

THE DATING OF TIMBER FRAMED VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE IN SUSSEX

by R. T. Mason, F.S.A.

The dating of artifacts is a fundamental duty of the archaeologist; study is ineffective without it. The pre-historian is fortunate as to the wide limits within which his dates may be set; the medievalist needs far greater precision if his results are to be of service. The following remarks are an attempt to apply to vernacular buildings similar methods to those so long used in other fields, that is, dating by style and typology.

In the matter of style we are greatly assisted by our nineteenth century predecessors. Their superb architectural scholarship is beyond question and they bequeathed to us a chronology which, in spite of critical examination by succeeding generations, has withstood the test of time. Today, therefore, all our major buildings, where they cannot be related to documentary evidence, may be dated within reasonable limits by their architectural features. Minor buildings, however, present a much more difficult problem. Not only is documentary evidence almost invariably lacking, but architectural features of the more elaborate kinds are apt to be very scarce. But, because of the exceptionally high quality of vernacular architecture in Sussex the local antiquary is in a more favourable position than many of his fellow-observers elsewhere. Documentary evidence apart, and disregarding for the moment the possible contribution of science, we ought to be able to date our minor buildings by stylistic or typological means, provided always that due regard is paid to historical feasibility in any particular case, and provided also that too much is not expected, leaving the limits of accuracy reasonably broad.

Style was investigated by the Victorians with great thoroughness.¹ In recent years the study of typology has greatly advanced and is a much more useful tool than as recently as twenty years ago. But the two must necessarily be used together and the objective in any particular case must be to arrive at a decision which has as much support from both as can be obtained in the circumstances. They must be both reconcilable and compatible for such a decision to be valid. We are unlikely by these means to achieve a precision greater than that of the Victorians, because changing fashions, though clearly discernable over a period of time, are erratic and irregular within it—varying from region to region. We are, however, probably quite justified in believing that when a man built a house he built it in the latest prevailing fashion—that is, of course, in the latest fashion of which he had knowledge. We surely do not need to envisage a situation where the farmer's mouldings are being cut in an outmoded Decorated style whilst those of his neighbour, the squire, are being cut in the new Perpendicular. Especially so since both may very well be employing the same carpenter.

¹ See, in particular, the numerous works of J. H. Parker.

Accepting the premise that stylistic criteria are as reliable and useful in vernacular architecture as they are in the supra-vernacular the question naturally arises as to whether scientific methods would be more accurate. The Carbon 14 method can now be applied more successfully to medieval carpentry, and advances have certainly been made in the field of dendrochronology. However, it would seem that neither at the present time yields narrower limits than do style and typology together, when they can be successfully reconciled.¹ But there are, of course, numerous examples in which style is virtually non-existent and typology is in doubt. In such cases dating by scientific means is the only resort available, and their application might well reinforce the typological sequences now being worked out.

Whereas style may be regarded as a nation-wide phenomenon, typology can be seen to vary from region to region. The application of typological dating, therefore, requires an extensive regional knowledge and a general appreciation of the national scene so that local idiomatic practices may be recognised and assessed. A typical instance of this need arose in the case of Houghton Place admirably described by W. D. Peckham.² The author (in consultation with P. M. Johnstone) suggested a mid fourteenth century date for this building without either knowing, apparently, that the very remarkable roof-structure, which is well illustrated in the article, is an almost exact replica, scaled down, of that covering the thirteenth century church at Higham Ferrers. Typology dictates, however, that neither of these roofs belong to the thirteenth century and that the Higham Ferrers roof is a part of some alterations carried out there about the year 1360.

In vernacular architecture stylistic dating relies very largely upon appreciation of moulding contours; this is particularly true of framed buildings where elaboration of other details is apt to be somewhat rare. But changes of architectural style are based just as firmly on the development of mouldings as they are on sculpture, tracery, and structural form. Therefore there seems to be no good reason why the old, well-tried criteria should not be applied to them. The idea of relating wood mouldings to those worked in stone is not accepted by some authorities, though no convincing argument has so far been advanced by them in support. It seems, upon the whole, very unlikely that carpenters and masons would be working at a given time in different styles. Building demanded, as it still does, close collaboration between all trades.

