

Vernacular architecture

ANNABELLE F HUGHES

This paper attempts to summarize the way in which the study and interpretation of traditional buildings has developed from the work of pioneers such as Eric Mercer and R T Mason. It examines and contrasts approaches by the two main research groups working in the region and considers the problems of establishing a terminology that is both user-friendly and technically acceptable. The accumulation of data has necessitated analytical approaches, best exemplified by the work of Peter Gray who, before his untimely death, was able to produce the text now available as Surrey medieval buildings: an analysis and inventory. Issues that he raised are presented in this paper and two of his distribution maps are included. Finally, examples are given from the Sussex Weald and the work of members of local buildings research groups to illustrate the importance of an integrated approach to the environmental and historical background within which traditional buildings were constructed and developed.

Introduction

Everyone lives in a house, or part of one, and most people have some experience of buying, selling or renting property and making changes, large and small, so that it suits their particular requirements. It follows that one of the easiest ways to help the general public to relate to historical change is by showing them how buildings have changed and asking them why. Although it has been suggested that the term 'vernacular architecture' should be replaced by 'traditional buildings', the first phrase has been in use for long enough for most people to know what it implies.

The serious study of vernacular architecture owes its beginnings to a number of pioneering individuals such as Maurice Barley, Eric Mercer, Stuart Rigold and R T Mason. Their followers were drawn from amateurs and professionals in a wide range of disciplines, and no qualification was required other than a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment. In this lay both strength and weakness. The strength of being without received or entrenched opinions, the weakness of having little by way of terms of reference, agreed terminology, or an established framework upon which to hang the information which accumulated.

Two strands emerged – recording and interpretation – and in this region two groups evolved, each with a different emphasis but with some common membership.

Looking at buildings from Kent to Hampshire, the Wealden Buildings Study Group has concentrated on trying to understand the ways in which buildings were originally intended to be used, how they have developed over time, and the reasons behind their siting and form. The Domestic Buildings Research Group (DBRG) has concentrated on recording historical buildings, principally in Surrey, and has amassed an impressive collection of records.

As increasing numbers of houses were studied, the need arose to develop a technical vocabulary and some categories for different types. The Council for British Archaeology (CBA) has produced the most recent glossary of terms, in an attempt to standardize across the country, but regional variations (and their groups) are resistant to absolute uniformity.¹ However, the terms medieval and post-medieval are familiar to historians, who have taken the accession of Henry VII or the dissolution of the monasteries as the change-over point, although this matter also is open to debate. For students of buildings, medieval has become shorthand for anything built within the period when the open hall² was the norm, and post-medieval for types succeeding these, which were fully floored from the start and had some kind of smoke control. As increasing numbers of houses have been examined, it has become clear that not all buildings fall neatly into these two groups. We have now arrived at a point when many constructions throughout the 16th century are described as transitional, illustrating changes and development in both construction and plan. As studies progress, it has also become apparent that there are differences in both styles and pace of change within regions and counties.

So where do we start and stop? In the Weald we are concerned mainly with timber-framed buildings and the survival rates of early examples means it is unlikely that we will find anything earlier than the second decade of the 13th century, although it has been possible to make comparisons with, and draw conclusions from, the roof constructions over earlier solid-wall buildings. With some notable exceptions, framing as a constructional approach generally began to descend the social scale towards the end of the 17th century, although local forms of traditional building persisted until the canals and railways spread materials – and styles – nationwide. And although the original building material may have

been timber, the older the building or the more changes it has undergone, the greater the variety of materials that can be involved, so we have needed to become familiar with the characteristics of brick and stone.

The increased amount of data collected has brought its own problems, for the more examples we have found, the more we have to qualify and modify our conclusions. We have a mental picture of the norm, but increasingly we are having to decide what to do with the oddballs – and whether they really are oddballs at all.

