

INTRODUCTION

NO new cathedrals were built in England or Wales after 1250, and few monasteries were established between that time and their dissolution 300 years later. The castles of Edward I in North Wales were almost the last fortresses to be erected in this country before the advent of Henry VIII's coastal forts and blockhouses. A considerable number of churches were extended or rebuilt during the later middle ages but they conformed in plan and liturgical function to those of an earlier age. On the other hand, houses had begun to take a recognisable form during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which reached fulfilment as a prism of society during the following two centuries. They reflected the spread of wealth, the rise of new families, social differentiation, and the organisation and growth of household institutions. Out of the one and a half thousand medieval houses that have survived in England and Wales, nearly 700 are described in these three volumes.¹ They stand as testimony to the first great age of domestic architecture, for that was not an achievement of the Tudors but a development of Plantaganet society between 1300 and 1500. It is these houses that lie at the heart of architectural and related institutional development during the later middle ages.

The crown, the aristocracy, and the gentry of medieval England were the movers and shakers of society. What they did, and how they did it, at national, regional, and local levels affected the government, the economy, the welfare, and the social justice or injustice of the country at all levels of society. It also determined the character, taste, and standards of society, and their homes are the visible witness to those standards.

Innovations in house design and layout occurred in residences of the ruling class. The crown and the aristocracy had the financial means and the need to encourage the necessary developments. Changes were gradual rather than dramatic, but once a technical improvement or social enhancement had been achieved, it was usually swiftly followed by people of the same social scale. Furthermore, there was considerable mobility of craftsmen throughout the later middle ages, capable of adapting or modifying recent technical developments or the greater residential scale demanded by a client. There was therefore a fairly rapid 'trickle down' effect from high-status buildings. Leading members of society were able to call upon the services of architectural practitioners who not only served regionally distinguished patrons but might well carry out royal commissions. During the late fourteenth century, the master-mason John Lewyn was as important in the north of England as William Wynford in the south-west or Henry Yevele in south-east England. Such people travelled considerable distances to give their advice or submit designs for a new project. Consequently, stylistic developments and architectural innovations

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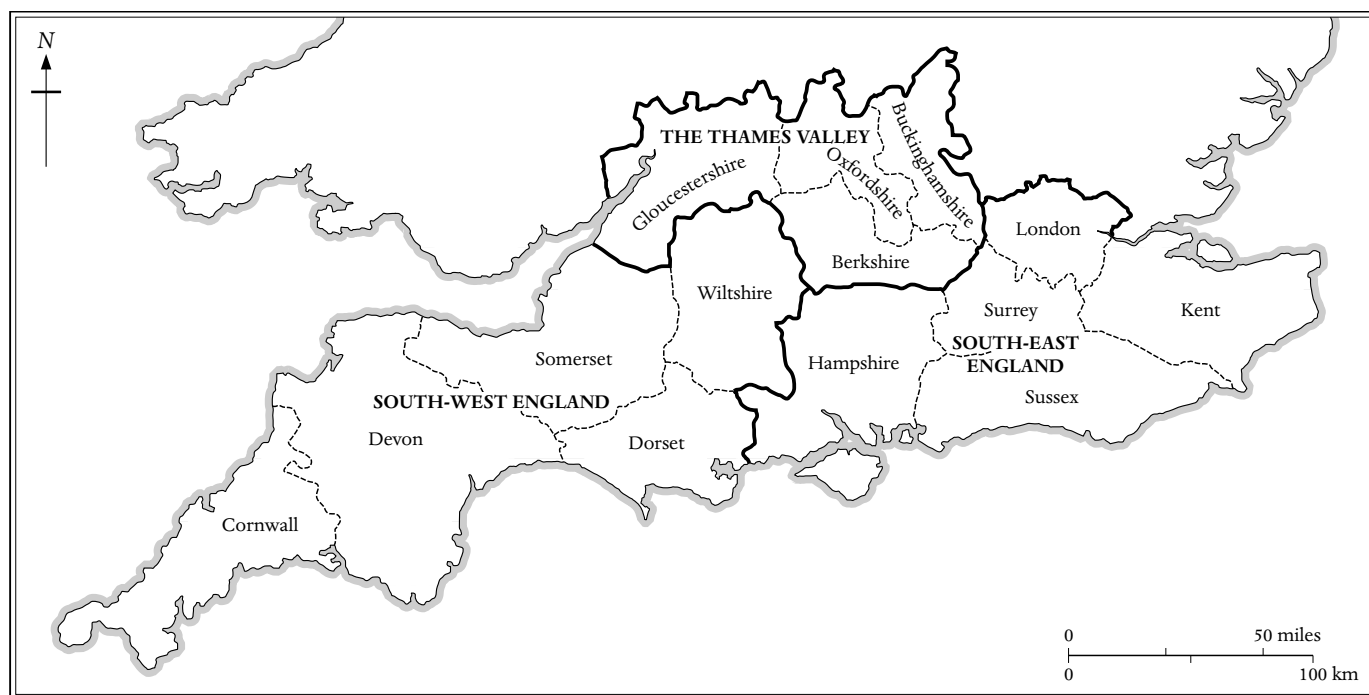


