

Some general hypotheses on English Medieval peasant house construction from the 7th to the 17th centuries

Einige allgemeine Hypothesen zu Hauskonstruktionen einfacher Bauern vom 7. bis zum 17. Jahrhundert

Quelques hypothèses générales sur la construction des maisons paysannes anglaises du 7^{ème} au 17^{ème} siècle

Stuart Wrathmell

The durability of medieval peasant houses

For three decades, from the mid-1950s until the mid-1980s, the archaeologists who dug rural settlement sites were in broad agreement as to the character and durability of medieval peasant houses. Such houses were built to last only a generation or so, their impermanence marked by the insubstantial and frequently rebuilt wall foundations recorded in the excavations of deserted medieval villages. In the words of John Hurst: 'The main problem at the moment is that the results of medieval excavation and the study of vernacular architecture [of the surviving traditional buildings that varied in construction methods and materials from region to region] show two quite different worlds' (*Beresford - Hurst 1971, 79*).

An explanation for this contrast was readily provided by building historians who studied the earliest surviving farmhouses and cottages. Over much of England the late 16th and early 17th centuries witnessed a phenomenon that was described by W.G. Hoskins as 'the Great Rebuilding', when people below manorial status first began to erect dwellings that would stand for centuries rather than decades (*Brunskill 1987, 27*). There were, of course, regional variations and exceptions. Some of the earliest surviving timber buildings below manorial level dated, in fact, to the 15th century. Prominent among them were the so-called 'Wealden' houses of south-east England, and the aisled houses of the Yorkshire Pennines (*Mercer 1975, 11*). Both traditions marked the presence of exceptionally prosperous farmers and clothiers, who had accumulated enough wealth to start erecting house-types that were clearly derived from earlier manorial traditions.

These structures, representing the diffusion of earlier, higher-status housing styles, differed markedly from the tradition generated in the Great Rebuilding, when peasants began to build 'better versions of the old houses with stouter materials, of more room and greater height ...[of which] the oldest survivors are of the 16th and 17th centuries' (*Mercer 1975, 9*). Eric Mercer's hypothetical reconstruction of a medieval peasant longhouse shows a simple rectangular building with no internal partitions, and with low stone walls supporting rafter poles that in turn support the roofing thatch (*Mercer 1975, fig. 23*). The illustration is

symbolic rather than representational: there are no major, jointed timbers to support the weight of the roof because of the belief that medieval peasant houses were fashioned from flimsy materials, rather than because a heavy, thatched roof could actually be supported by such flimsy materials.

In the mid-1980s the Great Rebuilding hypothesis was challenged on a number of fronts. Within the study of vernacular architecture, one of the most influential challenges concerned the rates of survival among timber-framed buildings. *Mercer (1975, 4)* had argued that 'the immense difference between the numbers of surviving late medieval [i.e. 15th century] and early medieval [i.e. pre-15th century] small houses... suggests that late medieval vernacular building in the South East was a new phenomenon'. Christopher Currie questioned the assumption that the failure of timber-framed buildings to survive in any quantity from certain periods necessarily indicates that they were structurally incapable of surviving for long: many other factors might condition rates of attrition of particular house-types in differing regions at varying dates (*Currie 1988, 3-6*).

Currie's examples were drawn from southern England; in the North, Barry Harrison and Barbara Hutton mounted a further challenge. The vernacular buildings of some parts of Yorkshire were characterised by 'cruck' buildings, in which pairs of curved timber blades formed the trusses that supported the house roof (as in *Fig. 2, top*). Elsewhere in the county, the vernacular timber-framed buildings were of 'post-and-truss' form, in which vertical posts framed the walls and supported the roof (as in *Fig. 2, bottom*). Crucially, documentary evidence suggested that the various parts of Yorkshire differentiated by these contrasting traditions had already acquired their characteristics well before the end of the Middle Ages: the cruck areas supplying medieval references to crucks; the post-and-truss areas providing references to posts (*Harrison - Hutton 1984, 6*). As *Figure 1* indicates, the contrast between cruck and post-and-truss areas can be seen to extend throughout England, the crucks having a largely northern and western distribution. The reasons for these differences are, as yet, unknown.

ENGLAND & WALES: CRUCK BUILDINGS

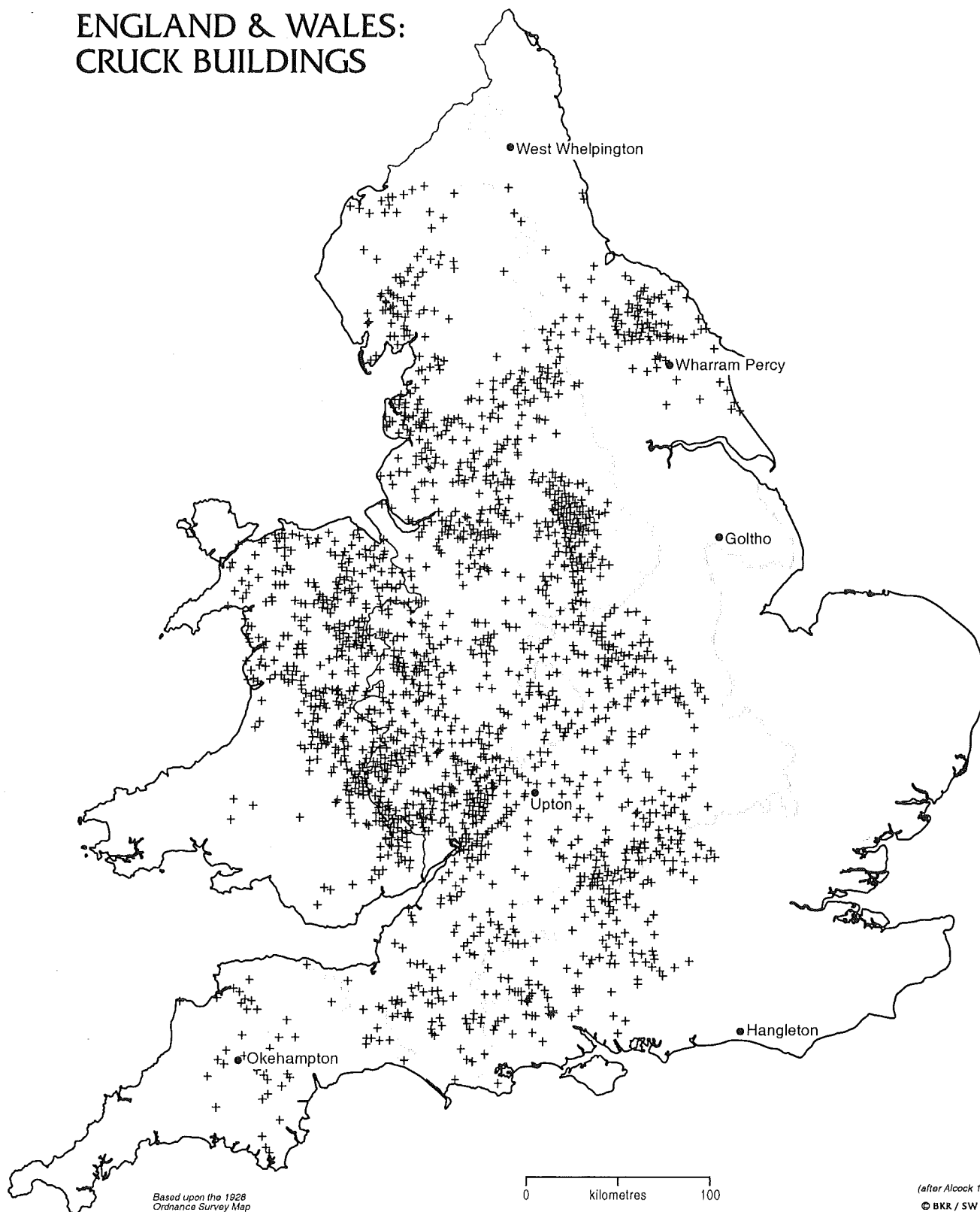
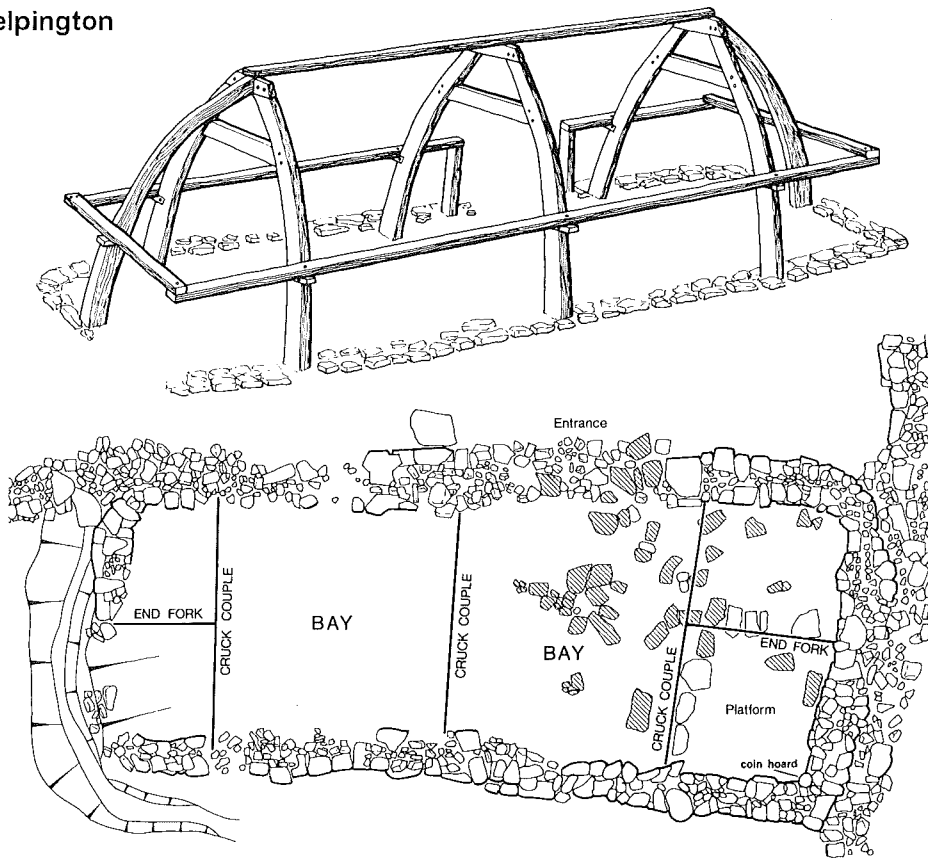


