A taste for the vernacular?

by Clive Fewins

If you just can't resist old houses and get a chance to travel round this country at a leisurely pace you'll discover pretty soon that this is an area in which the UK is still – almost unwittingly – a world leader. It's impossible to deny that the traditional vernacular buildings contribute massively to the overall scene in a village or small town and provide enormous, if sometimes subconscious, pleasure to thousands.

When I gaze at a group of these in a traditional village setting on a clear sunny day, one word comes to mind. It is that used many times over by that great architectural historian the late Alec Clifton-Taylor: *delicious!*

But what is a 'vernacular building', or, more specifically, a vernacular *house?* The simple answer is a house built with what was available in terms of local materials and manpower. Such buildings were usually simple, practical and often rugged.

Basically, before the mid-17th century, all domestic architecture was 'vernacular'. It was 'of the region' because architecture in the modern sense of the word did not exist.

No architect designed the historic cottages that provide so much character to the villages of Britain. You look at them as buildings and not as pieces of architecture. The difference here is important. Architecture involves deliberate design involving an element of aesthetic choice. Vernacular buildings, traditionally, do not: they were simply built using the materials that were to hand.

If you speak to people from countries where they do not have such a widespread and long tradition of vernacular building who know the UK well, they will refer to the sheer visual pleasure of these old houses. It results from the organic way in which they have grown and been adapted to suit the living patterns of succeeding generations. More than anything it is the passage of time that makes any vernacular building special and precious. Whether they started life as hall houses or hovels, barns that were later converted, industrial workshops, farmhouses or outbuildings, or redundant buildings of other kinds, the vernacular houses of this country really are the building blocks of the appearance of traditional villages and small towns in every corner of the UK.

