

DATING OF THE SMALLER SOMERSET HOUSES FROM EXTERNAL APPEARANCE

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Estimating the age of buildings is a complex subject and generalization can be dangerous, thus dating criteria must be used critically especially when attempting to date buildings on external evidence alone. Whilst many houses can be dated sufficiently accurately from the outside there are often exceptions in which internal examination, especially of the roof, is necessary for a final and definite assessment. In such instances a specialized knowledge of the vernacular architecture of the district is required and members of the Vernacular Architecture Group are always glad to help. This is not to say that much useful research cannot be done by anyone prepared to learn to recognize datable features, to acquire an awareness of the appearance of individual buildings and the character of settlements, and to note the varying use of local material and styles. The study of vernacular architecture is relatively new, especially in Somerset, and much fundamental data remains to be established by study and recording of regional distributions thus to allow 'finds' to be set in the context of the county as a whole it is desirable to consult those specializing in vernacular architecture to enable an overall correlation with existing records to be made. Notes, drawings, and photographs of several hundred buildings have been deposited in the Somerset Record Office for study by those wishing to extend their knowledge beyond this brief introduction. A wider picture of the country as a whole is to be found in *Field Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (1968), 'On the Dating of English Houses from External Evidence' by J. T. Smith and E. M. Yates.

When examining any building it should be kept in mind that there is a time lag due to persistence of local styles and to conservatism: new ideas introduced in London and other centres appear in remote areas, if at all, at a later date and often in a modified form. Moreover, date ranges of different styles in a given feature usually overlap. Dating can never be based on single features but must take account of the building as a whole, of its locality and of its social status: new ideas in smaller houses may be adopted 50 to 100 years later than in the great houses. Houses tend to become downgraded over the years so that a former prosperous farmhouse may now be an outbuilding to a later house.

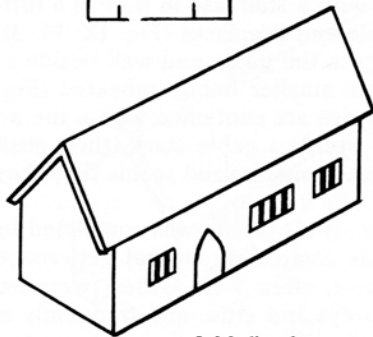
The precise site and size of settlements often cannot be established from documents and for many the only evidence of stages of growth and decay is to be found in the buildings. Often, however, several houses have followed one another on the same site and the age of existing buildings does not necessarily indicate the date of first occupation. Modernization of existing buildings is no recent phenomenon, for it has been the practice to improve older ones (Pl. 1), rather than entirely rebuild, from medieval times, although each age has had its quota of new buildings (Pl. 2). One of the most notable facts revealed by research in Somerset in recent years is the considerable and often extensive alterations that have been made to many old houses, and it is the oldest datable feature that gives the key to age, - but beware of reused items and those introduced from other buildings now demolished.

To understand the houses we see today it must be realized that at the end of the medieval period in the 16th and 17th centuries a 'Great Rebuilding', as it has been called, took place involving all classes of society and for several reasons, - an increased population and greater wealth, a desire for more privacy in houses, and the introduction of new ideas, often from abroad; and this rebuilding was followed by a further distinctive phase of new building in the 18th century (Pl. 3). Very often the inhabitants of Somerset contented themselves with the insertion of fireplaces and chimneys to eliminate the smoke filled interiors of the medieval houses, the insertion of upper floors and the necessary staircases to give increased accommodation, and the fitting of glazed windows to replace the earlier shuttered openings (Figs. I & II). Contrary to the view recently expressed by P. Smith¹ and E. Mercer² that medieval houses are rarely found in the South West of England, more than 40% of a random sample of over a hundred of the houses examined in Somerset of date not later than the early 18th century display evidence of a medieval origin; about three quarters of these formerly had an open hearth and the remainder were superior houses of the late medieval period with an original fireplace. Complete refronting as well as refenestration, which may have involved raising the walls, has often been carried out but the plan and elevation can betray the greater age, especially the rear elevation where earlier details often survive (Fig. III). Increased accommodation was also provided by the addition of wings which contained kitchens, dairies, or increased storage space (Figs. III & IV), but in some instances an apparent wing is in fact the remains of an earlier house of which the other rooms have been replaced by a later range built at right angles giving the same L or T plan (Fig. V; Pls. 4 & 5). The L or T plan should not invariably be taken as evidence of changes to a house, for this plan was being used in houses newly built in the later 17th century and even perhaps into the 18th century (Fig. XII).

