ENGLISH HERITAGE

Vernacular Houses Selection Guide

(Domestic Buildings 1)

Heritage Protection Department

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Selection Guide
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1 INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS

Vernacular houses, by which are meant houses built in the main from locally available materials that reflect custom and tradition more than the architectural fashions favoured by the wealthy, are a conspicuous and much-loved component of the English landscape, both rural and urban. They are essential ingredients of local distinctiveness. They are irreplaceable documents of the past lives of people who left relatively few other direct traces and provide evidence of long-lost craft traditions. (For vernacular farm buildings, see the selection guide on Agricultural Buildings). From the mid-nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, architects stimulated by the Picturesque Movement in art and the Romantic Movement at large, looked increasingly to vernacular buildings for inspiration, a trend that was transformed into the Arts-and-Crafts style of the years to either side of 1900 and, in diluted form, determined the character of much twentieth-century mass housing.

2 SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SELECTING VERNACULAR HOUSES FOR DESIGNATION

Vernacular and 'Polite' Architecture There is no hard-and-fast line between the vernacular and the 'polite' (i.e., buildings that adopt the architectural language of the court or the aristocracy). Vernacular buildings were responsive to change and frequently emulated polite architecture but a degree of conservatism remains an essential part of their character. By their nature they will seldom be in the vanguard of fashion, although they often display considerable technical innovation and versatility, and they need to be judged in their own right rather than as feeble imitations of 'refined' work.

Rates of Survival While vernacular architecture is sometimes said to be the architecture of the common people, only rarely do the houses of the poorest survive, certainly prior to the eighteenth century. These can normally only be retrieved through archaeology and what has come down to us is likely to have belonged to the relatively prosperous.

Regional Distinctiveness Having said this, the houses of yeomen farmers, gentry and merchants generally remained grounded in local tradition and locally derived building materials. Assessing their special interest requires some sensitivity to local geology, farming and tenurial practices and craft traditions so that a representative sample of the best and most intact of what is locally important is designated. For vernacular buildings, special regional interest is likely to be of special national interest.

The use of local building materials in vernacular houses (e.g., the roughcast slate of the Lake District or the pantiled roofs of eastern England) means that such houses make a crucial contribution to the distinctiveness of regional landscapes. This means that their significance may be more than the sum of their parts, that is more than the specific

criteria that are usually adopted in designation such as age, plan, building technology, fixtures and fittings might suggest.

Context Vernacular houses are also likely to have strong visual and functional links with neighbouring agricultural buildings, settlement and field patterns, which may sometimes influence assessments of significance. Conversely, vernacular survivals may have an added claim to note where located in urban settings, where such survivals are more unusual, and where their contrast with recent settlement is all the more interesting.

Alteration and Significance Hardly any vernacular houses have escaped alteration. The evidence of change, important in any building type, has particular value in those that have adapted incrementally over as many as six hundred years. Often these alterations are of outstanding interest in their own right and buildings that illustrate a representative or unusual sequence of development should be regarded as strong candidates for listing.

3 HISTORY

Very few vernacular houses survive from before the thirteenth century and relatively few before the fifteenth. Thereafter they survive in considerable numbers in the more prosperous southern counties but in parts of the north sixteenth-century buildings are comparatively rare outside a handful of wealthy towns and cities. In rural Northumberland even the seventeenth century is poorly represented. This geographical variation reflects broad disparities in wealth. Because of this staggered regional chronology and the diversity of materials and the craft traditions to handle them, the major historical phases are summarised in this guide under 'Special Interest' rather than in this section.

Vernacular houses continued to be built into the nineteenth century. As living standards rose, and as canals and railways made mass-produced building materials more widely available, even the homes of the poor approximated to a national standard and shed most of their regional characteristics.

4 SPECIAL INTEREST OF VERNACULAR HOUSES

There are a number of requirements for any house to make it fit for purpose: it must provide shelter and security; heat and the means to cook food; sufficient light; and (in all but the smallest, single-roomed dwellings) the means to move from room to room. Needs will change and these will be reflected in alterations to the internal arrangement and external appearance of houses. Evidence of change as well as of original plan and function is important when assessing these buildings for designation.