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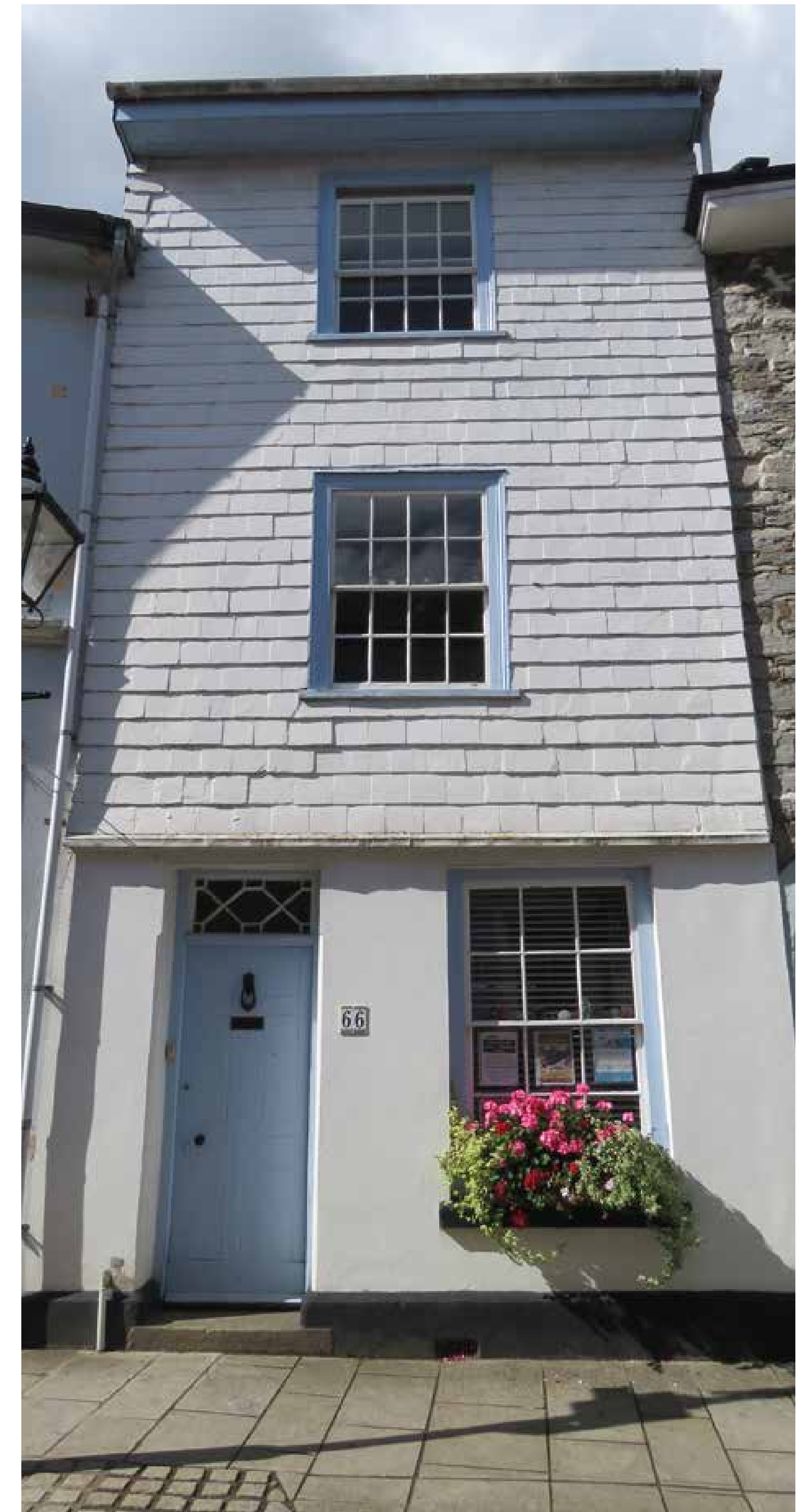
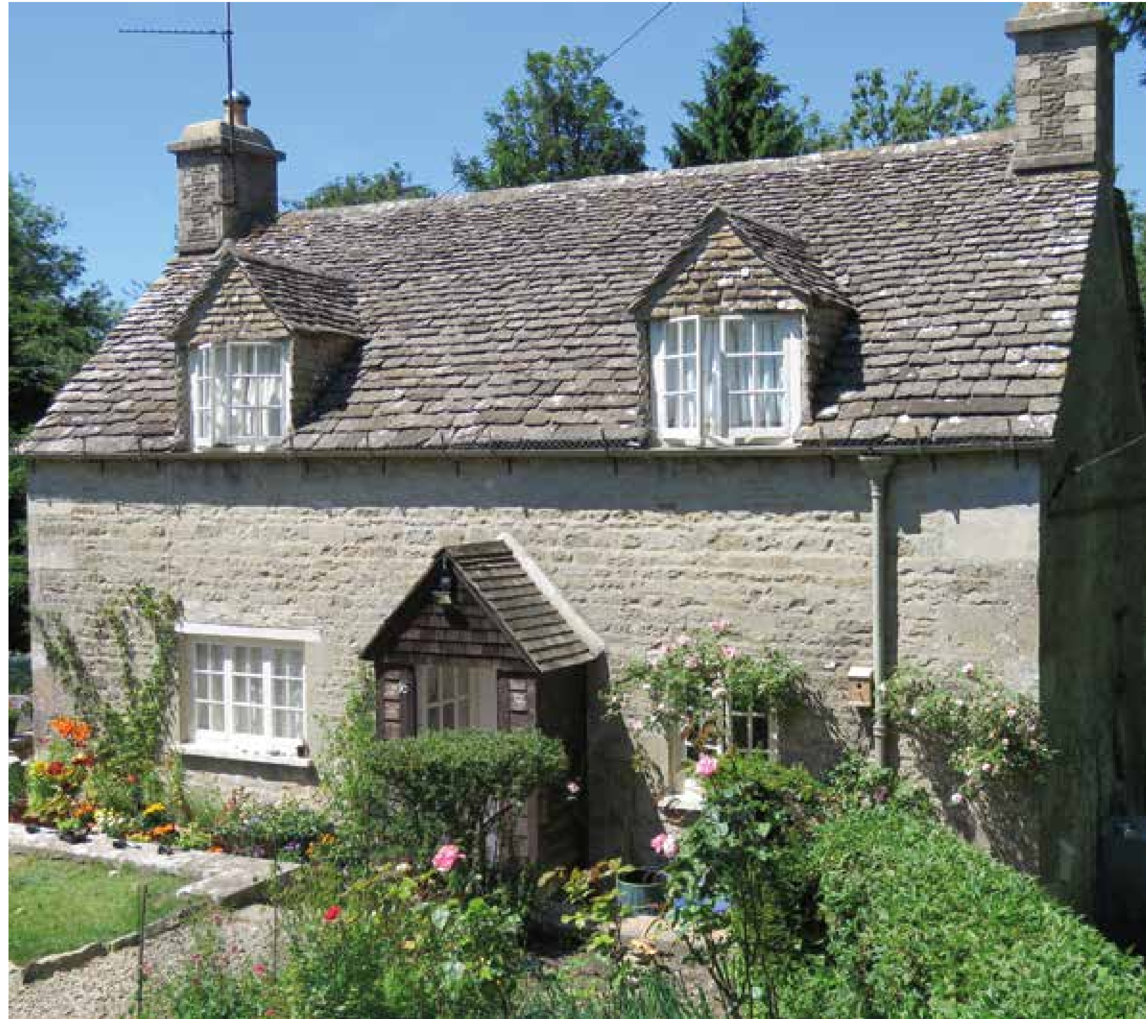
A fine period essay in brick, Oxfordshire