FIGURE 1 The region covered in volume III

spread rapidly, contrary to the commonly held assumption that the further houses lay from the metropolis, the more old-fashioned they became. Enough contracts survive to show that kings, magnates, leading prelates, and élite gentry had a very clear idea of what they wanted in the way of building requirements and laid down precise parameters. Palace-fortresses and large houses were not built from off-the-peg designs but were a reflection of the personal lifestyle and individual needs of the patron.

The consequences were threefold. The houses of England and Wales display very considerable individuality. They follow the basic components of residential planning – hall, chamber, and services – but with variety and character. They made a visual and symbolic statement befitting the owner's rank, with their form and planning determined by military or defensive factors, social status, domestic comfort, ceremonial setting, circulation patterns, and the need for privacy. Yet no two houses are alike, even when built for the same patron or by the same master-mason.

These houses reveal something of the career, taste, and financial resources of the owner. The availability of funds helped to determine the scale and quality of the residence and the standard of decoration and content. A house can also indicate the size of the patron's patrimony, his political and social standing, and the scope of his household. It is a living organism expressing his needs and habits as well as those of his descendants, for most houses are subject to the changes and modifications of later generations. In distinguishing those changes, you also see the aspirations and culture of later periods – whether of the fifteenth, seventeenth, or nineteenth century – as well as those of the originator. More precisely, houses reflect the temper, the fears, and the ebullience of the years when they were constructed or modified.

A house is essentially the framework to provide living space, so

that, apart from its form, the use made of that space is a primary function of the building. This flows from an understanding of the organisation of a household, how the occupants lived, and how the demands for greater privacy were met through the planning function. Churches were built for contemplation, prayer, and ceremony – an envelope for reflecting on the infinite wisdom and wonders of God. Greater houses were built to induce awe, to declare status, and to accommodate the owner's family and his household. Neither were built for the contemplation of architectural historians. Houses were living units, sometimes with decorative features and increasingly so as the middle ages progressed. Earlier historians have been prone to concentrate on architectural analysis and detailing in preference to working from the residence's initial function and purpose, so that my approach has embraced different tenets:

- House development did not occur in a vacuum but as a consequence of political, social, economic, and financial factors. Hence the historical introductions and the references to the contemporary milieu in many individual house assessments.
- Domestic architecture was not a single stream of technical development, emanating from some central but unspecified source. It was a series of eddies – with regional centres – which interrelated and spread to a greater or lesser extent. They were most obvious in Durham, Winchester, and London during the later fourteenth century and in Exeter, Shrewsbury, and Cheshire in the later fifteenth century. These volumes have been divided on a regional basis to help point up some of these local movements.
- Across this movement was a contrary one based on personal relationships and the networking of friends. The royal court, parliament, and private households were obvious channels of intercommunication where senior churchmen, leading nobles, and courtiers could discuss their building plans and influence each

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other, as the royal court did during the mid-fourteenth century, or the friends of Ralph, Lord Cromwell and succeeding treasurers of England in the mid-fifteenth century. The same interrelationship can be seen between the greater and lesser gentry as they served local administrative interests. Hence the thematic essays on tower-houses, lodging ranges, and trophy houses.

- Houses were the framework accommodating the household, the family, and their support staff, of different social rank under the same roof. The major concern of architectural historians with architectural detailing has obscured the fundamental purpose of medieval house development – social distinction, greater privacy, and more elaborate lifestyles. Some of the essays embrace these considerations, including those on licences to crenellate, secular art, and the impact of the Hundred Years' War on English houses.
- We have usually lost the immediate environment of any medieval residence. In recent years, the study of monastic establishments has turned from the church and claustral buildings to those of the outer court. This has yet to extend to the greater houses where the buildings and enclosure were frequently timber-framed and modest. But the larger picture extends to the adjacent landscape, though post-medieval developments, changing taste, and fashion have replaced or destroyed the gardens and parklands that were frequently an adjunct to such properties. Within the last few years, landscaping and setting have been given more weight, particularly in castle studies, while the archaeological examination of early gardens has become a specialist discipline. But we still need to try and establish why a patron chose a particular location or how he modified it to meet his particular needs. Why did John Holand, earl of Huntingdon, build Dartington Hall so far from the royal court, and to what extent did he develop the previous house or landscape the grounds close to his residence?
- If houses are the means to protect the family unit, then they need to be considered in the broader context of comparable residential institutions – contemporary educational foundations, secular colleges of priests, monastic granges and lodgings – with their comparable structural and functional components.

