and eating, the chamber/parlour/solar used for sleeping and the storage of valuables, and the service room/s used for cooking and brewing. These actions seem predictable but nuances occur that change the associations we project onto spaces, derived from their familiarity to our current use of the same rooms. The storage of goods in the chamber also includes the light furnishings and linen used to dress the table, alongside weaponry and agricultural tools. Occasional uses include serving food and craft practice, but the value of these objects in both financial and functional ways creates a setting where the chamber is less like a bedroom and more like a safe; able to ensure the safety of anything inside. The hall can be reviewed in a similar fashion with alternate uses to sitting and eating including

cooking, food storage, brewing, goods storage, crafts practice and weapons storage. Between these cases variations in room use for the same purpose suggests that the interpretation of space was rather less rigid than the evaluation of Bayleaf for example, and rather more individualistic. The uses of the remaining service rooms would support this idea, with around half of inventories suggesting that cooking and food storage occurred in such rooms, leaving a question mark around the function of the remaining half. The presence of purpose built brew houses and 'celers' (*cellars*) might suggest that specific practices were removed from the house, however this seems a rarity, likely because of the cost of building. Might the rooms in unknown cases left as multipurpose spaces, spare bedrooms, or used for purposes that remain unknown?

We see buildings that have stood the test of time not in their perfect original form, but as amalgamations of changes, additions and subtractions that have occurred since their conception (Johnson,2010,65). The need to create space through these means can be seen through the period of the Great Rebuilding from approximately 1570 to 1640 creating an alternate analysis relevant for the centuries prior. In a time of economic stability enforced by stable rents and profits generated by the rising cost of agricultural goods, freeholders' in rural landscapes adapted buildings with the favour of prosperity (Hoskins,1953,50) (Gardiner,2014,24). The time frame for such alterations can be seen to stretch later in history than the conventional dates (Machin,1977,38/39), but a correlation between either theory shows an increase in building alteration from at the latest 1600 (Appendix). A wide trend for transforming the hall into from a double height space into a storeyed section and the conception of the hearth and chimney changed open space into increasingly segmented and private spaces. The area in which people were hosted was centred on access to direct heat, with the closed hearth often placed aligning with the entrance facing into the ground floor hall. The first-floor typology seems to have changed from a chamber at each end, to a three or four room layout with central chambers centred on access to the hearth and chimney stack. Access analysis shows the common maintenance of two separate ends, but the creation of space freed rooms from their past associations especially when combined with exterior extension such as lean-to's and outbuildings (Martin,2003,39-42). Cases in East Sussex show an end reversal within the tripartite layout changing the use of services and solar chamber, seemingly centred on access to the heat source (Martin, 2000) (Fig.3+4)

A distinct fluidity in the approach to housing that manifests itself through the entirely lineage of buildings archaeology is reflected in the change from tripartite open hall centred on the open hearth to a closed structure centred on the closed hearth. When combined with the presence of two-cell houses with two rooms on both storeys found in urban and sub-urban environments, there is a flexibility seen in the interaction between the layout of the house and the actions of its inhabitants that seems to be missing in the large timeframe of open hall houses previously identified (Howson,2014) (Pearson,2012,120). It seems unlikely that from a period of the widespread appropriation of the tripartite plan to its change around the time of the change that there was no creativity in the way that space was engaged with, almost as if there was a robotic acceptance to how space had to be used. The space is, to some extent, deterministic yet the space is also responded to and acted within. Buildings shape people and people shape buildings; this seems to be missing from discourse on life through the period specified.

Theoretical values towards action, space and ritual practice can apprise on human action, relevant as much as today as 500 years ago. Bourdieu sets thought and feeling within the context of practical activity; in space, responsive to any external stimulus, not isolated to the mind. Cultural models exist separately and prior to (*a priori*) the circumstance they are applied to, but the tacit understanding of practice and action is said to exist in the tools, equipment, hardware of practice (*habitus*). Intimate tacit understanding isn't taught or acquired via instruction, but inherited through a familiarity with actions and space over time (*hexis*). If considered in people from explicitly differing backgrounds the ways which people respond to stimulus is not because of varying interpretations through cultural modes, but because of the habits borne of a tacit knowledge of how to exist within space using the senses. Cognition as a social activity that is part of persons and the generation of stimulus of the world, devised by Jean Lave, would imply that a situation in which multiple people (*agents*) and the space they exist in continuously come into being in response to each other. (Inghold,2000,162).