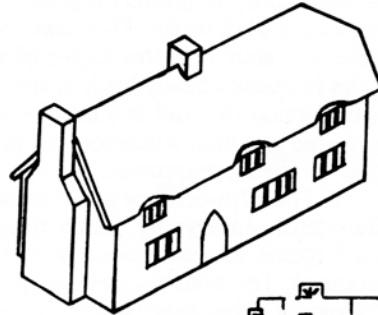
As an alternative to wings but sometimes in addition to them, outshuts or lean-tos may have been added (Fig. III). In the 17th century these were often an integral part of a newly built house (Fig. VI). The added outshut is usually distinguishable, as the roof slope is often not continuous with that of the house, and there may be a straight joint in the masonry. Such straight joints, when not hidden by plaster or rendering, are useful indicators of added rooms or

contiguous farm buildings, of inserted fireplaces, etc, but the absence of an unbonded joint is not necessarily proof of coeval construction.

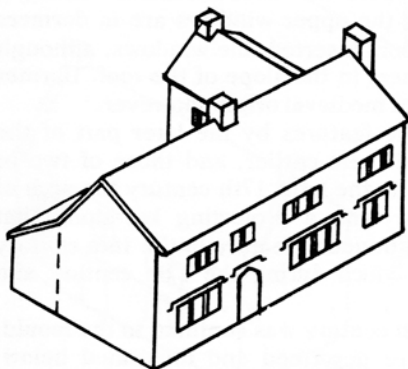
Houses with datestones should be examined most critically to ascertain to which part of the house the date actually applies, - as often as not it is the date of some alteration, often when a medieval house was 'modernized' in the 16/17th centuries. A record of dated houses over a wide area of England has shown that datestones were rarely used before the mid-16th century, reached a peak in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, and have steadily declined in use since. The earliest recorded in Somerset is 1559 at Cathanger House, Fivehead. A date of 1480 on a house in Milverton is suspect although the house may well be of the late 15th century.



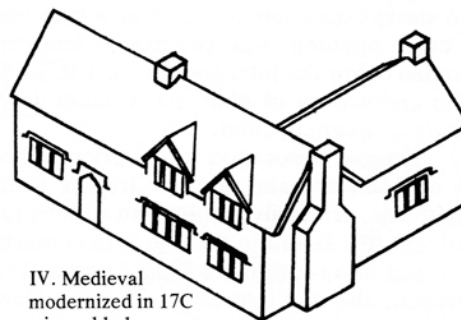
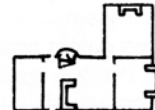
I. Medieval.



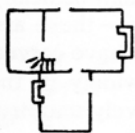
II. Medieval modernized in late 16C.



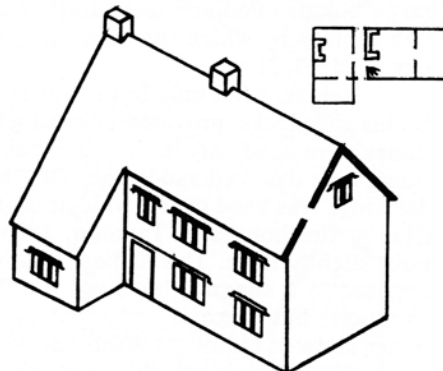
III. Medieval modernized in 17C
front wall raised, wing and outshut added