Like most disciplines, that of architectural history never stands still. That is what makes it so fascinating. Studies like this are simply snapshots of appreciation and understanding at a particular time. They will undoubtedly be challenged or confirmed, though there is a danger when the most recent critical appraisal is automatically considered to be the most reliable one. On the one hand, studies change with fashion, personal enthusiasm, or tendentious views (as with military architecture). On the other hand, new documentary sources are uncovered, greater academic precision is applied, technological developments are harnessed, and reassessments made leading to new perspectives (and prejudices). Examples have arisen during the course of preparing this trilogy. In volume I, my view that Markenfield Hall was a single build of c. 1310 was queried by a correspondent who pointed out that there are some architectural features that suggest the incorporation of a thirteenth-century structure. I agree with him.² Since volume II was published, the dendrochronology analysis of Baddesley Clinton has brought some much-needed precision to this essentially Tudor house with only a small standing part credited to 1458–9.³ While I was preparing volume III, an even more radical review was made of Acton Court,

highlighting how the interpretation of an apparently straightforward house can totally change. Within a few years, a house attributed to the early seventeenth century, and essentially considered to be of one build with some jaded classical detail,⁴ proved to be a complex medieval site with a sequence of standing structures initiated for a visit by Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn in 1535 and developed piecemeal during the mid-sixteenth century rather than to a pre-ordained plan. The new ranges were innovatory, structurally and decoratively, and were the precursor of the Elizabethan style. Yet the site retained several medieval buildings to create a vital link bridging the formative years of post-medieval architecture.⁵ None of this is likely to have been appreciated had Acton Court continued to remain in occupation. At how many other houses would such a revealing study be possible if family use did not inhibit such thorough examination? And in this particular instance, the proposed 'redevelopment' programme by a developer in 1984 included pulling down the internal partition with the rarest wall paintings (at that stage unknown), multi-room division, new windows, no site excavation, and the construction of four private houses within the immediate grounds. I have no doubt that some of the other houses in this volume will similarly reveal a more complex development history during the next century or so.

As in the previous volumes, secular cathedral closes, town houses, and vernacular properties have not been covered as they warrant separate study, while the opening and closing dates of the later middle ages have been generously interpreted. The three regions of southern England embrace the pre-1974 county boundaries, with the property assessments prefaced by short historical and architectural introductions. Relevant houses serve as an introduction to the essays covering broader aspects of domestic architecture. Thornbury Castle introduces one on household lodgings, the defences added to Amberley Castle and Halnaker House lead to a consideration of the impact of the Hundred Years' War on English houses, while the wall paintings at Cothay and Fiddleford Manor initiate a discussion on medieval secular art. Regional bibliographies are selective while those listed under a property are limited to publications which contribute to our knowledge of that building.

Visiting a substantial body of houses over an eighteen-year period has been a joy, but it has not been without some limitations. In his introduction to *Castles* in 1926, Sir Charles Oman told intending visitors that they must not attempt to present themselves at a property as the resident owner might be giving a garden party, holding a political meeting, or offering lunch to his tenants.⁶ I have never experienced any of these activities taking place. Owners are often at business, frequently in London, helping with farm or estate maintenance, or organising the opening of the house to the public. Their wives are either driving the children to or from school, maintaining the garden, or cooking for visitors. Permanent staff are rare: part-time staff are precious and few in number. Some houses have been converted into hotels, schools, or holiday homes, while others are in multi-occupation. Even so, I have been overwhelmed by the house standards maintained and the love given to so many properties. The great majority I have visited are still inhabited, with rooms in regular use, beds made and slept in, and kitchens adapted with modern facilities. In more than a handful of properties, I have finished my visit with a headache after losing count of the number of rooms examined and making notes on the extent and sometimes contradictory nature of the surviving evidence. For you are privileged to see areas

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where visitors rarely penetrate, examine roofs, and scour cellars (nearly all post-medieval though Hunsdon was a welcome exception) in the hope of finding earlier structures.