Materials The vernacular builder generally used materials lying close to hand but might be swayed by economic or social considerations to range more widely. But even where stone building traditions prevailed, not everyone could afford the cost of extraction and dressing and some might resort to mud or timber instead. Where locally available natural materials were poor the earliest houses may well not survive above ground (e.g., mud in Norfolk) and synthetic alternatives might be adopted quite early, as was brick in the Vale of York and parts of East Anglia.

Building materials are also of historical interest in that their use illustrates craft traditions that might otherwise be poorly documented. Evidence of the early use of materials may be hidden, like thatch, which was typically overlaid, and should be carefully sought out since it may be of great age (e.g., fourteenth-century thatch survives in Devon) and retain palaeo-biological evidence of great value. Some walling and roofing materials are now rare in some areas, such as mud in Norfolk and Lincolnshire, while still common elsewhere, such as the South-West. Roofing material like heather is extremely rare. Any substantially intact vernacular buildings using rare materials might merit protection, and in some cases, where survival levels can be demonstrated to be low (as with the clamstaff-and-daub structures of the Fylde in Lancashire, for instance) even fragmentary survivals can be listable.

Many of the earliest surviving buildings are timber-framed or possess early roof structures (see below). Timber buildings or components are especially important in that they are susceptible to scientific (tree-ring) dating. Timber framing was employed formerly in all parts of the country, though in some upland areas it may never have been common. Since salvaged timbers were frequently used, it is important to establish whether timbers are *in situ* or not. Sometimes *ex situ* timbers may be of historic interest but only exceptionally will their presence, of itself, justify listing.

In general, listing should have regard to the scarcity of certain building materials, both nationally and locally, and should aim to protect particularly complete examples of each vernacular building tradition. Nor is earliness the only gauge of significance: occasionally a late example may be scarcer or more revealing than an early one.

Plan-form, room use and circulation Plan forms tell us much of how these buildings were used, and can have a particular importance in the assessment of such structures. House plan varies according to date, location and the wealth of the builders and changed over time, but not uniformly: some changes took place in south-east England a century or more before they did in parts of the north.

Typically, the *medieval house* consisted of three components: a hall (or principal living room) at the centre; a service end (in longhouses, occupied by livestock, but invariably converted to domestic use) divided from the hall by a screened-off cross-passage or simply opposed doorways and, at the other end, the more private room or rooms, including the parlour. The hall was single storeyed and open to the roof, but both ends could be storeyed. Wealthier families might enjoy more specialised rooms, such as a detached kitchen, a second parlour or a chapel. The linear arrangement was fairly pervasive although one or both ends could take the form of a wing. Smaller one- or two-cell houses existed but very few survive. Occasionally, analysis of phasing – an important part of a designation assessment - might reveal the subdivision of houses into two or more units, as older buildings declined in status. The hall was the centre of

hospitality and had strong symbolic overtones that favoured its retention. Roofs and screens might be decorated and sometimes evidence survives of fittings such as the dais (or high table) with its coving. A combination of such features might warrant designation in a high grade.

The three-unit, cross-passage plan, arranged in line or with a wing or wings, continues with modifications through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but there are many regional variations. Wealden houses, to take one of the most celebrated and dramatic variants, take their name from the area of south-east England where the form was first recognised, but their distribution is much more widespread. They are characterised by jettied (overhanging) ends, which are linked at eaves level by a continuous plate passing in front of the recessed hall range, allowing the whole building to share a single roof. This gives scope for dramatic timber decoration. Very different in character, but roughly contemporary are the stone bastle houses of the Scottish borders where the living accommodation is above a ground floor devoted to cattle housing: they are a sort of storeyed longhouse and reflect the lawlessness of the region in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

