

INTRODUCTION

IN this second volume, the greater medieval houses of central England and Wales are divided into five geographical areas. The English counties between the valleys of the Trent and the Thames are grouped into four regions – East Anglia, the East Midlands, the Central Midlands, and the West Midlands to the Welsh border. Each region is usually made up of three or four counties, based on the pre-1974 boundaries, grouped by geographical or historical considerations. The Welsh counties make up the fifth region.

The form follows that adopted in the first volume which covers northern England. The houses surveyed in each section are prefaced by two introductions giving the historical background and an architectural overview of the region. One of these houses also serves as an introduction to an essay covering a broader aspect of medieval domestic architecture. The gatehouse of Butley Priory in Suffolk draws attention to the wide range of monastic residential buildings. Hunsdon House in Hertfordshire introduces the subject of fifteenth-century defensive tower-houses, as Wingfield Manor in Derbyshire similarly does for residential tower-houses. Goodrich Castle in Herefordshire leads to a discussion on aristocratic palace-fortresses and their successor, the trophy house. Regional bibliographies are selective, while those listed under each house are limited to works which contribute to our knowledge of that building. They are in date order to reflect changing assessments of a property.

In the case of Wales, the historical and architectural introductions are combined with the survey to form an assessment of domestic architecture during the later middle ages. English students' knowledge of Welsh history between Edward I's conquest and the Union with England in 1538 tends to be extremely sketchy. Yet Welsh houses cannot be appreciated without an understanding of the geography of the country, its political history, its social structure, its cultural patterns, and the complex relationship between its people, the English aristocracy, and the government of England. English interests and practices permeated Welsh domestic architecture which nevertheless developed along quite different lines, hitherto ignored by English writers. An extended overview has therefore been adopted in place of the introductions and survey which would not have brought out the critical differences and parallels between Welsh and English houses, or the factors that determined them.

The preface to Volume I detailed the scope of *Greater Medieval Houses of England and Wales*. It covers the houses of the crown, the aristocracy, and the gentry – titular magnates and barons (ecclesiastical as well as secular), knights, esquires, and lesser landowners – between 1300 and 1500. The book is not intended to be comprehensive but it seeks to cover all primary houses built by the upper

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-58131-8 - Greater Medieval Houses of England and Wales 1300–1500: Volume II: East Anglia, Central England, and Wales

