

The housing of peasant livestock in England, 1200–1520^{*}

by Christopher Dyer

Abstract

The pastoral dimension of peasant farming needs more investigation. The main focus of recent research has been on the number of peasant animals and the application of their manure in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. This enquiry extends the discussion to include husbandry and management, concentrating on the housing of animals, before and after 1350. A combination of archaeological and documentary evidence is used to assess demesne buildings (as a standard for comparison) and accommodation for peasant livestock. The evidence comes from documents relating to the maintenance of buildings, archaeological excavation and survey, and architectural history. Byres, stables, sheepcotes, and other buildings are identified, some built to a high standard. Their numbers seem limited, though there may be some under-recording. Peasant animals were kept in yards, pens, and shelters, and in severe weather are likely to have been placed in barns, which were multi-functional buildings. Peasants could not afford as many specialist buildings as the demesne, but adapted to their circumstances, and followed their own methods for managing the livestock and their manure.

Pastoral farming made a vital contribution to rural production in the middle ages, but we do not know a great deal about its scale and techniques. Peasant animal husbandry is especially obscure, yet taken together peasants kept more animals and created a larger output of wool, meat, and dairy products than came from the lords' demesnes.

An influential thesis about peasant livestock in the thirteenth century was set out in 1962 by Postan.¹ He used the lay subsidy assessments on moveable goods, mainly animals. He found, in the tax lists for south Wiltshire in 1225 for example, that the average payer was assessed on 1.8 horses and oxen, 2.8 cows and calves, 15.6 sheep, and 0.3 pigs. He argued that these figures were too low to provide adequate amounts of manure to maintain the fertility of the arable fields. The livestock were very unequally distributed among the taxpayers, leaving many

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¹ M. Postan, 'Village livestock in the thirteenth century', *ECHR* 15 (1962), pp. 219–49.

households with few animals, and the numbers tended to decline around 1300. The problems of low and falling agricultural productivity contributed to the crisis of subsistence and the onset of a falling population in the fourteenth century. This view received support from a number of scholars. Hilton pointed to the relatively small herds of cattle and flocks of sheep belonging to tenants that were reported trespassing on lords' land, and the limited numbers of livestock which were recorded as being pastured by peasants in the king's forest of Feckenham (Worcestershire).²

A revisionist view has been put forward by Stone, who examined a number of individual holdings for which animals were listed.³ The numbers in themselves do not seem very impressive, such as the Hertfordshire smallholder in 1337 who owned a horse, a cow, a bullock, and 12 sheep, but if the stocking rates (animals per acre) are calculated, such peasant holdings were better supplied with manure than many demesnes. The same conclusion was reached by Slavin using a large body of taxpayers in Blackbourne Hundred in Suffolk in 1283, where stocking rates were again impressively high.⁴ La Poutré has taken up this line of argument, concentrating on the manure, which he quantified in terms of its weight and chemical composition. He imagined a half-yardland holding (15 acres or 6 ha) receiving the dung from cattle stalled over winter, and from a small flock of sheep kept on the fallow and stubble throughout the year, and judged that the peasant land was not under-manured.⁵

Research into the number of animals and the quantity of their manure has been concerned with the period 1200–1350 because of its relevance to such issues as peasant welfare and the contribution of agricultural productivity to the fourteenth-century crisis. After the drop in human population which is often linked with the Black Death of 1348–49, pressure on resources was reduced, demand for animals and their products changed, labour costs rose, and the use of land shifted from arable to grazing. Animal numbers increased in some places and at certain times, but the scale and chronology of these changes varied. In the period 1350–1520 historians' attention has been concerned less with problems of subsistence and more with the rebalancing of the rural economy and shifts in the distribution of wealth. Knowledge of the quantity of peasant livestock needs to be extended to include their feeding and management.⁶

In the whole period between 1200 and 1520 peasants did not keep animals mainly for the sake of their manure but because of the variety of contributions that they made to the economy of the holding. They pulled ploughs, harrows, carts, and wains, and sometimes powered mills. Riding horses improved access to markets and employment. Dairy produce, meat, wool, hides, and horn were consumed by the household, or were sold. Peasants bred cattle and horses, and made money from the sale of some of the young animals.⁷ Broadberry

² R. H. Hilton, *A medieval society. The West Midlands at the end of the thirteenth century* (sec. edn, 1983), pp. 109–10.

³ D. Stone, *Decision-making in medieval agriculture* (2005), pp. 262–72.

⁴ P. Slavin, 'Peasant livestock husbandry in late thirteenth-century Suffolk: economy, environment, and society', in M. Kowaleski, J. Langdon, and P. Schofield (eds), *Peasants and lords in the medieval English economy. Essays in honour of Bruce M. S. Campbell*

(2015), pp. 3–26.

⁵ H. La Poutré, 'Fertilization by manure: a manor model comparing English demesne and peasant land, c.1300', *AgHR* 65 (2017), pp. 20–48.

⁶ R. Britnell, *Britain and Ireland 1050–1530. Economy and society* (2004), pp. 413–23.

⁷ J. Claridge, 'The role of demesnes in the trade of agricultural horses in late medieval England', *AgHR* 65 (2017), pp. 1–19, esp. p. 19.

and his colleagues have sought to calculate the contribution that pastoral farming made to the national income. They suggest that in the 1270s livestock production, measured in constant prices, amounted to 30.8 per cent of the agricultural output; this rose to about a third in the 1300s, came nearer to a half after 1350 and reached 46.9 per cent in the 1450s.⁸ In other words, the output of pastoral agriculture had attained near parity with that of arable towards the end of the middle ages. Furthermore, as agriculture represented more than 40 per cent of the total output of the whole national economy, the pastoral sector represented near to a fifth of the national GDP in the fifteenth century. Although the defining characteristic of peasants was the relatively small scale of their agricultural production, their large numbers enabled them collectively to make a major contribution to the rural economy and therefore to national income. Arable and pasture of course complemented one another, and while a high proportion of the grain harvested was used to feed the peasant households, much of the pastoral production supplied the market.

Pastoral farming clearly deserves investigation. In order to understand its importance the quantity of animals needs to be assessed, but also the quality of livestock husbandry. This article explores one dimension of this, the housing of animals by peasants, which touched most aspects of the pastoral economy. Those writing about agriculture from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century believed that housing contributed to productivity, for instance enabling better wool to be obtained from sheep if they were kept in sheepcotes. Housing for all animals allowed efficient feeding, with mangers and racks fitted in the buildings, while fodder might be stored under the same roof. Housing aided the convenient collection of dung, which was concentrated and mingled with the straw litter on which the animals stood. To what extent were animals kept in buildings, and what influence did this have on the efficiency of livestock management?

I

Buildings on manorial demesnes are well documented, and a brief foray into the abundant evidence will provide a standard for comparison. On the 57 manors of the bishopric of Winchester's estates between 1282 and 1304 the famous annual accounts, the pipe rolls, make reference to 90 barns, either said to be for grain, or just called 'barns', and 43 described as barns for hay and/or straw.⁹ There were various specialist buildings for carts, wains, and dairying. Animals were provided with 80 byres or cattle houses, 25 stables, 61 sheepcotes, 16 pigsties, 14 poultry houses, and 12 dovecots. Some of these large and well-funded manors were equipped with more than one barn and byre, and they were usually able to put a good number of cattle and sheep under cover. Horses were apparently not so often housed in specialist buildings, and one suspects that pigs and poultry were commonly kept in structures that did not require much expenditure and so escaped mention in the accounts.

⁸ S. Broadberry, B. Campbell, A. Klein, M. Overton and B. van Leeuwen, *British economic growth, 1270–1870* (2015), pp. 110–20, 194.

⁹ I am grateful for this information from

C. Thornton, from an unpublished typescript, which was part of his presentation to the Winter Conference of the British Agricultural History Society in 1995.

Animal housing is found on all types of manor, such as two well-documented examples provided by the large main manor and the small rectory manor at Bourton-on-the-Hill in Gloucestershire. The main manor, belonging to Westminster Abbey, resembled in size and levels of investment those of the Winchester estate. Between 1279 and 1399 the accounts give details of expenditure of money and labour on a barn, granary, hay house, cart house, wool house, stable, two byres at one point, a cow house, two sheepcotes (and a third for a time), two pigsties, a fowl house, and a dovecot.¹⁰ Smaller structures were provided, in one case for storing the barrels of tar used to combat disease among the sheep. In the course of repair and rebuilding in the fourteenth century, both the barn and a sheepcote were roofed with stone slates, replacing the more normal straw thatch. Nearby lay the manor of Bourton rectory, with buildings serving a much smaller area of agricultural land, yet in the period 1296–1304 a barn, byre, stable, sheepcote, pigsty, and dovecot were being maintained.¹¹

Many of our documents come from church manors, so it is worth mentioning a 1374 description of the estate of a knight, Thomas de Bradeston, whose manor of Stinchcombe in Gloucestershire was equipped with two barns, an ox house, a sheepcote, a pigsty, two dovecots and a hen house. His sheepcote, as at Bourton, was roofed with stone slates.¹² At a knightly manor house in Oxfordshire, Barentins at Chalgrove, an extensive range of buildings has been excavated, including in the fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century phase an outer courtyard with at least four agricultural buildings: a large barn, a byre, and a cart house, and on the edge of the moated enclosure a narrow building about 42 m long which is likely to have been a sheepcote.¹³ A number of other unidentified buildings probably included a stable.