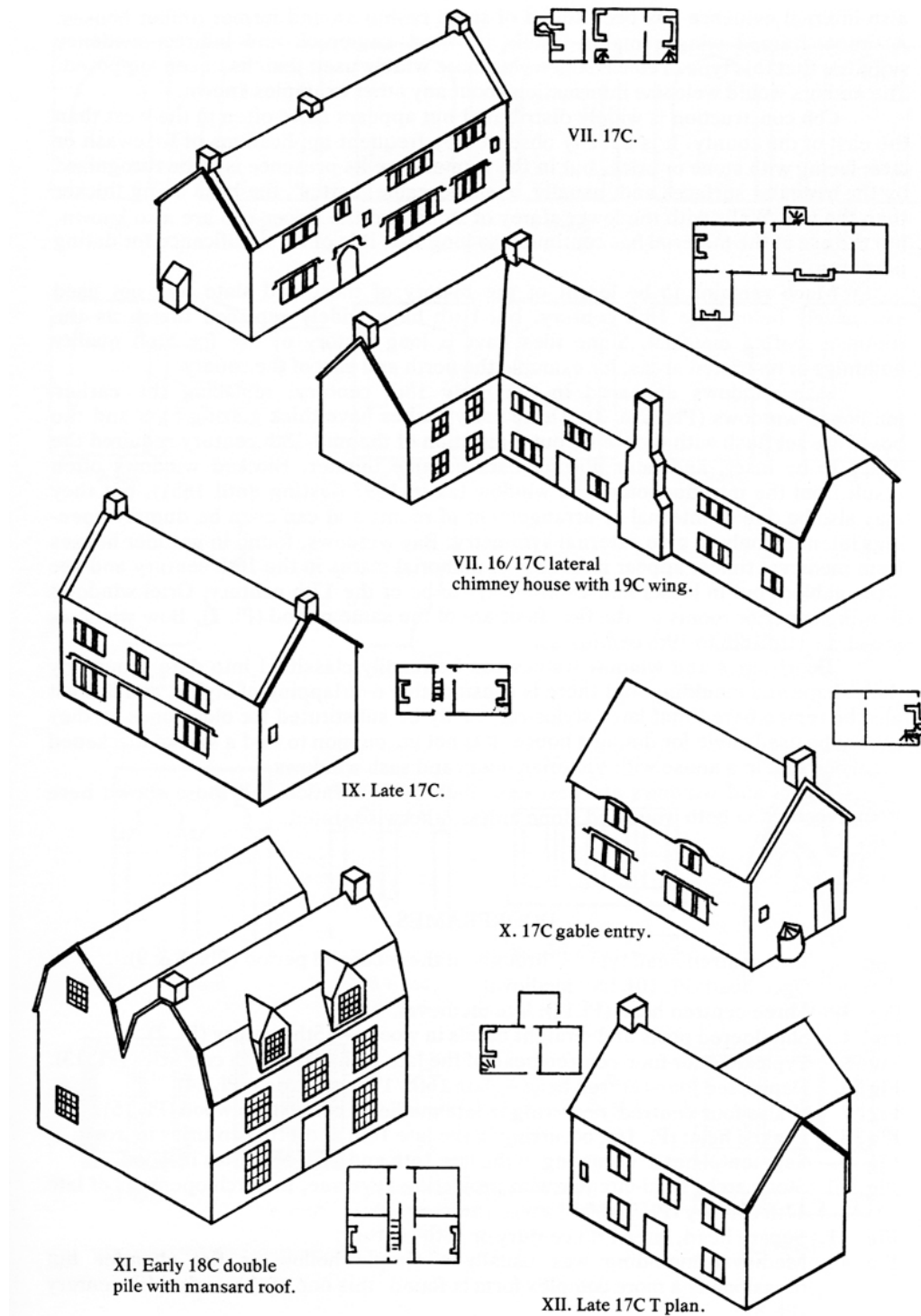
IV. Medieval
modernized in 17C
wing added.



V. Medieval cruck house partly
replaced by 16C building.



VI. 17C with outshut.



The plan of a house, often but not always discernible from outward appearances, is a helpful dating feature. The mid-17th century saw the introduction of greater width in houses: before this date they had normally been of single room width, the rooms arranged end to end with the entry sited between the 'lower end' (service) room and the main living room (the hall) beyond which was usually a smaller 'inner room' or parlour, an arrangement which is clearly discernible from the disposition of windows and door (Fig. VII). The positions of the chimneys indicate where the fireplaces are sited, most commonly in these houses the main (hall) fireplace being positioned axially backing on the cross entry; an alternative, more frequently occurring in the west of the county than in the east, is a fireplace on a side wall usually with an external stack (Fig. VIII; Pl. 6). The kitchen fireplace, sometimes with an oven or bacon chamber or both protruding outwards, is usually sited at the lower gable-end wall, and the parlour fireplace at the other gable-end, but one or other of these fireplaces may not exist or may be a relatively late addition.