Anthony Emery

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GREATER MEDIEVAL HOUSES OF ENGLAND AND WALES

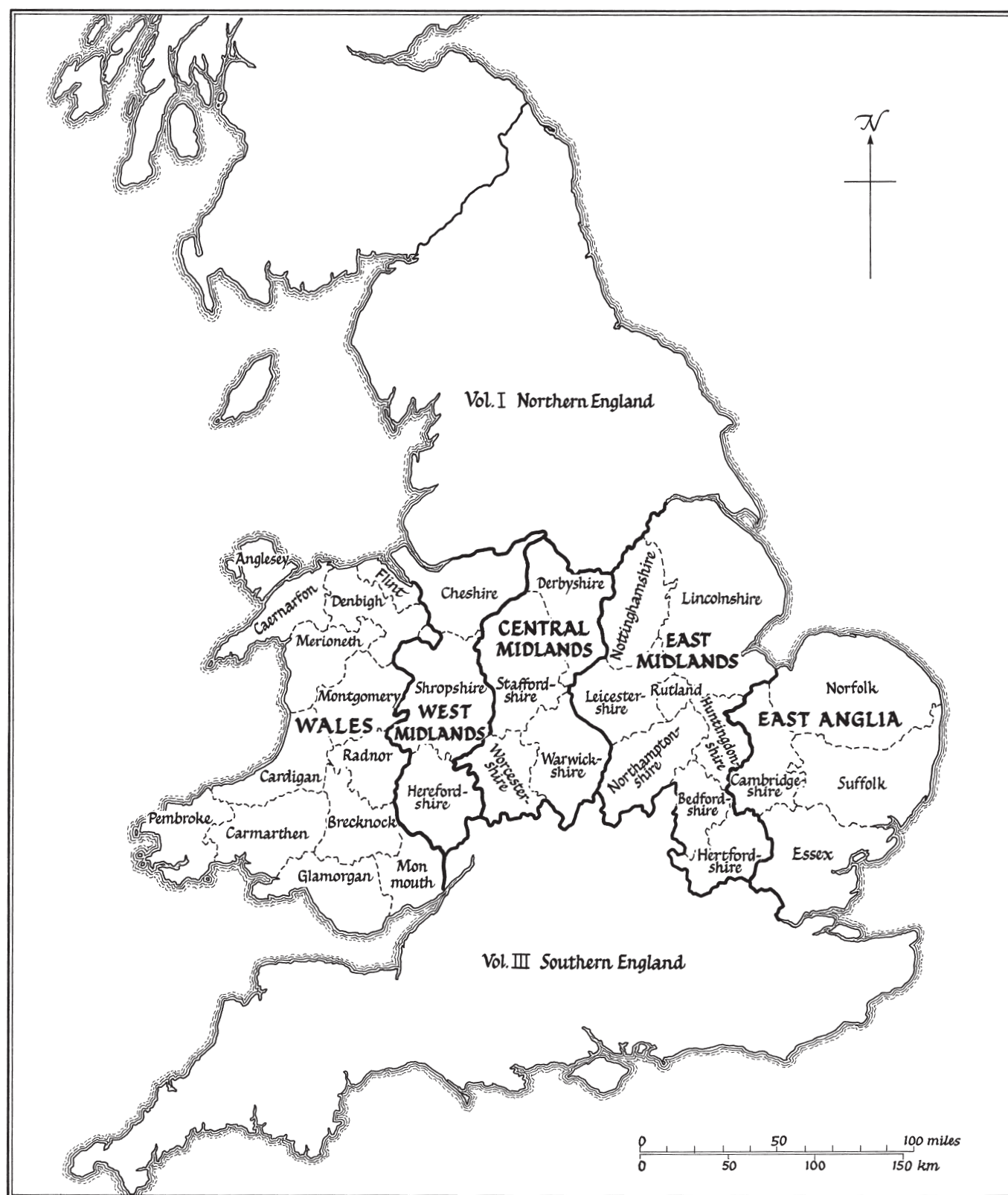


FIGURE 1 The region covered in Volume II

INTRODUCTION

ranks of late medieval society, and most secondary houses, particularly those with evidence not commonly found elsewhere or which illustrate a stage in house development. Secular cathedral closes, town houses, and vernacular dwellings are not included as they warrant separate treatment. The opportunity though, has been taken to consider communal domestic buildings which are highly relevant to the development of the medieval house but too frequently treated as separate subjects. Apart from the monastic evidence already mentioned, brief surveys are included on guild halls (under Coventry, St Mary's Hall), secular colleges of priests (Norwich, Carnary College), and academic colleges (Cambridge), together with deer parks (Bradgate Park), royal building activity (Fotheringhay and Hertford castles), and domestic art in East Anglia and Wales. Granges and domestic interiors and furnishings will be considered further in Volume III.

This inclusion of buildings from the wider field of secular architecture during the later middle ages raises the question of why medieval houses have been subject to less attention and academic interest than that given to fortresses, colleges, or monastic foundations. For the past hundred years, the study of the medieval house has stood in the shadow of that of the castle. The latter's more dramatic character, its immediate appeal to children, and site accessibility have led to an unbroken line of popular and academic books. If the former have concentrated on fluttering banners, glistening armour, and derring-do knights to create an over-ripe picture of medieval life, the latter have tended to overlook the problems of peacetime occupation, inadequate food and water resources under siege, the boredom of guard duties, and the misery of unheated and rain-penetrated rooms. Architectural historians have compounded the problem by over-emphasising a castle's military purpose and defensive technology to the exclusion of its domestic, social, administrative, and judicial rôles. The tide has only just begun to turn. Nevertheless, the 500 or so masonry castles in England and Wales, mostly ruined, are far better known and have been studied in far greater detail than the 700 or so greater houses in England and Wales, mostly roofed and frequently inhabited. Yet medieval houses and castles are complementary, not independent developments.

The life of most fortresses terminated abruptly after the mid-seventeenth century civil wars, if not earlier. On the other hand, the majority of medieval houses have enjoyed continuous occupation since their construction. Occupation frequently inhibits or prohibits examination. Yet houses were just as important to the fabric of medieval society, possibly more so for the majority of people, and they need to be rescued from their undeserved neglect. They lack the immediate appeal of an Elizabethan prodigy house, the grandeur of a Georgian mansion, or the over-ripeness of a Victorian country house, but medieval houses are the begetter from which later residences developed.