Fig. 1. Map showing the distribution of cruck buildings (marked by crosses) in England and Wales (after Alcock 1981). The names indicate excavation sites mentioned in the text.

West Whelpington



Goltho

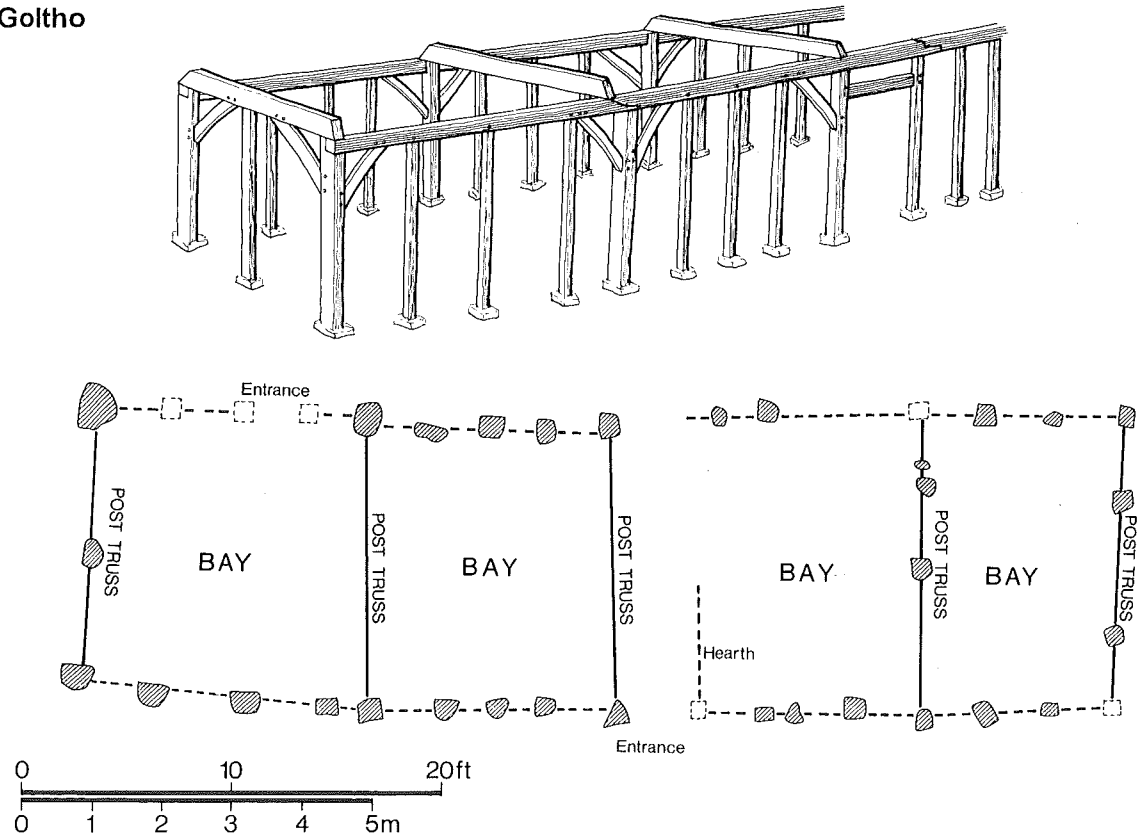


Fig. 2. The interpretation of a cruck building (top: West Whelpington) and a post-and-truss building (bottom: Goltho) from excavated remains. See Figure 1 for the location of these sites.