Not infrequently the service room has remained an unheated storeroom when a kitchen has been provided elsewhere as in a wing, and the inner room has continued in use as a dairy or other working space. In addition some houses have either lost the inner room or it has never existed, but otherwise the plan is similar.

Many houses of two-room plan of the later 17th century have a door sited centrally (or nearly so) into a lobby, sometimes with a staircase in it or in a turret at the rear, and the rooms on both sides have gable-end fireplaces (Fig. IX; Pl. 3). An alternative plan of the 17th century has an entry in the gable-end wall beside a fireplace and stair into the larger of two rooms, the smaller being unheated (Fig. X). Stairs in houses newly built in the 16/17th centuries are contained within the overall width beside the hall stack and sometimes also beside a gable stack, their positions indicated by small windows, but in medieval houses modernized at this time they are often in an external turret.

The 17th-century move towards the symmetrical facade was completed by the early 18th century, by which time the door was completely central between equal sized rooms on each side, of which the windows, often with sashes, were exactly balanced. The house was usually of two full storeys and attic, and frequently either 1½ rooms deep, that is, one large and one smaller room, or two equal sized rooms deep (a 'double pile'). An early form had the front and rear rooms separately roofed and sometimes a Mansard roof was used to give greater headroom in the attics (Fig. XI), but neither Mansards nor double roofs are particularly common, and a full span roof was soon developed. The tall facades of these later houses contrast strikingly with the low walls of the earlier houses in which the upper windows are in dormers (Pls. 1 & 3): when medieval houses had upper floors inserted, the windows, although often very small, could only be provided in dormers in the slope of the roof. Dormer windows do not necessarily imply that a house is of medieval origin, however.

Porches generally had become fashionable features by the later part of the 17th century although some grander houses had them earlier, and those of two or more storeys occasionally combine a stair turret. In the later 17th century the arch of the outer opening was commonly semi-circular with a projecting key-stone that extended below the intrados (Pl. 7). The latter continued to feature in the 18th century in the architraves of door and window frames which during the 17th century and later were square headed.

Exterior decoration in and prior to the 17th century was confined to the mouldings of doorways and window frames which are described and illustrated below. Drip moulds, primarily a utilitarian adjunct to these, also provided scope for decorative treatment (Pl. 1) and in the late 17th century individual drip moulds with angled ends developed into continuous string courses (Pl. 3). Relieving arches, although basically structural, also add interest to otherwise bare expanses of rubble walling, - these are more common in the north east of the county. Occasionally dormer gables have carved barge boards. Pediments and other Renaissance features appeared widely in the 18th century by which time moulding was largely confined to the relatively unobtrusive bead (Pl. 3).

Ashlar, used only in the better quality earlier houses and then often only for quoins and stacks, provides a pleasing textural contrast to rubble walls. Most building stones were used only in their immediate locality, this being true of materials such as chert, blue lias, red sandstone, etc., but Ham Hill and other free-working stone for dressings was used over a wide area. The earliest dated brick building in Somerset is Gray's Almshouses in Taunton, 1635, the stable block at Barrington Court being built slightly later. The earliest date we have for a vernacular building in brick (as opposed to a superior building) is 1703 in Ilton, followed by 1737 in Drayton near Langport, but there is documentary evidence for mid-17th century use and a few lesser undated buildings of this period are known.

With certain exceptions mostly in towns, notably Taunton and Axbridge and to a lesser extent Bruton, timber construction is not now seen: an outstanding example is the George Inn at Norton St. Philip. Sometimes timber-built houses are recognizable under later rendering (Pl. 6) and these are mostly of the 15th and 16th centuries; also internal evidence has been found of stone casing around former timber houses. A timber-framed wing remains visible in West Lambrook and indirect evidence suggests that this type of construction was more widely used than has been supposed. The authors would welcome information about any other examples known.

Cob construction is widely distributed but appears more often in the west than the east of the county. It is usually obscured by frequent applications of limewash or later facing with stone or brick, but in the former case its presence is to be recognized by the irregular surfaces and, usually, a considerable 'batter', the base being thicker than the top. Walls with the lower storey of stone and the upper cob are also known, but the use of the material has continued so long that it is of no significance for dating purposes.

