

For well over two centuries now the cathedrals and parish churches of England together with the houses of the aristocracy and gentry have been intensively studied, while the homes of the common people — vernacular architecture — have been until recently almost wholly ignored as a subject of academic concern. When any interest was taken in such buildings it was usually by painters, and latterly photographers, attempting to create an image of a mythical pre-industrial England where happy rustics lived in pretty cottages.

This attitude was compounded of romanticism, of anti-industrialism and of regret at the destruction of the English peasantry. It arose in the late 18th century and later; at a time when old-type houses were ceasing to be built in the countryside and were being replaced either by rows of utilitarian housing or by „estate cottages“, designed by professional architects and erected by landowners modernising their estates. These houses often provided good accommodation by the standards of the time, but they were in their form, in their material and in their style wholly alien from what had gone before. At the same time other landowners, imbued

with Malthusian notions, were pulling down as many old farmhouses and cottages as they could.

As a result, by the beginning of the 19th century vernacular architecture, as it had been known for the last three to four centuries, was dead throughout England and it was partly for this reason that the study of it began later than on the Continent, where it was still a living entity. It was not until 1898 that the first attempt at a serious study appeared: *The Evolution of the English Home*, by Sidney Addy. In the years following two books and a few articles appeared, but it was only after the second World War that the subject attracted wide attention.

The immediate cause of this new interest was the change that had come over the study of history in the universities and the teaching of it in the schools; a change that was itself a result in part of the changed position of Great Britain in the world. The emphasis upon political and diplomatic history gave way to an interest in social history, so that the marriages and wars of dynasties, and even the acquisition of an empire, were of less interest than the fortunes and the

The Bell, Hurley, Berks. The gabled inn of a Thameside village.



The New Inn, Gloucester. A corner of the famous galleried courtyard.





The Greyhound, Corfe, Dorset. *In the shadow of the Castle Knoll.*

Bisley, Gloucester Shire. *A small village inn in the South Cotswolds.*



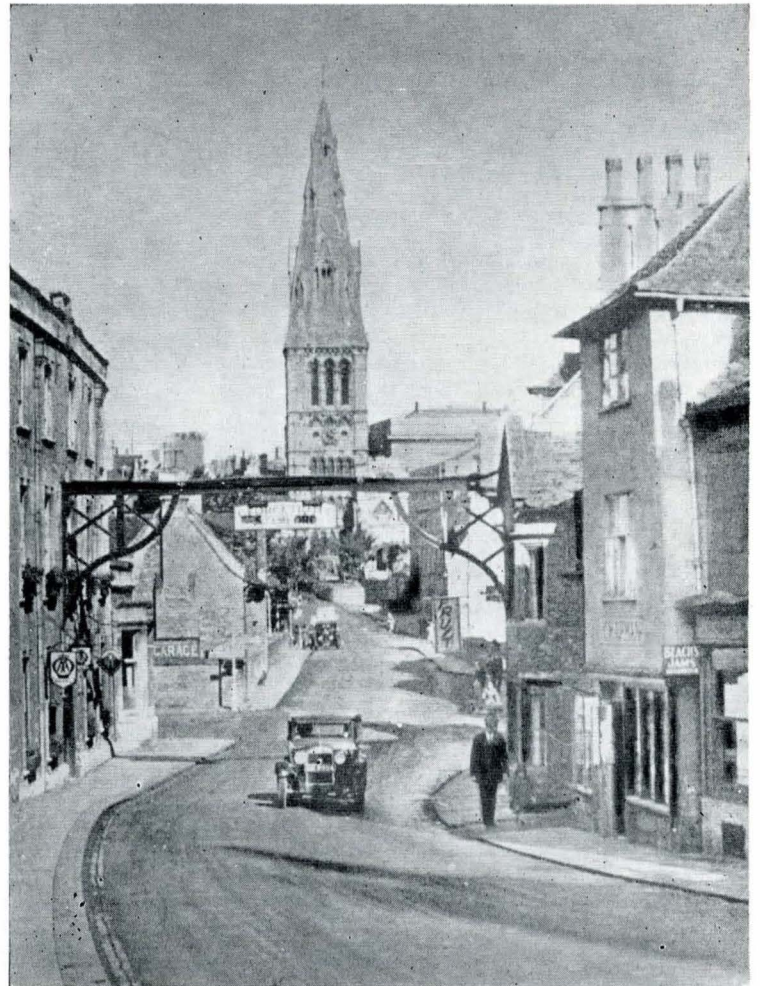
way of life of ordinary people. In 1952 the Vernacular Architecture Group was founded and it is today over 300 strong, despite a policy of restricting membership to active researchers. It publishes an annual journal with a circulation of nearly 1,000 copies and holds an annual 4-day conference attended by 70–80 people. Currently two universities include, or shortly will include, a course on the history of vernacular architecture in the curriculum for a B.A. degree. Like history and archaeology and art-history in earlier years, vernacular architecture is about to become part of an academic discipline.