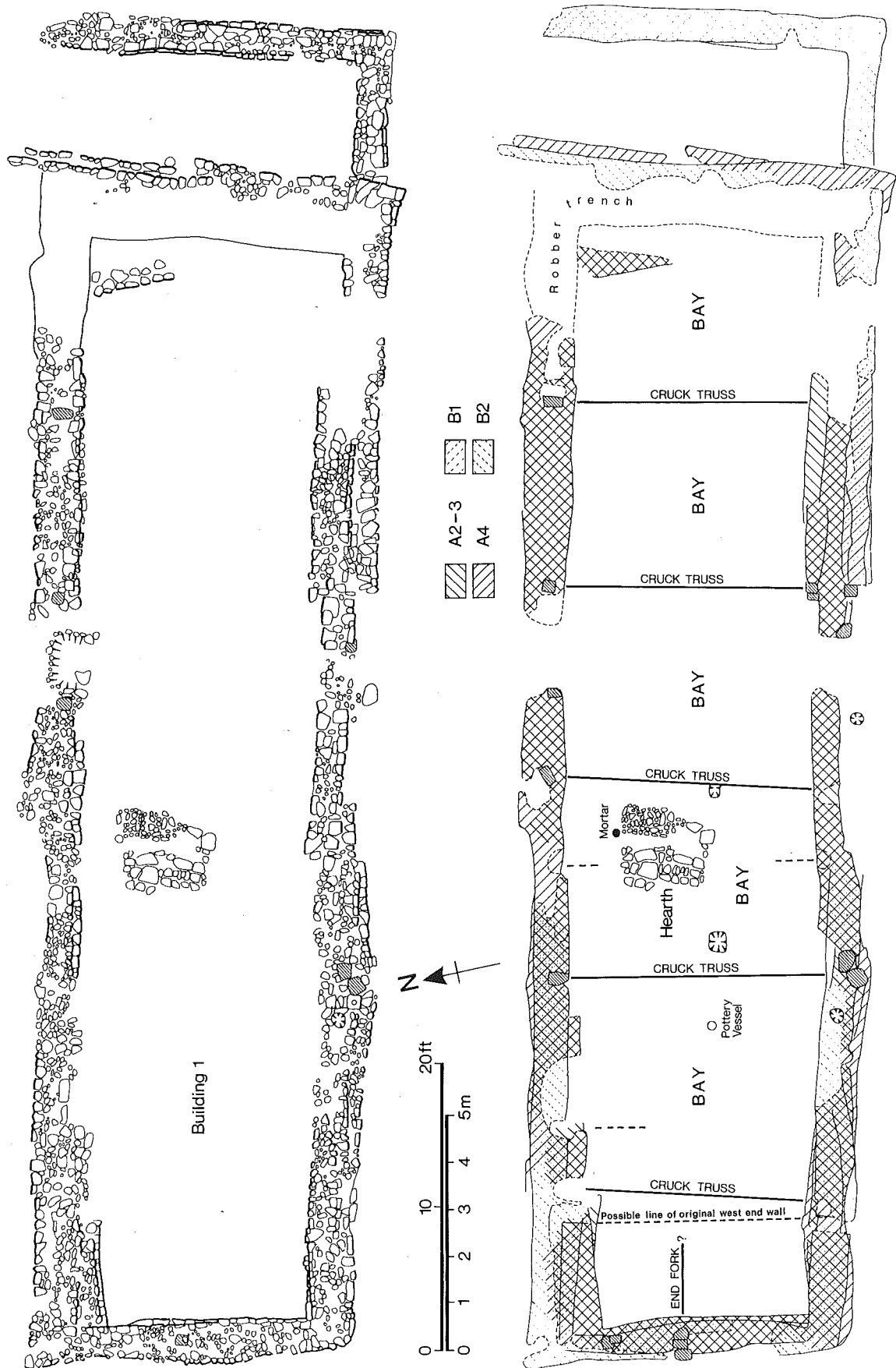


Fig. 3. Plan of Building 1, Area 6 at Wharram Percy, showing the successive rebuilding of chalk walls and the inferred positions of cruck trusses. For the location of this site see Figure 1.

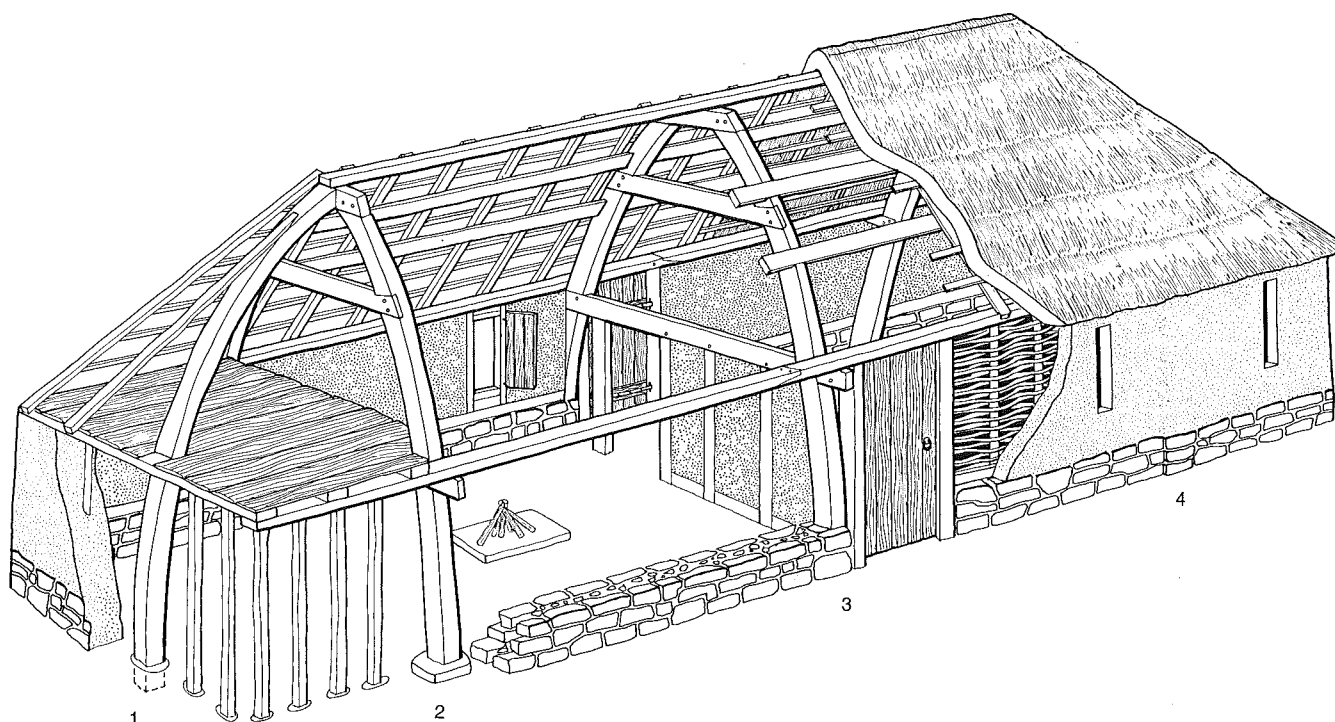


Fig. 4. Model of a medieval peasant house, showing the various possible relationships of superstructure to substructure: 1, cruck blade set in a posthole; 2, cruck set on a padstone; 3, cruck set within a groundwall. The discontinuity in wall alignment at 4 indicates another cruck-truss position.

The medieval documentary references to crucks and posts in Yorkshire are, in fact, only a small part of the considerable body of historical evidence for the use of substantial timbers in peasant farmhouses and barns. Christopher Dyer, in an important review of the documentary evidence, drew attention to the numerous references to medieval peasant buildings in manorial court records of the later Middle Ages. The dramatic reduction in England's population during the second half of the 14th century led to the amalgamation of holdings, and a consequent increase in the number of redundant farm buildings. Manorial lords, hoping eventually to find tenants for vacant holdings, fined their existing tenants for demolishing such buildings, or allowing them to decay (Dyer 1986, 22-3). In the West Midlands, peasant houses seem invariably to have been built with crucks; so, too, were barns, built to much the same standards as houses (Dyer 1986, 26). In the East Midlands, documentary evidence of vertical posts rather than crucks mirrors the distribution of surviving post-and-truss buildings (Dyer 1986, 31-2; cf. Fig. 1). Dyer also argued that these characteristics can be detected in peasant buildings of the period 1200 to 1350 (Dyer 1986, 35-7).