Evidently lords of all kinds in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were accustomed to store crops and keep a variety of animals and birds in specialized buildings. Barns had space for much of the corn, though thatched stacks were also built in the yard. A good proportion of the lords' cattle and sheep could have been accommodated in the byres or sheepcotes, but not all. Some of the livestock were evidently kept in yards or closes. Pigs and poultry appear often to have been housed in less substantial structures.

II

How did peasant buildings, and in particular their livestock housing, compare with those of the demesnes? The best documentary evidence comes from the records of dilapidation found in manor court rolls. Lords regarded the buildings on customary holdings as estate assets, and sought to enforce the tenants' obligation to carry out repairs. Taking the West Midland region as a much studied example, orders in manor courts to make repairs were unusual before 1320, grew in numbers in the decades before the Black Death, and then multiplied and reached a peak during the fifteenth century. Lords were alarmed by the neglect of tenant buildings,

¹⁰ Westminster Abbey Muniments (hereafter WAM), 8232–8318.

¹¹ WAM, 8247–8254.

¹² E. Stokes (ed.), *Abstract of Inquisitiones Post Mortem for Gloucestershire, part 6, 1359–1413* (British Record Soc., 47, 1914), pp. 82–5.

¹³ P. Page, K. Atherton and A. Hardy, *Barentin's manor. Excavations of the moated manor at Harding's Field, Chalgrove, Oxfordshire, 1976–9* (Oxford Archaeology, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 24, 2005), pp. 24–5, 49–56, 163–9.

which they feared might lead to complete ruin. The decays had many causes: holdings were being abandoned, or tenants were acquiring more than one holding, or they were changing the management of their assets, or simply could not afford the costs of labour and materials. The orders to tenants to make repairs sometimes identified the building that needed attention. At Upper Swell, Gloucestershire, in 1498, Thomas Boveton was presented in the manor court for not repairing defects in the timbers and roofing of his byre, and he faced a penalty of 6s. 8d. if he did not comply.¹⁴ Specific parts of a building could be selected for repair: at Stoke Giffard in Gloucestershire in 1454 John Oseward was told ‘to hang the door of his barn on the north side of the same barn’.¹⁵ The tenants were sometimes given incentives, in the form of gifts of timber, or release from rent, or reduction of arrears. Attempts might be made to coerce them, with requirements to pay to pay 3d. or 4d. when the neglect was reported, and then they were threatened with more severe financial penalties such as 6s. 8d., or even eviction. They might be required to put up a new building of specified size and quality, by a set date, again under threat of penalties.¹⁶ In extreme circumstances, lords would take over the repairs or replacement by organizing the work themselves. The clerks who wrote the court rolls tended to be brief and uninformative about the various types of building, often using the Latin word *domus*, which is commonly translated as ‘house’. This often meant a human dwelling, but could refer to a cart house, ox house, or sheep house, as the word was a generic term for a building. On rare occasions a complete set of buildings is described, as in the case of William Porter’s holding at Weston Subedge, Gloucestershire, in 1447.¹⁷ He was failing to keep in good repair a hall, two chambers, a kitchen, byre, sheepcote, barn, and dovecot ‘and other buildings’. This cannot be regarded as a typical farm complex, as Porter held an exceptional five yardlands (150 acres), in a period when the wealthier tenants in nearby villages were farming between 30 and 90 acres.

The types of buildings mentioned in series of court rolls are analysed in Table 1. These five examples have been chosen because the lords of these manors (or their officials) were particularly exercised by the problem of dilapidation, and the clerks recorded more details than usual. The choice of words varied, and one notes that at Kingscote and on the Archbishop of York’s estate, the main building for food preparation was called a bakehouse (*pistrinum*), but at Kingham there were kitchens and no bakehouses. Similar inconsistencies probably influenced the references to buildings for animals, with the result that sheepcotes were recorded in significant numbers at Kingscote and Broadway, and on the Evesham manors, but on a much smaller scale at Kingham and on the archepiscopal estate. Modest numbers of byres and stables were reported to be in need of repair at Kingham and on the Evesham manors, and very few or none on the others. In all about 25 per cent of the tenant buildings with their functions identified were intended for animals, which was less than the 36 per cent of buildings described as barns or granaries, but under-recording may account for some of that discrepancy.

Leaving aside the estates and manors which were assiduous in identifying the function of many buildings in need of repair, the routine entries in court rolls indicate that animal

¹⁴ TNA, SC2/175/77 (court rolls of Evesham Abbey manors in Gloucestershire).

¹⁵ Gloucestershire Archives (hereafter GA), D2700 MJ 11/1/2 (court roll from the Badminton archive).

¹⁶ P. Hargreaves, ‘Seignorial reaction and peasant

responses: Worcester Priory and its peasants after the Black Death’, *Midland Hist.* 24 (1999), pp. 53–78, esp. pp. 62–71.

¹⁷ Dorset RO, D10/M230 (court roll of Giffard manors).

TABLE 1. Buildings reported to be in need of repair.

		Hall	Chamber	Kitchen	Bakehouse	Barn/granary	Carthouse	Hayhouse	Byre	Stable	Sheepcote	Pigsty	Dovecote	Total
Archbishop of York's estates in Gloucester-shire, 1439–97 ^a	n	18	3	1	10	42	0	0	0	0	5	0	1	80
	%	23	4	1	13	53	0	0	0	0	6	0	1	100
Evesham Abbey's manors in Gloucester-shire, 1497–1513 ^b	n	25	10	4	0	31	1	0	7	8	19	3	1	109
	%	23	9	4	0	28	1	0	7	7	17	3	1	100
Kingham, Oxfordshire, 1516–25 ^c	n	15	4	9	0	19	0	1	6	6	3	1	0	64
	%	23	6	14	0	30	0	2	9	9	5	2	0	100
Kingscote, Gloucestershire, 1430–56 ^d	n	9	0	0	8	24	5	0	2	1	10	1	0	60
	%	15	0	0	13	40	8	0	3	2	17	2	0	100
Broadway, Worcestershire, 1503–18 ^e	n	2	4	2	2	15	1	0	1	1	18	1	0	47
	%	4	9	4	4	32	2	0	2	2	38	2	0	100
Total	n	69	21	16	20	131	7	1	16	16	55	6	2	360
	%	19	6	3	6	36	2	0	4	3	15	2	1	100

Sources:^a Gloucestershire Archives, D621/M1, M2.^b TNA, SC2/175/77, 78.^c New College Oxford, 3797.^d Gloucestershire Archives D471/M2.^e TNA, SC2/210/32, 33.

housing was in widespread use. The great majority of references to buildings in need of repair simply employ the unspecific term *domus*, or refer to defects in the messuage or tenement. In 1,257 presentments referring to decayed buildings or repairs, gathered from the records of more than 50 manors spread over the whole of the West Midlands, mostly between 1350 and 1520, about 70 per cent refer to unspecified buildings, but a number are given more precise descriptions, including 150 barns, 24 sheepcotes, 11 byres, six pigsties (called a swinecote in one case), five stables, and seven dovecots. The frequency of different types of animal housing resembles that found in the more detailed records in Table 1, with sheepcotes the most often mentioned, followed by byres. Most of the manors included in Table 1 were located in or near to the Cotswolds, which might be thought to explain the high proportion of sheepcotes, except that accommodation for sheep is prominent in the larger sample which extends over the whole region. A similarly small number of references to animal housing is found in other regions, such as the eight buildings for livestock listed among the 200 tenant buildings on the Ramsey Abbey estate (mainly in Huntingdonshire) documented between 1399 and 1458.¹⁸

¹⁸ E. Dewindt, *The Liber Gersumarum of Ramsey Abbey* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Subsidia Mediaevalia, 7, 1976).

The overall conclusion from records of tenant buildings requiring repair in the period 1350–1520 is that housing for animals was in widespread use but thinly distributed, with only one or two specialized livestock buildings on some holdings, and often none at all. This may mean that animal accommodation was not fully reported, but could also reflect its scarcity in the real world.

The bulk of the detailed documentary evidence examined so far comes from the period after 1350 because – with a few exceptions – dilapidation presentments appear only after the first plague epidemic. There are occasional references to peasant buildings between 1200 and 1350, but we lack the detailed testimony or large sample available for the later period. The records of the royal forests include an inquisition into offences against forest law in Feckenham Forest (Worcestershire) in the 1240s. This reported that 224 buildings had been put up in the forest, many of them on assarts (clearings of trees and vegetation).¹⁹ A few are identified as specialized animal housing, such as a piggery (*porcheria*), but a typical entry says, after describing the erection of the building, ‘from which go six oxen and four pigs’. The number and species vary, from such large groups as ‘six oxen, one horse, and twelve sheep’ to ‘a cow’. The association between buildings and animals is implied, and to reinforce this impression, when a barn was erected, animals ‘do not go’. The wording is enigmatic, but it can be read to mean that a clerk expected that woodland peasants in the early thirteenth century would keep livestock in their buildings. Another explanation would be that the animals were accommodated near the buildings, in yards or pens from which they were taken to pasture.

