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Peasant houses in Midland England

May 1, 2013 · 28 mins read

How the Black Death prompted a building boom

It used to be thought that only high-class houses had survived from the Medieval period. Radiocarbon and tree-ring dating has now revealed that thousands of ordinary Medieval homes are still standing in the English Midlands, many incorporated into des res village houses. Chris Catling reports on how some peasants lived very well in the Middle Ages.

Phoenix Cottage in Warwickshire, is a well-preserved cruck house of 1480-1482. Ceilings, upper storeys, and a chimney were added in the 17th century.

The term ‘peasant’ suggests poverty, ignorance, missing teeth, and poor personal hygiene: Baldrick stuff, all threadbare rags, hunched shoulders, and a life shared with pigs in a squalid hovel barely adequate to keep out the bitter winter wind. In fact, all that ‘peasant’ really means is that you live mainly off the produce of your own labour. Many a modern allotment-holder leads a semi-peasant lifestyle, and there are plenty of contemporary peasants all over southern and eastern Europe – not to mention those living in hippy communes in west Wales. For peasant, read ‘largely self-sufficient’.

Who are you calling a peasant?

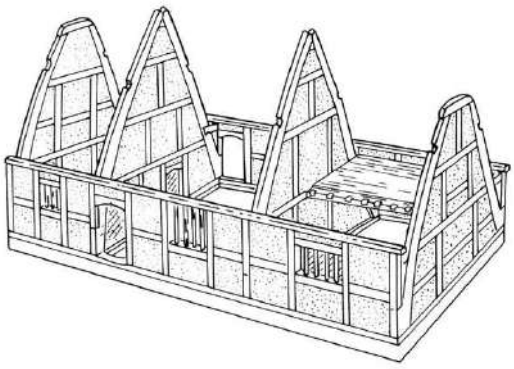
Chris Dyer, author of *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, points out that some historians are reluctant to use the term because they think it too imprecise (yet they happily use equally broad terms such as ‘merchant’ and ‘artisan’). Professor Dyer thinks that ‘peasant’ is a very useful word, and that nobody has yet devised an adequate substitute to denote people in the lower ranks of society, living in the countryside and gaining their main living from the resources available to them as a result of their own labours. Typically this is based on agricultural production on a piece of land held by customary tenure (common land) or copyhold tenure (in return for which the tenant had to render certain services to the lord of the manor).

Fifteen acres of arable land and pasture is just about enough to keep a family fed, and few peasant smallholdings exceeded 30 acres in extent up to the mid-14th century. One of the economic impacts of the Black Death and climate deterioration from the 1340s was to make more land available; population decline meant that those who survived were in demand as agricultural labourers, able to sell their services for hard cash, rather than land or kind. Peasant landholdings doubled in size in the period 1380 to 1540, enabling peasants to produce a surplus for sale in local markets. Many peasants were also able to supplement their income from pursuing such occupations as mining or fishing, or working as artisans or traders. Initially weak and vulnerable, surviving on a subsistence diet of very basic foods, peasants were increasingly able to afford better clothing, tools, utensils, and foodstuffs after the difficult decades of the mid-14th century.

The ‘Great Rebuilding’

In the same way, peasant housing underwent gradual improvement. Once it was believed that Medieval peasant houses were so miserable and insubstantial that no housing from this stratum of society could possibly have survived the 500 years or so that separate us from the Middle Ages. Built of poor-quality materials scavenged from the

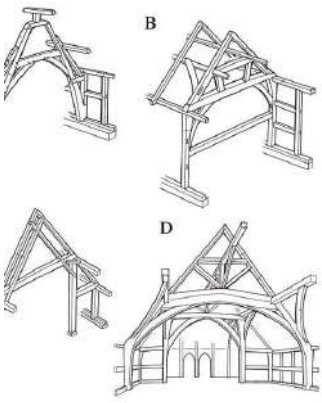
immediate locality 'fallen timber, mud, and furze' with animals and humans living in the same structure, they would have needed frequent replacement, and would have turned to dark earth within a few years of abandonment.



A typical Midlands cruck house, showing pairs of cruck blades rising from the sill beam at ground level to the apex of the roof in one sweep. The centre bay is an open hall, with service bay to the left and a two-storeyed chamber bay to the right.

The standard view was that no ordinary Medieval house could have lasted more than a generation, and this constant need to replace rotting structures was one reason why villages were not static, but moved about in the landscape until the so-called 'Great Rebuilding'. This began around 1570 and continued into the early 18th century, and marks the era when more solid houses were constructed with chimneys, staircases, glazed windows, and private chambers in place of an open hall.