For archaeologists, there was a major obstacle to addressing directly the hypothesis of the Great Rebuilding. As Hurst pointed out (Beresford - Hurst 1971, 79), almost all the excavated medieval peasant houses were located in villages that had been abandoned - for socio-economic reasons - before the postulated change from flimsy to well-built farmhouses in the 16th and 17th centuries. Some of the settlements, such as those in the South-western uplands, had been deserted

in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, in the wake of the substantial fall in population (Beresford 1979, 144-6). Others, like Wharram Percy in Yorkshire, had been depopulated in the late 15th or early 16th century as a consequence of changes in land-use and in the management of farming enterprises (Beresford - Hurst 1971, 11-17). One excavated village site in the north of England had, however, continued to be occupied until the early 18th century, and it was here that doubts about the archaeological evidence for the Great Rebuilding first surfaced.

The village of West Whelpington (Fig. 1), an upland settlement close to the border with Scotland, produced the stone foundations of longhouses and barns ranging in date from the 13th to the 17th centuries. The most recent structures, those occupied down to the early 18th century, appeared to fall comfortably within the main vernacular building tradition of the county, a tradition of cruck-framed longhouses with stone or mud walls and thatched roofs (Wrathmell 1984, 30-33). Yet their 13th century predecessors, some of them destroyed in the Scottish invasions of the early 14th century and never rebuilt, were represented by very similar remains. Some changes had, of course, occurred: partition walls had been inserted, and hearth positions had shifted from the centre of the living room to the partition; stone walls, previously constructed with boulders cleared from the arable fields, had later been formed from quarried stone. Nevertheless, there seemed at the very least to be a case for exploring the hypothesis that the 13th century buildings could have been constructed using cruck trusses, like their 17th century successors.

Figure 2 (top) shows the ground plan of a 13th century barn in the village, the one chosen for study. It was probably burnt down in a Scottish raid of c. 1320: a coin hoard had been deposited at that time in a hole in the walling at the south-east corner, and had never been retrieved. A series of 'cruck indicators' were defined: discontinuities in the wall foundations, which appeared to be constructed and rebuilt in separate stretches; slight changes in the width and alignment of the walls; the presence of larger, flat stones in the thickness of the walling, which might have served as padstones for major timbers; and finally, gaps in wall cores, where padstones may have been removed for re-use after abandonment. In addition, the end walls with rounded corners were taken to mark the positions of single crucks - 'end forks' - creating hipped ends rather than full-height gable walls (Wrathmell 1989a, 253).

A point that should be emphasised is that this exercise did not 'prove' that the barn had been a cruck structure; nothing could, except the survival of the crucks themselves. It showed that the remaining stonework was entirely consistent with a timber structure in which the roof was supported by cruck or post trusses that divided the building into 'bays': it bore the imprint of this kind of building. The choice of crucks for this interpretation was based on the numerous documentary references to the use of crucks in the medieval peasant buildings of this region, and the survival of numerous cruck buildings in the region down to the 19th and early 20th centuries. A similar approach formed the basis of another analysis, carried out on the remains of a 13th to 15th century longhouse at Wharram Percy in Yorkshire (Fig. 1).

The stone footings that marked Building 1, Area 6 at Wharram Percy were even more markedly formed of discrete stretches of walling, indicating the frequency with which the rough chalk blocks deteriorated and had to be rebuilt (Fig. 3). More durable stone was not available locally, and its appearance in buildings such as this one generally indicates the recycling of materials derived from the church or the manor house. Some large, flat sandstone blocks survived within the thickness of the chalk walling, and have been interpreted as the padstones for cruck blades. In other places, equally obvious gaps in the walling marked the former positions of padstones that had been removed in a further phase of recycling. The inferred locations of the trusses suggested that, on one or more occasions, the cruck blades had been repositioned during the life of the building (Wrathmell 1989b, 23-6). Similar analyses were then undertaken on excavated peasant buildings in areas of post-and-truss rather than cruck construction: at Goltho in Lincolnshire (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, bottom), and at Hangleton in Sussex (Fig. 1). Many of the indicators defined at West Whelpington and Wharram Percy were again evident (Wrathmell 1989a, 255-6; 1994, 189 and fig. 3).

Figure 4 models the varying relationships between superstructure and substructure in buildings of this kind. Position number 1 shows a cruck blade set in a

posthole; number 2 shows a blade on a padstone. Position number 3 indicates a blade set on top of a stone groundwall, and number 4 marks a shift in wall alignment indicating the position of another truss. It should be noted that all the relationships represented at numbers 1-3 could co-exist in a single building. Equally, a single timber might experience each of these three relationships in turn during its life as a roof support.

By the mid-1990s, most archaeologists and historians accepted the hypothesis that medieval peasant houses had been constructed using substantial timbers, and that these buildings could survive for centuries if kept in reasonable repair: the state of the debate at that time has been well summarised by Jane Grenville (1997, 123-33). Among some building historians, however, the debate has continued as to exactly how far back into the Middle Ages such traditions can be traced. A programme of dendrochronological analysis has shown that many small cruck buildings previously thought to have been post-medieval structures actually date to the Middle Ages. Yet Mercer has emphasised, in relation to the county of Shropshire, on the border with Wales, the very uneven chronological distribution of dated examples. There are large numbers of cruck buildings that date to the period 1380-1500, only one to the mid-13th century, and none at all to the intervening period. If peasant houses had been constructed with substantial crucks in the 14th century, why had they not survived? If the mid-13th century example was a typical peasant cruck, was there a catastrophic fall in peasant housing standards in the 14th century to account for the gap (Mercer 1997, 10-11)? His conclusions were that 'if well-built peasant houses existed at all before c. 1380 they were very rare', and that after c. 1380 there was 'something like a "housing explosion", a momentous increase in the number of peasants building to a standard which has ensured that thousands of their houses still survive' (Mercer 1997, 11).

What Mercer has, in effect, proposed is moving the Great Rebuilding back in time by about a century. His proposition is based on the assumption that, if durable peasant buildings had been common in the period from, say, 1180 to 1380, we would expect to find, on the chronological axis of a graph, gradually increasing numbers of them surviving to the present day. Yet such an argument takes no account of conditions in the 14th century: the famine of 1315-18; the plague epidemic of 1348-9, which is estimated to have killed about half the population of England; the succeeding epidemics (Dyer 1989, 140). If England were well-stocked with cruck and post-and-truss buildings by 1300, there would have been little need to add to that stock during a period in which the population was in substantial decline. Instead of cutting down trees for new buildings, the timbers of redundant houses and barns could be recycled, as happened at Cleeve in Worcestershire in 1416 (Field 1965, 128). In socio-economic terms, there is every reason to predict a decline in the number of peasant-house timbers felled during the 14th century.

The origins of the medieval peasant building tradition

In the examples of excavated peasant houses discussed earlier in this paper, the basic characteristics of such buildings have been inferred from the way in which the former presence of upright timbers seems to be reflected in the patterns of excavated padstones and groundwalls. The stonework itself was not designed to support the roof directly, but to provide a measure of protection to the timbers that did so. It has been observed, in England as well as on the Continent, that the introduction of padstones to protect the feet of major timbers occurred, for most types of building in most regions, in the late 12th and 13th centuries (*Beresford - Hurst 1971*, 93; *Zimmermann 1998*, Abb.1 and 104-32). The introduction of groundwalls, to protect the base of the wattle-and-daub panels that filled the spaces between the main uprights, came at much the same time. The question is, whether this introduction signalled a new type of timber superstructure as well, or whether the stonework represents a modification to an already established tradition of timber construction.