Anecdotal references to peasants’ agricultural buildings, admittedly mentioning barns more often than byres or stables, can be found in early manorial court rolls, and records of the coroners and the royal courts.²⁰ An unusual entry in the King’s Bench records for Staffordshire in 1363 concerns Christine Curson of Fauld who was accused of digging and quarrying (for alabaster) and causing the destruction of 20 dwelling houses (‘insethouses’), 10 barns, 3 bakehouses and 5 byres.²¹ The byres were valued at 5 marks (£3 6s. 8d.) each, and their timbers were sold, suggesting structures of some quality. As in the samples cited already, barns were more numerous than byres. The offence was probably committed before 1363, and the damaged buildings are likely to have been built in the first half of the fourteenth century.

Returning to the whole chronological range of sources for the later middle ages, are there other explanations for the limited evidence for buildings for animals on peasant holdings? Once it would have been said that there were plenty of longhouses, that is buildings with dwellings and byres under the same roof. Perhaps the *domus* so often figuring in the sources was a dual purpose structure, and therefore byres were more plentiful than first appears? Our documents would not necessarily conceal the existence of longhouses and one was described at Northfield (Worcestershire) in 1440, as ‘a hall ... and a chamber at the front end of the said

¹⁹ J. Birrell (ed.), *Records of Feckenham Forest, Worcestershire, c.1236–1377* (Worcestershire Hist. Soc., new ser., 21, 2006), pp. 21–6.

²⁰ E.g. Worcester Cathedral Library, E15 (court roll of 1347 mentioning decayed houses); B. Hanawalt, *The ties that bound. Peasant families in medieval England* (1986), p. 42; A. R. Dewindt and E. B. Dewindt (eds),

Royal justice in the medieval countryside (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts, 57, 1981), pp. 305, 371.

²¹ G. Wrottesley (ed.), *Extracts from the plea rolls of Edward III and Richard II, AD 1360 to AD 1387* (Collections for a History of Staffordshire, 13, 1892), p. 31.

hall with a byre at the rear end of the aforesaid hall'.²² Such descriptions are so rare in most of Midland, southern, and eastern England that there is no reason to suppose that people and animals commonly shared the same building.

The written sources were influenced by the attitudes of the officials who dealt with problems of dilapidation. In ordering repairs, and offering help, they selected the buildings that they regarded as having the greater importance. Their concern was to keep in good repair the necessary dwellings and barns, and they must have regarded stables and sheepcotes as desirable but not essential. They had a sufficiently difficult struggle to persuade tenants to carry out any repairs on the basic house and barn, and they perhaps avoided adding to the tenants' burdens with extra demands. One sees the same priorities at work when lords took on the building work themselves, and in a number of projects to repair or build new buildings for tenants, such as those at Thorner in Yorkshire in 1423–27, Fulstow in Lincolnshire in 1429–30, Tillington in Staffordshire in 1437–38, and Whatcote in Warwickshire in 1443–50, houses and barns were selected for expenditure.²³

It might be argued that the shortage of references to animal houses resulted from the poor quality of their construction, and this is likely in the case of pigs, which were kept at least in ones and twos by many peasants, yet pigsties are only sporadically said to be in need of repair. At Barcheston (Warwickshire) in 1451 a by-law ordered the tenants to keep pigs in 'les styes' (and not roaming the streets and fields causing nuisance).²⁴ Every pig owner was evidently assumed to have, or acquire easily, a suitable home for their animals. Perhaps a sty with mud walls or hurdles could be cheaply constructed. An extra consideration in the case of poultry was to keep them safe from predators especially at night, and a solution to that problem, according to Chaucer's 'Nun's Priest's Tale' was to allow a (fictional) cock and hens to roost in the rafters of their owner's cottage.²⁵

However, the suggestion that animal housing was insubstantial cannot be applied to every part of the peasant building stock; like the byres at Fauld, some of the animal accommodation could have been as well constructed and expensive to build as the peasants' dwelling houses. At Southrop in Gloucestershire in 1472 when William Lyfoly surrendered his holding, his successor agreed to provide either a barn or a sheepcote in which the retired couple could live, presumably after modification.²⁶ Barns (and most sheepcotes in that region) would have had stone foundations and a timber frame based on crucks, so they were well enough constructed to be converted into a dwelling. In the fifteenth century a surge of house construction (based on tree-ring dating of surviving timbers) was accompanied by an improved quality of housing.²⁷ This probably influenced the standard of animal houses, some of which were built by the same craftsmen. For example orders for repairs to byres, stables, and sheepcotes can

²² Birmingham Archives and Heritage, no. 51080 (Northfield court roll).

²³ C. Dyer, 'Medieval peasant buildings (1250–1550): documents and historical significance', in N. Alcock and D. Miles (eds), *The medieval peasant house in Midland England* (2013), pp. 105–18, esp. p. 107; id., 'Living in peasant houses in late medieval England', *Vernacular Architecture* 44 (2013), pp. 19–27, esp. pp. 19–20.

²⁴ Warwickshire RO, CR580/4 (Barcheston court roll).

²⁵ L. D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (1987), p. 254 (l. 2884), p. 257 (l. 3172).

²⁶ GA, D11718/61/B1 (Southrop court roll).

²⁷ R. Suggett, 'Peasant houses', in C. Gerrard and A. Guttierrez (eds), *The Oxford handbook of later medieval archaeology in Britain* (2018), pp. 226–41.

refer to substantial timbers, such as the *cowhouse* at Kingham in Oxfordshire which had a defective ‘first piece’ in 1521.²⁸ High quality buildings, however, were not sufficient in number or size to house all peasant livestock.

To sum up the lessons derived from the documents, many peasants had the facilities to keep some of their animals in a well-constructed building designed for that purpose, but although they commonly owned a horse, some cattle and sheep, a pig or two, and some poultry, they were not recorded as building and maintaining simultaneously a stable, byre, sheepcote, pigsty, and hen house. Peasant livestock were apparently not as comprehensively sheltered as those on the demesne, though even the lords’ privileged animals and birds were not all kept in roofed accommodation.

III

The remains of peasant buildings provide vital information about their construction, modification, use, and abandonment. The evidence comes from the archaeological excavation of houses and farm buildings in deserted settlements of which the final phase was often in the late fourteenth or fifteenth century. Occupation sometimes ended around 1300, and many of the structures on sites occupied after 1400 go back to the period 1200–1350 or before, so the archaeological evidence is not confined to the 1350–1520 period. In the 1960s dwellings were selected for excavation, but eventually associated buildings and structures were investigated as standard practice. These groups of buildings were often contained within plots defined by ditches or walls, and the excavators called the enclosed areas tofts or crofts. Identifying the function of buildings can pose problems, as the excavations often reveal a floor area edged by traces of walls, either stone foundations or post holes and beam slots, but with few hints of the way that the building was used. A hearth suggests a dwelling, and a byre or stable would be indicated ideally by internal drains, a wide door, internal partitions for stalls, and a manger, but partitions or mangers are scarce. Drains seem to appear in many buildings, not just in those intended for animals, and hearths were apparently not confined to dwellings. To make matters more difficult, functions might change: for example, a dwelling could become a byre. Precise dating is elusive, and buildings in apparent association cannot always be shown to have been in use at the same time. A further difficulty arises in distinguishing between a roofed building and an enclosed yard or pen.

Our starting point in reviewing this evidence are sites in the Cotswolds, where building remains are well preserved thanks to their substantial stone foundation walls. In the village of Upton (in Blockley, Gloucestershire) a single line of buildings running from south to north, went through a number of changes in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Figure 1a).²⁹ In the earliest phases the excavators interpreted the most prominent building (AE) as a longhouse, with a hall (with a hearth and oven) to the north, and an apparent byre in its lower end to

²⁸ New College, Oxford, 3797 (Kingham court roll).

²⁹ R. Hilton and P. Rahtz, ‘Upton, Gloucestershire, 1959–1964’, *Trans. of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Soc.* 85 (1966), pp. 70–146, esp. 100–7;

P. Rahtz, ‘Upton, Gloucestershire, 1964–1968. Second report’, *Trans. of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Soc.* 88 (1969), pp. 74–126, esp. pp. 86–98.

FIGURE 1. *opposite* Plans of peasant houses and farm buildings with accommodation for livestock.