The 'vernacular threshold'



four main types of Medieval er-framed house found in the llands: (A) a cruck truss; (B) a x-framed truss; (C) an aisled ss; (D) a base-cruck truss, in h the cruck blades rise to a tie m and do not form part of the roof.

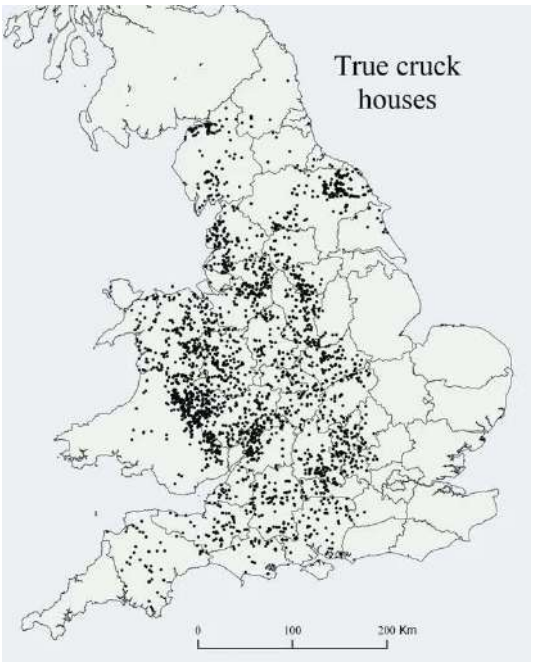
The homes of higher-income social groups were the first to be rebuilt. Vernacular homes lagged by a few decades. Another phrase in common use among architectural historians is the 'vernacular threshold', used to describe the date after which the houses of ordinary people began to be rebuilt in a sufficiently robust form to have survived to the present day. Until recently, that threshold was set somewhere in the later 17th century, partly in the belief that the more substantial timber buildings that had survived from the 16th century or earlier must be the houses of superior types with larger landholdings and higher incomes, such as prosperous farmers and yeomen.

This kind of circular argument, whereby if it survived it could not be a peasant house because peasant houses did not survive, has now been comprehensively undermined by a study initiated by the late Bob Laxton and continued by Nat Alcock, Robert Howard, Dan Miles, and Cliff Litton. Their Leverhulme-Trust-funded project set out to

investigate cruck houses, and to provide more accurate dates for this type of early building.

Crucks of the matter

Cruck buildings, referred to in Medieval documents by the Latin word *furcae* (fork) are built around pairs of timbers (cruck blades) that extend from the ground all the way to the apex of the roof in a single sweep, forming an arch-like truss. Typically these are houses of three bays, with a truss at each end and two internal trusses. The central bay forms an open hall, without upper floor or chimney, recognisable today by the fact that the surviving roof timbers are covered in soot and tar deposits from smoke rising from a central hearth on the floor below. One of the side bays was used as a service space, while the other, the only one with an upper floor, reached by a ladder, provided rooms for sleeping.



This map shows the location of all 3,086 known examples of cruck-built houses in England and Wales, showing a marked westerly distribution, and an unexplained absence of such structures in many of the easternmost counties of England.

Crucks are not the only structural form found in the Midlands. There are also aisled buildings, base crucks (in which the cruck blades only rise as far as a tie beam), and box-framed structures, but these are all minor components among the older timber buildings of the region. With 3,086 documented examples, crucks are by far the most common type to have survived. Plotted on a distribution map, cruck houses are mainly found in western Britain, and are completely absent from large parts of eastern Britain. This sharp boundary was recognised a long time ago, but has never been explained.

Centuries older than expected

For this study, some 120 houses were examined in great detail in the counties of Buckinghamshire, Leicestershire, Oxford, and Warwick, with a few also in Gloucester and Nottinghamshire. Of these, 83 were found to have primary timbers suitable for carbon dating and dendrochronology. The results, to everyone's surprise, showed that nearly all the cruck buildings sampled were built during the 300-year period from the 1260s to the 1550s: in other words, a long time before that 17th-century vernacular threshold.