Some scholars have supported the first of these alternatives. Christopher Dyer, for example, noted that opinion among building historians was 'moving towards associating the beginning of stone foundations in the west with the development of cruck building. As it is thought that the use of crucks in peasant buildings developed in the 13th century, the simultaneous appearance of stone foundations seems more than a coincidence' (*Dyer 1986*, 36). The hypothesis structuring this conclusion is that, once substantial timbers started to be used in peasant houses, there was a need to protect them from damp. The corollary, presumably, is that before the late 12th century peasant houses did not contain substantial timbers that needed to be so protected.

On the other side of the argument, Christopher Currie has stated that 'the change to padstones in the thirteenth century did not ... require a change in the design of the superstructure' (*Currie 1988*, 4). But what do we actually know about the 11th and 12th century peasant houses that preceded the introduction of stonework? Very little, as Mark Gardiner's recent survey of the evidence has shown. Most of the excavated house plans datable to this period seem to come from manorial or quasi-manorial homesteads (*Gardiner 2000*, 170-74). Where are the contemporary peasant houses? The problem here is one of visibility. During the 11th and 12th centuries, England witnessed a rapid growth in population, and its villages and hamlets continued to expand during the late 12th and 13th centuries, through the period which saw the introduction of stone groundwalls. Inevitably, the evidence of pre-stone earthfast buildings - or, even more so, of buildings constructed without either stone walls or postholes - will have been obscured by the later activity.

The problem is exemplified in the report on the 1970s excavations in Okehampton Park, in south-west England (*Fig. 1*). The investigations uncovered a group

of well-preserved longhouses and ancillary buildings, marked by stone foundations. Their occupation was dated broadly to the 12th and 13th centuries. One of the longhouses, building A1, measured about 16 m by 4 m; it is shown in *Figure 5*. Its structural characteristics are similar to those of the barn at West Whelpington (*Fig. 2*): walls shifting alignment, built and rebuilt in discrete stretches, and gable-end walls with rounded corners. Of even greater interest at Okehampton was a series of postholes lying wholly or partly beneath the walls of A1; these are indicated on *Figure 5*. There were other postholes on this site, within the areas occupied by adjacent buildings, but as indicated on the overall plan (*Austin 1978*, *fig. 4*) there were no others in the vicinity of building A1. Therefore, the coincidence of postholes and stone walls is a matter of significance.

The remains were interpreted in the excavation report as marking two separate buildings, with similar dimensions and sharing the same alignment, one built of timber (crucks are suggested), the other in stone (*Austin 1978*, 201-2). The posts are paired and, crucially, there is a posthole at each end of the building on its axis, undoubtedly marking the foot of an end cruck, like the ones postulated for the barn at West Whelpington (*Fig. 2*). It requires only a small perceptual shift to see in these remains, instead of successive structures on the same site, a single building with cruck trusses; one that began its existence with earthfast posts that were eventually, after rotting, cut off above the ground surface and underpinned with stonework. The evidence is, as usual, clear in the photographs. In one of the west-side postholes the walling was actually built down into the base of the hole; and in one of the ancillary buildings (A2) the gable posts (one set in a hole) had been framed by recesses in the walling (*Austin 1978*, pls VIa and VIb).

The distribution of postholes beneath the side walls of A1 may indicate various rearrangements in the positions of the trusses during the life of the building. This is not the place to discuss detailed interpretations. The basic point is simply made: that a building which began life as an earthfast, cruck-framed longhouse, presumably with walls of turf or wattle-and-daub, later acquired stone groundwalls that underpinned the feet of the crucks and provided a more durable base for the turf or wattle-and-daub wall panels. Given that most scholars would now have no difficulty in accepting the 13th century stone phase as a cruck structure, it follows that they should also be able to accept the 12th century, pre-stone phase as a cruck structure: it was the same building. According to this hypothesis, the stonework was introduced to extend the life of timbers that had already stood for decades, perhaps centuries; it did not signal a new tradition of building.

The implications of this can be further explored through excavations at the deserted village of Upton, Gloucestershire (*Fig. 1*), which were carried out in the early 1960s. A row of houses and outbuildings, uncovered in Site A (AA to AC), was dated to the 13th and 14th centuries. It comprised a series of rectangular rooms defined by clay-bonded stone walls. These are shown on *Figure 5*. The excavators suggested a chronological

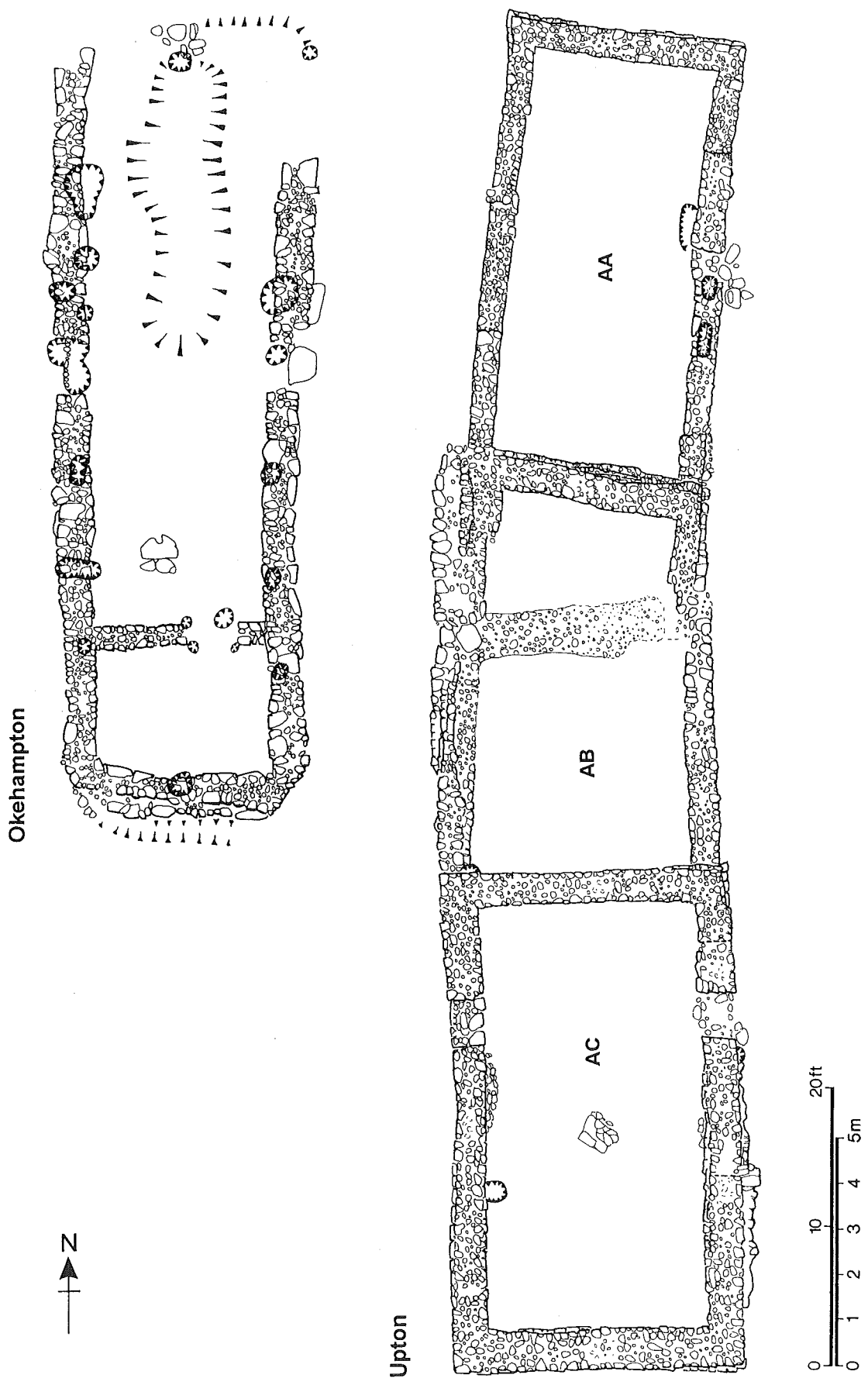


Fig. 5. Plans of Building A1 at Okehampton, and Building A at Upton, showing postholes within and beneath stone groundwalls. For the location of these sites see Figure 1.

sequence starting with AC and ending with AA. The walls stood in places about 0.8m high, and their even tops, formed by weathered slabs of stone, were thought to indicate their original height (*Hilton - Rahtz 1966*, 100-02). It should be noted, however, that if these walltops really did mark the eves level of the roof, then people would have been able to stand upright in this room only along its central axis, where the roof ridge was probably almost 2 m above the floor level (*Hilton - Rahtz 1966*, 103).