Papers in a recent publication by the CBA have explored the existing and future patterns of understanding, recording and conserving vernacular buildings.³ While this is not the place to précis or comment on the opinions expressed, some points are worth reiterating in the context of this paper. The contributors come from a variety of backgrounds – university teaching, historic building consultancy, archaeological units, English Heritage – but there is general recognition of the continuing value of the amateur in the field, the original implication of the word not being second-rate, but doing something simply for the love of it. It is even pointed out that the amateur is often able to record and carry out research on vernacular buildings outside the constraints of planning briefs, project time and restricted funding that are experienced by professionals. Also, the amateur can often gain access to buildings where anything that smacks of officialdom is unwelcome.

The work of amateur groups in recording and trying to understand vernacular buildings can and should be harnessed to lead towards a wider understanding of historical context, regional patterns and differences. It was with this in mind that, as soon as Peter Gray knew that his time was limited, he set about a project that he had been considering for some time – the construction of a database of the medieval buildings of Surrey, using the records and experience of the two groups mentioned, in such a way that it would be easier to make useful analyses. Even before this was finalized, he was able to tell me that a large proportion of the estimated medieval buildings in Surrey had been surveyed, there were few moulded dais beams, end jetties were not common, and there were 28 Wealdens⁴ with an interesting pattern of distribution. Two of the maps from Gray's analysis⁵ have been used to illustrate points in this paper. This work has been the stimulus to the DBRG to pioneer and test a method of recording that could make it easier to enter information directly on to a database, and to codify the existing records. A cottage at Salfords provided a good example of how the dating evidence of a lease in 1629, referring to a house 'recently erected', correlated with details recorded using this new approach.⁶

Categories of medieval buildings

From Peter Gray's work it now transpires that of 856 buildings with medieval characteristics identified in Surrey, surveys are available for 712, which is probably over 80% of those extant. This has to be qualified by the observation that the area north of the North Downs lacks data from a significant number of buildings. In comparison, the publication of *An Historical Atlas for Sussex* in 1999 made it possible to get some idea of the state of surveys in that county, and it highlighted the areas where little work has been done, such as the extreme west of the county and patches of mid-Sussex.⁷ Of buildings surveyed in Sussex, excluding the Rape of Hastings, which has been the subject of exhaustive study by David and Barbara Martin,⁸ 355 proved to be medieval, including 194 in twelve Wealden parishes. Of these 46 have sans-purlin roofs (17 being aisled), 246 are crown-posted, 31 have side-purlins and 40 are Wealdens (the count has since gone up by two). However, these figures alone are only a limited outcome of more thorough identification and recording.

Gray's draft analysis includes nine categories for open-hall houses:

- 1 The double-ended hall.
- 2 The single-ended hall (2 bays).
- 3 The single-ended hall (1 bay).
- 4 The simple 2-bay building.
- 5 The house with a 3-bay hall.
- 6 The hall with an open service bay.
- 7 The hall with aisles.
- 8 The hall with fine cross-wings.
- 9 Wealdens and jettied single-range houses.

This is not the place to discuss each of the categories, but serves to illustrate the complexities that are introduced the more houses are recorded. As increasing numbers of buildings are identified, we have been able to move from the norm of two- or three-unit buildings towards recognizing new categories – the house built in instalments, detached kitchens, smoke-bay houses, buildings that seem to have special functions – and we have begun to identify particular groups of buildings that need more in-depth study.

Early surviving buildings have always exercised a fascination, and nearly 30 years ago R T Mason noted eight features he called 'archaic', and maintained that where two or more were observed in a building 'it could probably be assigned to the turn of the 13th century, if not earlier.'⁹ This contention is still largely valid today, although we have also begun to identify features which help us to assign buildings to the 14th century with more confidence.

Among the other features we have begun to recognize which seem to be characteristic of early houses are the low-floored end and end aisles. The

original flooring of an end bay can be so noticeably low, that the ground floor space was virtually no more than an undercroft, although in most cases later modification has all but obscured the evidence. Often it can be shown that at the same time, the other end beyond the hall was unfloored, and this was almost certainly the case when there is, or was, an end aisle.