But can we really claim that these buildings are vernacular, and do they justify the term 'peasant house'? The authors of the study answer this by turning the old argument on its head: in place of the doctrine that all early houses must be high status, they say that so many of these houses have survived that they cannot possibly all be of manorial status or the houses of the wealthiest members of the community. 'When

a village has 10 or even 20 such houses, it is a safe deduction that they were the homes of ordinary people including the whole hierarchy of rural society, from substantial and middling peasants down to a few smallholders', they conclude. In other words, these may not be the houses of the very poorest peasants, but they are of peasant status, nonetheless.

Unlike higher-status houses, with their chamfered and moulded beams and ornate roof posts and windbreaks, peasant houses tended to have little by way of superfluous decoration. Here is a rare exception in the form of a decorative boss: the hexagonal rosette (a motif often found in Medieval church graffiti or scratched on to chimney beams) might have had an apotropaic function, designed to ward off evil spirits.

How they were built

The absence of the roof decoration and timber ornamentation seen in so many higher-status houses, their small floor area (881 sq ft on average), and the modest upper chambers, with low eaves and little headroom, all support this basic premise, as does the efficient use of fast-grown and immature timber that makes cruck construction such an economical form of house building. Only the eight cruck blades are constructed from tall, mature trees of at least 24 inches in diameter.

Early crucks used an entire tree of the right size and shape for each blade, trimming off all but one of the main branches, and using the surplus timber for making windbraces and arch braces, the components of the frame that make it rigid and stop the house falling over. This was soon superseded by the more economical alternative of sawing such a tree in two, creating a symmetrical pair of blades that together form an arch. A further 19 tall, straight, medium-sized trees are needed for the tie beams, wall plates, purlins, and ridges, and a further 60 trees of about 4 to 6 inches in diameter are needed for studs, rafters and internal walls, screens, and floorboards.

In all, 111 trees were consumed to build one of the houses studied at Mapledurham: 75 of which came from immature trees of 6in diameter or less, grown in woodland that produced tall, straight trees, 30 of which came from medium-sized woodland trees, and six of which came from large branching trees. By comparison, 332 trees went into the building of a similarly sized box-framed house constructed in Suffolk in 1500. And if 111 trees sounds a large number, Oliver Rackham, the expert on ancient woodland use, estimates that the Mapledurham house would have used the growth of 1.25 acres of woodland, and the oldest trees would have been about 50 years in age, the smallest about 10.

Mill Farm, Mapledurham, Oxfordshire, during and after rethatching in 2004. This cruck-built three-bay house, dated to 1335, survives almost in its original state, except for the insertion of the chimney stack in the late 15th or early 16th century and new doors and windows in the 18th century.

Evidence for a smoke louvre was discovered when Mill Farm, Mapledurham, was re-thatched, in the form of empty mortice holes and fractured tenons. Smoke louvres, used to draw smoke up and out of the hall, are usually located directly above the open fire and thus help locate the position of the hearth.

Timber sources

Arguably, that is a modest amount of woodland resource, though Rackham also points out that some box frames were even more efficient: a smaller number of very large trees sawn into multiple components could reduce the number of trees required to less than 40, though such large and potentially valuable timber was no doubt much harder to acquire than gleanings from local coppiced woodland. In fact, the scarcity of timber could add substantially to the cost. In his book *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, Christopher Dyer says that some peasants enjoyed the rights of 'housbote', entitling them to take some building timber from the lord's wood, but the right was supervised by the lord's officials, and the quantities of timber taken were rarely enough to build a complete house.

It therefore seems likely that peasants had to obtain timber on the open market. Some Midland towns, such as Lutterworth, Stratford-upon- Avon, and Woodstock, served as outlets for timber originating in the Forest of Arden, and guild records from these towns show that small oak trees cost 3d each in AD 1500, while 'great oaks' cost 8d each; the timber for one cruck-built house therefore cost around 10s 0d, though the cost of labour for felling, preparation, and cartage probably doubled the price. The actual costs of finished buildings, where these are known from documentary sources, range from £2 to £11, with £4 as the median figure.

Peasants could make their own contribution to the building work, by digging foundations, and using their own cart, if they possessed one, to transport the materials, but records of the period show that even such relatively unskilled jobs as mixing daub were undertaken by specialists. It is perhaps not surprising, then, to learn from poll-tax lists of 1379 and 1381 that there were large numbers of carpenters in England: some 8,000 just in the five main counties in this study. Again, ordinary rural-dwellers – peasants – must have been among their clients, because middle- and upper-class customers alone could not have provided work for so many house-builders.