The Roman house was the importation of a foreign tradition which played no further part in the development of English architecture after its abandonment by the early fifth century. The evidence of Anglo-Saxon houses is essentially archaeological with some documentary support. In her detailed surveys, Margaret Wood described thirty-nine Norman houses and seventy thirteenth-century residences, figures that would be higher today, while these three volumes cover nearly 700 houses from the following two centuries and make no attempt to be exhaustive. The medieval house is the root from which our present houses have branched. It may be a

truism that the basic components of our homes – entry hall, with-drawing room, kitchen and bedroom – are the same as those of our medieval forebears but it is one that needs to be restated. There is immense satisfaction in establishing the origins of these units and following the infinitive variety of their development. It is only with the medieval house that we can approach, physically and meta-phorically, the precursor of our own dwellings. And in the case of those between 1300 and 1500, they are usually on a scale and in a form to which we can relate more immediately than to peasant long-house excavations or the trumpeting mansions of the Georgian age.

There was no standard plan. Medieval houses had the common components of hall, chamber, and offices, used and developed in intriguingly different ways and subsequently extended by other structures reflecting different social ranks and culture. Hall, chamber, and offices were also a feature of castles, but fortresses were essentially site-determined, defensive in purpose and execu-tion, and were not the progenitors of the dwelling house of today.

Few medieval houses stand untouched by later generations. Replacement and continuous occupation frequently mean that a house's origins have been modified, extended, defaced, or virtually obliterated. The almost total completeness of a Haddon Hall or Berkeley Castle, and the survival of a single period house such as Bolton Castle or Wingfield Manor is rare. The survival of little more than the hall or possibly the chamber is more usual. Piecing the evidence together from the remains of a single wall, a window, a roof structure, or a partition is like reconstructing a crime from the fragmentary evidence left by the perpetrator. Needless to say, the evidence can be conflicting, adding to the enjoyment of the dis-coveries. Though one hopes to make a convincing case for the reconstruction, other conclusions may be equally valid. One of the joys of examining standing buildings is that the evidence used for its interpretation by an earlier generation can be re-examined, possibly enhanced with more recent information, and the earlier assessment confirmed or modified.

The thread of hall, chamber, and offices stretches from at least the eleventh century to the present day. Initially separate units, their conjoining in a single structure forms the first critical phase in the development of the greater house in England and Wales. As this had occurred before the close of the thirteenth century, our period covers the second stage in the story of domestic architecture. It includes the expansion of this all-important heterogeneous structure, and the addition of further discrete units reflecting the greater wealth and developing hierarchy of late medieval society. Some of these developments are structural, such as the abandonment of aisled halls and the introduction of household lodgings, galleries, and tower-houses. Some are cultural, such as restricting access, the desire for privacy, and the development of separate suites for the owner and his wife. None of these changes was sudden. Like the introduction of the longbow in the fourteenth century or hand cannons before the close of that century, changes were evolutionary, not revolutionary.

These volumes close at the point when the third critical phase of house development was initiated – the reversal from an inward-looking to an outward-facing structure which no longer reflected its internal functions. During the sixteenth century, windows were punched into hitherto unbroken exterior walls and regularised, courtyards were opened up, and balanced façades became standard. Form took precedence over function so that multi-fenestrated exteriors gave no indication of internal layout, while the introduction of

GREATER MEDIEVAL HOUSES OF ENGLAND AND WALES

internal passages, staff stairs, and smaller rooms improved circulation, contributed to room specialisation, and ensured the pre-eminence of social status and privacy.

The story of the larger house in England and Wales is of absorbing interest to many people. The methodology of study is secondary to the visual experience as demonstrated by the hundreds of houses open to the public and by the millions of visitors to them each year. Post-medieval writers have been more effective in explaining the construction and function of a Tudor or Georgian house to the public than the specialists of an earlier age. Laypeople often ask the pertinent questions as to why houses develop in the way they do, and what the reasons are for the changes observed. But they have been discouraged from pursuing their interest in medieval houses because houses are rarely mentioned by those who practise history, while architectural studies are generally obsessed with planning and construction techniques. A gap has developed between professional historians and architectural specialists through their failure to consider each other's disciplines, while both groups need to disseminate their knowledge more readily to a wider public. The intellectual arrogance of abstruse literature can be off-putting, while the failure to consider the broader issues impoverishes a person's understanding of the past. We need to spend more time on the analysis and interpretation of the material we hold to answer questions, rather than simply expand the already extensive database. We need to tap into the years of retirement that many people enjoy, unfettered by research or an over-theoretical intellectual climate. We must stimulate rather than stifle their nascent interest. The public's intellectual curiosity in the medieval house was as strong a century ago as that focused on the castle. The latter has been maintained, but the former needs to be rekindled; people's interest in this wider field of study – and their written contributions to it – should be wholeheartedly encouraged.