An increasing desire in the *sixteenth end seventeenth centuries* for privacy and convenience led to the downgrading of the hall as the centre of the house. It saw the adoption of improved heating (and smoke extraction) in the form of smoke-bays, smoke-hoods and chimneystacks. Whilst driven by increasing standards of living, the disruption of the traditional plan was also influenced by the more centralised houses of the nobility and gentry that themselves reflected continental and Renaissance patterns. Such influences were slow to have much impact, but vernacular houses gradually acquired a separate kitchen taking the place of the unheated service rooms in the medieval house and reserving the hall for dining and more general social uses. The gathering together of flues and hearths in single stacks had profound consequences for the way in which houses were planned in that it allowed two or more rooms to be heated from the same stack. This could be done by placing the stack between the hall and the parlour, often as part of a 'lobby-entrance plan' in which the door was placed directly in line with the stack, shifting the point of access away from the services towards the 'upper end'. Many halls were floored over, creating new upper chambers, and consequently many stacks incorporated upstairs fireplaces as well. As chimneystacks became less bulky, the central cross-axis of the house was freed up, allowing for a more generous stair directly in line with the entrance. It became commoner to place services at the rear of the house rather than at one end, echoing gentry precedents. During the eighteenth century, more centralised plans of this kind became widespread.

Surviving fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth-century chimney shafts above roof ridge level are rare. Fireplaces frequently survive with only minor damage or alteration, though many remain concealed behind later, often smaller, chimneypieces or have been blocked altogether. Where the fire area can be examined it may be found to incorporate an oven, an inglenook bench, a smoking chamber or evidence for a former crane or roasting jack.

Walls Broadly speaking, English vernacular buildings are built either with mass walls (of stone, brick or earth) or with timber-framed walls incorporating non-structural infill, or with a combination of the two.

Timber buildings exhibit considerable structural variations. *Box framing* is the most widespread form. The size of panels can be a useful dating indicator. Large panels are characteristic of early framing; close-studding (where the studs are roughly equal in width to the spaces between them) is particularly a feature of the decades on either side of 1500; geometric patterns based on quadrants are common in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; square panels are common in the seventeenth century; and large panels associated with long slender straight braces (often nailed) are typical of eighteenth and nineteenth-century work. The material used to infill each panel varies enormously from area to area. Wattle-and-daub and lath-and-plaster are widespread, but stone is sometimes found on the eastern fringe of the Pennines. From the sixteenth-century this might include brick.

Aisled construction, resembling the division of a church into nave and aisles, sometimes in stone but much more commonly in timber, is generally considered early. But, while the double-aisled domestic halls are seldom found after the fourteenth century, single-aisled examples appear to have lasted longer and evolved into the 'outshuts' characteristic of many seventeenth-century and later vernacular buildings. By no means all early buildings are aisled but where there is evidence for aisled construction, this is likely to be of significance. Those which retain decorative aisle posts, substantial elements of the original roof, parts of one or more aisles or coherent evidence for room use and circulation may even be listable in a higher grade.

Cruck construction, which has several important variations, is relatively common across northern, western and midland England but almost unknown in East Anglia and the south-east. There is no evidence that crucks pre-date box-framing, but it remained in use for a long time, as late as the eighteenth century on the North York Moors. Because cruck-framed houses were difficult to modernise, many were downgraded to farm use; also cruck frames were often re-used in outbuildings. All buildings retaining substantial elements of cruck construction are likely to merit listing. Higher grades should be considered for examples which are particularly complete, which exhibit a finish indicative of high-status use, or which illustrate relatively uncommon constructional hybrids.

Roofs Roof structures are important not only as evidence for traditional technologies but also for the social meanings they embody since, during the medieval period and into the sixteenth century, the hall (main living room) was open to the roof, which was frequently decorated, sometimes lavishly. Evidence of soot ('smoke blackening') deposited by an open hearth on the roofing timbers and covering materials strengthens the case for listing, and louvres and gablets to help the smoke escape are particularly rare and precious. Better quality first-floor rooms were also open to decorative roofs. Roof structures frequently survive even when lower portions of the building have been extensively rebuilt and should be inspected wherever possible.

Certain roof types are valuable aids to dating although there is no simple chronological sequence. The earliest surviving roofs are of the coupled common-rafter type in which the rafters are of a constant scantling (that is, size) throughout. From the thirteenth century trussed roofs appear, in which the common rafters are grouped in structural divisions called bays divided by trusses, and the trusses are stiffened longitudinally by purlins. There is an extensive range of such roof forms, and considerable specialist knowledge is sometimes required to tease out the full significance of their carpentry.

Some, like the crown-post and arch-braced collar types, enjoyed great popularity and then fell out of use, the former during the sixteenth century, the latter around 1600, while others, such as the king-post and queen-post types, remained in use for centuries. As more houses became storeyed throughout and the upper rooms were ceiled there was no longer any need to decorate them. Increased attic accommodation encouraged the adoption of truss types that permitted free movement at this level.