Devon town house with tile hanging





Cotswold cottage with rough stone walls and stone dormers

THE COTSWOLDS

If your first love is traditional houses that look as though they have grown 'out of the ground' then you need to visit the Cotswolds.

This is probably the most famous region of the country for its traditional stone. There are huge quantities of limestone just beneath the surface in this region, which covers much of Gloucestershire and west Oxfordshire and extends into Wiltshire and southern Worcestershire.

The glory of fine Cotswold limestone, which can vary greatly in different parts of the region, is that it can be used widely for both carving and fine stone finishing. The less finely finished old vernacular buildings are constructed entirely of blocks roughly dressed at the quarry or on site. It is these that often look as though they have risen out of the ground on which they stand. The word often applied to them is 'timeless'.

THE WEST COUNTRY

The belt of oolitic limestone that runs from Yorkshire through the counties of Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire continues southwards towards the coast. When you get to Somerset the warm gold colour of limestone buildings in Wiltshire and the Cotswolds has changed to a richer brown.

In central and southern Somerset many historic village centres consist entirely of buildings of soft blue lias limestone. Good examples occur in the small towns of Somerton, Ilminster, Crewkerne and Martock.

In terms of building materials Devon is easily the most diverse of the western counties. Chalk and flint are abundant, especially in the south of the county. Brick houses are seen more in north Devon. Pebble houses are to be seen near to the coast. Inland you are as likely to see houses of sandstone and granites as of limestone.

Cob, however, is the traditional building material that Devon is most famed for and that gives the distinctive soft rounded feel to so many old Devonian cottages. Massive cob walls beneath a thick layer of thatch produce the 'tea cosy' look that so characterises the traditional cottages of this county. Cob is a mixture of dung, mud and straw. After being largely ignored in the 60s and 70s cob has made a return. New cob houses are being built in small numbers.

In Cornwall many of the houses, which are usually built from stone, are covered with layers of white or pale-coloured lime render, as is so often the case in Devon. Slate and granite are the main building stones.

WESSEX

This term covers all of Dorset and Wiltshire, Hampshire and Berkshire, much of Oxfordshire, the west of Surrey and part of West Sussex.

Dorset is a county of small market towns and villages. Many are noteworthy for their traditional buildings of warm golden limestone. But you will also find much use of brick, external render, flint and a high proportion of thatch on traditional buildings.

In the area of Wiltshire, and in particular Marlborough, chalk and flint dominate the vernacular buildings. Brick is often used to add strength, notably around doors and windows. To the west of Salisbury, especially around Shaftesbury and Sherborne, local green sandstone (it actually often looks more grey than green) is widely used in traditional buildings.

Further east and north the brick and flint villages between Reading and Oxford are very distinctive. South of here, between Alton and Petersfield, the scene changes subtly, with tile hanging much in evidence and greater use of brick.

