

Conference Report

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The history of rural housing: new approaches and old problems

by Jane Whittle

The study of housing exists as a thriving field quite separate from agrarian history, yet houses are an integral element of Britain's rural landscape, and have a significant impact on rural society. This conference attempted to bring the history of houses and agrarian history closer together, by considering new approaches to studying rural housing, and examining the long-running issue of housing shortage in rural England.

Will Browne and Margaret Yates opened the conference with 'Houses, history and cybernetics: the challenges of an interdisciplinary project'. The paper outlined a project designed to improve the visitor experience at the Weald and Downland Museum near Chichester. The museum, a charity founded in 1969, has a collection of houses from the thirteenth century to the 1860s, which have been moved and rebuilt on its forty-acre site in sympathetic surroundings. Browne and Yates' research project aimed at finding new ways to inform staff, many of whom are volunteers, and visitors not only about the technical and architectural context of the houses, but also the social history of their inhabitants. A new social history of the houses was researched and written by Danae Tankard. The expertise of cybernetics, the science of systems and interaction, was used to develop new ways of communicating this knowledge and existing resources in the museum's archive to visitors and volunteer staff at the museum. The project has resulted in an improved website for the museum, and new ways of training volunteer staff. There are also plans to provide visitors with interactive information pavilions unobtrusively dotted around the museum. These will be near to particular houses, but will not interfere with the historically accurate

presentation of their interiors or exteriors. The paper reminded us about the importance and complexity of making historical research interesting and informative for non-experts, and also the challenges and rewards of working with approaches from outside the discipline of history.

In 'Rural houses from the Reformation to the Georgian Order', Adrian Green offered a reappraisal of Hoskins' idea of 'the Great Rebuilding' of rural housing in England between 1558 and 1642. He agreed with others, such as N.W. Alcock, that the Great Rebuilding still has validity as an argument; while also incorporating S. Pearson's critique, which emphasizes the importance of regional differences. From his own research on County Durham, he showed that, contrary to Hoskins' assertion that rebuilding was later in the four northern counties, Durham also experienced the changes observed in the stone belt further south. Traditional longhouses, where accommodation was shared with animals, were converted into larger, two-story farmhouses with chimneys and separate barns provided for livestock. The style of these houses, and date of their conversion, was almost identical to examples from Northamptonshire. To explain the timing of these changes Green turned both to economic explanations, for instance the wealth provided by coal mining in County Durham, and demographic reasons. The great rebuilding began at a time in the mid-sixteenth century when the marriage rate was very high: Green argued that more needs to be done to ascertain how rebuilding fitted into the life cycle: was it done immediately after marriage, or later in life in a period of greater financial security? The final part of the paper looked at new

approaches to the history of housing, particularly ideas developed by anthropologists working on the housing and material culture of colonial America, such as Henry Glassie and Jim Deetz, which have subsequently been applied to English housing by Matthew Johnson. These suggest the importance of recognizing the grammar of housing in any particular period, which reflects the way particular cultural assumptions become embedded in material culture. One such grammar was the Georgian order of architecture, which appeared simultaneously in the Western fringe of the British Isles and Virginia in America, in the eighteenth century.

The last two papers of the conference were both concerned with the shortage of housing in rural England: in 'The nineteenth-century rural housing crisis: motives and perspectives', John Broad discussed the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; while Barbara Linsley examined 'Rural housing in a recession: affordable housing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries'. The fundamental problem with rural housing in this period has been that it is not profitable: it costs more to build and maintain housing than working families on low incomes are able to afford in rent. The costs have increased over time. In the late eighteenth century it cost around £50 to build a cottage; in the late nineteenth century attempts were made to design cottages that could be built for £100, but this proved virtually impossible. As a result solutions to the provision of housing have oscillated between charitable and state-funded solutions, which have always proved expensive, and reliance on the market, which has never been able to meet people's needs. In the late eighteenth century, enclosure made it difficult for working people to build their own houses on commons and wasteland, as had happened – despite opposition – earlier. This left five other providers of housing. The poor law enshrined the duty of the parish to find housing for its poor. Local charities engaged in building and buying houses for the needy. Great landowners built 'model' cottages, in part for the prestige of displaying their taste in architecture and philanthropy. Landowners and farmers built and maintained tied cottages so that they could house agricultural workers close to the farms on which they worked. Finally, within villages much of the property was owned by freeholders of middling wealth and status, who rented out often poor-quality, crowded housing on a commercial basis. The 1831 census reveals that overcrowding, in terms of the number of families occupying a property, was worse in villages than market

towns, and worst of all in small villages. Rural Sussex had more overcrowding than the industrial north of England. The New Poor Law worsened the situation further by removing the duty to house families outside of the workhouse, and compelling parishes to sell off their housing stock. The sanitary regulations of the later nineteenth century, while designed to improve the quality of housing, once again aggravated the situation as landlords pulled down housing rather than facing the expense of improvements. Thus, despite rural depopulation, the housing shortage in rural England remained a pressing problem at the end of the nineteenth century.

Barbara Linsley traced the repeated attempts of governments to legislate for improved housing from the late nineteenth century onwards, and the impact this legislation had in Norfolk, a rural county with low wages. Council-built housing for working families first emerged after the First World War. In 1919, the government pledged to build half a million houses via local councils, but due to problems of finance and materials, only 197,000 were built before funding was removed in 1921. However, in 1923 and 1924 further legislation allowed councils to build subsidized housing at controlled rents, and extra subsidies were made available for rural housing. These subsidies were removed in 1934. Despite the private building boom of the 1930s, which provided more rural houses, the great majority were built for middle-class buyers. A period of economic expansion and prosperity from 1945 to 1970 has been followed by further problems, with local councils encouraged and later compelled to sell their existing housing stock. The overall trends since 1914 have been a decline in private renting, a growth and then decline in council housing, and a growth of owner-occupation. Yet the problems of rural housing remain severe. House prices have outstripped average earnings, and the gap is particularly wide in areas such as north Devon and south Norfolk where earnings are low and house prices are inflated by second homes and commuters. Affordable housing is needed for those in rural areas who cannot afford to buy or rent housing. There are currently 1.7 million families on council waiting lists for housing nationwide. Planning laws dictate that 40 per cent of new housing should be 'affordable', but few new houses are being built at the present time, due to the economic downturn. Rural housing remains a pressing issue, and neither the market nor the state has yet provided an adequate solution.