

## THE MEDIEVAL PEASANT HOUSE

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TEN years ago it would have been quite impossible to try and bring together in any systematic fashion the work done in Britain on the medieval peasant house. Quite a number of excavations took place during the first half of this century but many of them were on a very small scale and the complexity of these flimsy structures is such that only large scale work is likely to get satisfactory results. One of the objects of the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group (DMVRG), formed in 1952, was to investigate the development of the medieval peasant house. Since 1953 excavations have been conducted at the deserted village of Wharram Percy in the East Riding of Yorkshire. During the same period other bodies have been excavating medieval peasant houses in different parts of the country. The Ministry of Public Building and Works, in particular, have been sampling medieval villages in their programme of rescue excavation on sites which are about to be destroyed during various types of development.

The work of the DMVRG at Wharram Percy was planned on a long term programme, in the light of the experience of Professor Dr. Axel Steensberg in Denmark, where he had shown the great complexity to be expected on medieval domestic sites. Eight years were spent on the first house site, House 10. Investigations brought to light a series of nine superimposed peasant houses dating from 1200 to 1500. The earliest buildings were constructed of timber; post holes and timber slots were found cut into the natural chalk. By the later thirteenth century substantial stone built houses were constructed and in the fourteenth century these were replaced by half-timbered buildings on narrow sleeper walls 18 inches wide. The latest buildings in the village, of the fifteenth century, were extremely poverty stricken and perhaps made of cob with hardly any timber superstructure at all. Each house was not only not built on the same foundations but there were three complete changes of position and alignment during the three hundred years. The excavations have exposed a very interesting series of building techniques and revealed that the medieval peasant houses at Wharram Percy were rebuilt about every generation suggesting that they were very flimsy structures. It has, however, been shown not only that the houses were placed in different position in the same toft but that the actual toft boundaries were considerably changed as well. The earliest structure of all was a twelfth-century manor house showing further

fundamental changes in the use of the land in this part of the village. It is difficult to be sure of the exact plans of some of the earlier buildings but most of those which can be recognized are of the long house type. The earthworks of the village are also extremely clear and twenty-five long houses are plainly visible as earthworks on the ground so the same sequence may be expected in other parts of the village.

The long house, Fig. 1. B, a building varying in length from 30 to 70 feet and 12 to 20 feet wide usually has a hearth at the upper end with sometimes a partition dividing the living part into two rooms. At the end of this there are two opposed doorways with the lower part being used either for cattle or storage. There has been some confusion in the use of the term 'long house' and this should be kept only for those houses in which the cattle are housed under the same roof line as the people and in which there is access inside the building between the two parts, usually, but not always, with a cross passage.

This house type is well known in that part of Britain which Fox called the Highland Zone, and there are many surviving examples in Scotland, northern England, Wales, Devon and Cornwall. In the 1930s Lady Fox excavated several long house sites on Gelligaer Common in Glamorgan. These buildings were extremely flimsy with turf walls and had a central row of posts. The first excavation of a long house with substantial remains was carried out by Mr. E. M. Jope in 1938 at Great Beere in Devon. Here the classic three-room plan was found with inner room, partition, main living room with a hearth, cross passage and a small byre at the lower end. Excavations in the last ten years have produced other similar long house plans from Garrow on Bodmin Moor, Cornwall, Hound Tor on Dartmoor, Devon, Swainston in County Durham, and West Whelpington, Northumberland. This type may therefore be regarded as a common plan in the Highland Zone in medieval times although in Scotland it is difficult to find examples before 1750 as there are scanty medieval remains.

In the rest of the country there are very few surviving examples of the long house, which as a type seems to have gone out of use by the middle of the sixteenth century during the great period of rebuilding which took place during this time. It was thought until recently that this lack of examples meant that the long house was a Highland Zone type only. Recent excavations have, however, shown the long house to be present over wide areas of Lowland England, for example, at Holworth in Dorset, Fyfield Down in Wiltshire, and Hangleton in Sussex (which has the classic three room plan). In the stony areas of the north of England including Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and also in the Cotswolds, long houses are quite plainly visible on the ground and there are earthworks with typical opposed entrances close to one end. It is more difficult to prove the presence of the long house in the Midland areas, as although the streets and tofts are visible in deserted villages, there are no earthworks of actual houses and it is presumed that these were made of timber. Excavations

have been attempted on clay sites, at Wolfhampcote in Warwickshire and Detton in Shropshire, but failed to produce house plans. Nevertheless the evidence is so strong from surrounding areas that there can be little doubt that the long house was used in the Midlands also in medieval times.