Much remains to be learnt of the history of tiles, and slate was not used extensively before the 18th century, but both have widely replaced thatch as the common roofing material. Stone tiles have a long history of use for high quality buildings in restricted areas, for example the north and east of the county.

Sash windows appeared in the early 18th century, replacing the earlier mullioned windows (Pls. 2 & 3). These early sashes have thick glazing bars and the boxes are set flush with the walls, but legislation of the mid-18th century required the boxes to be inset, and later glazing bars became thinner. Blocked windows often result from the introduction of the window tax in 1697 (lasting until 1851), but they may also be due to internal re-arrangement of rooms and can even be dummy openings intended only to give external symmetry. Bay windows, found in grander

houses from medieval times, appear in houses of manorial status in the 16th century and are often gabled, but in lesser houses are likely to be of the 17th century. Oriel windows lighting superior rooms on the first floor are of the same period (Pl. 2). Bow windows are of the late 18th to 19th centuries.

Doorframes and window frames can be readily classified into date groups by their shape and moulding, but there is considerable overlapping of styles, and it must also be remembered that later styles can easily be substituted for older ones so they cannot be used alone for dating a house. It is not uncommon to find a smoke blackened medieval roof in a house with Victorian doors and sash windows.

Doors and windows are best described by illustration. All those shown have been recorded in both wood and stone unless otherwise stated.

DOORFRAMES

- Fig. 1. Two-centred head typical throughout the medieval period (Pls. 8 & 9).
- Fig. 2. Ogee head (Pl. 10): late medieval.
- Fig. 3. Three-centred head (Pl. 11): late medieval.
- Fig. 4. Shouldered posts and straight lintels in wood - 15th century (Pl. 2).
- Fig. 5. Typical Tudor four-centred head of the late 15th/early 16th centuries (Pl. 13).
- Fig. 6. Depressed four-centred head - late 16th/17th centuries (Pl. 14).
- Fig. 7. 'False four-centred' occurring in late medieval contexts in wood (Pl. 15).
- Fig. 8. Peaked head (Pl. 16): occurring in the late 16th and 17th centuries in wood.
- Fig. 9. Segmental head: occurring in the late 16th and 17th centuries in wood.
- Fig. 10. Stone arch, semi-circular with projecting keystone, in porch openings of late 17th century (Pl. 7).
- Fig. 11. Square head, later 17th century or 18th century.
- Fig. 12. Medieval moulding was usually a simple hollow or flat chamfer but occasionally a more complex form is found, this one of the early 14th century (Pl. 8).
- Fig. 13. The common Tudor moulding, hollow/step/ogee.
- Fig. 14. 17th century ovolo moulding, here combined with an ogee.
- Fig. 15. The small bead moulding normal in the 18th century.
- Fig. 16. The more ornate bolection moulding of the superior 18th century house.

WINDOWFRAMES

- Figs. 17 & 18. Rare examples of medieval hall and solar windows survive in wood, consisting of several narrow lights with cinquefoil and trefoil heads.
- Fig. 19. Less important windows have plain square-sectioned wooden mullions set diagonally in plain head and sill beams.
- Fig. 20. Superior houses sometimes had tall hall windows of two-centred lights with hollow chamfered mullions under traceried heads (Pl. 17).
- Fig. 21. Typical Tudor four-centred lights with hollow moulding of the late 15th and early 16th centuries also occur occasionally in the 17th century.
- Fig. 22. In the 17th century most windows had ovolo moulding and square heads (Pl. 2).
- Fig. 23. The less common reserved chamfer, probably 16th century or early 17th century.
- Fig. 24. Hollow mouldings reappear with square heads in late 17th/early 18th centuries (Pl. 3), and also occur occasionally throughout the ovolo period.
- Fig. 25. Less important windows of 16th/17th centuries have octagonal wooden mullions mason mitred to the head beam.

FOOTNOTES

- 1. P. Smith, *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* (1975), 39.
- 2. E. Mercer, *English Vernacular Houses* (1975), 19.