Buildings with substantial evidence of medieval roofs will always merit listing, even if other parts of the original structure are lost. Those with early, decorative or technologically significant roofs should be listed at high grades, especially if other parts of the structure survive. Post-medieval vernacular roofs will only rarely warrant protection in their own right. Because some roofs have been little altered they may preserve fragile surface finishes and other features such as smoke-blackened thatch or evidence of louvres. This could justify a high grade.

Fixtures, fittings and decoration *Medieval vernacular houses* were simply fitted out with exposed beams, joists and unceiled roofs. Some of these features might be carved or moulded and roof decoration could be elaborate, especially over the hall. Fireplaces and doorways generally received some form of decorative emphasis. Doors and door furniture were usually very simple; windows were originally unglazed at all but the higher social levels and secured with timber mullions and shutters; stairs were crudely constructed with solid baulks of timber instead of separate plank treads and risers: such features seldom survive in anything like their complete form and even fragmentary evidence should be sought out. Extensive schemes of original wall decoration were once relatively common but have now been either damaged or concealed by over-painting or wallpaper. Wall panelling, or wainscot, widely adopted in greater houses during the sixteenth century, begins to appear in wealthier vernacular houses towards 1600, along with the first instances of decorative plasterwork. Painted schemes that amount to more than fragments are particularly important. Elaborately decorated medieval vernacular interiors will always require listing at a high grade where the survival is extensive or coherent. Even partial survivals will possess considerable significance, such is the paucity of survival. Many houses preserve ritual marks by means of which occupants sought to invoke divine protection or ward off evil spirits. These document largely unrecorded folk practices and add greatly to the interest of interiors.

There was an increasing tendency to ceil off roof spaces, often creating attic rooms in the process. The full underdrawing of ceilings with lath and plaster, concealing the beams and joists, remained rare in vernacular houses throughout the seventeenth century, and even in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it is often restricted to the parlour or to a handful of better rooms. Joined stairs begin to make their appearance in the seventeenth century, as do panelled doors, but simple boxed or winder stairs and ledged plank doors remain the norm at the lower social levels throughout. Upper floors of plaster laid on reeds are common in some areas (e.g. the east midlands).

Ancillary functions It is a mistake to regard vernacular houses as exclusively domestic in function. Many buildings housed small-scale processing and manufacturing either in rooms which doubled as domestic accommodation, or in an additional room or rooms provided specifically for the purpose. Most rooms of this sort have been converted to domestic uses, often making them difficult to identify. Roof-spaces and sometimes

upper floors were frequently used for the storage of agricultural produce or merchandise. Longhouses incorporated animal housing while in others, such as the Pennine laithe house, the occupants shared the same roof with a barn and sometimes with other agricultural functions. Farmhouses frequently incorporated a dairy, cheese room or brew house, and such features, where they survive reasonably unaltered, add materially to the interest of the building as a whole.

Urban house types In smaller urban centres and on the peripheries of larger settlements, houses share most of the characteristics of their rural counterparts. But in the centre of larger towns, houses often assumed peculiarly urban forms. The commercial benefits of placing shops on the street frontages displaced living accommodation to the rear of the building or to upper levels (more information can on Medieval shops can be found in the Commercial selection guide). Medieval lock-up shops rarely survive in anything like recognisable form and any that retain evidence of original windows, doors, or stalls for the setting out of wares are extremely rare and will always justify protection. The more substantial urban houses may include a hall placed in a rear range and sometimes a fully developed courtyard plan. Undercrofts, sometimes vaulted, may be found in the more commercially valuable streets of medieval towns.

The urban vernacular tradition lasted into the nineteenth century (and has never altogether disappeared). As outlined above, the buildings that have come down to us tend to be the more solidly constructed and hence more opulent examples. Many cities retain examples of transitional construction in which the conventions of polite building are modified by vernacular approaches. Plan forms can vary to suit multiple occupancy; staircases can be configured to suit particular patterns of use; space can be found within a house for industrial uses; and re-used materials can be incorporated into a structure. The evidence of lower status dwellings survives particularly unevenly, and it can sometimes require further analysis to identify the true importance of a building.

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