

# ENGLAND'S HOUSING HERITAGE

## - *A Regional Guide* -

England is a patchwork quilt of different vernacular buildings. In the second of a two-part series, **Clive Fewins** takes a tour across the landscape to explore the traditional materials and idiosyncrasies which have led to the construction of these characterful homes

**F**or a small country Britain is remarkable for the variation of its building types. Even if you are a person who professes not to be interested in design, this enormous variety of vernacular buildings adds an inescapable charm to traditional villages and small towns throughout the country. A major reason for this is the enormous diversity of its geological formations. It often seems that every sub-division of every county has its own idiosyncrasies that root the houses firmly in their immediate environment. As the underlying rock changes from limestone to flint or from granite to sandstone, so the buildings change in appearance.

Whether you're renovating one of these fine, old, vernacular cottages, or building a new home and seeking to emulate 'vernacular style' it pays dividends to understand how and why certain materials and building techniques have come to pass in your locality.

### THE COTSWOLDS

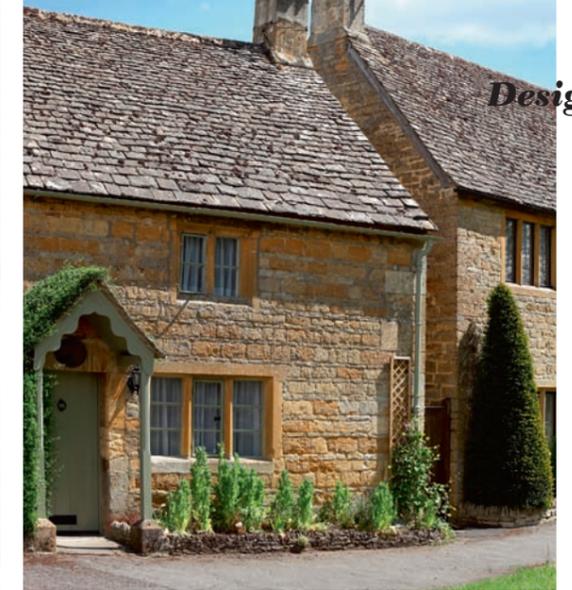
This is probably the most famous region of the country for its traditional buildings, largely because they are built of the local stone. There are huge quantities of limestone only just beneath the surface in this region, which covers much of Gloucestershire and west Oxfordshire and extends into Wiltshire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

The glory of fine Cotswold limestone, which actually varies considerably in different parts of the region, is that it can be used widely for carved and ashlar finishing. However, this usually only features on the finer buildings. The lesser buildings of old are built entirely of blocks roughly dressed at the quarry or on site — and so frequently look as though they have risen out of the ground on which they stand.

This timeless quality of these vernacular buildings pervades throughout the region and, despite many new houses built from bland reconstituted stone, gives the region an undeniable charm.

#### Part One Online

You can see the first part of Clive's guide to vernacular buildings online at [homebuilding.co.uk/vernacular](http://homebuilding.co.uk/vernacular)



IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

## PROTECTED CHARACTER

The unique and varied character of many of our old buildings is often protected, either through listed status or within a designated area such as Conservation Areas. If your vernacular house is listed you will need listed building permission for any alterations that would detract from the special architectural or historic interest of the building. When dealing with listed buildings it is wise to work closely with your local authority — if only because breaches of listed building permission constitute a criminal offence, (while breaches of planning permission do not).

Your house will more than likely be Grade II listed. If it should be Grade II\* or Grade I listed naturally it will be more difficult to gain approval.

The listing of a building applies to the interior as well as the outside, so internal changes require permission in exactly the same way as

superficial alterations. The installation of doors and windows, alteration of fireplaces and removal of surfaces are all examples of internal work which will require prior consent. Bear in mind that outbuildings and associated lands are also usually listed along with the property too.

Solar panels and other systems enter the equation nowadays too, so you'll likely require permission for their installation. In addition, the National Planning Policy Framework makes it clear that 'non-designated heritage assets' can also be taken into account by planners when a sensitive application is being considered. Listed buildings and Conservation Areas are 'designated' heritage assets, but non-designated heritage assets might include local features whose setting and appearance might be affected by an application.



## THE WEST MIDLANDS

Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire are often referred to as the ‘black-and-white counties’ after the characteristic timber frame buildings that provide much of their charm. 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.

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



## Black, White – and Red – Counties

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Black and white timber frame houses prevail this region; Many buildings of note often featured decorative panels too; One dominant stone is sandstone (a handful of old homes are even built into the sandstone hillsides of Shropshire); While the clay soils mean red brick is a material often seen here too

## 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 again tends to dominate, especially in the central and western parts of the region.

On 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 of 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, however, around the town of Stamford are among the very best examples of oolitic limestone in Britain. The stone villages of Northamptonshire rank as inferior only to those of the Cotswolds.