A new reading of the plan is that it shows groundwalls, with many of the characteristics of those at Wharram and Okehampton: they shift in alignment; they were built and rebuilt in discrete stretches; they indicate places where cruck trusses may have been founded within them, or on them. In the light of the interpretation of more recently excavated structures, especially at West Whelpington (*Evans - Jarrett 1987*, 214-25), it now seems probable that the original structure was a longhouse stretching from the south end wall of AC to the wall (later reduced to its foundations) running across the floor area of room AB. AC was its living room, marked off from the rest of the house (the byre) by a cross passage. The passage was indicated in the excavation by the entrances set opposite each other. In this interpretation, the wall between AC and AB would not have been part of the original plan. Building AA, perhaps a barn, was attached at some stage to the north end of the longhouse. Subsequently, the extant wall between AA and AB was inserted. Later the living area AC was divided off from the rest of the longhouse by the insertion of the wall between AB and AC, accompanied by the rebuilding of the side walls as far as the entrances.

As in the other examples, the rebuilt stretches of walling lend themselves to division into bays, with the positions of the cruck trusses marked not only by discontinuities in the walling but by padstones and postholes within and beneath the stonework. Building AA, for example, can be divided into five or six bays, though some trusses were probably repositioned when AB was lengthened. Truss positions can also be detected in the living area, AC, in one case just south of the central hearth. This is a particularly informative case, with a posthole projecting into the floor area from beneath the inner face of the west wall; whilst on the east side, in contrast, a large, flat slab set on top of the wall probably represented a padstone (*Hilton - Rahtz 1966*, pl. VII).

The relationships of posthole, padstone and walling in AC could be explained by a sequence of rebuilding similar to that postulated for Okehampton. The longhouse was originally a building with earthfast cruck trusses and wattle-and-daub walls, without stonework. At some stage it was provided with stone groundwalls to raise the wattle-and-daub panels off the ground surface, and to encompass and therefore protect the feet of the crucks from the weather. On the west side, the groundwall was built immediately outside the foot of the cruck blade. On the east side, however, the foot had rotted, was cut off and underpinned by a large stone slab set on top of the groundwall. This kind of succession is evident in

some northern cruck buildings that have survived into recent times (e.g. *Jennings 1997*, 97-8).

Such a rebuilding sequence would allow us to reconsider the dating of buildings AA-AC at Upton. The excavators noted that occupation on this particular site began before the 13th century: some of the pottery might predate the Norman conquest. Yet the excavated buildings must be 13th century or later, because 13th century pottery was found within the walling material and therefore provides a *terminus post quem* for the construction of those walls. To quote the excavators: 'The occupation of Site A as an area may thus be as early as late Saxon. A later date, however, must be given for the building complex AC-AA by reason of pottery sealed within the walls of AC. This includes pieces of highly decorated glazed jugs which on current dating are likely to be later than 1250, or possibly 1225. On this basis AC should be assigned to the 13th century or later, and probably to the late 13th century or later...' (*Hilton - Rahtz 1966*, 107).

But if, as suggested here, the groundwalls were inserted into pre-existing buildings, then the *terminus post quem* provided by the pottery applies to the insertion of those walls (or their subsequent rebuilding), and not to the initial erection of this longhouse. Upton's AB-AC could well have been erected in the 11th or 12th century, or in an even earlier period. Both at Upton and elsewhere, the excavators of medieval peasant houses may in fact have been unwittingly revealing buildings that were established in the 11th and 12th centuries, at significantly earlier periods than would be implied by the *termini post quos* derived from pottery, coins or other datable artefacts in or under the stone walls. We may thus be able to fill the 10th to 12th century hiatus identified by Gardiner with buildings that are recognisably part of the later medieval tradition, though lacking stone groundwalls. When, therefore, did this tradition of house construction originate, and why?

The plans and structural evidence of 6th to 8th century rural dwellings seem very different from the ones previously discussed in this paper. Indeed, in a review of the evidence, *Simon James, Anne Marshall and Martin Millett (James et al. 1984)* defined what they described as a distinct 'early medieval building tradition'. The definition of the tradition is partly based upon the ground plans of long, rectangular buildings which seem to have been precisely laid out, structured by combinations of square modules. An entrance is usually to be found exactly in the centre of each long wall, and annexes were sometimes constructed at the ends of the building (*James et al. 1984*, 184-90). Structural evidence, well-preserved at Cowdery's Down in southern England, indicates that at least in some cases the walls were formed by planks of uniform size set in continuous trenches. Inclined posts had been founded in individual postholes set just outside the lines of the walls. These were set at regular intervals, about 1.5 m to 2 m apart, and were paired across the building (*James et al. 1984*, figs 7 and 8).

James, Marshall and Millett proposed an interpretation of the Cowdery's Down structures as cruck buildings, adapting various technical details from later

medieval traditions (James *et al.* 1984, 193-5). Their reconstructions have been challenged by Alcock and Walsh (1993), and by the writer (Wrathmell 1994, 189-90). After all, if the buildings belong to a structural tradition that is (as they claim) quite distinct from the later one, then the use of concepts drawn from the later tradition to model these early buildings may be entirely unjustified. In terms of their formal and spatial characteristics, buildings such as those at Cowdery's Down are so different from either manorial or peasant houses of later centuries that they imply a different social context. Such differences can readily be envisaged in the transition from communities in which ideas of kinship played a fundamental role, to communities that were shaped by medieval tenurial relations.

In structural terms, the building tradition current in the 6th to the 8th centuries seems to lack what Richard Harris defined as the 'grammar' of medieval timber building. There is no sign of the large bay divisions that later reflected the patterning of rooms in a timber building, and it is difficult to believe that these buildings contained complex jointing, such as the 'tie-beam lap-dovetail assembly' that later became the standard method of fastening together the main horizontal, vertical and roof frames (see Harris 1989, 1-6). Whatever the precise form of superstructures, one contrast between the two traditions is evident in the archaeological record: the earlier buildings used much larger quantities of major timbers. Indeed, the later development of complex joints may have been a response to the desire to minimise the numbers of large timbers used in houses and barns.

The key to understanding why such a development should take place is perhaps to be found in the control of England's timber resources. The development of manorial social structures varied considerably from region to region, but one of the underlying themes seems to be the control of access to timber exercised by the manorial lords. In Sussex, on the south coast of England, it was the policy of landlords to treat standing timber as a private resource, even in areas where there was much of it available, and to encourage tenants to reuse material from demolished buildings (Currie 1983, 53). And in the northernmost county of England, 15th century records of the earls of Northumberland clearly indicate that they provided their tenants with large numbers of cruck timbers. In 1471-2, for example, 34 pairs of crucks were supplied by the earl's bailiff to the tenants of Lesbury (Hodgson 1921, 27).