The medieval period in England – spanning some 500 years – is one of the least popular in the field of archaeology, falling uncomfortably between the buried evidence of earlier centuries and the documentary evidence of the archivist and historian. Though much work has been done on peasant culture, the archaeology of the greater house is still the Cinderella of its field. Deserted medieval villages, moated sites, and vernacular dwellings have been assiduously studied since the 1950s when they first became the subjects of individual appraisal and specialist research projects. Town houses have similarly experienced a resurgence of interest arising from bomb damage during the Second World War and the subsequent over-enthusiasm by town planners for 'comprehensive development'. The results have substantially modified our understanding of medieval rural, village, and town life but it has not been matched by a similar reassessment of country houses. Of course, continuous habitation and family privacy make such work more difficult, though not impossible, while some residences such as Collyweston, Ampthill, and Thorpe Waterville are virtually green-field sites today. Nor does partial habitation preclude excavation as has been shown at Acton Court, Dartington Hall, and Kennington Palace. Fortunately, the domestic field has been helped by the development of archaeological techniques, particularly photogrammetry, dendrochronology, and geophysical examination. Some of the findings, particularly those of dendrochronology, have been dramatic and brought a precision hitherto lacking in domestic architecture. Much of this work during the last fifty years has been

described by Jane Grenville in *Medieval Housing* (1997) but, as that volume makes clear, the field is wide open for the more extensive use of resources, techniques, and analysis to illuminate the development of the greater medieval houses.

For the political historian, domestic architecture is relatively untilled soil. Students assess the worth of chroniclers, write learned essays on rediscovered documents, and pour over official papers and records. Yet they neglect the standing evidence almost entirely in favour of written evidence. High-status houses, like castles, can tell us a great deal about a builder's taste, his aspirations, his standards of living, and his household size. Such houses reflect power structures, political standards, and social relationships. The personality and criteria of individual statesmen such as Ralph, Lord Cromwell, William, Lord Herbert, or Richard, Lord Scrope can be as easily 'read' from their houses as from the evidence of their correspondence. Maxstoke Castle tells us as much about Sir William Clinton's attitude to life in his golden years as Gainsborough Old Hall does of Sir Thomas Burgh's career success. There is a cross-fertilisation between the disciplines of medieval history and domestic architecture which has tended to be applied more to peasant buildings than to aristocratic houses. Yet the northern palace-fortresses illuminate the Percys' and Nevilles' perception of their standing between the later fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The castles of returning war veterans were conceptually different during Edward III's reign from those built at the time of Henry VI, trophy houses heralded the 'new men' of Henry VI and Edward IV, while the defensive tower-houses of some leading Yorkists were the precautionary measures of an impending conflict.

For the social historian, houses identify wealth and status. They are more prominent and more permanent than any other medium including clothes, furnishings, plate, or staff numbers. They have symbolic and hierarchical meaning, and are a reflection of fashion and change. No new cathedrals were built after 1250, few monastic houses were founded after that time, and hardly any fortresses were constructed for the defence of the realm after Edward I's Welsh campaigns. Houses, however, continued to be developed or expanded throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reflecting the spread of wealth, the rise of new families, social differentiation and etiquette, and the organisation and development of household institutions. Houses at both aristocratic and slightly lower social levels during this period reflect the reordering of space to meet changing social relationships, restricting access, developing privacy, limiting the hall to ceremonial use, and adopting the castellated forms of an earlier age towards the close of the period.