Wood mouldings can often be somewhat irregular—so much so that on occasion only an approximation of the intended contours is achieved. This may readily have led to some mistrust, but quite apart from discrepancies which can result from warping and shrinkage, we have to consider a basic difference in the nature of mason's as compared with carpenter's techniques and presumably in the nature of the profile-templates used. The mason cuts his moulding stone by stone and may therefore apply a true or *positive* profile which is an exact replica of the finished work. Upon the other hand the carpenter, dealing with a continuous beam, would necessarily use a reversed or *negative* profile and some irregularity might well result therefrom. In this respect wood is possibly less tractable than stone and a really well-cut wood moulding may well represent a higher degree of manual skill than a similar one in stone. Sussex is remarkable for the quality and abundance of its wood mouldings, and in general they are

¹ For a recent list of articles on Dendrochronology and the radio-carbon dating of timber buildings see *A bibliography on vernacular Architecture*, Vernacular Architecture Group (Newton Abbot, 1972), 135-136.

² W. D. Peckham, "Houghton Place", *Sussex Archaeological Collections* (hereafter abbreviated to *S.A.C.*), vol. 63 (1922), 203-215.



Plate I. 48 High Street, East Grinstead. Dais beam moulding, early fourteenth century. End wall of hall re-built in brick



Plate II. Pope's Cottage, Hartfield. Leaf stop to dais beam, early fourteenth century

accepted view that this type of house emerged in the late fourteenth century. It became extremely popular in the Weald and was by no means despised elsewhere; isolated "Wealdens" are to be found in most timber-framed areas and occur as far away as the city of York.

Open trusses are usually embellished with arris mouldings, generally plain or hollow chamfers. But there are a few instances of arris roll mouldings on arch braces and tiebeams as at Sullington Manor and Chennels Brook, Horsham, with another not far away at Greens Farm near Newdigate. The arris roll is most common in twelfth century buildings but was frequently used in the thirteenth. In at least two of the above examples typology considered in association, points to a late thirteenth century date. Sullington Manor has features which suggest a very early date but is too much obscured by later accretions to permit a firm conclusion. The wide chronological range of Perpendicular mouldings must necessarily present a difficult problem, but with a view to at least a very broad separation it might be suggested that in dais beams the very simple arrangement of large cavetto and two small rolls is probably early (say 1370-1450) whereas the more confused arrangements with a proliferation of small rolls are later (say 1450-1540). The inclusion of small battlements as part of the design is common but affords little help towards close dating.

In typological dating much assistance is to be had from a study of changes in roof construction. Recent investigations have shewn a convincing relationship between the medieval roofs of south-east England and those of somewhat earlier date in France.¹ The most significant feature is the "notched lap" joint which, in England, has generally a thirteenth century implication. It occurs in at least one Sussex house (Sullington Manor) which also has the exceptionally wide rafter-spacing noted as a characteristic of early French roofs. In medieval houses in Sussex the crownpost roof is almost universal. We are fortunate that the earliest closely dated example survives at St. Mary's Hospital at Chichester. This roof, dated by documentary evidence to *circa* 1285 shows the type to have been fully developed mechanically before the end of the 13th century.² It seems fairly certain that earlier roofs were similar but lacking the collar purlin and crownpost. It may be supposed, therefore, that they consisted simply of pairs of rafters coupled at a high level by short collars, sometimes reinforced by short braces between collar and rafter. This kind of roof is found in a number of early buildings as at Chennels Brook, Horsham, Capons, Cowfold, Longridge Farm, Chailey, and elsewhere but it clearly persisted well into the fifteenth century and perhaps into the sixteenth.

The side-purlin (as opposed to the central purlin-crownpost) roof is of high antiquity in certain parts of England, notably the West Midlands, where it can be of fourteenth century date. This does not seem to be the case in Sussex as our earliest side-purlin examples occur in conjunction with crownposts, a form of hybridisation found at Priory Cottage, Bramber, and the Vicar's Hall, Chichester, which are probably late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, respectively. The crownposts are soon omitted however, and the unadulterated side purlin seems to have become established during the second half of the fifteenth century as at Old Place, Pulborough. It overlaps the crownpost-collar purlin design for up to 100 years as it would appear that the crownpost went completely out of favour by about 1540 or thereabouts. The earlier versions of the side purlin roof have windbraces from principal rafter to purlin to

¹ Summarised by R. T. Mason in *Framed Buildings of England* (1974), 51.