Dyer, whilst agreeing that the use of major timber by tenants was clearly under manorial control, has emphasised that, in the later Middle Ages, tenants could also buy timber on the market (Dyer 1986, 27). Indeed, the massive reduction in the population during the 14th century, and the numerous peasant buildings that consequently ceased to have a function, must have formed a major stimulus to the development of that market once economic growth resumed. In earlier times, however, it is likely that the major timbers for a building were supplied by the lord, whilst the tenant had to organise the erection, and to provide the walling materials (wattle and daub, stone groundwalls) and

roof covering. From the lord's point of view, the materials provided by the tenant protected the lord's asset - the major timbers - from deterioration. This is why lords took measures to prevent tenants allowing buildings to fall into disrepair (e.g. Dyer 1986, 22).

The system of lords providing these major timbers can perhaps be traced back to the beginnings of tenurial relations characterised by 'the manor'. One of the laws of Ine, king of Wessex in the late 7th century, states that: 'If anyone covenants for a yardland or more at a fixed rent, and ploughs it, if the lord wishes to increase for him the [rent of the] land by demanding service as well as rent, he need not accept it if *he does not give him a dwelling* [my Italics]...' (Whitelock 1979, 406). Here is a clear indication, in a law that survives because it was reissued by King Alfred, that the provision of a house by the lord was a key element in establishing the social and economic bonds expressed in obligations of service.

Conclusions

There was unquestionably a marked change in building traditions in England during the centuries when manorial structures were developing, when social relations were being redefined through land tenure, and when the trend towards nucleated settlements and regulated open-field systems was reaching its peak across a large swathe of the country (Roberts - Wrathmell 2002). It seems only a small step to link all these changes together. There have been several attempts to 'reconstruct' the superstructures of the 6th to 8th century buildings, most of them informed to a greater or lesser degree by what came after. The result has often been a lengthy discussion on the way in which the builders overcame problems in keeping these buildings standing, in the context of the repertoire of structural techniques evident in the surviving medieval buildings of later centuries. This may be the wrong way of looking at this issue. As F. W. B. Charles so perceptively pointed out many years ago, 'it is important to realise that the craftsman's skill is in avoiding unnecessary difficulties, not in overcoming them' (Charles 1974, 22).

The transition to the later tradition, with its cruck and post-and-truss peasant buildings, may have occurred several centuries earlier than most scholars would currently allow. The direct evidence may not be there, but there are indications that the distinction between earthfast and non-earthfast construction may not have been as marked on the ground as it is in our minds, and in our excavation records. Lords provided the main timbers for houses and barns. At a time when the acreage of arable was expanding rapidly, when the numbers of villein tenements were rising significantly, and timber reserves were in decline, there must have been obvious advantages in reducing the quantity of major timbers required for peasant houses, even if it required more complex jointing to hold them together.

The peasants will have been required to conserve their lords' assets by maintaining the walls and roof cover to protect the timbers. The insertion of stone

groundwalls was a measure taken to extend the life of existing buildings, rather than being a herald of new types of construction. It was, in fact, the first stage of a trend which can be seen throughout the lives of cruck and post-and-truss buildings: the gradual replacement of wattle-and-daub panels, of turf or clay walling, of wooden shingles or thatch, by more durable materials - stone and brick. Replacement has often been piecemeal, and has consequently provided a record of its own history.

Finally a word of warning, especially to those readers who have little acquaintance with current and recent debates about English traditional buildings and their origins. These conclusions are highly speculative, and would not find support among many of England's buildings historians. This does not, of course, mean that the conclusions are necessarily wrong.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professor Brian Roberts for supplying *Figure 1*, and to Chris Philo for drawing *Figures 2 to 4*, and for preparing *Figures 2 to 5* for publication. I would also like to thank Klaus Hammer and Charlette Sheil-Small for preparing the German and French summaries of this paper.

Zusammenfassung

Mehr als 30 Jahre lang, beginnend in den 1950er Jahren, glaubten die meisten Archäologen und Gebäudehistoriker in England, daß die mittelalterlichen Behausungen der Landbevölkerung dürftig gebaut waren und nur wenige Jahrzehnte überstanden, und daß erst im 16. und frühen 17. Jahrhundert, der Zeit des 'Great Rebuilding', die Dauerhaftigkeit normaler Bauernhäuser verbessert wurde. Erst Mitte der 1980er Jahre wurden Einwendungen gegen diese Auffassung erhoben und es ist heute allgemeine Meinung, daß die Bauernhäuser und Scheunen, die zwischen dem 13. und 15. Jahrhundert gebaut wurden, Jahrhunderte überdauern sollten, indem man im wesentlichen die Arten von Bauhölzern und Bautechniken verwendete, wie sie heute in den noch überlebenden, traditionellen Gebäuden auf Bauernhöfen gefunden werden.

Eine Schlüsselfrage bleibt jedoch unbeantwortet: wie weit kann man diese Tradition in die Vergangenheit zurückverfolgen? Es kann sein, daß sie im späten 12. und 13. Jahrhundert entstand, als zum erstenmal Mauerwerk in Form von 'padstones' und 'groundwalls' in bäuerlichen Gebäuden verwendet wurde, um zu verhindern, daß die tragenden Holzelemente und das organische Wandmaterial mit der Erdoberfläche in Verbindung kamen. Das Argument hier ist jedoch, daß dieser Wandel - so dramatisch der Einfluß auf den archäologischen Befund auch ist - die unterliegende Kontinuität in der Bautradition vernachlässigt: die Einführung von Mauerwerk zu dieser Zeit sollte sowohl die Langlebigkeit seit hundert oder mehr Jahren stehender Gebäude als auch, wenn nicht sogar in stärkerem Maße, die Dauerhaftigkeit der vielen um diese Zeit des Bevölkerungswachstums errichteten, bäuerlichen Gebäuden erhöhen.

Ausgrabungen von zwischen dem 6. und 8. Jahrhundert entstandenen ländlichen Siedlungen haben andererseits Gebäude mit deutlich unterschiedlichem Charakter zu Tage gebracht, besonders im Hinblick auf das Fehlen von 'Bay'-

Unterteilungen und auf die in großer Menge verwendeten wesentlichen Bauhölzer. Die Art und Weise des Häuserbaus, die wir von traditionellen, erhalten gebliebenen Gebäuden ableiten, eine Art, die völlig mit den archäologischen Überresten der vom 12. bis 15. Jahrhundert gebauten bäuerlichen Häusern übereinstimmt, scheint weithin unanwendbar auf jene frühen Bauten. Warum, also, fand dieser Wechsel statt?

Die Antwort mag mit den sozial-ökonomischen Veränderungen vom 9. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert zusammenhängen. Das Lehnswesen, in seiner einem Gutsbetrieb zugrunde liegenden Struktur, trat an die Stelle der früheren sozialen Ordnung, die in weit größerem Maße auf Blutsverwandtschaft beruhte. Die zu einer Zeit des Bevölkerungswachstums und der zunehmenden landwirtschaftlichen Nutzung geringer werdenden Bauholzreserven befanden sich weitgehend in den Händen des Gutsherrn. Das in bäuerlichen Häusern verwendete hauptsächliche Bauholz wurde in weiten Teilen des Landes vom Gutsherrn gestellt. Das typische mittelalterliche bäuerliche Gebäude, dessen Dach von einer Reihe von 'cruck' oder 'post-and-truss'-Rahmen gehalten wird, benötigt die geringste Menge größerer Bauholzelemente, gewährleistet aber gleichzeitig dauerhafte Wohnbauten und Scheunen für die Gutsleute.