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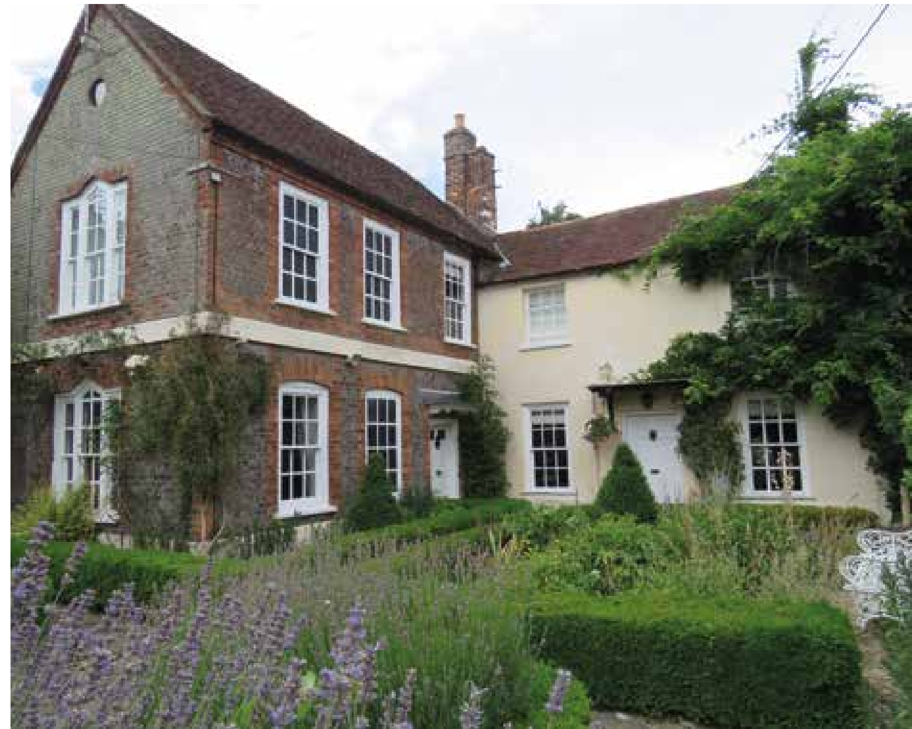
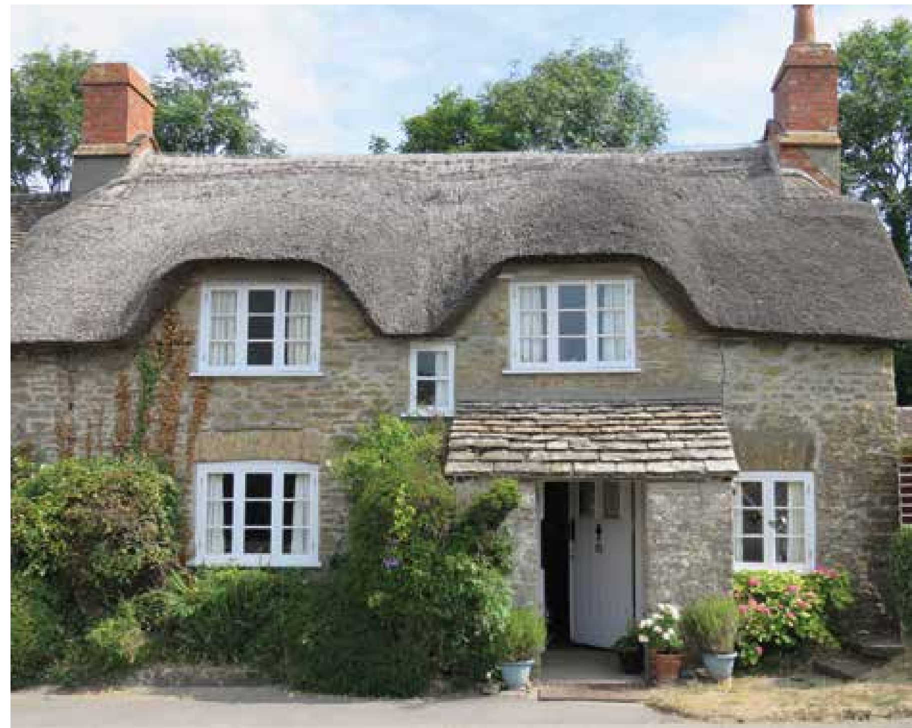
Chilterns two-in-one house

Stone, thatch and fagstone porch roof, Dorset





THE HEART OF ENGLAND

The central shires of Staffordshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Warwickshire, Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire are all underlain by thick beds of clay. Brick, therefore, tends to predominate, especially in the central and western parts of the region.

In many of the older vernacular buildings brick is combined – as infill – with timber-framed construction. Some authorities refer to these buildings as 'half-timbered'.

In the eastern part of the region stone is more visible, and entire villages are built from the orange red and golden-brown ironstones – also known as marlstones – that are contained in the great limestone belt that continues from the Cotswolds into the west into this region.

In Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire the limestone is an inferior type that tends to crumble. For this reason many of the traditional buildings are rendered in roughcast for protection against the elements. The limestones found in the northern part of Northamptonshire around Stamford are among the very best oolitic limestones in Britain. The stone villages of Northamptonshire rank as inferior only to those of the Cotswolds.

The roofs of vernacular buildings in this part of the country are justly renowned. They are very variable. Warm red pantiles compete with slates that can vary in colour from blue-grey to a pinkish purple. Thatch is also quite common.

THE WEST MIDLANDS

Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire are often referred to as the 'black-and-white counties' after the characteristic timber-framed buildings that provide much of their charm. They contain some beautiful old houses and many of the black-and-white vernacular buildings of the region are renowned for their decorative panels – often of brick – frequently incorporated in the half-timbering.

Apart from that, although there are many fine historic buildings of bright red sandstone and some limestone buildings in the far west of Shropshire, think red brick when you consider the vernacular homes of this region.

THE WEALD

From Kent through what is now Sussex there are ranges of chalk hills – the North and South Downs. Oak and clay form the basic materials in many of the vernacular buildings here.

In medieval times a great deal of forest was gradually felled, largely for charcoal burning to serve the needs of the iron smelting industry. At the same time the use of brick made from the local clays increased. This was accompanied by the increasing use of tile. When oak had to be used more sparingly then the spaces inbetween the timbers could be covered in lath, with tiles hung on the exterior. Decorative tile hanging featuring repeating patterns is a particular feature of the area.

Flint is also found widely. It exists in the chalk seams that run up from the Dorset coast through Hampshire. It looks particularly lovely in combination with brick.

The only other stone in the region is a sandstone that runs along the north of the Downs and is seen in towns like Midhurst and Petworth.

To the east weatherboarding is used as cladding. Good examples are to be seen in Kentish towns such as Folkestone, Ashford and Sandwich.

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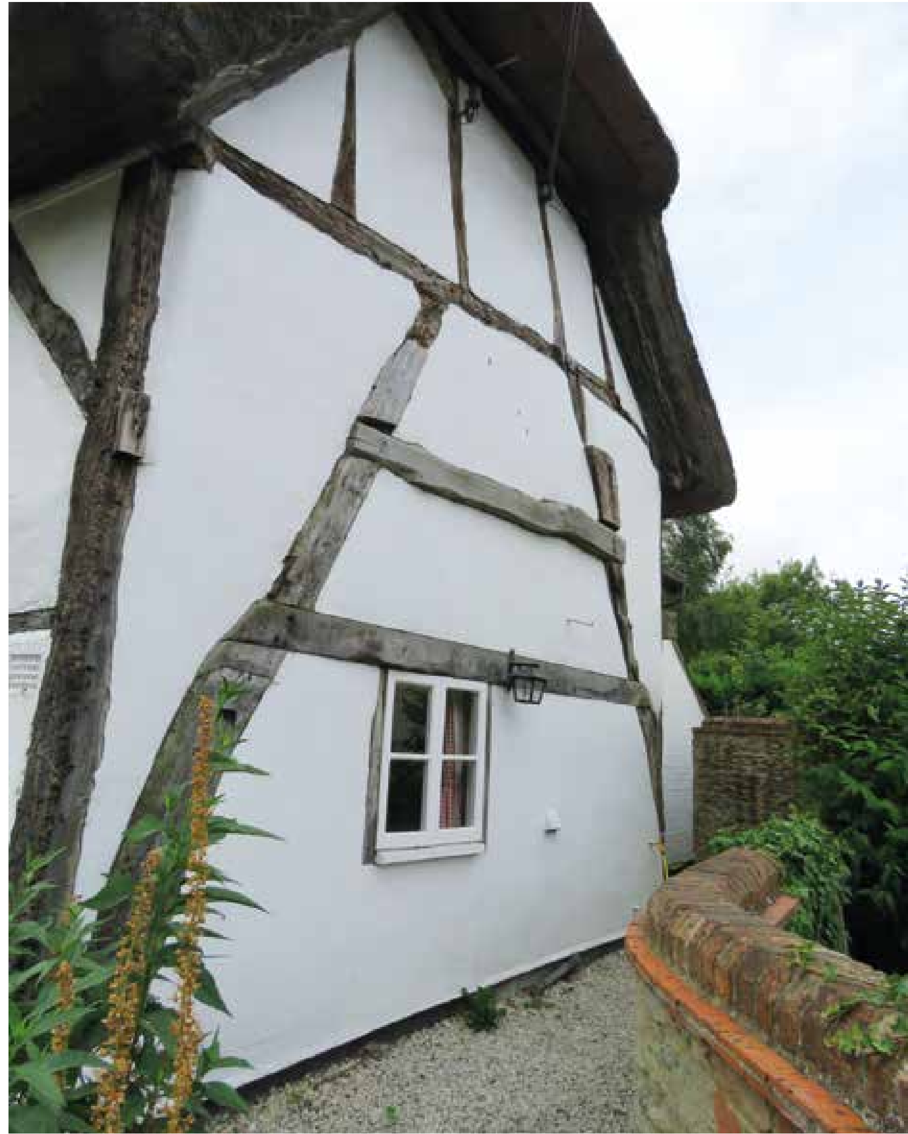