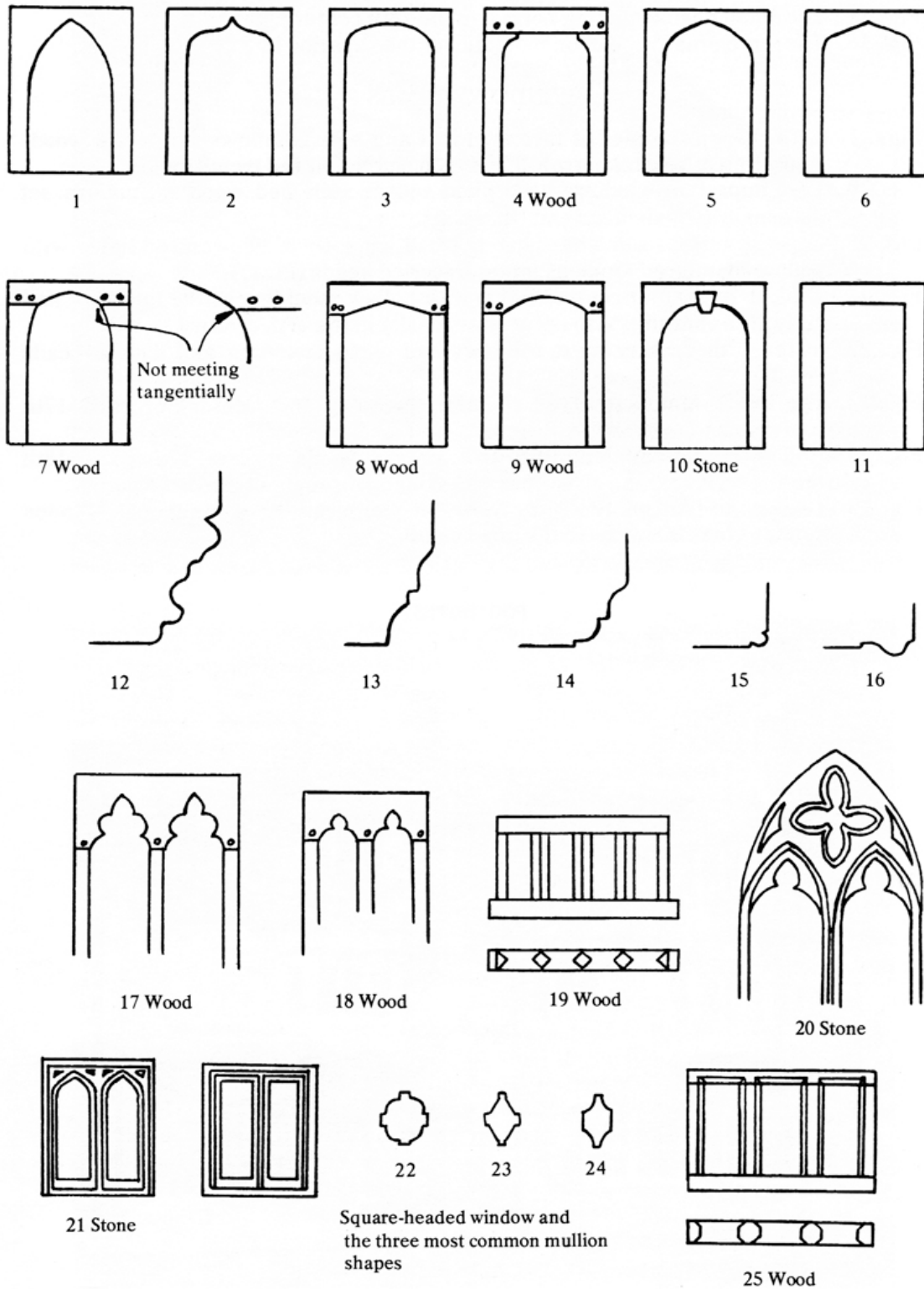


Plate 1. White House, Norton St. Philip. Medieval house modernized mid 17C; square-headed ovolo moulded windows under angled dripmoulds, upper windows in dormers.



Plate 2. Market House, Somerton. 17C town house, 18C sash windows replacing some of the square-headed ovolo moulded windows. Oriel first floor windows.



Plate 3. Craigmores, Somerton. Late 17C house with square-headed hollow mullioned windows under a stringcourse and added tall 18C wing; pediments are 18C, that the left being an addition.



Plate 4. Redbridge Cottage, Standerwick, Berkley. Medieval cruck house partly replaced by early 16C wing forming a T plan. The only exposed cruck known in Somerset.