The Hundred Years' War and the consequences of the Black Death greatly encouraged social mobility. Most barons, many gentry, and thousands of Englishmen fought or saw service in northern France between 1337 and 1453. The developing wine trade with Aquitaine and the cloth trade with Flanders brought mercantile wealth, while craftsmen moved between construction sites, pilgrims journeyed to Santiago de Compostella, diplomats attended overseas courts, and magnates travelled to Prussia (e.g. Furnivall 1367), Spain (Gaunt 1386–8), Rhodes (Scrope 1435), and Italy (Tiptoft 1458–61). The movement was two-way. Peter of Geneville settled here from France (Ludlow), Edward I's master architect, James of St George, came from Savoy as did Otto of Grandisson (St Donat's Castle) whose nephew became bishop of

INTRODUCTION

Exeter. These and similar movements helped to draw England away from the edge of European culture and closer towards the centre. Even marriage played its part, as for example, when the Reymes family moved from Suffolk to Northumberland to build Aydon Castle, the Umfravilles relocated from Northumberland to Lincolnshire to develop a towered house at South Kyme, and John Holand and his wife established their family home in south Devon rather than close to the court. These upper levels of society were the movers and shakers of political life, they established taste and social standards across England and Wales, and it is their houses that are studied in these three volumes.

The later middle ages is the most neglected period in English art history. We have no museum in England devoted to medieval art like the Musée de Cluny in Paris or The Cloisters in New York. While there has been a steady flow of exhibitions on Tudor art, no exhibition of fifteenth-century culture has ever been mounted. The one major display covering the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries ('The Age of Chivalry' in 1986) failed to redress the balance between ecclesiastical and secular art, and paid lip-service to domestic architecture with three photographs and a handful of artefacts. Joan Evans' *English Art 1307–1461* was the last book published on our period, and that was half a century ago, while the subsequent volume in the *Oxford History of English Art* series devoted to the critical period 1461–1553 was never written, leaving a hole in the sequence of eleven volumes. The subject is ripe for reappraisal. Despite the irreparable damage wrought by the Reformation, ecclesiastical art still dominates our attitude to medieval culture.

Medieval secular art is scattered and not always in good condition, but diligent searching can bring a rich reward which must start with an understanding of the English house that it was meant to adorn. Peter Thornton's *The Italian Renaissance Interior: 1400–1600* (1991) reveals the richness achievable through scrupulous scholarship. A not dissimilar study on English decoration and furnishings could be assembled from contemporary illustrations and inventories, and from survivals such as the wall paintings at Longthorpe Tower, Cothay Manor, and Bradley Manor, chairs of state at Westminster, Coventry, and Evesham, dais hangings at Haddon

Hall and Coventry, English tapestries at The Cloisters and the Burrell collection, furniture at Penshurst Place and Wenlock Priory, glass at Ockwells Manor and Lyddington Palace, mazers at Cambridge, plate at King's Lynn, and pictures at Gorhambury and Kentchurch Court. And all this should be seen against the background of the many roofed and glazed interiors that still exist, many little changed (though repaired and restored) since their constructions – for example, at Tattershall Castle, Haddon Hall, Bowhill, and the Prior's House at Wenlock.

Panoramas of English medieval architecture are still bedevilled by an almost total exclusion of all forms of building other than ecclesiastical – the churches and the cathedrals. Castles occasion a few paragraphs, community buildings a passing reference, but houses barely warrant discussion. Even though the Perpendicular style has now been admitted to the Victorian pantheon of worthwhile study of the early and high middle ages, it is still Victorian in judgement and ecclesiastical in content. As soon as the Reformation axe falls, severing the artery of religious art, Tudor and Stuart houses suddenly rise, phoenix-like to take its place. Antecedents are barely discussed and hardly ever considered in context. Yet the climax of Perpendicular art was arguably during the second half of the fourteenth century. Despite the peaks of royal and collegiate chapels during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, ecclesiastical art developed few new forms of planning or design. Much of the work was repetitive in character, although touched with individual beauties. During Richard II's reign, secular and ecclesiastical work reached great heights, but in the following century and a half, the baton essentially passed to secular architecture. Ecclesiastical buildings experienced an era of sustained *ostinato*, while its younger sister was marked *accelerando*, leading to the rhythm and melody of Tudor palaces and Elizabethan prodigy houses.