On the basis of these agreed early features, 28 houses in Surrey have been identified as 'early'. Among these, Highland Cottage, Coldharbour (Capel), shown in figure 11.1, Tigbourne and Sister Cottage (Witley), Greens Farm (Newdigate), Long Vere House (Hascombe), and the Blue Anchor Inn (Godstone) have evidence for low-floored ends.¹⁰ The recognition of these early variations is leading to fresh considerations as to the uses of the bays which flanked the hall.

Two other significant houses in this group have to be Burstow Lodge (Burstow), with a wealth of moulded timbers, and Chaldon Court (Chaldon), where in spite of the fact that the hall does not survive, there is still a substantial house comprised of three ranges that once formed the high end.

Another newly recognized category is the house with detached kitchen or service block. Because these features have usually become absorbed into the main house, or converted into separate dwellings, it is only with the improved experience of those who study and record buildings that their significance has been recognized. Since they are usually of two or three bays, the implication has been that at least one bay was unfloored to contain a cooking hearth, but this was not always so, and their exact use is still not clear – it may even have varied from house to house. To date,

thirteen possible examples have been identified in Surrey, but much remains to be learned about them.

Here an example from Capel serves to underline the need to combine documentary research and an understanding of buildings. Aldhurst Farm (figs 11.2, 11.3) is made up of three significant timber-framed ranges: a rather crude three-bay crown-posted building, heavily sooted, and a four-bay house with a smoke-bay, which are linked by a single bay that appears to be contemporary with the latter. As there was a crown-posted barn (now removed) it seemed reasonable to suppose that the first range represented the earliest surviving dwelling, although there were some reservations. However, a transcript of the Dorking Court Rolls contains an entry dated 1529, when Robert Yong was allowed to move a kitchen to Aldhurst from another tenement called Tepehams.¹¹ Interpreting the crown-posted building as a kitchen makes far more sense, although it raises the question as to whether either of the other ranges could have been there in 1529.

Jetties in the countryside do appear to have been used as an aesthetic rather than as a functional detail, as the extra accommodation achieved was hardly significant, and a face jetty could make framing the roof more complicated. The Wealden with a single roof is the most effective design visually with the least structural complications. Although the style appears to have originated in the Weald, where the greatest concentrations are found, it spread throughout the country and was adapted for different requirements. The database has revealed a concentration of the type in the southern half of the county, with significant clusters to the east (fig 11.4).



Fig 11.1 Highland Cottage, Coldharbour, Capel, photographed c 1930. This is a good illustration of how the outward appearance of an old building can be very deceptive. It gives no clue to the 'notable early features' noted by Peter Gray of a fine open truss and evidence for a low-floored end. Dorking Museum: SC5/197



Fig 11.2 Aldhurst Farm from the rear. This shows the smoke-bay range to the left, the end elevation of the detached kitchen from Tepehams on the right, and the central linking bay. Reproduced by permission of Surrey History Service: Surrey Photographic Record 2873. Copyright of Surrey History Service



Fig 11.3 Aldhurst Farm looking towards the detached kitchen range (centre) with end elevation of crown-posted barn on left (since removed). Courtesy of the Frith Collection (53534, 1905) and Mary Day

Transitional houses

Only in recent years have we begun to recognize the need for a whole new classification for those buildings that form a bridge between the medieval and post-medieval periods. These transitional houses demonstrate a number of features, such as a variety of techniques to control and confine smoke, flooring inserted in stages to increase floor space, change in the ways in which houses were planned, rooms used and their occupants moved around them, and

combinations of both medieval and post-medieval elements, which could sometimes be explained by the conservatism of builders or owners.