Résumé

Pendant plus de trente ans, depuis le début des années 50, la plupart des archéologues et des historiens du bâtiment en Angleterre ont cru que les maisons des paysans du moyen-âge étaient des structures peu solides capables de durer pendant quelques dizaines d'années tout au plus et qu'une grande amélioration de la durabilité des fermes ordinaires - le 'Great Rebuilding' - s'est produite au 16^{ème} siècle et au début du 17^{ème} siècle. Cette opinion a été contestée au milieu des années 80 et, en général, on estime désormais que les maisons paysannes et les granges du 13^{ème} au 15^{ème} siècle avaient été construites pour durer des siècles, en employant les sortes de gros bois de charpente et de techniques structurales qu'on peut trouver dans les bâtiments traditionnels de fermes restant encore.

Une importante question reste encore sans réponse: jusqu'à quelle date peut-on faire remonter ces traditions? Il se peut qu'elles soient apparues à la fin du 12^{ème} siècle et au 13^{ème} siècle lorsque, pour la première fois, de la maçonnerie sous la forme de 'padstones' et de 'groundwalls' a été utilisée dans des bâtiments paysans pour empêcher les gros bois de charpente et les matières organiques dont étaient constitués les murs d'entrer en contact avec le sol. Néanmoins, il est soutenu dans cette communication que ce changement, dont l'effet sur les annales archéologiques a été dramatique, occulte une continuité sous-jacente des traditions de construction: c'est-à-dire que la maçonnerie introduite à cette époque était conçue tout autant pour augmenter la longévité de bâtiments construits cent ans ou plus de cent ans auparavant que pour améliorer la durabilité des nombreuses maisons paysannes en cours de construction à cette époque où la population augmentait.

Par ailleurs, des fouilles de peuplements ruraux du 6^{ème} au 8^{ème} siècle ont révélé des bâtiments de caractère sensiblement différent, tout particulièrement par leur manque de séparations en 'bay' et par les grandes quantités de gros bois de charpente utilisées dans ces bâtiments. Le modèle de construction de maisons dérivé des bâtiments traditionnelles restant encore, modèle qui paraît être en accord avec les ruines archéologiques de maisons paysannes du 12^{ème} au 15^{ème} siècle, semble n'être généralement pas applicable à ces structures plus anciennes. Pourquoi donc le changement s'est-il produit?

La réponse pourrait se trouver dans les changements socio-économiques du 9^{ème} au 11^{ème} siècle. Les relations entre seigneur et métayer, dans le cadre du domaine seigneurial, ont remplacé les groupements sociaux précédents qui soulignaient bien plus les liens de parenté. Les ressources en bois, qui diminuaient à une époque d'augmentation de la population et d'expansion des cultures, étaient largement entre les mains des seigneurs et les gros bois de charpente utilisés dans les maisons paysannes étaient, dans de nombreuses parties du pays, fournis par les seigneurs. La maison paysanne médiévale typique, avec un toit soutenu par une série de charpentes 'cruck' ou 'post-and-truss', utilise le plus petit nombre de gros bois de charpente compatible avec la fourniture de granges et de maisons durables pour les métayers du seigneur.

Bibliography

- Alcock, N. 1981:*
Cruck Construction: an Introduction and Catalogue, Council for British Archaeology Research Report 42, London.
- Alcock, N. W. - Walsh, D. 1993:*
Architecture at Cowdery's Down: a reconsideration, Archaeological Journal 150, London, 403-09.
- Austin, D. 1978:*
Excavations in Okehampton Deer Park, Devon 1976-78, Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society 36, 191-240.
- Beresford, G. 1979:*
Three deserted medieval settlements, Medieval Archaeology 23, London, 98-158.
- Beresford, M. - Hurst, J. G. 1971:*
Deserted Medieval Villages. London.
- Brunskill, R.W. 1987:*
Illustrated Handbook of Vernacular Architecture, 3rd ed. London.
- Charles, F. W. B. 1974:*
Scotches, lever sockets and rafter holes, Vernacular Architecture 5, London, 21-4.
- Currie, C. R. J. 1983:*
Timber supply and timber building in a Sussex parish, Vernacular Architecture 14, London, 52-4.
- Currie, C. R. J. 1988:*
Time and chance: modelling the attrition of old houses, Vernacular Architecture 19, London, 1-9.
- Dyer, C. 1986:*
English peasant buildings in the later Middle Ages, Medieval Archaeology 30, London, 19-45.
- Dyer, C. 1989:*
Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages. Cambridge.
- Evans, D. - Jarrett, M. G. 1987:*
The deserted village of West Whelpington, Northumberland, third report, part one, Archaeologia Aeliana ser. 5, 15, Newcastle upon Tyne, 199-308.
- Field, R. K. 1965:*
Worcestershire peasant buildings in the later Middle Ages, Medieval Archaeology 9, London, 105-45.
- Gardiner, M. 2000:*
Vernacular buildings and the development of the later medieval domestic plan in England, Medieval Archaeology 44, London, 159-79.
- Grenville, J. 1997:*
Medieval Housing, Leicester.
- Harris, R. 1989:*
The grammar of carpentry, Vernacular Architecture 20, London, 1-8.
- Harrison, B. - Hutton, B. 1984:*
Vernacular Houses in North Yorkshire and Cleveland. Edinburgh.
- Hilton, R. H. - Rahtz, P. A. 1966:*
Upton, Gloucestershire, 1959-64, Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society 85, Gloucester, 70-146.
- Hodgson, J. C. 1921:*
Percy Bailiff's Rolls of the Fifteenth Century, Surtees Society Publications 134, Durham.
- James, S. et al. 1984:*
James, S. - Marshall, A. - Millett, M.:
An early medieval building tradition, Archaeological Journal 141, London, 182-215.
- Jennings, N. 1997:*
Earthfast crucks in Cumberland, Vernacular Architecture 28, London, 97-8.
- Mercer, E. 1975:*
English Vernacular Houses, Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England, London.
- Mercer, E. 1997:*
The unfulfilled wider implications of vernacular architecture studies, Vernacular Architecture 28, London, 9-12.
- Roberts, B. K. - Wrathmell, S. 2002:*
Region and Place: a study of the archaeology and historical geography of England between Roman times and the mid-nineteenth century, English Heritage, London, forthcoming.
- Whitelock, D. 1979:*
English Historical Documents c. 500-1042, 2nd ed., Oxford.
- Wrathmell, S. 1984:*
The vernacular threshold of northern peasant houses, Vernacular Architecture 15, London, 29-33.
- Wrathmell, S. 1989a:*
Peasant houses, farmsteads and villages in north-east England. In: Aston, M. - Austin, D. - Dyer, C.: The Rural Settlements of Medieval England, Oxford, 247-67.
- Wrathmell, S. 1989b:*
Wharram: a Study of Settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds 6, York University Archaeological Publications 8, York.
- Wrathmell, S. 1994:*
Rural settlements in medieval England: perspectives and perceptions. In: Vyner, B.E. (ed.): Building on the Past, Royal Archaeological Institute, London, 178-94.
- Zimmermann, W. H. 1998:*
Pfofen, Ständer und Schwelle und der Übergang vom Pfofen- zum Ständerbau - eine Studie zu Innovation und Beharrung im Hausbau. In Strahl, E. (ed.): Probleme der Küstenforschung in südlichen Nordseegebiet, 25, Oldenburg, 9-241.