The roofs of vernacular buildings in this area are also notable. They are more varied than almost any other region. Warm, red pantiles compete with a variety of slates that vary in colour from blue-grey to a pinkish-purple. Thatch is quite common, and roofing of local Swithland stone – ‘slates’ cut from local granite seams – is to be found to the north of Leicester.



## Heart of the Country

ABOVE: Timber framed buildings were often infilled with brick  
LEFT: The picture-postcard town of Stamford boasts some of the finest oolitic limestone in the country



**Stone-Built West Country**  
 TOP TO BOTTOM: The limestone in and around Somerset are richer brown; Blue lias limestone also features in the centre of the county; The Cornish coast meanwhile is lined with granite-built homes, many of which are covered by lime render, and topped with locally quarried Delabole slate  
 CENTRE: Cob, a mix of dung, mud and straw, was used to build many a home within the Devonish area



**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. Around Bristol you will find some older buildings of carboniferous (mountain) limestone, while in the centre of the county around Somerton and around the Blackdown Hills many historic village centres consist entirely of buildings of soft blue lias limestone.

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 the north, while pebble houses are to be seen near to the coast. Inland you are likely to see houses of sandstone and granites.

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.

The material consists of a mixture of dung, mud and straw. After being largely ignored in the sixties and seventies cob has made a return — new cob houses are being built in small numbers again.

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



**Mixed Palette of Materials**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Local green sandstone features in the medieval village of Shaftesbury; This rendered Dorset cottage features a traditional thatch roof; Wiltshire is famed for its flint-built buildings with brick added around window openings; Purbeck, a peninsula in Dorset, is of particular note for its locally quarried limestone — Purbeck stone is still quarried today (visit [lovellpurbeck.co.uk](http://lovellpurbeck.co.uk))



**WESSEX**

The term ‘Wessex’ covers all of Dorset and Wiltshire, Hampshire and Berkshire, much of Oxfordshire, the west of Surrey and part of the county of West Sussex too.

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 roofing on traditional buildings.

In the area of Wiltshire focused in and around Marlborough, chalk and flint vernacular buildings dominate. Brick was often used to add strength, notably around doors and window openings.

To the west of Salisbury, especially around Shaftesbury and Sherborne, local green sandstone — it actually often looks more grey than green —

was and still is widely used to build 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 being much evident, so too is the greater use of brick.

On the whole you will see less evidence of timber framing here in this part of southern England than in the south eastern counties which feature overleaf.

**Brick was often used to add strength, notably around doors and windows**

**THE WEALD**

From Kent through what is now Sussex there are ranges of chalk hills, the North and South Downs — the area known as the Weald. Oak and clay form the basic materials of many of the vernacular buildings here.

In medieval times, as much forest was gradually felled to serve the iron-smelting industry, the use of brick made from the local clays increased. Likewise the use of tile spread. When oak had to be used more sparingly, then the spaces in between the timbers could be covered in lath, and 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 and 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.



*When oak had to be used sparingly then spaces in between could be covered in lath and tiles hung*



**Lake District**  
The vernacular houses here are distinctive for their whitewashed walls and local greenish slate roofs (as seen on this Grade II listed building) — the slate in this region is reputed as being among the finest in the world



**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, foursquare building that constitutes a type seen from coast-to-coast and traversing the Pennines 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 (as LEFT). Meanwhile, Northumberland possesses many traditional rural buildings, most dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, built of local stone in a simple, linear form, as seen in the cottages of Blanchland (ABOVE). ■

**EAST ANGLIA**

Although fine building stone is still quarried in 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, or coursed with brick quoins, or attractively laid in alternating square panels or chequerboard patterns in conjunction with brick. In many historic buildings of the region flint is knapped (dressed) and laid as flushwork — the decorative combination of 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 rubble pieces that are often incorporated in barns and outbuildings, mainly in villages to the east of Kings Lynn.

The clays that underlie much of the region also gave rise to brick. The soft, red bricks seen in East Anglia are often laid in elaborate patterns. In addition, 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 rarely see 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.



**A Timber and Tile Vernacular**

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** This flint and brick 17th century game keeper's cottage was painstakingly restored. New flint used to replace damaged flintwork was sourced in the traditional way — from the surrounding land; Tile hanging is common in this part of the world, and was often decorative; The only stone in the region is the sandstone seen in villages such as Petworth



**A Region Without Stone**

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** This artfully designed (by Stephen Mattick) self-build home features the traditional art of pargeting — patterns, decorative shapes and scenes created in lime render; A cottage constructed in clay lump (the clay is from chalky, boulder clay found in parts of East Anglia) — visit Suffolk County Council's website for useful information on the subject; A wall built from brick and flint is a rich and characterful construction sometimes seen in East Anglia; The area is dominated by weatherboarding too



IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK; 1 X DARREN CHUNG; 1 X SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL (CLAY LUMP)