

Thursday 13th January 2005.

Oxfordshire Houses – John Pilling.

This interesting talk was based on his book of the same title which was published in 1993. John Pilling concentrated on the transition in building styles from medieval times right up to the twentieth century. His main theme was that buildings resemble documents in the way design and materials reflect life style changes.

In the opening sequence of pictures the focus was on properties with prominent halls seen partly as status symbols. Typical examples were Minster Lovell Hall near Witney and Yelford Manor close to Bampton. The latter had been home to gentry who suffered the experience of a hall open to the rafters.

Our speaker interrupted the strict progression of Oxfordshire houses in order to reveal how amongst French chateaux were buildings contrasting with the hall houses such as our local example of Broughton Castle. They were more symmetrical as well as taller and more compact. This gave more privacy rather than the Fiennes preference for stylish large windows.

His choice of Chastleton House afforded an example closer to the chateau model. This incorporates a hall of sorts but depends more on symmetry, large windows and a hidden main door. This house marks the transition from medieval construction to renaissance characteristics. In the same way an East Hendred property (Wickens Stores in the early 1990's) reveals sixteenth century modernisation as a way to achieve privacy. Though scarcely as grand as Broughton, it has a striking fireplace and chimney, herring-bone design bricks and an off-centre front door.

Cogges Manor was another choice of property in which the attractions of a fine medieval hall had been superseded by a more modest hall together with small comfortable bedrooms.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw great emphasis on chimney features, as at Dorchester on Thames, where a diamond shape had been favoured. The characteristic was all part of pride in the house.

John Pilling concluded his talk with some examples of properties built for people of more modest status. Typical of these was a stone/thatch house at Stanton Harcourt built for farm workers and craftsmen. In a few cases, cruck construction houses have survived. The Barley Mow Inn at Clifton Hampden has really lovely cruck (timber) blades in the gable wall. This style of house almost certainly reflects the use of locally available materials in the days before transport development allowed builders to look further afield.

John Pilling completed the transition from medieval to modern times with some examples of double fronted properties where chimneys were on side walls. These were a far cry from the hall houses with which he had commenced this fine profile of Oxfordshire buildings.

Note. Reports on our meetings in February, 'Church and Chapel and the Religious Census of 1851 – touching on nonconformity in north Oxfordshire', by Dr Kate Tiller, and in March, 'Archaeology of Roman Oxfordshire', by Paul Booth, will appear in our next issue.