An example of the latter is the way in which the medieval plan of service, cross-passage, heated hall and solar or parlour persisted, even when the smoke from the open fire was being confined by a stone wall around the fire at ground-floor level, surmounted by a timber-framed flue. Sometimes the fire was contained against the line of the cross-passage, or

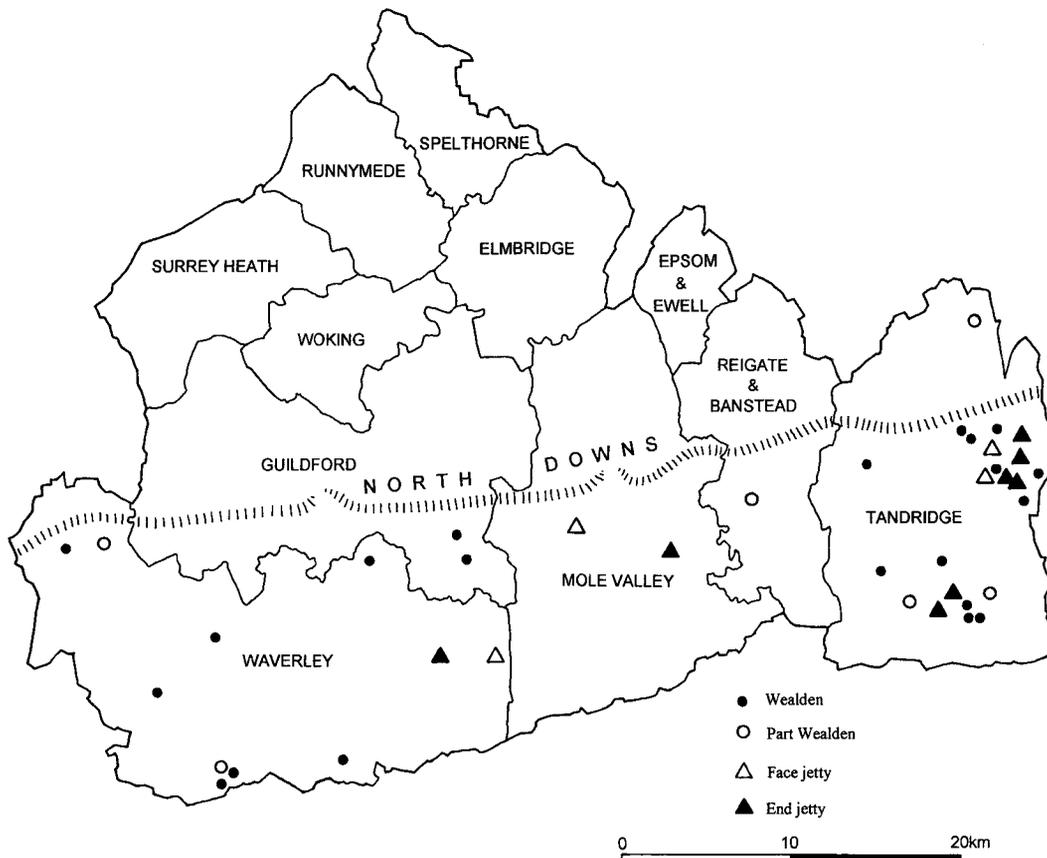


Fig 11.4 Distribution of face-jetties, end-jetties and Wealdens, after Gray 2002, fig 9, by permission of the Domestic Buildings Research Group (Surrey)

even against the front or rear wall of the hall, and experience is showing that these arrangements could be either the result of an adaptation of an earlier type, or of an innovative new build. In either case, these are evidence of a significant period of experimentation with new ideas which is reflected in the variations to be found in the 16th century.