There are few pleasures greater than privacy and I have been most privileged to intrude on it. The amount of time I have been able to spend examining a property therefore depended entirely on the wishes of the owner. I have had to cover a number of houses in less than an hour, walking behind the owner while scribbling at a rate of knots as we move through an environment never before seen by an architectural historian. Usually owners have been most generous with their time, and at some of the largest properties I have been allowed to stay for days. There have been occasional restrictions. I have not taken interior photographs. The exceptions have been few and with permission. Owners are equally cautious about the preparation of floor plans. Some ask that they should not be published, while others only allow a skeleton outline. Occasionally, one or two rooms have been excluded from a visit, for security has become of paramount importance since the 1970s.

Owners and architectural historians see houses in a different light from each other, but there are also other approaches. The engravings of the Buck brothers encouraged the appreciation of the ruinous and Gothick disorder in place of the symmetry and formality of earlier topographical studies, while J. M. Turner's perception of our architectural heritage was steeped in the contagious spirit of Romanticism. Whereas I see Trecarrell Manor as a never completed courtyard residence of c.1500–10, with the granite hall and free-standing chapel with their retaining roofs bearing comparison with those at Cotehele, John Piper saw Trecarrell Manor as 'farm buildings with medieval remains, perfect in rare and once common relationship of old and new. Medieval doorheads, mouldings, and other

fragments here and there . . . lying in grass and nettles. The whole well-placed among old trees in a dip, approached only by remote flower-starred lanes of East Cornwall. The ruins of hall of manor house . . . of exquisite colour, greys, pale, stained with yellow lichen. Interior used as a store, drying place, etc., earth floor, good beamed ceiling. Darkness penetrated by lights from open door, cracks and crevices. Windows largely blocked with slate slabs. Chapel across the yard. Stone floor, traceried window intact without glass. Spreading ash tree with twisting bole at corner. Muddy roads, washing hanging out!⁷ All these are valid approaches to a subject that can be inspiring, frustrating, puzzling, and quirky. It can bring discoveries as well as disappointments, but most of it is a journey of adventure and fun, as I hope the following pages will gradually reveal.

NOTES

- 1 In addition to the 700 houses noted in detail, a further 350 are briefly described in the text. The earlier centuries were covered by Margaret Wood in her two *Archaeological Journal* studies in 1935 and 1950 listing thirty-nine Norman and seventy thirteenth-century houses. As a consequence of more recent research, these numbers should be increased by at least 20–25 per cent. The balance is essentially made up of medieval town houses. Fragmentary and excavated evidence is excluded from this total.
- 2 Since confirmed in *Med. Arch.* 47 (2003) 292.
- 3 N. Alcock and R. A. Messon, *Antiq. Jour.* 85 (2005), which corrects *Greater Med. Houses*, II (2000) 359–61.
- 4 N. Burton, *Arch. Jour.* 134 (1973) 329.
- 5 K. Rodwell and R. Bell, *Acton Court* (2004).
- 6 (1926) v.
- 7 July 1943, quoted and illustrated in R. Ingrams and J. Piper, *Piper's Places* (1983) 96–7.

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Excerpt

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Part I

THE THAMES VALLEY

1

**THE THAMES VALLEY:
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

GLOUCESTERSHIRE

THE River Thames and its tributaries have determined the landscape of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Oxfordshire but the river barely affects Gloucestershire. Its birth there is indistinct and the nascent water barely achieves scale before it has left the county a little beyond Lechlade. The River Severn and the Cotswold hills are the primary features of Gloucestershire, determining three contrasting landscapes. The Vale of Gloucester is spanned by the Severn and its tidal estuary. The latter is flanked by the Forest of Dean towards the Welsh border and the Vale of Berkeley (a continuation of its sister vale) to the foot of the south Cotswolds. This range of hills extends the length of the county and initiates its most lovable characteristics. Beyond the Cotswold escarpment lies a broad, gently sloping limestone plateau dipping towards the distant Thames valley.

Each of these distinctive landscapes determines its building materials, population, and economic prosperity. The Forest of Dean was little populated and therefore lacks major medieval houses. In contrast, the Severn was a leading trade route, frequently subject to flooding but serving a rich pastoral region. The Cotswolds were exposed, windswept, and thinly inhabited, as some parts still are, but the hills provided some of the most profitable sheep runs in England.