Plate 5. Burcott Manor Farmhouse, St. Cuthbert Out, Wells. Inner room of a medieval house replaced by a 17C wing giving a T plan.

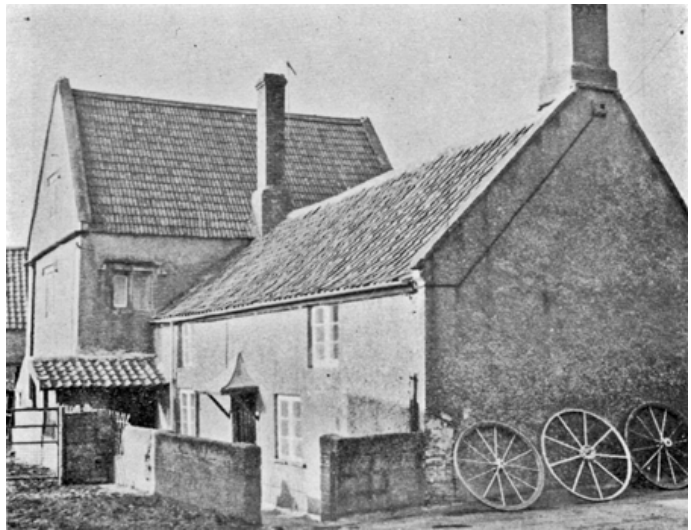


Plate 6. Gatchell Cottage, Trull. Early 16C lateral stack, later lower end stack and an addition beyond the upper end where a second door has been inserted. Lower end rendered over timber framing.



Plate 7. Weston Farmhouse, Combe St. Nicholas.
17C porch entrance with semi-circular
head and dropped keystone.

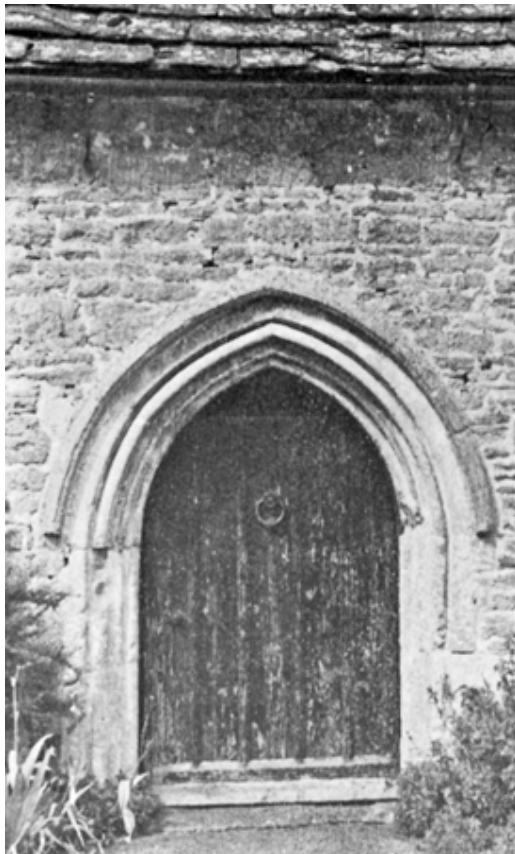
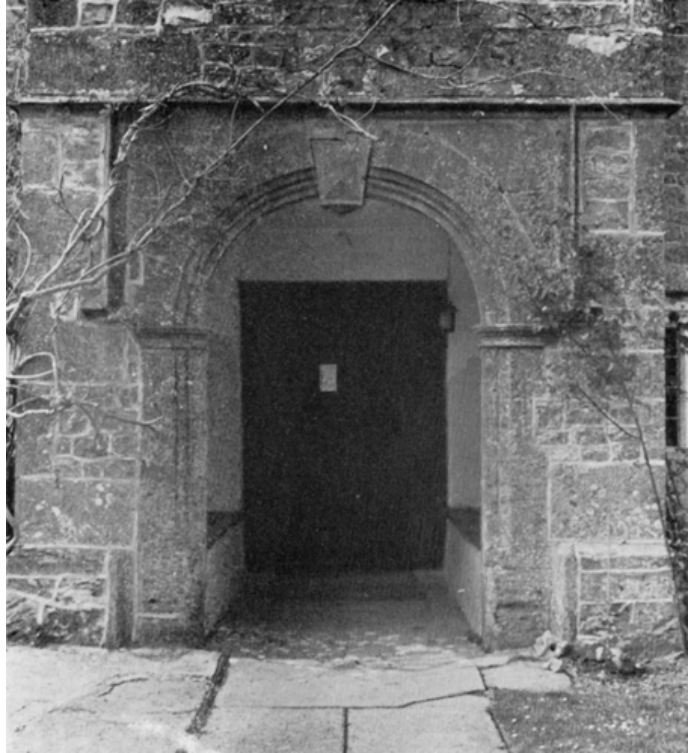