- a) Upton, Gloucestershire (Cotswold village). Buildings of varied functions built in line, with a byre at the extreme north (AA), and an enclosed yard at the southern end (AF).
- b) Okehampton Park, Devon (Dartmoor hamlet). Two clusters of buildings, consisting of three longhouses (A1, A3, B2), three barns (A2, B1, B3), house for livestock (A4) and three sheep pens (CDE).
- c) Great Linford, Buckinghamshire (Midland champion village). Croft F. A dwelling (A), barn (B) and two buildings for (?) animals (C, D).
- d) Cedars Park, Stowmarket, Suffolk (Dispersed settlement). Enclosure with compartments). Dwelling (A), Yard (B), Sheepcote (C), shed (D), garden (E). A pond lies north of A. (buildings of timber).

Note: unless otherwise stated the building plans in Figure 1 and 2 show foundation walls of stone or chalk.

Sources: Rahtz, 'Upton, Gloucestershire, 1964–1968', pp. 94–6; Henderson and Weddell, 'Medieval Settlements on Dartmoor', pp. 129–30; Mynard and Zeepvat, *Great Linford*, pp. 67–73; Woolhouse, *Medieval dispersed settlement ... at Cedars Park, Stowmarket*, pp. 30–41, 106.

the south. The 'byre' with its prominent stone-built drain is now thought to have had an industrial purpose. An enclosed area (AF) at the end of the house, about 8 m by 7 m, was presumably a yard for animals, as its width exceeds that of most roofed buildings. In a later phase of occupation a dwelling house (AC) was built to the north, higher up the slope, and to its north, a succession of two separate buildings may have served as byres. The later byre (AA) measured 9 m by 5 m with a wide doorway, but subsequently the door was narrowed and the floor heightened, perhaps for the storage of crops. So in this complex of buildings, the parts occupied by animals may have been the yard to the south and successive byres to the north.

In the Gloucestershire Cotswolds some evidence comes from plans of building foundations visible as earthworks in pastures or woodland. At a number of sites such as Roel (in Hawling), Thorndale (in Withington) and Hullasey (in Coates) a recurring pattern was a group of three or four buildings, each of two or three bays (10 m to 15 m in length) arranged around a yard.³⁰ It seems likely that animals were kept in at least one of these structures, but this must remain a speculation. A sheepcote, identifiable because of its dimensions, survives as an earthwork among the remains of the deserted village of Lower Harford (in Naunton).³¹

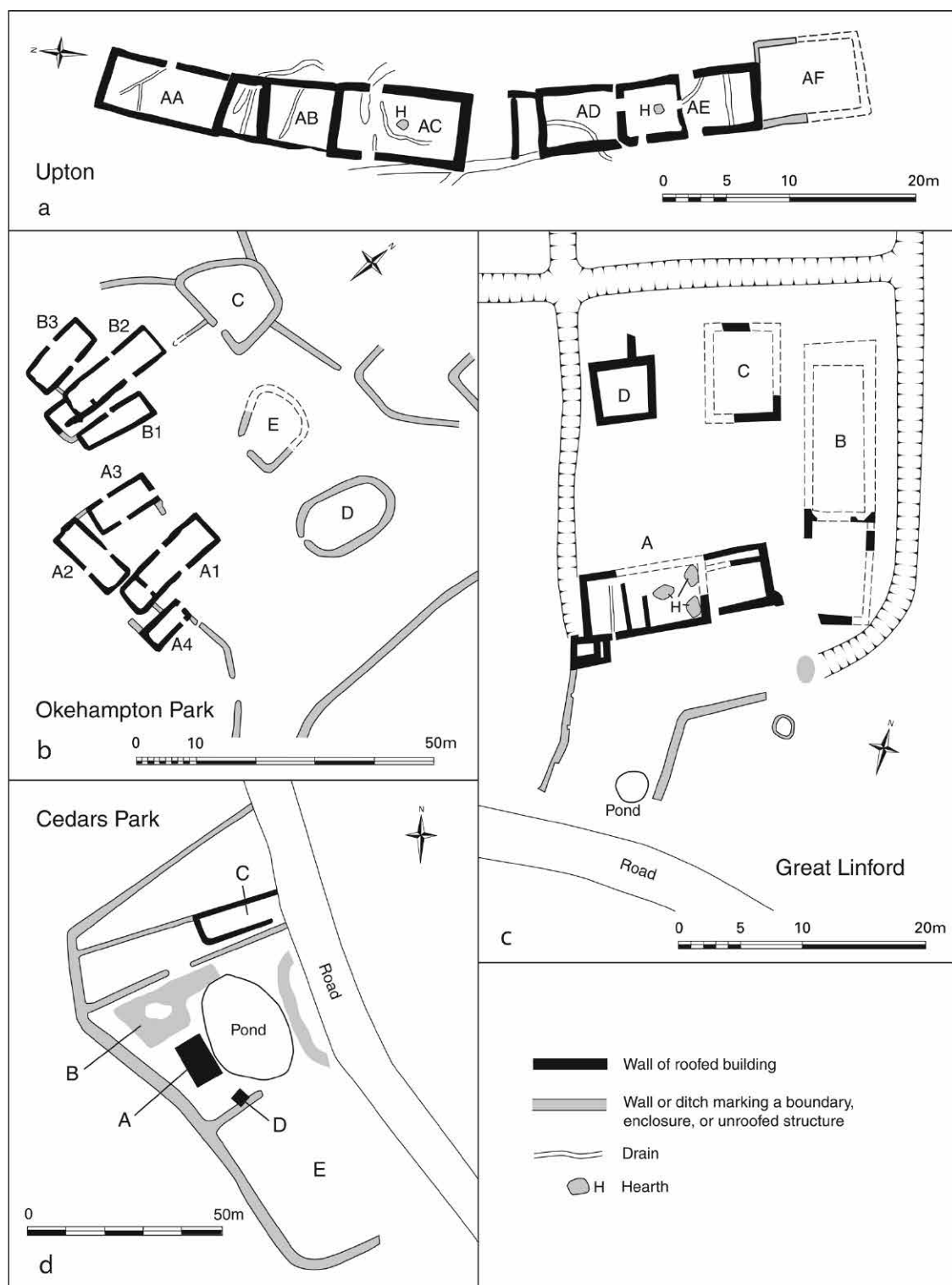
Upland sites elsewhere in the country also offer the advantages of well-preserved remains of houses, with substantial stone foundations. The best known settlement site on Dartmoor, Hound Tor, occupied in the thirteenth and part of the fourteenth century, has buildings of distinct types: longhouses, smaller dwellings, and buildings described as barns with corn-driers when first excavated, but their ovens and kilns may also have enabled them to serve as bakehouses or brewhouses.³² The cattle occupied the byre end of the longhouses, and these well-defined spaces were the main provision for animals on Dartmoor, and on high ground elsewhere

³⁰ J. Bond and C. Lewis, 'The earthworks of Hawling', *Trans. of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Soc.* 109 (1991), pp. 169–70; C. Dyer, 'Villages and non-villages in the medieval Cotswolds', *Trans. of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Soc.* 120 (2002), pp. 11–35, esp. pp. 17–19; P. Ellis, 'The medieval settlement at Hullasey, Coates', *Trans. of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Soc.*, 102 (1984),

pp. 210–12.

³¹ C. Dyer, 'Sheepcotes: evidence for medieval sheep-farming', *Medieval Arch.* 39 (1995), pp. 136–64, esp. pp. 140–1.

³² G. Beresford, 'Three deserted settlements on Dartmoor: a report on the late E. Marie Minter's excavations', *Medieval Arch.* 23 (1979), pp. 98–158.



in Devon.³³ Clusters of buildings in Okehampton Park (Devon) occupied in the thirteenth century included three longhouses (A1, A3 and B2) of varied size; the excavator estimated that the byre ends of these longhouses each had the capacity to house six or eight beasts (Figure 1b). The byre end of a longhouse at St Neot in Cornwall could have accommodated ten.³⁴ A site at Ottery St Mary shows that longhouses could also appear in lowland Devon.³⁵

The byre end of a longhouse need not have been the only means of accommodating animals in peasant farms on the uplands. At Brassington in Derbyshire the complex of buildings associated with a dwelling belonging to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries included a possible barn, but the excavators considered that it might have housed sheep.³⁶ A smaller building of unknown function might also have been intended for livestock. On the Okehampton Park site (Figure 1b), as well as the byre ends of three longhouses, at least one of the outbuildings (A4) may have housed cattle, and three unroofed walled pens were likely to have sheltered flocks of sheep. At the Northumberland village of Alnhamshales, where the main accommodation for animals was in the lower ends of longhouses, a number of associated smaller buildings visible as earthworks may have included space for animals.³⁷

On lowland sites where byres and living space for people were separate, animal houses can be found among the buildings clustered around dwellings. One of the most complete village excavations in England, at Great Linford in Buckinghamshire, included a complex in Croft F of the period c.1250–c.1425 (Figure 1c). A house (once regarded as a longhouse, but now interpreted as a dwelling) was accompanied by a probable barn and two small buildings of unknown function, which might have included animal housing.³⁸ Indentations in a wall were thought to be shelters for bee-hives, a rare find though bees were kept in most villages. Croft L at Great Linford included among its seven buildings, as well as a barn, a probable stable and two other buildings of unknown function. Other buildings of similar date contained in the crofts at Great Linford were identified as dwellings, bakehouses/kitchens, or barns. The Great Linford buildings were based on stone foundations, but at nearby Westbury timber buildings were occupied between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. In nineteen crofts at least 44 buildings were arranged round yards, with a number of groups consisting of between three and five buildings. Only one building (in Croft 10) was positively identified as having housed livestock, though it is likely that among so many structures a few more

³³ C. G. Henderson and P. J. Weddell, 'Medieval settlements on Dartmoor and in West Devon: the evidence from excavations', *Proc. of the Devon Archaeological Soc.* 52 (1994), pp. 119–40; H. Fox, *Dartmoor's alluring uplands. Transhumance and pastoral management in the Middle Ages* (2012), pp. 17–18.