Arable farming was the main source of livelihood in the early middle ages but the sheep runs developed in size between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries to become the dominating resource of the region. The lay subsidy of 1334 reveals that the income-generating resources of Gloucestershire positioned the county as eighth in England even though it had a relatively low population.¹ Bristol, near the mouth of the Severn estuary was the leading export centre for the region. By the mid-fourteenth century, it had become the second most wealthy town in the country.

The limestone hills were a primary source of high-quality building stone and roof tiling, with a coloration that ranges from deep cream to pale tobacco tones that has endeared it to generations of church, house, and village builders. It was used for all high-quality houses throughout the middle ages. The low plateau of the Forest of Dean contains three series of rocks, a deep red sandstone suitable for building, coal measures, and limestone with iron ore deposits which provided the livelihood of Forest occupants until the twentieth century. The clay soils of the Vale and the lack of building stone encouraged the use of timber framing, particularly for houses lower down the social scale. The prior of Llanthony used it for his country houses at Prestbury (fourteenth century) and

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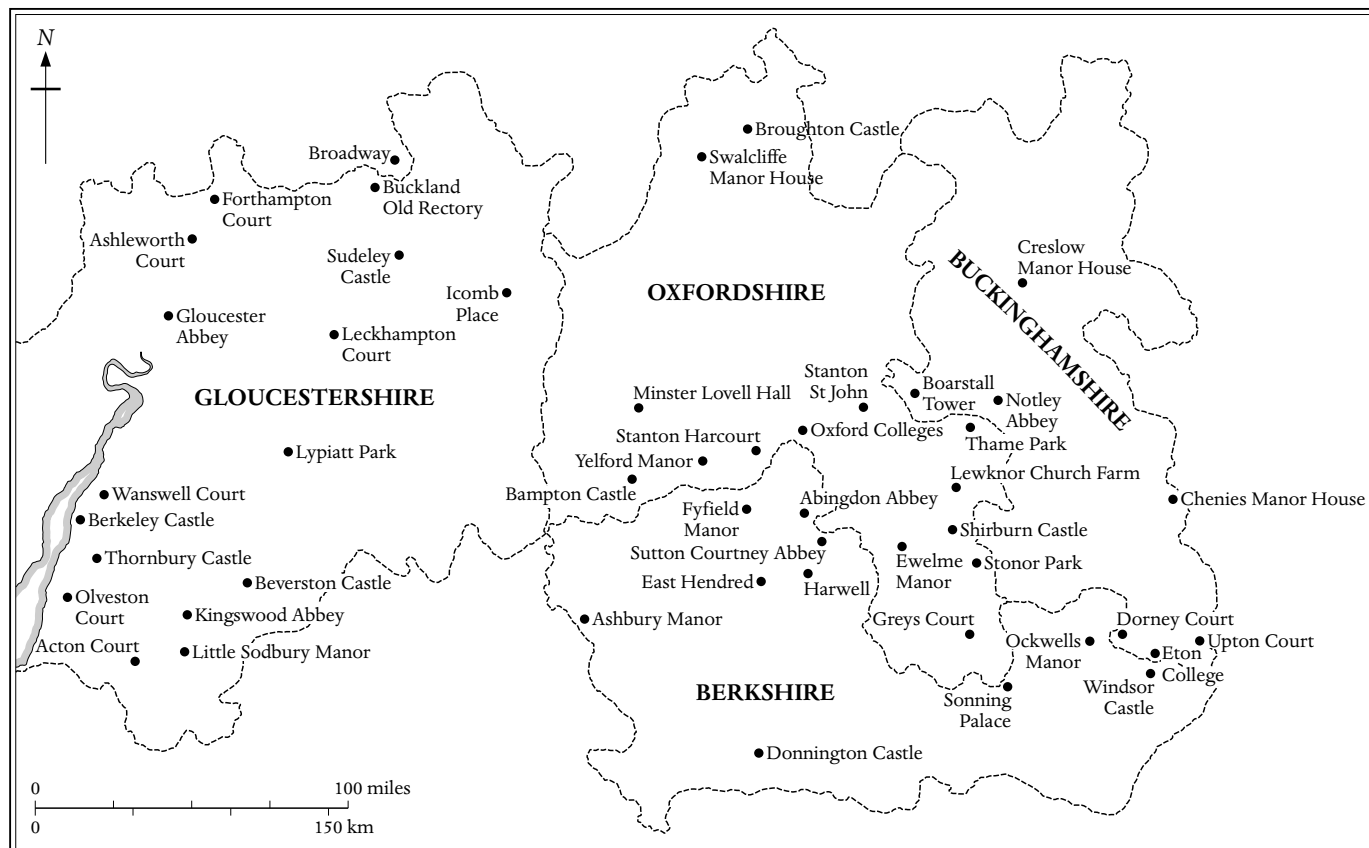


FIGURE 2 The Thames valley: residences described in the text

Brockworth (1534–9), both timber-framed above a stone ground floor, as was Manor Farm at Frampton on Severn (early fifteenth-century rear wing). Total timber framing as at Ashleworth Manor was not socially acceptable before the early sixteenth century. Like Worcestershire, Gloucestershire is still a rural county, and like its northern neighbour it was dominated throughout the middle ages by ecclesiastical institutions.

