

Review

FRAMED BUILDINGS OF THE WEALD, By R. T. Mason. 2nd edition, Coach Publishing House, Ltd., Horsham, 1969. Price 35/-

When Mr Mason first issued this book in 1964 he was bold enough, or modest enough, to be his own publisher. If in fact no established firm would produce so valuable, so comprehensible a work, containing so much of the author's own recent recording, then our publishing industry was suffering from senile atrophy. All good luck, then, to the new company that reissued it as their first venture. There is no cause whatever to be apologetic about the subject: it has potentially a wide public and a wealthy one, not least in the South-east; and Mr Mason's presentation is lucid and not over-technical, while his matter is both reliable and idiosyncratic. It only remains to ask three questions: how does the new presentation compare with the old; what improvements have been made in the present edition; and what more improvements might follow in the next, in order to fulfil the connotation of the title?

The new edition is by a photographic process, which offers relative cheapness but does not lend itself easily to correction. The typeface is coarsened, but the rather wispy drawings are actually improved by it. The process will no doubt be adjusted, but for the offset half-tones a new, and probably less contrasty, copy is needed, though it is hard to point to any detail that is actually lost. Some of the additional photographs seem to reflect this need, but the quality of brightness, as well as precision, is elusive and it is needed in order to 'sell' the book and its subject. We have much to learn on this matter outside England. A few, but not nearly enough, notes and signposts for further reading are included, and one added chapter which shows the Mason method at its best. It takes as its text one house, the Old Court Cottage at Limpsfield, which is just in Surrey, though just out of the Weald as Mr Mason defines it, and builds on this a very creditable account of what is known of really archaic framing and its progeny, including a 'schema' of major phases of aisled building. This method, laced with exhortations to better understanding, deserves to succeed: it is *vulgarisation* in the good, French sense. Among the qualified writers on the subject there may be better and more vivid draughtsmen than Mr Mason, but there are also many that sound turgid beside him. One can only hope that his book will one day expand to the full implication of its name. It is arguable, but is not argued here, whether the Weald is more of a unity than a barrier, a giver rather than a receiver. It divides itself naturally into a north-eastern and a south-western part, and Mr Mason is primarily concerned with the latter, that is, Sussex beyond the Forest Heights. There is an inevitable imbalance, since by the end of the Middle Ages the east Weald was far more intensively cultivated than the rest, and has remained so, and yet preserved even more of its framed buildings. In fact, such buildings are even more numerous on

the lighter soils that immediately fringe the clay, and there is little discussion of the relation of the Weald to its environs. Furthermore, the book remains, as before, essentially on framed *houses*; little has been added on barns and nothing on belfreys, nor on those significant and accessible little structures, church-porches. On the other hand, the short but valuable chapter, *Town and Village*, is truly pan-Wealden in its implications, and typifies the essential humanity of the book, and its sense of *terroir*, which is not the same as 'folksiness', nor as a taste for the picturesque. These qualities will give the book a permanent status even if it is never greatly enlarged.

STUART EBORALL RIGOLD