Specialist buildings

Both form and position have forced us to reinterpret a number of buildings as non-domestic, even if these are sometimes in settlements we would now hesitate to term urban or industrial. Work remains to be done on collecting and comparing data about such buildings, and exploring associated documentary records for possible clues to their use. There are two examples in Old Oxted, which were recognized by Peter Gray – Brook House and the Old Bell – both of them crown-posted. Brook House was jettied on both sides, suggesting it may have stood on an island site, is unusually narrow, and may even have had some kind of original chimney stack. The Old Bell (fig 11.5) had three jettied bays with an open bay at one end, which provides evidence for some kind of rear access and for the more significant rooms being on the first floor. Although at the time Gray thought it unlikely that it had been an inn originally, and it was almost certainly not a house, new research into inns, taverns and alehouses would support the theory that it had been a

tavern, since taverns usually contained public rooms of some kind at first floor, and often ground-floor shops.¹²

Just a few miles away, in Westerham, a similar building has been identified, facing the Green. With four crown-posted bays, fully floored and jettied along the street elevation, but with no indication of how it might have been heated, its plan and position strongly suggest a commercial function.

Discussion: approaches for the future

Increased recording throughout the Weald from Kent to Hampshire has begun to demonstrate a pattern of changing ratios from east to west between open halls with crown-posts and those with side-purlins, the latter being more predominant in Hampshire. How far Surrey fits into this pattern, if it does, is a question open to closer examination (see Peter Gray's distribution map reproduced as figure 11.6). It was in Surrey that the smoke-bay house was first identified by Joan Harding, and a significant number of examples have been recorded. It remains to be explored whether this type is especially characteristic of the county's development, and if so, exactly what it is telling us. Is it a product of the pattern of settlement that was prevalent, or of the soil types and landscape, or a combination of both? This leads on to the need to consider how buildings vary across the county, and if so, why.



Fig 11.5 The Old Bell Inn, Godstone, showing the jettying of its long elevation. The open-hall bay was at the left end, down the hill. Drawing by R W Oram from *Oxted explored*, by A Wells and K Percy, 1975, courtesy of Tandridge District Council

Because the study of buildings has brought together people from different fields of expertise and interest, a variety of resources are being employed. Dendrochronology, which is the technique of dating buildings by comparison of growth rings in timber, thus arriving at a felling date, is being developed and refined, although it is clear that even this will not supply all the answers we would like. For various technical reasons it has proved difficult to obtain such dates for buildings in this region, but recently some have been arrived at for buildings in East Grinstead, Rudgwick and Charlwood, which have useful implications. Documentary material from parish, property and probate records, manorial and ecclesiastical courts, maps and surveys, are all helping to supply evidence for building and change. Two

examples from my own area of Sussex will have to suffice.

A barn at Eastlands, in Cowfold, was reported to be 'interesting'. Apart from a few visible curved braces, the first impression was not promising as most of the building was covered with corrugated iron sheeting, but once through the doors I realized it was no ordinary barn. Clearly it had been built as a four-bay open-hall house with a crown-posted roof, to which a bay had been added in the 17th century after it had been downgraded to a barn, when a new farmhouse had been built. Fortunately it came within the outlier of a manor, Stretham, in Henfield, belonging to the bishops of Chichester, for which a number of records survive, and these provided unusually detailed documentary evidence.¹³ A custumal of 1373 recorded a copyhold with house and yardland, and the tenant's name made it possible to trace it through 200 years. In 1583 the tenant of this copyhold applied for a licence to demolish and rebuild the 'mansion dwelling house', and a survey of 1647 listed a messuage, house, granary and other outbuildings with 60 acres. One unsatisfactory photograph and the ground plan on maps is all that has survived of the replacement house, which was demolished in the 1960s, unrecorded. The early house remained in use as a barn, and has now been restored to residential use. The combination of constructional and documentary evidence from this example has provided additional points of reference for future assessments and comparisons.