It is not always possible for the excavator to determine the use of the third room of the long house. The best evidence for its use as a byre is the presence of drains and these have been found at Wharram Percy, House 5 and at Hound Tor in Devon. Even better evidence comes from Garrow, Cornwall, where what has been interpreted as a stone manger was found with holes pierced through the stone blocks for tethering the animals. On other sites it is possible that the third room was used for the storage of grain, as, for example, at Riseholme in Lincolnshire and Muscott in Northamptonshire where the third rooms do not seem suitable for cattle. It has often been said that there is little documentary evidence for the long house or in fact for medieval peasant houses at all. Mr. Field has however, recently shown, by a study of Worcestershire Court Rolls, that it is possible to find references to the peasant house in medieval documents and he has discovered, not only references to the three room plan, but also definite evidence for cattle under the same roof as the inhabitants. In some of these documents the actual term *longa domus* is used.

It is not suggested that every medieval peasant house in England was a long house but that this was the typical house of the medieval villein who would have cattle to stall or grain to store. On some sites farms have been found comprising a house and a separate byre, Fig. 1C. At Seacourt, Berkshire, most of the houses seem to be of this type, while at Hangleton, Sussex, both long houses and farms were being built at the same time. This mixture shows that the farm and the long house cannot be regional variations, nor can they be in use at different times as the Hangleton examples were contemporary. It is significant that most of the villages which only have long houses, such as those in Yorkshire, were sheep depopulations of the fifteenth century, while those with farms were deserted in the fourteenth-century retreat from marginal land, as Seacourt and Hangleton. It is therefore suggested that, while the long house was the typical house type of the medieval villein, who had to spend a great deal of his time working for his lord, the farm was inhabited by the emerging yeoman farmers who were working more for themselves and therefore would need more storage space. This would explain the lack of farms at a sheep depopulated village, such as Wharram Percy, for the lord would only be able to destroy a village if all the villagers were his tenants and there were no independent farmers. More work is therefore urgently needed to test this hypothesis. It is also vital to excavate whole toft areas to check for outbuildings rather than just excavating the living house. There were also smaller cottages averaging about 30 by 15 feet, Fig. 1. A, which may have been occupied by the cottars. These would not need either byre or barn; though there are often very small storage sheds of very flimsy construction, associated with both cots and longhouses.