Prosperity amid crisis

What is especially surprising about these findings is that the main phase of new building in this sample of Midland buildings peaked during a period of severe economic recession, the evidence for which

is visible to archaeologists in the form of abandoned or shrunken Medieval settlements all over the country. Until now we have thought of the period from 1380 to 1510 as one of crisis. Estimates of the size of the Medieval rural population in England put the number at 500,000 in 1100, rising to one million in 1300, falling back to half a million by 1400, and then remaining static until the 1540s.

As populations fell back, half of the housing stock was made redundant: half a million houses were abandoned and fell into ruin between the 1350s and 1500. In manorial records we find that peasants are fined in increasing numbers for not keeping their houses in a good state of repair, or for demolishing buildings and taking the timber for use as firewood. There is also a marked increase over this period of properties that were once described as cottages or messuages – essentially a dwelling together with its outbuildings and land – being called tofts (meaning the grown-over site of a burnt or decayed house).

This lime-ash floor, seen from beneath, dates from the 18th or 19th century, but it is similar to the type of floor that might well have been used in Medieval peasant houses. It was made from lime ash (the residue of waste lime and ash raked out from the base of a wood-fired lime kiln) mixed with gypsum, clay, broken pottery, sand or coal ash, laid on a bed of close-spaced reeds to form a tight thatch layer. Such a floor is rodent-proof, relatively flexible, surprisingly strong, and capable of being burnished to a smooth finish.

The fact that houses of some stature and no little cost were being built at a time of recession, climate change, economic uncertainty, population decline, and the abandonment of settlements seems contradictory. It shows how difficult it is to characterise any one period in history as if everyone's experience of living at the time was identical. Manorial records, such as those from Haselor in Warwickshire, reflect these contradictory tendencies. Over a period of 150 years, the manorial accounts tell a story of falling crop yields, reductions in the amount of land under arable cultivation, diminishing rental income, difficulty in collecting rents, tenants in arrears for large amounts (in 1464, the amount owed by tenants was £70 17s 10¾d, equivalent to more than one year's total revenue). Fines were frequently imposed on defaulters, and persistent non-payers were eventually forced to surrender their holdings.

Incentives to build

But new tenants were not easy to find: it was not in the landlords'

interest to let land and buildings decay, so increasingly they offered incentives to attract or retain the right sort of tenant. This is one reason why some peasants could afford the costs involved in constructing a new three-bay house at this time, or to repair an existing structure, or to add barns and other buildings. One common incentive was to share the cost, by giving tenants free materials, such as timber and straw, leaving the peasant to pay for the construction work. Landlords also agreed to rent-free periods of a year or two, or they cancelled rental arrears if their tenants invested in better buildings (and records show that a number of peasants were fined for taking advantage of this and then not erecting the promised new building within the specified time).

'his fire-damaged house (Home Farm, rby, Leicestershire) shows that a typical cruck-built peasant house dated by dendrochronology to c.1380 was later ased in brick, while the open hearth was placed by an internal chimney, typical of sort of improvements carried out from late 16th century as part of the so-called 'Great Rebuilding'.

This still begs the question of how the peasant could afford the specialist services of building craftsmen, but Professor Dyer points out that there was also an active credit market in many Medieval towns and villages: peasants could borrow money in the expectation that their investment in, say, a better plough would pay for itself in increased crop yields. The same argument applies to investment in buildings: livestock and grain kept indoors in good condition would fetch a better price. The better the buildings, the more able peasants were to pursue additional profitable activities, such as brewing and baking, or making butter and cheese to sell in local markets, or (as seems to be the case in the Midlands) to join the growing number of peasants who engaged in domestic textile production.

Opposite forces

Decay and growth clearly co-existed in Medieval society. According to Christopher Dyer, 'for every symptom of decline, some related and opposite trend can be identified.' Villages decayed and were deserted and rents declined, but that made land cheap for entrepreneurial peasants able to expand their holdings. Abandoned arable fields were increasingly used for grazing animals whose meat, wool, hides, or horn and bone gave higher returns than grain, not least because of a growing demand from town-dwellers for more meat in their diets.

This 1954 photograph, showing a now-demolished cottage at Long Crendon, Buckinghamshire, gives a good sense of what a Medieval peasant house might have looked like before 20th-century improvements.

For the survivors of the later Middle Ages 'the wealthier peasants with relatively benign landlords, low costs, and good health' this was a period of opportunity amid general decline, and our past focus as archaeologists and historians on settlement shrinkage and decay has served to hide a more complex story in which renewal, entrepreneurship, investment, and craftsmanship serve as a powerful counterpart to the Baldrick view of the Middle Ages.