There were fifteen monasteries in the county excluding short-lived or minor foundations, six of them among the largest and most wealthy in the country. The older-established Benedictine order led with its foundations at Gloucester, Tewkesbury, and Winchcombe, but the three twelfth-century Augustinian foundations at Bristol, Cirencester, and Llanthony were almost as wealthy. Their manors dominated the region, with just over a third of the county in the hands of the church, though much of the territorial wealth of Tewkesbury lay south of the Thames rather than in Gloucestershire. The Cistercian foundations at Flaxley, Kingswood, and Hailes were less important than their sister houses in northern England.

Tewkesbury and Bristol abbeys also enjoyed the benefit of being adopted by the two leading families – the Despensers made the former their mausoleum from the early 1320s, while the lords of Berkeley, who had founded St Augustine's, Bristol, maintained their patronage throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but particularly during the vital years of rebuilding from 1298 to about

1330. Gloucester was not so fortunate initially, but its acceptance of the body of the murdered Edward II at the close of 1327 transformed its finances through royal donations and privileges. In all three cases, the building consequences were among the most innovative for the period in Europe.

The Berkeley family dominated lay society in the county. It might be thought that the Clare earls of Gloucester would be more powerful but they held relatively few estates in the region. The majority lay in East Anglia, Kent, and Glamorgan, and after the death of the last male heir at Bannockburn (1314) they were divided between three co-heiresses with the Gloucestershire estates going to the Despenser family. They lived at Hanley Castle in Worcestershire from the early fourteenth to the late fifteenth century and now acquired the important lordship and manor of Tewkesbury 7 miles away, where Edmund Despenser (d.1375) built a house destroyed in 1471.² Permanent occupation by the Berkeleys made them the foremost family in the region before the advent of the Beauforts in the eighteenth century. This long-living house eschewed national politics in favour of local supremacy, except in the fourteenth century when the two aspects were in tandem. The Berkeleys also had several collateral branches to maintain their influence more widely than would otherwise have been possible.

There were few other major families. Giffard of Brimpsfield came to prominence under John Giffard (d.1299), a follower of the earl of Gloucester with cousins who held prominent positions

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PLATE I Berkeley Castle: hall range

as archbishop of York (d.1279) and bishop of Worcester (d.1302). However, the capture and execution of his son John (d.1322) as a rebel supporter of the earl of Lancaster brought the direct line to an end. The Giffards were the only family to establish a baronial *caput* on the inhospitable Cotswolds. The younger branch of the family that settled in the region at this time did so at Leckhampton Court at the foot of the escarpment facing the Vale, where virtually all the other leading families settled. This included the earls of Stafford who had held the manor of Thornbury since 1348. It was only after Edward Stafford, 3rd duke of Buckingham chose to make that manor house his principal seat and redeveloped it as a magnificent palace-fortress from 1507 onwards that the spotlight of national politics fleetingly illuminated this corner of Gloucestershire.

During the first part of the fourteenth century, about half the manors in the county were held by the gentry.³ Of this broad social group of knights and esquires, the number of resident members of substance has been estimated as about fifty in the 1340s with about thirty of knighthood status, apparently reducing to about half that estimated number by 1400.⁴ They included the four collateral branches of the house of Berkeley at Beverston, Coberley, Dursley, and Uley and lesser families such as de la Mare of Cherington,

Denys of Syston, and Poyntz of Iron Acton. The foundations at Acton Court nearby represent one of the few fourteenth-century gentry houses to survive, together with the hall and services range of Giffard at Leckhampton Court. They and the courtyard walls of the Berkeleys at Coberley and the Willingtons at Yate make up less than a tenth of the gentry houses known to have existed at that time.⁵