³⁴ D. Austin, 'Excavations in Okehampton Deer Park, Devon, 1976–1978', *Proc. of the Devon Archaeological Soc.* 30 (1978), pp. 191–239, esp. p. 222; D. Austin, G. Gerrard and T. Greeves, 'Tin and agriculture in the Middle Ages and beyond: landscape archaeology in St Neot parish, Cornwall', *Cornish Arch.* 28 (1989), pp. 5–251, esp. p. 60.

³⁵ A. Mudd and others, 'A medieval building and its

contents at Island Farm, Ottery St Mary, East Devon: excavations in 2014', *Internet Arch.* 47 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.47.4>.

³⁶ G. Makepeace, 'Report on the excavations of a medieval farm at Hill Top Farm, Aldwark, near Brassington, Derbyshire, 1992–95', *Derbyshire Archaeological J.* 121 (2001), pp. 162–89.

³⁷ P. Dixon, 'Survey and excavations at Alnhamshales deserted medieval village, on the Rowhope Burn, Alnham Moor, Northumberland', *Arch. Aeliana*, fifth ser., 43 (2014), pp. 169–220.

³⁸ D. Mynard and R. Zeepvat, *Excavations at Great Linford 1974–80* (Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society, monograph 3, 1992), pp. 67–73.

were put to a similar use.³⁹ The hamlet of West Cotton in Northamptonshire was formed of about 20 buildings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which included dwellings, barns, cart houses, malt kilns, but only one byre/stable.⁴⁰ In East Anglia, accommodation for animals has been found at Grenstein (Norfolk) where a ‘cattle shed’ stood among the five to seven buildings in a single toft occupied in the late fourteenth and fifteenth century. In the thirteenth and early fourteenth century at Cedars Park near Stowmarket in Suffolk in an area of dispersed settlement, a house was associated with a sheepcote and a shed (Figure 1d).⁴¹ At Gomeldon in Wiltshire, as well as longhouses of the thirteenth century, at least one barn was identified (Figure 2e), and a dwelling seems to have been converted c.1300 to a byre or stable.⁴² A byre, together with two barns and a dwelling, formed a group of buildings on a tenement dated after c.1350 at Faxton in Northamptonshire.⁴³

Having glimpsed a sample of sites across a wide spectrum of dates, and having appreciated the problems of interpretation, the evidence can be aggregated from 44 sites, on which more than 400 buildings have been excavated. Eight buildings have been identified as stables, seven as separate byres (though sometimes the reports say cautiously ‘a stable or byre’) and three as sheepcotes, with two pigsties, two henhouses, and two dovecotes. Dozens of buildings could not be assigned a precise function, but as many of these were probably barns, stores, or cart sheds, only a proportion were likely to have been used primarily for livestock. Putting together the buildings described by the excavators as animal houses, with those which could possibly be included in that category, the total would amount to about 10 per cent of the sample of 400. Including the excavated longhouses with their designated byres would take the total to around 20 per cent.

Some excavated tofts or crofts contained only a house and a barn. An example comes from the most thoroughly investigated part of the Wharram Percy village, Site 12, on which an unusually large longhouse occupied until c.1500 was matched by a long barn to the north (Figure 2f).⁴⁴ Here livestock were housed in the byre end of the longhouse, but in the Midlands there is clear evidence from sites such as Barton Blount (Derbyshire) and Goltho (Lincolnshire) for peasant holdings in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries consisting of a dwelling and a barn, where each pair of buildings was often associated with a well-defined yard.⁴⁵ The

³⁹ R. Ivens, P. Busby and N. Shepherd, *Tattenhoe and Westbury. Two deserted medieval settlements in Milton Keynes* (Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society, monograph 8, 1995), pp. 89–198. Phosphate analysis (pp. 456–7) confirmed that animals had been kept in a few locations.

⁴⁰ A. Chapman, *West Cotton, Raunds. A study of medieval settlement dynamics, AD 450–1450* (2010), pp. 184–239.

⁴¹ P. Wade-Martins, *Village sites in Launditch Hundred* (East Anglian Archaeology, 10, 1980), pp. 112–21; T. Woolhouse, *Medieval dispersed settlement on the mid Suffolk clay at Cedars Park, Stowmarket* (East Anglian Archaeology, 161, 2016), pp. 29–61, 118–20.

⁴² J. Musty and D. Algar, ‘Excavations at the deserted

village of Gomeldon, near Salisbury’, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 80 (1986), pp. 127–69, esp. pp. 133–48.

⁴³ D. Wilson and G. Hurst, ‘Medieval Britain in 1966’, *Medieval Arch.* 11 (1967), pp. 307–9. C. Gerrard has also shown me a full-length typescript report of this site, mostly written by the excavator, L. Butler, which he is editing for publication.

⁴⁴ S. Wrathmell, *Domestic settlement 2: medieval peasant farmsteads* (Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire wolds, 6, 1989), pp. 22–33.

⁴⁵ G. Beresford, *The medieval clay-land village: excavations at Goltho and Barton Blount* (Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph 6, 1975), pp. 12–18, 30.