Some of the cruck houses built at the time proved to be a better investment than their original builders could ever have dreamed: still standing 500 years later, many have since been extended and are now very des res. The so-called 'cruck villages' of Long Crendon (Buckinghamshire), East Hendred, Harwell, and Steventon (Oxfordshire), Rothley (Leicestershire), and Stoneleigh (Warwickshire) owe their picturesque qualities to such houses, which now sell for well in excess of three times the average national house price: not bad for a Medieval peasant's hovel.

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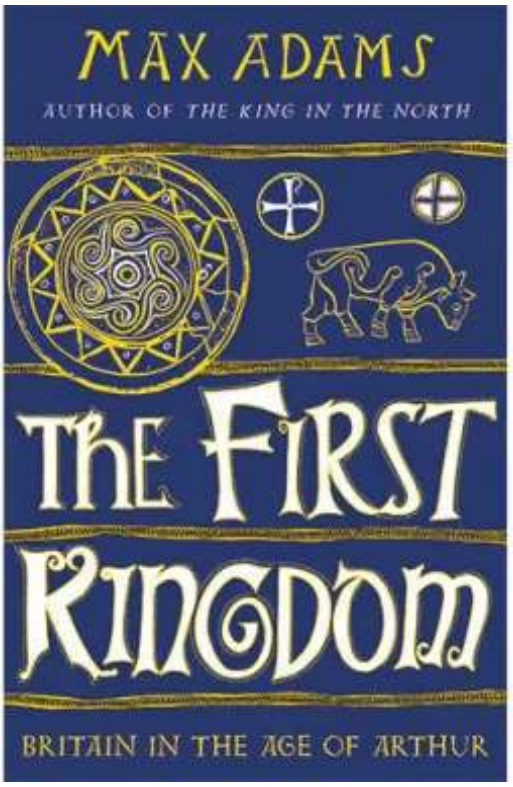

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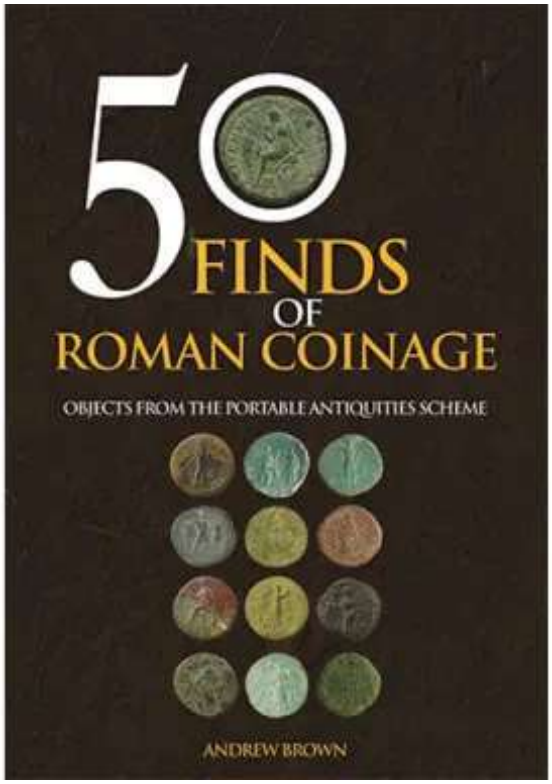

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Jeff Riopelle

December 1, 2013 at 8:00 pm

These folks lived in a nicer accommondation than I do! I'm jelous.

Reply

Jeff Riopelle

December 1, 2013 at 8:02 pm

accommodation…jealous…geez!

Reply

Cruck Houses | WCC Medieval History

May 31, 2014 at 6:13 am

[…] – Unknown, Archaeology.co.uk, (2014), Peasant houses in Midland England http://www.archaeology.co.uk/articles/peasant-houses-in-midland-england.htm […]

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christian

February 28, 2020 at 4:38 pm

these guys don't look like pesants

Reply

John Scurich

July 2, 2020 at 6:34 pm

Excellent and informative article. Thank you.

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SaraBP

January 22, 2021 at 3:51 pm

The rose was a powerful symbol of Mary, mother of Jesus.

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GaryN

January 23, 2021 at 11:53 pm

Thank you for that wonderful 1954 cottage photograph. The demolishing of that home was possibly justified, but it's so sad to lose such a fine example of medieval architecture.

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