The study of English vernacular architecture is essentially a historical study and the viewpoints and the interests of its students vary in accordance with their views of historical development. At one level, that of the use of materials and of constructional techniques, differences in approach are generally not of any great importance. But some questions, as for example the relationship of cruck buildings (those in which a pair of inclined timbers rise from the ground and join at the apex to support the roof) and box-frame buildings (in which a triangulated roof is placed upon a framework of horizontal and perpendicular timbers) lead into wider considerations of cultural associations and social and economic changes; for their solution depends not solely upon establishing the facts, but upon interpreting them as well.

One of the major problems in the study of English vernacular architecture is to account for the very marked differences between one part of the country and another; differences not only in the use of materials, methods of constructions, and forms of houses but in the numbers and dates of surviving examples. For example, in the South East very many vernacular buildings of stout timber survive from the late Middle Ages; in the North West the earliest surviving vernacular buildings are of stone and date from the 17th century.

Broadly, there are two schools of thought about this problem. The dominant one sees present regional variations as the modern consequence of old-age differences based upon different physical environments, upon different cultural tra-

The George, Stamford, Lincolnshire. *The famous coaching inn, with a glimpse of the town and of St. Mary's spire.*





The Crown, Nantwich, Cheshire

ditions and upon different ethnic origins. For example, cruck buildings, which survive mostly in the upland areas of the North and the West are considered to be a „highland“ form, to belong to a wholly different tradition from box-frame buildings and perhaps to be of „Celtic“ origin. On the other hand crown-post roofs, of which the great majority are found in the South East, are considered to be a „lowland“ form, perhaps introduced from the Continent by that band of Norman, Breton and Flemish adventurers who followed William the Conqueror in 1066.

The other school, very much in a minority, starts from a different standpoint. It does not deny the existence of regional variations but claims that those observed at present are not of immense antiquity but have come about in the course of the last five or six centuries, as the result of uneven development between one part of the country and another. It considers that to speak in terms of eternal „highland“ or „lowland“ forms is misleading and that whatever cultural distinction there may once have been between „Celts“ and „Anglo Saxons“ and „Norman-French“ had been eliminated from English society by the end of the 14th century, that is before the appearance of the earliest of those vernacular buildings which we know today.

But schools would agree that the study of vernacular architecture is not an end in itself, but serves the larger end of the study of English history to which it can contribute information about matters which documents often overlook.

The first school stresses the continuity in English history and the effect upon vernacular houses of tradition and environment; the second is conscious of the many changes that vernacular architecture has undergone in response to changes in social conditions and class relationships. The two viewpoints have been presented here, for sharpness of delineation, as though they were wholly irreconcilable, but in fact many writers on the subject sometimes embrace one view and sometimes the other; and occasionally both at once. The pre-

sence of conflicting views is to be welcomed, for it is from the clash of opinions, and the resulting enquiries, that new truths emerge and that old errors are banished. What is perhaps less healthy is that neither viewpoint is often expressed directly, but has to be inferred from what is said, and that many writers, and indeed many younger writers, tend to accept unquestioningly the concepts of the established authorities. The English, a famous German once remarked, „have a habit of regarding the first form of appearance of a thing as the cause of its existence“ and it has to be admitted that many students of vernacular architecture think that they have explained cruck building or crown-post roofs when they have located the earliest known example.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to end this brief sketch on a critical note. It is not complacent to say that the study of vernacular architecture is flourishing in England at the moment and there is every hope that it will before long become a recognised academic discipline and, what is more important, a valuable tool in unravelling some of the problems of English history in the late medieval and early modern periods.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans la première partie de l'étude, l'auteur montre les circonstances dans lesquelles l'architecture vernaculaire anglaise n'a commencé à susciter l'intérêt des chercheurs que vers la fin du XIX^e siècle, et surtout après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, à la faveur des nouvelles tendances des études historiques, de plus en plus orientées vers les aspects sociaux. En 1952 a été fondé un „Groupe d'architecture vernaculaire“, qui publie une revue et organise des sessions annuelles. L'un des problèmes majeurs de l'étude de l'architecture vernaculaire anglaise — qui est, dans son ensemble dominée par les points de vue historiques — est l'interprétation des différences marquées relevées d'une région à l'autre. On peut distinguer, dans les grandes lignes, deux conceptions à cet égard: l'une selon laquelle ces variations régionales sont dues à des différences très anciennes d'environnement, de traditions et d'origine ethnique; l'autre, en nette minorité par rapport à la première, qui, sans contester l'existence de différences régionales, considère celles-ci comme de date relativement récente (les cinq ou six derniers siècles), dues au développement inégal des zones respectives; selon les adeptes de cette conception, les différences culturelles entre Celtes et Anglo-Saxons d'une part, Normands et Français de l'autre ont disparu dès la fin du XIV^e siècle, avant l'apparition des premières constructions vernaculaires connues.