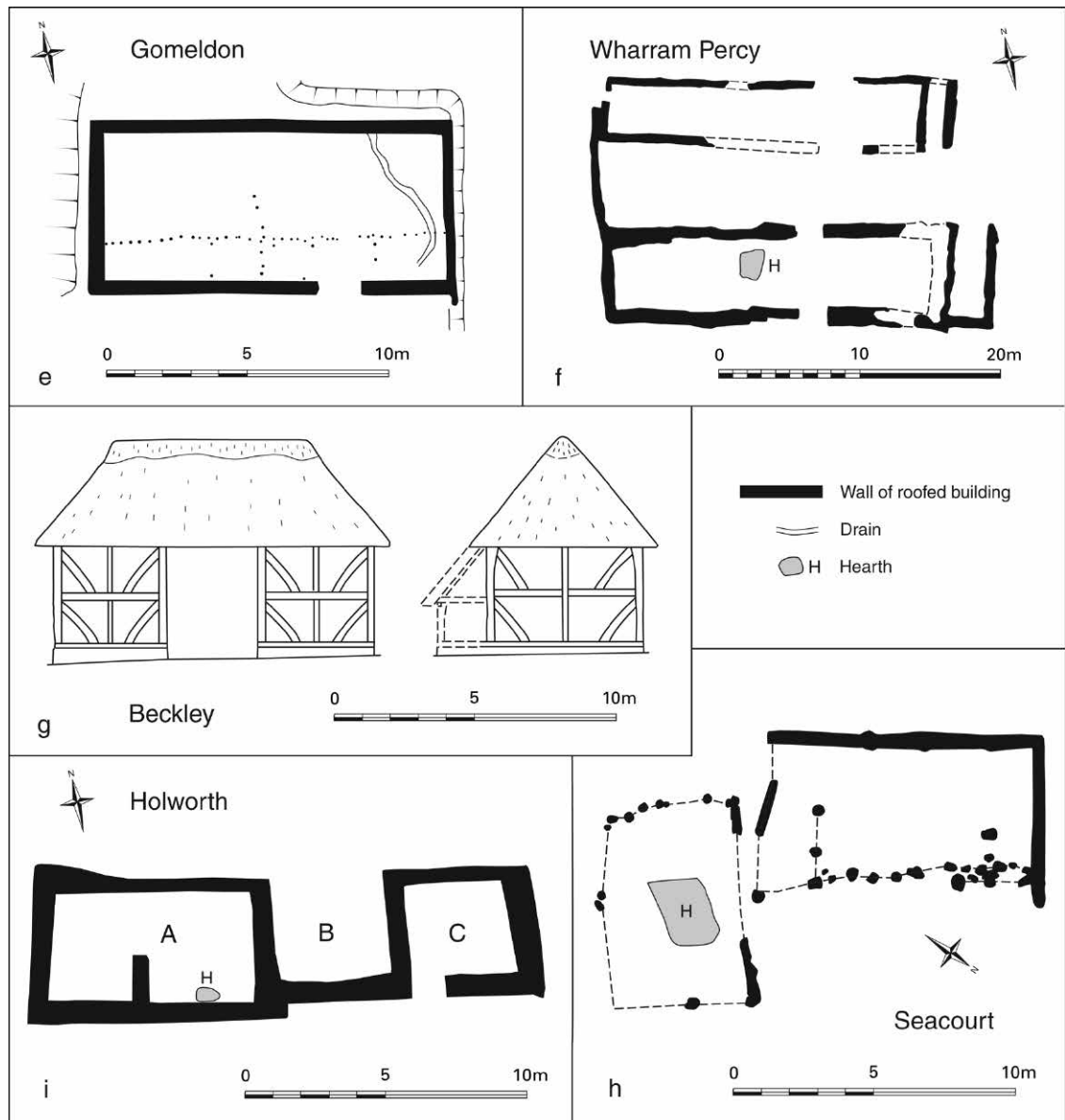


FIGURE 2. Plans and an elevation of barns and spaces for livestock

- e) Gomeldon, Wiltshire (Village on chalk downs). Barn with internal compartment for livestock.
- f) Wharram Percy, North Yorkshire (formerly East Riding) (Wolds village). House (to south) and barn.
- g) Kingsbank, Beckley, Sussex (Wealden farm). Elevations of side and end walls of barn, with an aisle on the north side. In the post-medieval period aisles or lean-to structures on barns were used for livestock (timber-framed standing building).
- h) Seacourt, Oxfordshire (formerly Berkshire) (Champion village). House and barn. The barn has internal subdivisions (buildings of timber).
- i) Holworth, Dorset (Village on chalk downs). Dwelling (A), Store/Granary (C), sheltered space for livestock (B).
- Sources: Musty and Algar, 'Deserted medieval village of Gomeldon', pp. 138–9; Wrathmell, *Domestic settlement*, pp. 30–3; D. and B. Martin, *Farm buildings of the Weald*, pp. 99–101; M. W. Beresford and J. G. Hurst (eds), *Deserted medieval villages: studies* (1971), p. 110.

best preserved buildings at Caldecote (Hertfordshire) belong to a phase after the 1360s.⁴⁶ A well-built house at the latter village was associated with a large barn, another building called a barn by the excavator but which was at least partly used as a bakehouse and brewhouse, and a dovecot. The doves were the only livestock with a building dedicated for their use. A house, kitchen, and barn were identified at Boreham in Essex. Extensive excavations at Hangleton in Sussex found at least 17 buildings, which were mostly dwellings and kitchens or bakehouses.⁴⁷

The general conclusion that emerges from this survey of archaeological research is not dissimilar from that arising from the documents. The evidence is imperfect, incomplete, and difficult to interpret. In some circumstances peasant animals were sheltered in buildings designed for that purpose, and byres, stables, sheepcotes, pigsties, fowl houses, and dovecots have been identified. In their size and fabric the buildings intended for cattle, horses, and sheep resembled dwellings and barns. Very rarely did peasants provide housing for all of the varieties of livestock, as could many demesnes. Sometimes the only buildings on a holding were a dwelling and barn, or a dwelling, barn, and bakehouse, with no specialized provision for animals at all. Towards the end of the period a dwelling could be converted to house animals, as happened in a late phase at Hangleton, and some longhouses, like that at Wharram Percy, had a large byre, but there is no clear indication from archaeological evidence that the trend to pastoral farming after 1350 was accompanied by a major increase in peasant animal housing.

IV

These provisional conclusions might be modified by considering more carefully the role of longhouses and barns. Long before the age of scientific excavations, longhouses attracted interest among archaeologists and folklorists as standing buildings in the uplands. The layout of the houses which brought man and beast into close proximity seemed to epitomize the ‘otherness’ of the peasant way of life. The excavators of the 1960s believed that longhouses were not confined to the ‘Highland zone’, but had once been commonplace features of the Midlands and south. They were too ready to recognize longhouses from uncertain evidence. Subsequent sceptical reappraisal (for example at Upton and Great Linford) has discounted the animal presence at one end of a number of lowland houses previously interpreted as longhouses. Longhouses were a feature mainly of the north and west according to a new consensus, and in the sample of 44 sites used here, twelve of those with longhouses were located in either Devon and Cornwall or the North. Longhouses were once thought to have diminished in number after 1400, when they were replaced by specialist dwellings and farm buildings. However they are found in all periods, into modern times, in the west and north. The large excavated example at Wharram Percy continued in use after 1500. Evidently the longhouse in the Middle Ages had

⁴⁶ G. Beresford, *Caldecote. The development and desertion of a Hertfordshire village* (Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph 28, 2009), pp. 102–9.

⁴⁷ N. Lavender, ‘Bronze age and medieval sites at Springfield, Chelmsford: excavations near the A12 Boreham interchange, 1993’, *Essex Archaeology and Hist.* 30 (1999), pp. 1–43, esp. p. 39; E. W. Holden, ‘Excavations

at the deserted medieval village of Hangleton, part 1’, *Sussex Archaeological Coll.* 101 (1963), pp. 54–181; J. and G. Hurst, ‘Excavations at the deserted medieval village of Hangleton, part 2’, *Sussex Archaeological Coll.* 102 (1964), pp. 94–142 (the excavators at Hangleton called the bakehouses/kitchens outshuts or ‘oven sheds’).

a significant role in accommodating cattle in the pastoral uplands, but in the Midlands, south, and east, when cattle were housed they were kept in separate byres.⁴⁸

Barns were mentioned frequently in documents (especially when repairs were ordered by manor courts). They have been excavated on settlement sites, and some peasant barns have survived. Barns were regarded as necessary parts of the infrastructure of peasant production, on smallholdings and cottage tenements as well as on larger holdings. They were often equal in size to the house near which they were sited. Characteristic buildings were the barn of Croft F at Great Linford which measured 13 m by 6 m; and at Croft E at Barton Blount the barn was 13.3 m long and 4.9 m wide. The barn which still stands at Pendock in Worcestershire consists of 4 bays, or c. 20 m by 5 m, and a surviving medieval peasant barn at Chittinghurst in Sussex measures 12.5 m by 6.5 m; another Sussex barn at Beckley has an aisle and so is 7 m wide and 11.5 m long (Figure 2g).⁴⁹ Larger barns served the expanding land holdings at the end of the Middle Ages, with a 25 m by 5 m example on Site 12 at Wharram Percy (Figure 2f), and 16.5 m by 5.5 m at Caldecote's Croft B.⁵⁰ The documents confirm that the most barns in 1350–1520 were of three bays (c.15 m by 5 m) though two-bay and four-bay examples are known. They cost £2–£4 to build, and the quality of a peasant barn at Blickling in Norfolk enabled it to be converted in 1434 into a dwelling for a retired couple.⁵¹ The still-standing barns mentioned above were soundly constructed, Pendock using crucks and Chittinghurst and Beckley in the box-framed tradition of the south-east (Figure 2g).

The main purpose of barns was to store crops in sheaf before they were threshed. The sheaves would be carried by cart from the harvest field and piled inside the barn. Threshing on the floor of the barn or nearby, would begin in September and continue for months afterwards. Alongside the expectation that barns were primarily corn stores, we have hints that they were used flexibly. The east end of the Wharram Percy barn had at one stage of its life contained mineral coal, brought to the village on the wolds of the East Riding from mines in West Yorkshire. Specialist cart houses and wain houses are recorded sporadically in the documents. Eighteen appear in the large sample of tenant buildings (p. 34 above), and they figure in Table 1. Those tenants without a cart house or wain house might have pushed these valuable vehicles into the barn, like William Haley of Lowdham in Nottinghamshire who in 1479 kept a cart and wain in his 'granary and barn' alongside 11 quarters and 4 bushels of grain and malt.⁵² Did this flexibility extend to putting animals in the barn? Court roll references include a four-bay building at Wichenford in Worcestershire being described as 'a barn with a sheepcote' in 1473, and in 1498 at Adlestrop in Gloucestershire a building was called a 'barn and stable under one

⁴⁸ M. Gardiner, 'The distribution and adoption of the byre-house (longhouse) in late medieval Britain', in I. Bohacova and P. Sonnemer (eds), *Medieval Europe in motion* (2014), pp. 145–62.

⁴⁹ Mynard and Zeepvat, *Great Linford*, p. 72 (in a second phase it had an extension added which measured 8 m by 4 m); Beresford, *Clay-land village*, p. 45; Pendock's barn was observed by the author before it was incorporated into a modern dwelling; E. Miller (ed.), *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, III,

1348–1500 (1991), p. 170; D. and B. Martin, *Farm buildings of the Weald, 1450–1750* (2006), pp. 99–101.

⁵⁰ Wrathmell, *Domestic settlement*, pp. 30–2; Beresford, *Caldecote*, pp. 104–5.

⁵¹ Norfolk RO, 11262 26 A 4. This maintenance agreement assigned to the retired couple a chamber in a cottage previously built as a barn, and access to the bakehouse.

⁵² Borthwick Institute York, Archbishopal Registers, 22, Booth. 22, fo. 321r (probate inventory).

roof'.⁵³ As well as these long-term formal divisions of barns, there might have been occasions or seasons when space for animals could have been found in the barn.