Archiving over all these riches is the joy of appreciating an era so different from our own in attitude, culture, society, and ethos, and yet so similar in the desire to house the family in a way that befits financial and social aspirations. Perhaps we are not quite so different from our forebears as we like to assume, particularly as we study their domestic achievement in central England and Wales in the following pages.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58131-8 - Greater Medieval Houses of England and Wales 1300–1500: Volume II: East Anglia, Central England, and Wales
Anthony Emery
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Part I

EAST ANGLIA

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58131-8 - Greater Medieval Houses of England and Wales 1300–1500: Volume II: East Anglia, Central England, and Wales
Anthony Emery
Excerpt
[More information](#)

EAST ANGLIA:
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



PLATE 1 King’s Lynn: secular cup and cover, c.1340

EAST Anglia is the historical name for the early Anglo-Saxon kingdom encompassing Norfolk, Suffolk, and part of Cambridgeshire. More recently, the description has been extended to include most of Essex as it does here. These four counties encompass the most extensive area of lowland in England, bounded on the north and east by the North Sea and by drained fenland for much of its western edge north of Cambridge. It is a region of river valleys, occasionally interrupted by modest rising ground rather than low hills, with rivers separating Norfolk from Suffolk (Waveney and Little Ouse), Suffolk from Essex (Stour) and Essex from Kent (Thames). The bleak coastline was not such a military risk during the middle ages as in the south-east, but its considerable length facing north-west Europe encouraged the development of the local woollen and cloth trade which transformed East Anglia into the engine of the nation’s prosperity during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The region is still primarily agricultural, densely farmed, and with few large towns. It is covered by a network of small dispersed villages, hamlets, and individual farms linked by narrow roads and green lanes. Though the region has a geographical, historical, and architectural unity, the medieval background of the counties warrants individual consideration to avoid smoothing out their richly textured development and complexity through broad generalisations.

NORFOLK

Norfolk is the fourth largest county in England and was the most densely populated during the later middle ages. It retains over 670 medieval churches, plus a further 250 that have been ruined or destroyed,¹ making it possible to see perhaps two or three towers from a single vantage point as you travel around the county. It has 700 villages and towns, 150 abandoned settlements, sixty-five monastic foundations, and over 400 greater or lesser estates and country houses from more recent times.² Yet of this considerable number of houses, only a handful or two show medieval evidence, all the more surprising in a still rural region.

Norfolk is a fertile, gently rolling, and relatively dry region – propitious conditions for arable farming, though the coastal lowland is frequently windswept and bitter in winter. The Fens hindered contact with the Midlands while the absence of any physical barrier southwards encouraged a stronger neighbourly link than usual. Norfolk and Suffolk have always formed an associated unit – historically as the kingdom (and later earldom) of the East Angles and, after the Conquest, as a single see based at Norwich.

By the late thirteenth century, Norfolk was one of the most prosperous regions in Britain. It supported a substantial population, on a strong agricultural base (notably arable), with a complex social

EAST ANGLIA

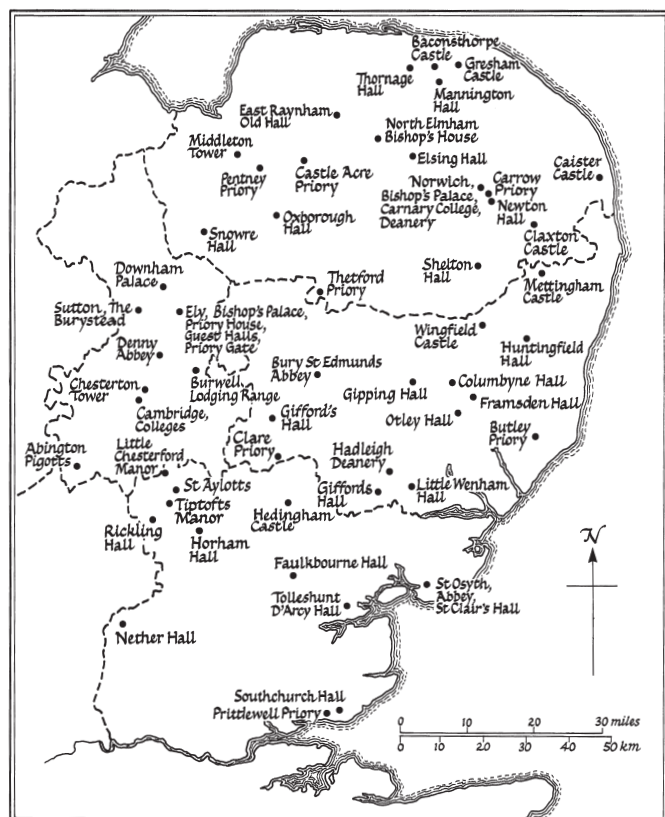


FIGURE 2 East Anglia: residences described in the text

and tenurial structure, and over 100 small towns and market communities. These settlements, most densely distributed in the centre, south and east of the county where the population was largest, had been stimulated by innovative agricultural practices and the development of worsted manufacture during the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, particularly with the introduction of new skills after the arrival of Flemish weavers.³