It is often forgotten that knights were a broadly based class of society, variously and vaguely defined, with a diverse span of incomes that fluctuated between generations depending on the number of manors they held and the range of additional financial resources they mustered. In 1316, some knights and esquires in Gloucestershire lived on the resources of a single manor (Sir John Giffard of Leckhampton) but the average was about four manors (John Berkeley of Dursley). Holders of six to eight manors were less frequent (Theobald Russel of Dyrham with six manors in other counties), while ten to thirteen manors were rare (Sir John Willington of Yate with eight manors in other counties).⁶

More houses survive from the fifteenth century, including the spectacular residence of the last Lord Sudeley, the Blaket family at Icomb, Sir Maurice Denys at Olveston, followed by the expansion of Acton Court by Sir Nicholas Poyntz during the 1530s. Poyntz

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was one of the local gentry families which rose on the tide of Tudor politics and prosperity to mix with those newly risen from yeoman stock or successful immigrant courtiers. Together, their industry and resources transformed the landowning pattern of Gloucestershire and its houses.⁷

Until the early fourteenth century, wool from the Cotswolds was not significant, but its exploitation by monastic and lay families from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century brought about an era of sustained expansion and economic prosperity. For the monasteries, it offset the decline in lay interest and property bequests that many houses suffered during the last two centuries of their life. Their granges spanned the Cotswolds as their abbatial houses did the Vale. In 1276, Kingswood had eight granges producing wool sales of 40 sacks per annum during the second half of the thirteenth century. With a sack equalling 364 lb, this implied a flock of at least 8,000 sheep.⁸ In the following century, Winchcombe had a similar annual output.⁹ The granges are mainly identified today by their barns, as at Siddington (1245–7 Cirencester), Calcot (c.1300 Kingswood), Frocester (c.1300 Gloucester), Stanway (c.1370 Tewkesbury), and Farmcote (c.1500 Hailes)¹⁰ but the houses at Ashleworth, Brockworth, Forthampton, and Prinknash are still occupied, though the last three have been extended by later generations.¹¹

Sheep farming consolidated and enhanced the predominant position of the Berkeleys and was a major factor in the redevelopment of their houses as well as Berkeley and Beverston castles during the first half of the fourteenth century. It brought similar benefits to a broad span of 'gentle' families as well as those lower down the social scale, but it was exploitation from a distance by families living in the Vale and on the west flank of the Cotswolds rather than on the hills. The anomaly of this era of rebuilding from the late fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century was that though many parishes rebuilt their churches on the grandest scale and many small households and townspeople benefited from redeveloping their homes in stone, the more substantial landowners preferred the softness of the Vale to the high, windswept hills.¹²

There are few gentry houses before Richard II's reign but their numbers swell rapidly towards the Tudor period. Of the forty-seven resident gentry families in the fourteenth century, two-thirds lived in the Vale.¹³ At least twenty-three houses in south Gloucestershire retain part of their late medieval roof structures, a further twenty have features suggesting medieval origins, and a further seven have reused medieval timbers.¹⁴ These fifty homes are admittedly at the vernacular rather than the gentry level but they again reflect the wealth of the region and its residential distribution pattern. As in Wiltshire and Somerset, it is not the absence of later industrialisation that might otherwise have destroyed such homes but the prosperity of the region that accounts for the existence of such a substantial number of houses today of late medieval origin. Even after cloth making supplanted wool growing under the Tudors and Stuarts, the centres of profitability did not move far, only from the Cotswold hills to the valleys round Stroud, and to the Wiltshire towns of Bradford-on-Avon and Trowbridge a little further south.

OXFORDSHIRE

Unlike Gloucestershire, none of the three counties of the central Thames valley makes a natural unit, physically or administratively. More than its neighbours, the county of Oxford straddles the

Midlands and southern England, with the River Thames acting as much as a physical division as the administrative boundaries mark its territorial limits. In contrast, the Thames forms a well-defined and long-standing administrative division between Berkshire and Buckinghamshire at variance with its geographical impact as a primary traffic artery serving the whole region.

None of the counties has a distinctive personality. They are physically modest, rural, and long dominated by the county town, though that has always been modest in the case of Buckinghamshire. Oxfordshire is bounded by the Cotswolds to the west, the Berkshire Downs to the south, and the Chilterns to the south-east. The meadows and pastureland of the Thames and its tributaries are the primary characteristics of the region. However, the transfer of the lowland Vale of Whitehorse immediately south of the Thames from Berkshire to Oxfordshire in 1974 was one of the few sensible local government and boundary changes made at that time. Berkshire and Buckinghamshire are also defined by the tributaries that drain into the ever-widening Thames, and by the low chalk hills to the south. The former created two broad clay lowlands – the Vale of Aylesbury to the north-east crossed by the Thame and the Ray, and the Vale of Whitehorse to the south with the Ock as its most important tributary. The chalk downs sweep south-westwards, with the Thames gap at Goring separating the beech-clothed Chiltern Hills of south Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire from the open, bare downs of Berkshire. South of these downs is the Kennet valley, the major routeway from the Thames at Reading to Bath and the west followed in turn by road, canal, railway, and motorway to the point north of Newbury where Swindon's presence forced the concrete ribbon to cross the downs.