The size of peasant barns suggests that they were intended for more than one purpose. Estimates of the amount of grain contained in a stack of demesne or tithe corn, made as an aid to auditing, allow us to assess the capacity of a barn.⁵⁴ According to a thirteenth-century treatise on accounting, a stack of unthreshed wheat measuring 30 feet in length, 15 feet wide and 10 feet high (to use the measurements employed in the treatise) would contain 40 quarters of grain, which would mean that a peasant barn 45 feet by 15 feet with a stack about 8–10 feet high would have ample room for 25 quarters of grain from 15 acres of land harvested each year from a yardland of 30 acres.⁵⁵ At Wharram Percy the three-bay (15 m by 5 m) barns visible as earthworks are thought to have been able to store the 32 quarters likely to have been harvested from a two-oxgang holding (equivalent to one yardland), and still have space to spare.⁵⁶ A barn would only have accommodated all of the crops from the holding's arable for a short time, as threshing would have started soon after the harvest, and the heap of sheaves would have diminished through the following months as the grain was consumed by people and livestock, sold, or exchanged. The barn could also have contained hay, but again the size of that stack shrank from November onwards. As the crops were processed and removed, the section of the barn's floor area that could have been used to store agricultural implements and animals expanded. By mid-winter there would have been room in a three-bay barn with a floor area of 63 square metres for a flock of 30 sheep which needed 25 square metres, securely penned with hurdles so as to avoid damage to the remaining sheaves. Alternatively a few larger animals could have been tethered in the space available.

Indirect evidence for the use of barns for general purposes comes from a maintenance agreement of 1483 from Shirehampton near Bristol. William Rous had surrendered his messuage and half-yardland to John Tyllyn, with the concession that William and his wife Margery could continue to live in two chambers in the house, retain some plots of land and meadow, and keep 30 sheep.⁵⁷ The agreement allowed the retired couple to use half of the barn, and as they had limited capacity to produce corn and hay, their main concern would have been to shelter their sheep. The flexible use of the barn and indeed other peasant buildings finds support in the archaeological evidence for alterations and modifications. The barn at site 12 at Wharram Percy (already mentioned because of its considerable size) had been shortened at one stage of its history by 2.3 m. and a large shallow depression at its western end suggested a separate use of this part of the building, next to an opening in the end wall, perhaps an entrance for cattle (Figure 2f). The timber barn of the early thirteenth century at Seacourt (Berkshire) had

⁵³ R. K. Field, 'Worcestershire peasant buildings, household goods and farming equipment in the later middle ages', *Medieval Arch.* 9 (1965), pp. 105–45, esp. p. 136; TNA, SC2/175/77 (court rolls of manors of Evesham Abbey).

⁵⁴ D. Oschinsky, *Walter of Henley and other treatises on estate management and accounting* (1971), p. 475.

⁵⁵ This presumes that the fields in which the holding lay were managed on a two-course rotation, with a yield

of 13 bushels per acre.

⁵⁶ C. Dyer *et al.*, 'The late medieval village of Wharram Percy: farming the land', in S. Wrathmell (ed.), *A history of Wharram Percy and its neighbours* (Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire wolds, 13, 2012), p. 321.

⁵⁷ Worcestershire Archives, ref 009: 1, BA 2636 165/92225 4/8 (Henbury court roll).

two internal compartments defined by rows of post holes apparently supporting partitions (Figure 2h). These may have served as cattle stalls. In the thirteenth-century barn at Gomeldon a line of post holes ran along the interior of one of the long walls defining a space 12 m long and 1.6 m wide, with indications of subdivisions as if a line of sheep pens had been constructed with posts and hurdles (Figure 2e).⁵⁸

V

Having reviewed the information that can be gleaned from documents and archaeology, what are the implications for the housing of peasant animals? In parts of the country with a strong pastoral element in their economies, mostly in the North and west, animals were kept for part of the year, or at night, in the lower end of a longhouse. The longhouses had room for perhaps six to ten animals, so some beasts may have been housed in small specialist buildings for which there is some archaeological evidence, or kept outdoors. Estimates have been made that more substantial Devon farmers at the end of the Middle Ages were keeping 20 or 30 cattle, far beyond the capacity of a longhouse byre.⁵⁹

In the Midlands, south, and east, where most people and agricultural production were located, buildings had limited space for animals. Byres were not usually embedded in dwellings, and often the subsidiary buildings associated with a house were barns, or kitchens or bakehouses. If a large holding provided itself with housing for animals, these might include a byre, stable, or sheepcote, but very rarely all three. In other words, peasant holdings would not normally have the full repertoire of specialist animal housing which was often available among the buildings at the centre of a large manorial demesne. Pigsties and poultry houses are rather scarce in the records of manorial buildings, and are even more rarely reported on peasant holdings. This may have been the result of the cheapness of their construction. In considering the care accorded to horses, cattle, and sheep, peasants may have been flexible in the use of space, so that the byre or stable housed both cattle and horses. They also would have taken makeshift and temporary measures, such as finding space in barns as the weather worsened. As in other aspects of daily life, members of the village community may have co-operated, so that an elderly peasant or a widow who had sublet land could allow a part-empty barn or sheepcote to be used to house a neighbour's animals, doubtless receiving reciprocal favours, including rent.

In a practical solution to the problem of sheltering livestock, peasants arranged spaces in which animals could be kept out of doors. A custom which was applied generally, and is sometimes mentioned in by-laws, stated that no more animals could be pastured on the common pasture in the summer than might be accommodated in the closes and buildings of the tenant's holding in the winter. This *levant et couchant* rule was spelled out in a by-law at Roel (Gloucestershire) in 1452, that tenants should not keep in the winter sheep outside their 'close, fold or house'. This choice of words showed that if a tenant had no sheepcote, or if his

⁵⁸ Wrathmell, *Domestic settlement*, p. 31; M. Biddle, 'The deserted medieval village of Seacourt, Berkshire', *Oxoniensia* 26-7 (1961-2), pp. 70-201, esp. pp. 96-103;

Musty and Algar, 'Deserted medieval village of Gomeldon', pp. 138-9.

⁵⁹ Fox, *Dartmoor's alluring uplands*, pp. 210-22.

or her sheepcote did not have room for the whole flock, the animals would be kept in a close. By good chance a plan of the surviving traces of the twin villages of Roel and Hawling shows the remains of walled closes at the rear of the Roel houses, which were well suited to sheltering sheep.⁶⁰ Smaller walled yards have been noticed on a number of excavated settlement sites, such as three oval enclosures at the Okehampton Park hamlet, and the rectangular enclosure at the end of the line of buildings at Upton (Figures 1a and 1b). Such yards were sometimes paved at least roughly with stone or cobbles, and sometimes sunken as the result of trampling and the periodic removal of the dung and earth. At Barton Blount and Goltho the excavator called them 'crew yards' and argued that they contributed to an integrated system of farm management.⁶¹ Typical dimensions were 15 m by 13 m and 20 m by 18 m, and they could have contained as many as 20 cattle, which the excavator presumed would have been made necessary by the expansion of pastoral farming after c.1350, when yards appear on these east Midland sites. However yards are found on sites dated before 1350, so they were not always a late innovation (Figure 1d). The beasts would have been provided with plentiful straw, and a temporary and roughly built cover could have been erected over part of the yard to give the animals some shelter.

A roof of some kind may have been provided on the space with a cobbled surface lying between two buildings, with a common south wall, at Holworth in Chaldon Herring (Dorset) (Figure 2i).⁶² A building at Stansted in Essex apparently of the twelfth or thirteenth century was open-sided, which suggested to the excavator that it served as a store, but it could have accommodated livestock. Remains of stretches of mud walling of the thirteenth century at Faxton in Northamptonshire may have been the remains of open-sided animal sheds, and at West Cotton 'shelter sheds' could have been used for carts or animals, or both.⁶³ Outshuts and lean-to structures, for example attached to the walls of barns, are known from surviving buildings of the post-medieval period, and clues for such structures in the Middle Ages include mortices for fitting mangers and racks on the exterior timbers of barns in Sussex. Timber buildings probably of the twelfth or thirteenth centuries excavated at Tatton in Cheshire included a rectangular dwelling or granary, attached to which was an irregular lean-to structure 5 m by 4.5 m with a drain suggesting that it had contained animals.⁶⁴ All of these structures belong to the complex of buildings, sheds, and yards that clustered around peasant dwellings. In Yorkshire, especially in the Dales, some farm buildings were located outside the settlements, in fields, meadows, and wastes. These were not just the outlying barns and lathes still visible in that landscape, but also less substantial helms and hovels, or structures called booths and wormstalls in the documents. They are known to have been used in recent times to store carts and fodder, and although there is no clear evidence that livestock were kept in

⁶⁰ GA, D678/62 (Winchcombe Abbey court roll); Bond and Lewis, 'Earthworks of Hawling'.

⁶¹ Beresford, *Medieval clay-land villages*, pp. 17–18.

⁶² P. Rahtz, 'Holworth medieval village excavations, 1958', *Proc. of the Dorset Natural Hist. and Archaeological Soc.* 81 (1959), pp. 127–47, esp. p. 135.