Equating the interior lives of those inhabitants of rural medieval buildings to the above suggests that distinctions between cultural models are the relative unknowns when linked to building interiors. The circumstance they are applied to is certainly one of clear layout and development, but the familiarity with individual spaces would have allowed for distinct differences in one's tacit understanding of their own space

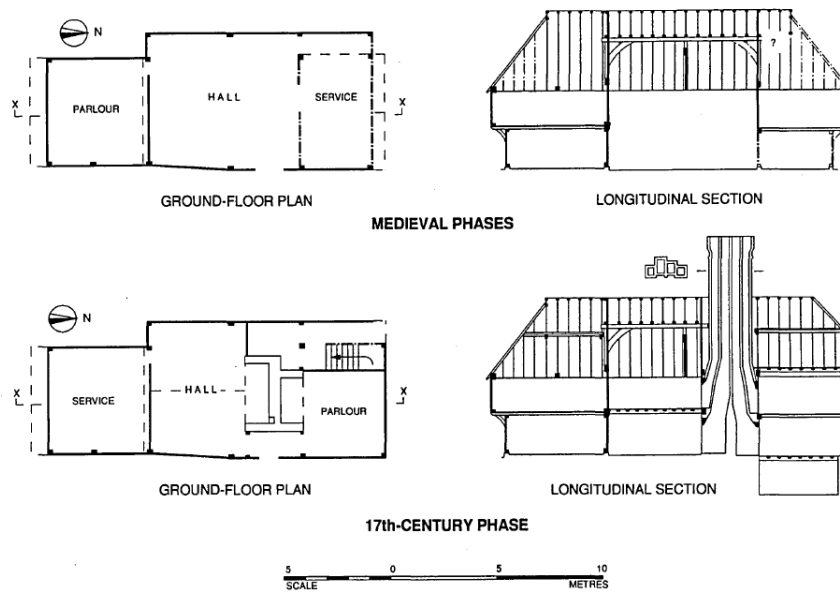


Figure 1
Dunsters Mill House, Ticehurst

Above: (3) The layout and elevation showing the archetypal change to enclosed spaces centred on the closed hearth. Note the end reversal of chamber and services.

Below: (4) A more complex change, accommodating a cellar and additional services housed in a rear extension.

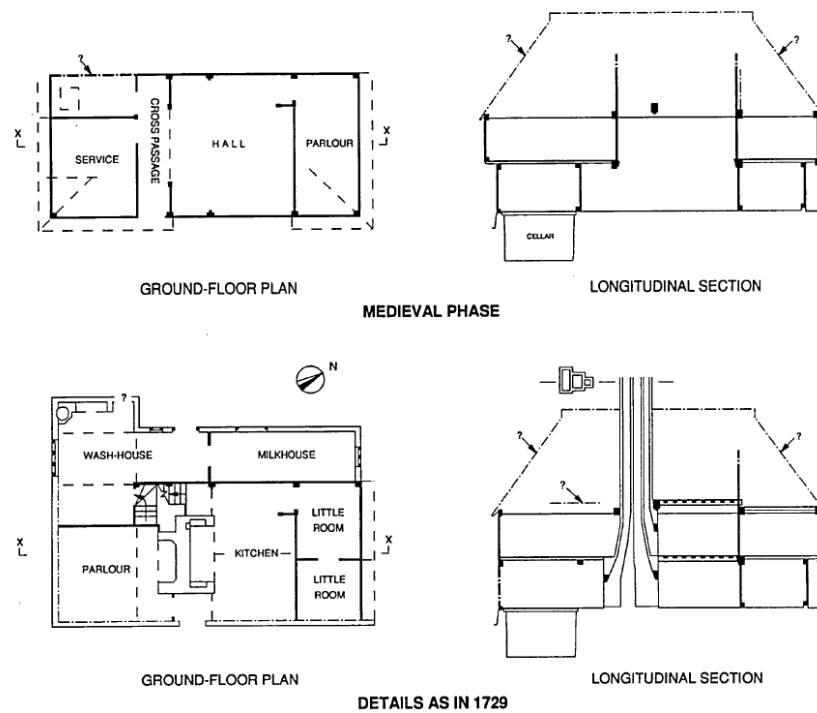


Figure 2
Float Farm House, Udimore

with its embodied meaning. Variations in cultural models may be between towns or between regions requiring a greater need for holistic evaluation. The idea of social responses to the space playing off one another is undetermined, and places greater weight on the development of lifestyle from interaction with people rather than place.