Oxfordshire has been well endowed with good-quality building stone. The Cotswold limestone in the west runs into iron ore deposits to the north-east, creating a distinctive belt of golden brown stone in the area around Banbury and nearby Northamptonshire. Oxford and the university in the central clay vale were fortunate in the ready availability of ragstone from the low hills west of Oxford with better-quality stone initially from Taynton, followed by Wheatley from the late thirteenth century, Upton-by-Burford during the fourteenth century, and Headington before the close of that century. It was the combination of high-quality building stone, a well-organised quarry industry, and river transport availability that made it suitable not only for prestigious building at Oxford and mansions such as Blenheim Palace, but also further afield at Windsor Castle, St Paul's Cathedral, and Westminster.¹⁵ To the south-west, the flint of the Chilterns is far less practical, as Greys Court demonstrates, making the area among the earliest to take advantage of the virtues of brick at Stonor Park (1416–17) and Ewelme (1430s).

Except for the modest acres of the Wychwood Forest between the Evenlode and Windrush valleys, there is little trace today of the royal forests that extended across the centre of Oxfordshire. They were essentially in three groups, with much open countryside and fields between the more dense woodland. Wychwood in the west extended from Burford to Woodstock, Shotover lay east of Oxford, centred on Beckley, with Stowood immediately north of it and continuing to the forest of Bernwood in Buckinghamshire.¹⁶ Henry I had built a royal hunting lodge at Woodstock, much favoured by his successors, King John built another further west at Langley, and Edward III rebuilt the earlier lodge at Beckley. There was also a

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PLATE 2 Broadway, Abbot's Grange: from the east

separate tract of woodland covering much of the Chiltern Hills, with a line of medieval parks centred on the major houses at Thame, Shirburn, Ewelme, Stonor, Greys Court, and Watlington Castle. These, together with the royal residences, were the two major concentrations of private parks. They reached a development peak during the second half of the thirteenth century,¹⁷ with that established by Lord Lovel in 1442 for his mansion at Minster Lovell among the last of the medieval creations.

Considering the region's accessibility and intense cultivation, it is interrupted by surprisingly few large towns, though Oxford and Wallingford both suffered from economic misfortune throughout the later middle ages. People in the south-west and near Henley looked towards London as the outlet for their goods and produce, while those in the north-west and at Banbury found accessible markets in the south Midlands and the Cotswolds. It is in this latter part of the county that the combination of the wool trade and intensive farming practices resulted in the line of splendid churches from Adderbury and Bloxham to Chipping Norton, Burford, Witney, and Bampton. The royal castles guarding the strategic river crossings at Oxford and Wallingford made them significant during the mid-twelfth-century struggles between Stephen and Matilda and again during the reign of King John, but Oxfordshire otherwise played little part in national affairs until the outbreak of Civil War in 1642.

As with Gloucestershire, the largest landowner in the county was the church. The estates of the bishop of Lincoln were important long after the see had been moved from Dorchester to Lincoln four years after the Conquest. The bishop's substantial holding, centred on Banbury, Dorchester, and Thame, was not far less than that of the bishop of Winchester with his estates at Witney (with an early palace there) and in the north-west. Not surprisingly, the monastic houses were in the vanguard of sheep farming,¹⁸ with Osney as the pre-eminent monastic landowner, together with Thame and Dorchester. And of course, the Oxford colleges were fundamentally religious foundations with an ever-growing body of local estates.

Until the mid-fourteenth century, secular holdings had been modest, with no dominant magnate or gentry leader. But the growth of estate sales, particularly after the Black Death, and the increasingly popular practice by monastic houses of leasing their land rather than farming it directly, encouraged the prosperity of several local families. The Stonors, for instance, initially built up their estate by gradually purchasing one manor after another. By 1300, their holding comprised at least a dozen tenements varying from 10 to 40 acres, scattered across the parishes of Stonor, Watlington, Pyrton, Pishill, and Bix.¹⁹ From such modest beginnings, the family developed their landholding and standing in society with a house that reflected the financial acumen of Sir John Stonor (d.1361) as much as his appointment as Chief Justice of