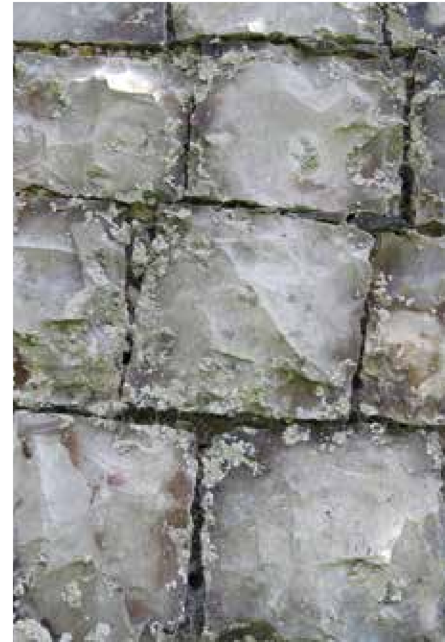

Left: Period cottage with cruck frame, Oxfordshire

Top: Fine East Anglian flushwork in flint

Bottom: Norfolk wall of old bricks, carstone and flint

EAST ANGLIA

Although fine building stone is still quarried in parts of Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Rutland, East Anglia generally lacks good stone. The result is that the traditional domestic buildings of the region are often dominated by weatherboarding, although there is much flint, found in the underlying clays. When used in building, flint is unsuitable for structural work on its own. In East Anglia it is quite common to see it randomly mixed with broken bricks or rubble and contained by brick quoining.

You will also see it layered in courses with brick above and below, coursed with brick quoins, or attractively laid in alternating square panels or chequerboard patterns in conjunction with brick. In many historic buildings in the region flint is knapped (dressed) and laid as flushwork – the decorative combination on the same flat plane of flint and ashlar stone.

Another inferior stone seen widely in north Norfolk is carstone, a form of rough brown sandstone that, apart from flint, is the only building stone found in Norfolk. It comes in hard rubbly pieces that are often incorporated in barns and outbuildings, mainly in villages to the east of Kings Lynn. This area is also home to quite a lot of cobble walls, with material either quarried or taken from the beach.

The clays that underlie much of the region also give rise to brick. The soft red bricks seen in East Anglia are often laid in elaborate patterns. The clay in East Norfolk produces a rather insipid-coloured yellowish brick. Mixed with straw and moulded into blocks this clay produces a material known as clay lump – sometimes known as chalk lump or bats. These are local names for unburnt mud bricks. You will find it hard to find these unfired clay blocks in traditional East Anglian buildings because they are generally rendered for protection against the weather.

In the southern half of Suffolk, and also in Essex and Cambridgeshire, there is much external plasterwork. A local speciality is pargeting, in which often delicate patterns are formed as a means of decoration.

THE NORTH

Despite the diversity of scenery there is a strong sense of continuity of building styles in traditional homes in the north. The use of hard sand and gritstones and slate has traditionally led to a no-nonsense type of squat four-square building that constitutes a type seen from coast-to-coast and traversing the Pennine hills that form the backbone of northern England.

In the clay-rich lowlands of Cumbria many of the buildings are made of the local red and cream bricks, with quoins of dressed stone. The only other area where you will see many older houses of brick is the Vale of York. In the Lake District the stone buildings are often whitewashed and roofed with local green slate.

Northumberland possesses many traditional rural buildings, most dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, built of local stone in a simple linear form.

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