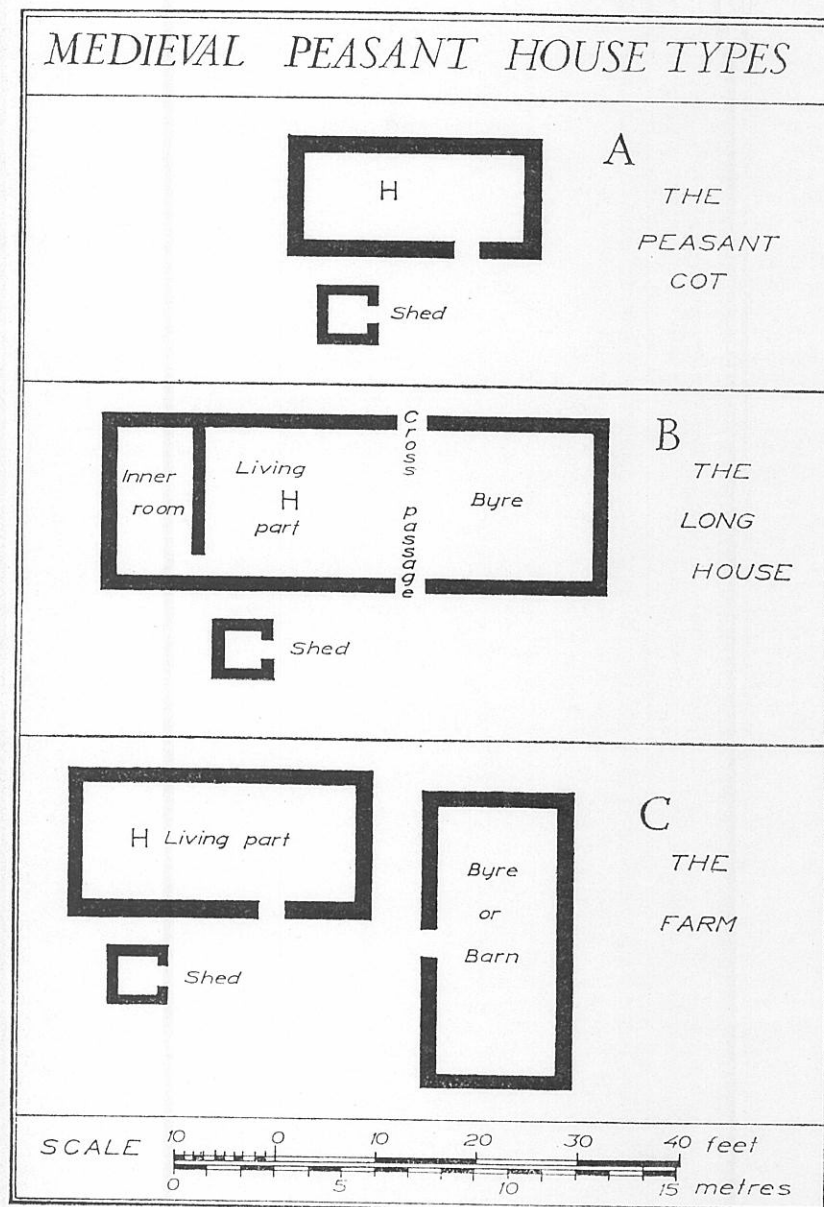


FIG. 1.



There is most interesting evidence from Yorkshire to confirm the suggestion that the long house went out over most of the country during the sixteenth century, for at Wharram Percy, which was deserted about 1510, every earthwork has the appearance of being a long house and there are no other buildings in and near the tofts. At Towthorpe, in the same parish, only about two miles away, which was not deserted until 1600, there is a series of farms in which there are two or three buildings of quite considerable size in each toft. It therefore seems likely that, at least in Yorkshire, the change-over from the long house to the farm took place about the middle of the sixteenth century, and certainly the lack of documentary evidence for long houses in wills and other documents of the period which have been worked over by Mr. M. W. Barley suggests that in the rest of the country, except the Highland Zone, the same change was taking place.

All the excavated houses date between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. There is very little evidence for the early medieval peasant house and therefore it is difficult to trace the origins of the long house in England. Until five years ago it was still thought that the Saxon peasants lived in small huts in the ground like those found at Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire. Recent excavations, however, have shown that Mr. C. A. R. Radford was right when he suggested, in 1957, that most of these pit huts were working huts and that the Saxons really lived in quite substantial wooden houses like those found on the continent at Warendorf and other sites. Substantial timber houses have now been found from the fifth century at Linsford in Essex, from the seventh and eighth centuries at Sedgeford, Norfolk and Maxey, Northamptonshire and from late Saxon times at Eaton Socon and St. Neots, Huntingdonshire and Thetford and Norwich, Norfolk. Unfortunately there is not sufficient evidence from any of these houses to show the use of the various rooms or even if they were partitioned.

There are some flimsy rectangular houses of the Neolithic period in England but these are very imperfectly understood. All the British houses of the Bronze and Iron Ages seem to be circular, and therefore stand apart from the main European stream of the rectangular house. Rectangular buildings return in the Roman period but only in the remarkable long house at Iwerne in Dorset, and some Basilican Villas, is there any evidence for the living of man and beast under the same roof. In Scotland and the Isle of Man viking houses have been found with large central hearths and benches on either side after the Scandinavian pattern. In the Isle of Man these remain largely unchanged until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. At Jarlshof, Shetland, the first building is a normal viking house but the second one is a long house. It is difficult to explain these two fundamental traditions at almost the same time. Excavations at Birsay, in Orkney, have also shown a long house at the earliest ninth-century level although the later buildings were of the more typical viking pattern. Little is known of viking houses in Scandinavia as most of the evidence comes from the great forts. There is no definite evidence of long houses at

any of these sites. In Iceland and Greenland it is possible that some of the earliest settlements had buildings of the long house type but these very soon developed into separate farm buildings and the complex passage farms which have been so thoroughly investigated by the Scandinavian expeditions.