Not far away, visible from a new by-pass around Billingshurst, is a house that has the proportions,

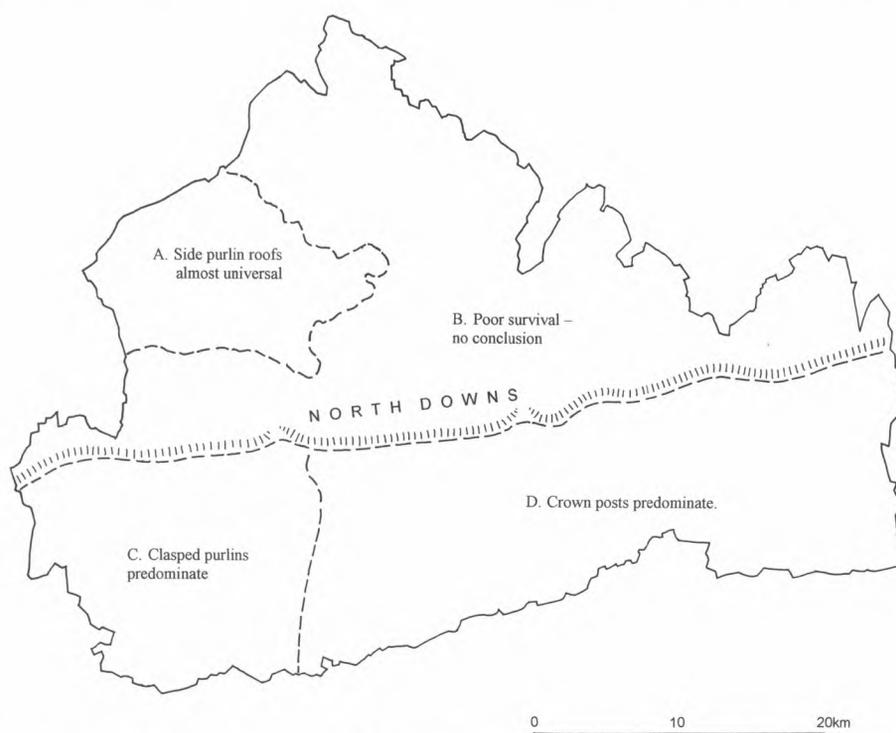


Fig 11.6 Distribution of crown post and clasped purlin and windbraced roofs, after Gray 2002, fig 11, by permission of the Domestic Buildings Research Group (Surrey)

some joisting and the remains of trusses all supporting the theory that it is a medieval house updated with a chimney-stack in the 17th century. However, an initial reading of written sources suggested there was no building on this site, then known as Hilland, until the second quarter of the 17th century, although parish records indicated tenants from at least the 1530s, which was supported by the constructional evidence. Further documentary evidence was contained in depositions before a church court in 1633, arising from a dispute over the assignment of church seats, and aiming to establish the continuity of a building belonging to the tenancy. Unfortunately, although two of the witness statements may have been sufficient for that particular purpose, they contained puzzling ambiguities. They agreed about alterations made in about 1612, but they also raised the possibility that the building had actually been moved within the holding. This sounds a note of caution when using documentary sources, with or without a building, for even when both are available, it is not always possible to be certain about what has taken place.

It has become ever clearer that structural investigation must go hand-in-hand with an appreciation of landscape and an understanding of the historical setting. Not only do we have to be aware of the underlying geology and topography of a given area, but also of the changes that have happened over time. As some of the buildings were erected four or five hundred years ago, a great deal may have happened to the landscape around them – some of it natural, some man-made. In their turn, these changes may have influenced modifications made to the buildings. We need also to appreciate the economic background to the original build and how that may have changed, and to investigate the patterns of administration – of manors, hundreds, parishes – and the documents these generated.