⁶³ R. Havis and H. Brooks, *Excavations at Stansted Airport, 1986–91*, II, (East Anglian Archaeology,

107, 2004), pp. 388, 542; for Faxton see the forthcoming report mentioned at n. 43 above; Chapman, *West Cotton*, pp. 181, 209, 225.

⁶⁴ Martin, *Farm buildings*, pp. 52–8; N. Higham, 'The Tatton Park project, part 2. The medieval estates, settlements and halls', *J. Chester Archaeological Soc.*, 75 (1998–9), pp. 88–90.

them, some of these undated and undateable structures may have served in the middle ages as temporary animal shelters.⁶⁵

VI

The finding that there was limited provision of animal housing by peasant cultivators lends some support for the views of Postan, in the sense that giving buildings low priority seems to be in accord with his finding that animals were few in number. Meanwhile demesne managers were keeping many of their cattle, sheep, and horses indoors. Presumably those who organized and funded demesne agriculture believed that housing contributed to the health and productivity of the livestock, which suggests that peasants were not following prevailing wisdom. For example, wool was a vital source of cash for peasants, especially those who were better off and could keep flocks of 20 or 30, but it has been argued that fleece weights were reduced in adverse weather conditions in the fifteenth century.⁶⁶ We know that demesne managers arranged for the systematic collection of dung from byres and sheepcotes, concentrated in a confined space, and mingled with the straw litter on which the animals stood, but those peasants who lacked such buildings would not have been able to collect and spread manure with the same beneficial effect. The whole story accords with the belief that peasant farming was under-funded and in particular was starved of capital. Peasants could not afford to buy sufficient numbers of animals, and could not invest in the buildings that would have sheltered the animals and increased the profits of their owners. The argument can be made that peasant pastoralism was deficient in both quantity and quality.

The case put forward by those revising Postan's ideas also receives some support from the findings presented here. Peasants may have lacked capital, but they compensated by their adaptability, ingenuity, and opportunism, which has often been noted in analysis of their approach to farming in general, such as their selection of crops.⁶⁷ They were helped in their pastoral activities by the mildness of the lowland climate, which allowed the livestock to stay out in the fields longer than their upland or continental counterparts. As bad weather set in, and less grazing was available on the commons or fallows, the animals could be put in yards, closes or crofts, with some protection from the surrounding hedges or walls, and temporary roofing or 'shelter sheds' could keep off the worst of the heavy rain or snow. In extreme conditions room could be found in barns which had by December and January more space thanks to the threshing of corn since the harvest. In addition, co-operation between households could have supplied accommodation in under-used buildings.

Modern farming practice would lend some support to the revisionists. Keeping cattle in yards would not necessarily be harmful. Paved or cobbled surfaces in the yards would help to prevent 'poaching' caused by concentrating many hoofs in a limited space. Modern farmers doubt the

⁶⁵ S. Moorhouse, 'Features within medieval township farming landscapes in Yorkshire and their functions', J. Klápště (ed.), *Ruralia 10, Agrarian technology in the medieval landscape* (2016), pp. 49–88.

⁶⁶ M. Stephenson, 'Wool yields in the medieval

economy', *EcHR* 41 (1988), pp. 368–91, esp. pp. 382–5.

⁶⁷ B. Dodds, *Peasants and production in the medieval north-east. The evidence from tithes, 1270–1536* (2007), pp. 134–47.

benefits of housing animals, especially in the closed buildings favoured in the Middle Ages, as diseases would spread in confined spaces. Sheep, for example are vulnerable to pulmonary infections.⁶⁸ Confinement in a closed sheepcote might have led to the shedding of fleeces, and the wool might not have been improved in quality in the way that eighteenth-century agricultural writers believed. Reservations about housing livestock continuously can be seen in the advice given by ‘Walter of Henley’, writing in the thirteenth century. He seemed to assume that cattle would spend much time indoors, but advised that in rainy weather they should be moved outside for the sake of their health, and in the case of sheep, which he expected would spend the period between 11 November and Easter in their sheepcote, he urged that they should be kept in the fold or in the field in spells of dry weather. Though Walter suggested that pigs would benefit from lying in their sties in the morning, he implies that they should later in the day go outside.⁶⁹ Medieval breeds, if exposed over many generations to an open-air existence, would have developed appropriate characteristics, like the long coats now seen on Exmoor ponies, or the tough constitution capable of surviving hardships that we associate with the Herdwick sheep of the Lakeland fells. Whether kept indoors or out, the animals needed to be fed in winter with hay, straw, and limited quantities of field crops, especially oats and legumes such as vetch and peas. The yards and closes would have to be scraped and manure gathered to add to the dung hill.

One of the advocates of the revisionist position conjures up a picture of cattle in England being kept in stalls through the winter, and producing quantities of dung, which in addition to the sheep droppings scattered over the stubbles and fallows, ensured that peasant land was well manured.⁷⁰ The practice of keeping cattle in ‘winter stables’ was a feature of agriculture in inland Flanders, where peasants with smallholdings profited from urban demand for dairy produce. They had little access to common pastures, but instead fed the animals from their own holdings. Stable manure, mixed with the deep straw litter of the stalls, enabled peasants to cultivate cereals intensively with high yields and without fallows.⁷¹ This part of the revisionist argument is taking optimism about English peasant animal husbandry too far. The Flemish style of intensive manuring and cropping is a long way from the circumstances of English low-intensity farming, for example in the Midlands and south, where fields were subject to fallowing, often on a two-course rotation. Urban demand was not as strong as in Flanders, and common pastures survived in England throughout the period. Although livestock do not seem to have been fed in stalls in the Flemish style, demesnes kept cattle indoors for at least part of the winter, and we have accounting records of daily allowances of fodder to horses and oxen. English demesnes also built large byres capable of holding dozens of beasts, and not just at the specialist vaccaries of the northern uplands.⁷² In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

⁶⁸ J. Webster (ed.), *Management and welfare of farm animals* (2011), p. 215.

⁶⁹ Oschinsky (ed.), *Walter of Henley*, pp. 330–1, 336–9.

⁷⁰ La Poutre, ‘Fertilization by manure’, p. 39.

⁷¹ A. Verhulst, *Précis d’histoire rurale de la Belgique* (1990), pp. 120–2; E. Thoen and T. Soens, ‘Élevage, prés et pâturage dans le comté de Flandre au moyen âge et au début des temps modernes. Les liens avec l’économie

rurale régionale’, in F. Brumont (ed.), *Prés et pâtures en Europe occidentale* (Actes des Journées Internationales d’Histoire de l’Abbaye de Flaran, 2008), pp. 79–99, esp. pp. 89–90. I am grateful to Erik Thoen for his advice on this point.

⁷² J. Langdon, ‘The economics of horses and oxen in medieval England’, *AgHR* 30 (1982), pp. 31–40; Miller (ed.), *Agrarian History*, III, pp. 875–7.

in some regions specialized types of barn were designed to enable tenants to maintain cattle in stalls fitted inside the barn through the winter, and to store their hay in the same building, not just in Lancashire and north Yorkshire, but also in Sussex.⁷³ No evidence is known for such purpose-built barns on medieval peasant holdings.

If peasants in the Middle Ages did not collect quantities of manure deposited in large byres, that does not mean that they had no manuring strategies. Revisionists should see in the peasants' dung hill an asset that was not available to the demesne. Here the animal manure collected from the yard, sty, and any animal housing would be supplemented by household waste, ashes, and human ordure to make a rich mixture to be spread on the fields. The family, who would benefit directly from the crops, had the incentive to spread the muck efficiently, and to show that it was distributed, fragments of medieval pottery that had been thrown on to the manure heap as part of the domestic rubbish can still be recovered from the surface of the fields.⁷⁴

To sum up, the survey of documentary and archaeological evidence has found peasants with a good range of byres, sheepcotes, stables, and pigsties, but not in the numbers that might match the demesnes. This is partly because of deficiencies in the evidence, as animal housing was not regarded by those compiling documents as being of such great importance as human habitation. Archaeologists have not been able to identify the function of all buildings, not through lack of interest, but because the methods available cannot provide certainty. Those who wish to revise the Postan thesis should not visualize the farm as a smaller version of the manorial demesne. Rather they should see peasants finding ways of managing animals at low cost, and using their limited resources in intelligent ways, to achieve their twin goals of self-sufficiency and a saleable surplus.

⁷³ J. Grundy, 'Dairy cattle housing in Lancashire, seventeenth to twenty-first centuries', *Vernacular Architecture* 46 (2015), pp. 26–39; Martin, *Farm buildings*, pp. 51–8.

⁷⁴ R. Jones, 'Signatures in the soil: the use of pottery in manure scatters in the identification of medieval

arable farming regimes', *Archaeological J.* 161 (2004), pp. 159–88; id., 'Understanding medieval manure', in R. Jones (ed.), *Manure matters. Historical, archaeological and ethnographic perspectives* (2012), pp. 145–58, esp. pp. 151–2.