It is remarkable that in Scandinavia, outside Denmark, and in Holland and Germany, despite the vast amount of excavation which has been carried out on houses of the migration period, hardly any work has been done on the medieval peasant house. In Germany the only large scale excavations recorded are those at Höhenrode and Königshagen. Here there seem to have been separate buildings forming a series of farms in the village. It is only in Denmark that material has been produced in large enough quantities to draw any conclusions; this has been largely due to the pioneer work of Professor Dr. A. Steensberg during the last twenty-five years. One of his most significant discoveries has been the fact that already in medieval times the courtyard farm, which is such a feature of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Danish landscape, was already firmly established. In fact the tradition may go at least as far back as viking times if Lindholm Høje is really a courtyard farm. Does this indicate a far greater prosperity among the Danish peasants of medieval times than in this country? Nevertheless there are long houses surviving in parts of Denmark and they have also been excavated at such medieval sites as Pebringe where the long house has a drain. Dr. G. Hatt has shown that the long house goes back in Denmark at least until the early Iron Age at such sites as Østerbølle and Ginderup. The little sheds outside the entrances of some of the houses at Østerbølle compare closely with small outbuildings at Wharram Percy in England and other sites, Fig. 1. B. In Holland the important excavations at Elp, Drenthe, take the aisled long house back into the Bronze Age, at least as far back as 900 B.C. It is not certain how much older it is as there are so few earlier Bronze Age houses excavated. In many parts of Europe there are large Neolithic houses, as for example at Kölnlindenthal and Zwenkau in Germany and Sittard in Holland. These are of interest as they have three lines of posts; this seems to be the primary form of roofing for wide structures from Neolithic times. Development in domestic architecture then seems to involve either suppression of the central row to produce the aisled house or suppression of the side rows to produce the house with a central row of posts. It has been said that these are two fundamentally different traditions but the difference has been exaggerated and may be related rather to the different widths of buildings. Most of the English evidence for medieval long houses suggests a central row of posts, for example at Fyfield Down in Wiltshire and Wharram Percy in Yorkshire, but at Gelligaer Common one of the houses had an aisled construction in the house part and a central row of posts at the cattle end. Also, while most of Danish Iron Age houses are aisled, in medieval times both forms are found and at Åsa House D, one end of the house is aisled and the other has a central row of posts. More work needs to be done on this important

aspect and it is very dangerous to suggest at this stage that any of these house types is Celtic or Teutonic in origin. As Professor Dr. Uhlig has recently suggested, these house building traditions may go back further in the past than we think and come from a common source before the differentiation of the tribes.

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EASTERN YORKSHIRE:  
THE GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND TO EARLY  
SETTLEMENT

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As this title implies, the purpose of this essay is to provide some account of the geographical character of eastern Yorkshire with particular reference to its influence upon early settlement, especially but not exclusively Scandinavian settlement. Indeed it would hardly be possible to confine attention to the Scandinavian settlement, for the geographical influences, problems, and opportunities confronting the Scandinavians were much the same as those that earlier had faced the Anglian settlers. Both groups, using broadly similar farming techniques, would make comparable assessments of the potentialities of the country for farming, for village sites, for routes inland, and for bases for sea-fishing, and both Scandinavian and Anglian place-names, taken together, are arranged in patterns that show a more obvious correlation with geographical character than with an historical sequence of events. It is true that evidence from place-names and archaeology suggests groups of Scandinavian settlements here, Anglians there, and intermingling elsewhere. But however arranged in terms of national origin, the same geographical factors appear to apply in the same way. This essay then will not discuss details of to what extent Scandinavians replaced or supplemented Anglian settlement here, or colonized more or less empty territory there, which are more the concern of the historian. It will deal with those factors and arrangements of relief, rocks, soils, drainage, and vegetation that provide the common geographical background for post-Roman settlement generally.

Eastern Yorkshire, which in this essay means Yorkshire between the Tees and the Humber and east of and including the Vale of York, forms the northernmost sector of the English scarplands: because of particular features of rock formations, geological structure and history it has its own distinctive geographical character. Because of geological structure it falls into two main divisions: the wide open vale of the west of relatively simple character (Fig. 1); a much more complex eastern half, walled off from the Vale by almost continuous escarpments behind which a succession of north facing escarpments separate areas of strongly contrasting geological formation and geographical character (Fig. 2). The effects of the Ice Age and particularly the Last Glaciation are very evident over the whole area.