Members of buildings groups are finding themselves increasingly drawn into studies of parishes which involve building surveys. Diana Chatwin has produced books focused on the parishes of Rudgwick and Slinfold.¹⁴ Jean Shelley has co-ordinated field days which have contributed to booklets on the buildings of Horley and Ardingly.¹⁵ Peter Gray's work is well known to many in Surrey and beyond. All three are, or have been, members of both the groups

mentioned above. There are continuing studies of the parishes of the Arun valley, near Amberley, which focus on or include the buildings. All the framed buildings of Northchapel were recorded when a new history of the parish was produced to mark the millennium, and as a follow-up to this, came the opportunity to study the seven historical houses which make up the neighbouring hamlet of Hillgrove.

Hillgrove is at the northernmost point of Lurgashall parish, where it abuts Northchapel, originally a chapelry to Petworth, and is close to the Surrey border. Its heart is ten acres of common land belonging to the Petworth estate, which research discovered was bordered by outliers of three other manors. Historically it drew in owners or tenants from both Hampshire and Surrey, for example from Alton and Haslemere. It became clear that the building development of the hamlet was directly related to the ownership and pattern of land tenure. Because of the position of the hamlet, the residents did not necessarily use their parish church but the one that was nearest, so it was necessary to examine the records of both Lurgashall and Northchapel. Likewise administrative and family issues had even more inter-parish connections than usual.

Two medieval houses survived, one each on two of the outliers adjoining the common land. In the context of the area, the constructional type suggested that these dated from the end of the medieval period, but because of the position of the hamlet they might be reflecting influence from the western tradition, and be proportionally earlier. Three houses were transitional or post-medieval, and illustrated both fragmentation of early holdings and encroachment on to common land. Of the remaining two, one was an 18th century update, the other a complete 18th century new build, and both could be linked to different members of the same family.

Both this work and studies in the Arun valley, bringing together landscape, history of settlement, buildings and documents, are showing how an understanding of buildings, their use and development can contribute to unravelling the interdependence and relationship between apparently separate communities. This must sign-post the way ahead for those who are passionate about buildings, and those who would use their specialist knowledge.

NOTES

1 Alcock, N W, Barley, M W, Dixon, P W, & Meeson, R A, *Recording timber-framed buildings: an illustrated glossary*, revised edn, CBA, 1996.
 2 A unit of the house without a first floor and heated with an open hearth.
 3 Pearson, S, & Meeson, R A, *Vernacular buildings in a changing world*, CBA Res Rep 126, CBA, 2001.

4 Type of medieval open-hall house, where a single span roof over front jettied end bays make the central open-hall bay or bays appear recessed. One of the best-known examples is Bayleaf, at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum at Singleton.
 5 Gray, P, *Surrey medieval buildings: an analysis and inventory*, DBRG, 2001.

- 6 The Little, Staplehurst. Information provided by R Wild.
- 7 Leslie, K, & Short, B, *An historical atlas of Sussex*, Phillimore, 1999.
- 8 Martin, D, & Martin, B, Hastings Area Archaeological Papers for and on behalf of the Rape of Hastings Architectural Survey, 1974–.
- 9 Mason, R T, *Framed buildings of England*, Coach Publishing, Horsham, 1974.
- 10 Houses with similar evidence in Rudgwick, north Sussex, have been dated by dendrochronology to between 1369 and 1379.
- 11 Surrey History Centre: C21/10/2/118 (transcription of Arundel Castle Archives: M793). Information from Vivien Ettlinger provided by Mary Day.
- 12 Pennington, J, *The inns and taverns of western Sussex, 1550–1700: a regional study of their architectural and social history*, PhD thesis, University of Southampton (Chichester), 2003.
- 13 Records held by West Sussex Record Office, Chichester.
- 14 For example Chatwin, D, *The development of timber-framed buildings in the Sussex Weald: the architectural heritage of the parish of Rudgwick*, Rudgwick Preservation Society, 1996.
- 15 For example Shelley, J, *Maps and houses of Horley from Tudor times until the railway came*, Horley Local History Society, 1997.

Dr Annabelle F Hughes, Research Consultant on Historical Buildings, 32 Hillside, Horsham, West Sussex RH12 2NG