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn were as prosperous and as populous as Norwich. Although navigational restrictions badly affected the subsequent fortunes of the two ports, there is considerable evidence that both Norwich and the county had recovered from the Black Death and a sequence of poor harvests before the close of the fourteenth century. This prosperity paid for the regional rebuilding or extension of Norwich's many churches, with a particular burst of activity between 1470 and 1530 which saw it become one of the five leading provincial towns in the kingdom. It was the largest walled town in England with forty towers and twelve gates, built between 1297 and 1344, and today encloses more medieval parish churches than any town in Europe with thirty-one still surviving out of fifty-six.⁴ Yet despite this widespread prosperity across the region, few early houses have survived. It has been estimated that there were at least 1,400 manor houses in Norfolk in 1316,⁵ though this impressive number begs the question as to their size, function, and standing. Yet only a dozen or so major residences pre-date the Tudor period with a similar number retaining less extensive structural evidence.

The reason for this paucity is often attributed to the dearth of quality building stone and recourse to timber as the alternative building material until the advent of brick in the mid-fifteenth century.⁶ Only the wealthiest magnates could afford to bring stone from Normandy – as William d’Albini did for his keep at Castle Rising – or stone from Barnack – as the monks did for Norwich cathedral priory, and the prior of Castle Acre for his lodging. Except for carstone near Hunstanton, flint and pebbles are the only available materials, particularly in north and central Norfolk, and this severely limited the range of workmanship and decoration. Yet this did not hinder the construction of the many hundreds of churches. The absence of larger-scale secular residences before the second quarter of the fifteenth century lies not in the absence of suitable building materials but in the physical character, the tenurial development, and the later prosperity of the region.

Norfolk is divided physically by a north-south line separating the slightly elevated chalk ridgeland of the west from the river valleys and lowland plateau of the Yare and Wensum and their tributaries to the east. This north-south watershed tends to delineate the area of water-retentive claylands in central and south-east Norfolk, with better drained soils in the north-east, and the area of lighter soils to the north and west. In historical terms, this division also separates the more populous river valleys and regions of open land, pastoral farming, and small landowners in the east from the area of more intensive arable activity, post-medieval enclosures, and large estates towards the west.

Domesday Book shows that Norfolk did not have the dominating manorial structure of the Midlands but a large number of free tenants, particularly in the centre and east, a dispersed pattern of settlement, and a poorly regulated open-field system.⁷ Pre-Conquest developments led to the later conditions of a particularly complex manorial pattern with the greater number of settlements fragmented between several owners and a multiplicity of manorial houses varying greatly in size.⁸ Many of them were isolated thereby making requests for a chaplain or a licence to hear mass in a house more understandable than in the south-east. The houses at Elsing, Shelton and Wingfield, for instance, are still half a mile or more from church or village. It was only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that substantial blocks of land were amassed in the hands of leading landowners to create the major estates of the north and west, and the much smaller ones in the east and south.⁹

The county lacked the regulated villages of the Midlands so that lordship was weak and dispersed, particularly on the central and south-east claylands. After the Conquest, the d'Albinis had settled at Buckenham and Castle Rising and the Warennes at Castle Acre, but the division of the Albini inheritance in 1243 and the preference of the Warenne earls of Surrey for their south-eastern estates and national politics meant intermittent or absentee lordship.¹⁰ The few large estates of medieval Norfolk were either in the hands of such absentees or were held by the church with its grip on a sixth of all the manors in the county. It was not until the fifteenth century that this pattern began to change with the rise of the gentry, the amalgamation of manors, and the abandonment of many earlier sites, particularly moated ones. Cutting across these long-term trends were more immediate political upheavals, dominated during the middle of the century by the struggle for local supremacy between the de la Pole dukes of Suffolk, as supporters of Henry VI, and the Mowbray dukes of Norfolk who joined the Yorkists in