The analysis of space in medieval households seems to produce conclusions that show the inhabitants to be at the will of the structural layout, with lives compartmentalised into three distinct sections. The value of artefact and physical evidence in supporting this view from oft-repeated patterns in structural analysis, documentary study, and contextual social study does assimilate evidence in convincing terms. However, the certainty with which this evidence is seems to fall short of leaving space for flexible interpretations of space by those who lived through the period before the Great Rebuilding. Although autonomy was finite and restricted by economic conditions under the rule of the lord and manor, time spent outside societal responsibility would have been less restricted and this relative freedom would have allowed for a measure of creativity. Rather than maintain the notions that creates a determinist tripartite life, it would be better to view the actions inside the medieval house as products of trend: likely to occur but open and flexible to change.

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Figures

1 – Tankard, D. (2014) *Form and Function in the Late Medieval Rural House*

2 - Tankard, D. (2014) *Form and Function in the Late Medieval Rural House*

3 – Martin,D (2000) *End Reversal During the Conversion of Medieval Houses in Sussex*, *Vernacular Architecture*, 31:1, 26-31

4 - Martin,D (2000) *End Reversal During the Conversion of Medieval Houses in Sussex*, *Vernacular Architecture*, 31:1, 26-31

Appendix

1 - Meeson,R (2012) *STRUCTURAL TRENDS IN ENGLISH MEDIEVAL BUILDINGS: NEW INSIGHTS FROM DENDROCHRONOLOGY*, *Vernacular Architecture*, 43:1,58-75

2 - Dyer, C. (2013a). *Living in Peasant Houses in Late Medieval England*. *Vernacular Architecture*, 44, pp. 19-27.

3 - Gardiner, M. (2014) *AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LATE MEDIEVAL PEASANT HOUSE*, *Vernacular Architecture*, 45:1,16-28,

Appendix

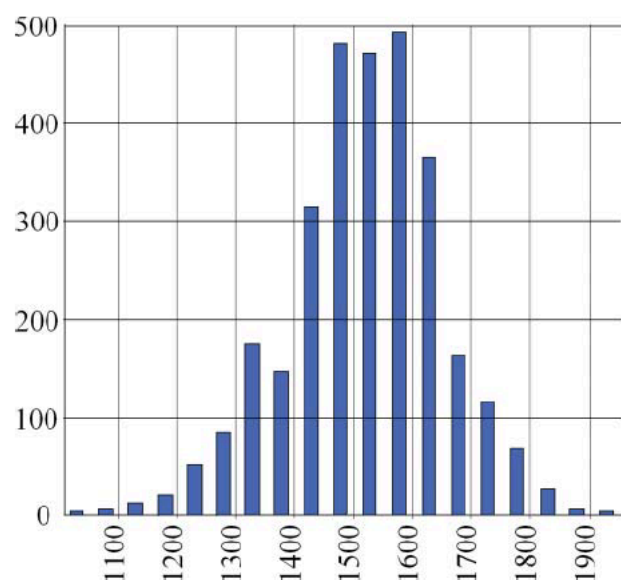


Figure 1. Histogram of English tree-ring dated buildings listed in Vernacular Architecture up to 2010

Table 1. Activities located in different rooms in York diocese inventories of the fifteenth century

	Hall	Chamber	Kitchen	Brewhouse	Celer	No Room Named
Sitting	15	0	1	0	0	8
Eating	12	0	0	0	0	3
Serving	8	2	3	0	0	10
Cooking	8	0	11	0	0	15
Storing food	2	0	2	0	0	1
Brewing	3	0	9	1	1	3
Crafts	3	1	1	0	0	10
Sleeping	0	17	0	0	0	12
Storing goods	6	15	1	0	1	12
Lighting	6	0	0	0	1	7
Table cloths/towels	0	8	0	0	1	3
Agric. tools	0	2	0	0	0	3
Weapons	2	3	0	0	0	3
Slaughtering	0	0	0	2	0	0