² W. H. Godfrey, "Medieval hospitals in Sussex" *S.A.C.* vol. 97 (1959), 130-136.

give longitudinal stability. In the best examples the purlins are framed into the principal rafters whereas in humbler buildings they are continuous and lie upon the backs of the principal rafters. There seems to be no chronological significance in this circumstance.

Towards the close of the sixteenth century a more mature version of the side purlin roof was introduced in which not only are the purlins framed into the principals, but the rafters are framed into the purlins so that a flush upper surface of all components is presented to receive the roof coverings. This continued in use well into the eighteenth century, until the tradition of timber framing was replaced by brickwork and stone. Other roof types occasionally met with are the "queen post" and "queen strut" designs. The latter would seem to belong in general to the sixteenth century and, where the struts are vertical, is sometimes found to be covering an open hall and is smoke-blackened as a result. It is supposed that these must be very late medieval productions—perhaps as late as the second half of the sixteenth century. True "queen post" trussing occurs in association with flush-framed rafters and side purlins in a type of roof which is pretty well confined to the seventeenth century. It is clearly designed to accommodate the demand for attic space and is only found in buildings of two or more storeys. In it the tiebeams are fixed to the wall-posts about two feet or so below eaves level, and has therefore come to be called the "dropped tiebeam" roof; the arrangement leaves the attic space virtually free of obstruction and it is well known that at this period the attic was frequently used as storage and living space. Framed houses of this kind may readily be detected by means of the narrow band of timberwork which runs along under the eaves, but it should be borne in mind that medieval open-halled houses were very often re-roofed in this fashion.

The general overall design of framed buildings affords less help in dating than might be expected. There is, of course, the indisputable fact that open-halled buildings are medieval in both character and date, whereas fully storied buildings (other than those of "continuous jetty" type) are in general post medieval. Here we may reasonably use the deadline suggested by the late Dr. Salzman, i.e. that the medieval period ended about 1540. Among the recognisable medieval types are aisled houses and those with one or two crosswings. There is also a simple type which has a great chamber (with open truss) above either the service or solar ends as at the Priest's House, West Hoathly¹ (solar end) and Downstreet Farm, Piltdown (service end). None of these variations yield reliable dating criteria, and aisling, which until recently was deemed invariably early, is now found to exist in association with both fourteenth and fifteenth century mouldings. Skinner's Cottage at Hoath Corner, Chiddingstone, Kent, which has a single aisle, can hardly, on stylistic evidence, be earlier than about 1450. The single-aisled house is much more common in Sussex than the fully-aisled, and, to judge from published work would appear to be a regional characteristic. There are good examples at Apple Tree Cottage, Henfield, The Old Manor House, Keymer, and Priory Cottage, Bramber. None of these seem earlier than the late fourteenth century.

Patterned external framing, where visible and not extensively altered may assist in dating to a limited extent. The common irregular square panels with heavy curved braces, though evidently the earliest of all forms, was used throughout the whole chronological range of surviv-

¹ I. C. Hannah, "Medieval timber houses at West Hoathly and Forest Row," *S.A.C.* vol. 71 (1930), 128-133.

ing buildings and is not therefore of much service. However, the modest local version of the ornamental framing of Cheshire and south Lancashire may generally be placed in the second half of the sixteenth century or occasionally early in the seventeenth. The Middle House, Mayfield, and East Mascalls, Lindfield, are probably the best survivals. Small quadrilaterals of uniform size belong invariably to some date in the seventeenth century, with a possible slight overrun into the eighteenth; it is very doubtful whether the true timber framed tradition persisted after about 1730. Close studding, the architectonic peak of wall framing, first appears in the early fifteenth century and continues well into the seventeenth. It was long thought to be the earliest type of framing but that is clearly not the case; it may be said, even so, to be the earliest type of consciously patterned framing.

In case the foregoing remarks should impress the reader as an admission of imprecision it should be said that they simply attempt to systematise what looks at first glance to be chaotic and to make the best use of very inadequate criteria. No more is claimed than that the methods suggested are at least as accurate as are scientific ones at this time, and should the latter be further refined, it will be interesting to see how typological and stylistic dating stand up in comparison.