Plate 8. Wick Farmhouse, Norton St. Philip. Cross
entry doorway of c.1300 with wave moulding and
under bulbous drip mould over two-centred head.



Plate 9. Manor House, Croscombe. Cross entry way
of c.1400, hollow moulded two-centred head
angled drip mould.

Plate 10. Gatchell Cottage, Trull.
Late medieval ogee-headed doorway.

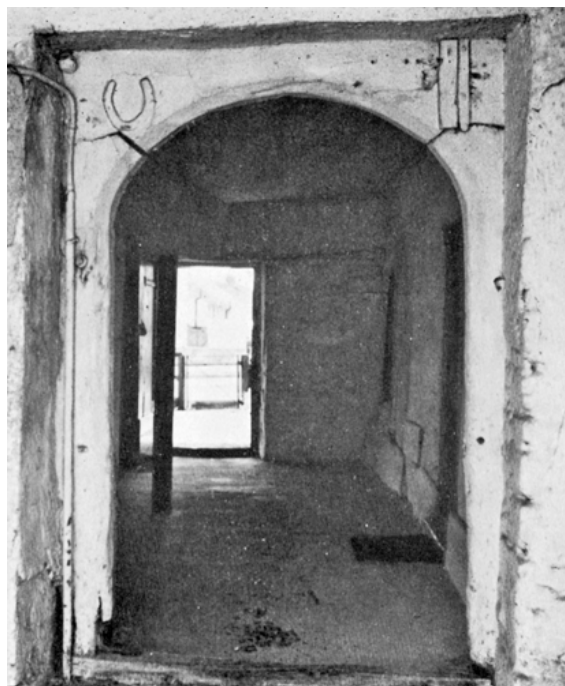
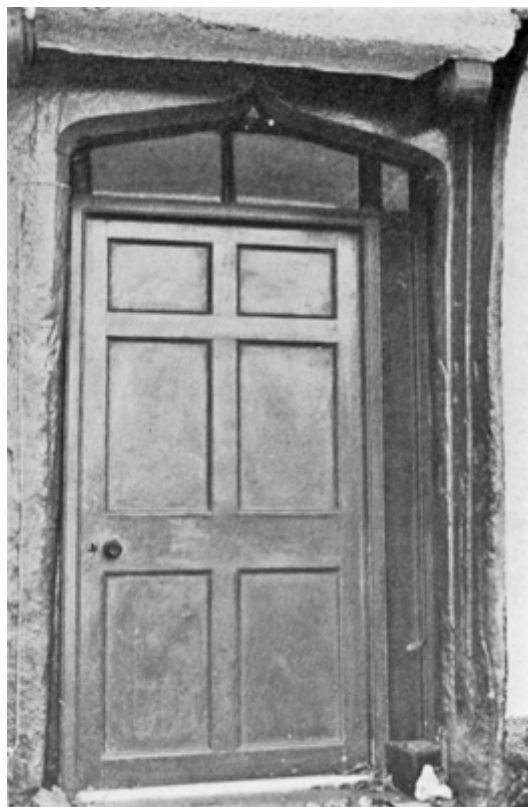


Plate 11. 115-117 Galmington Road, Taunton.
three-centred doorway of the cross passage.
(The house is now divided into three cottages).



Plate 12. Farndon Thatch, Puckington.
15C Medieval shouldered doorway.

Plate 13. Highchurch Farmhouse, Hemington.
Early Tudor four-centred doorway.



Plate 14. Hamwood Farmhouse, Trull.
17C depressed four-centred head,
ovolo moulding and scroll stops.

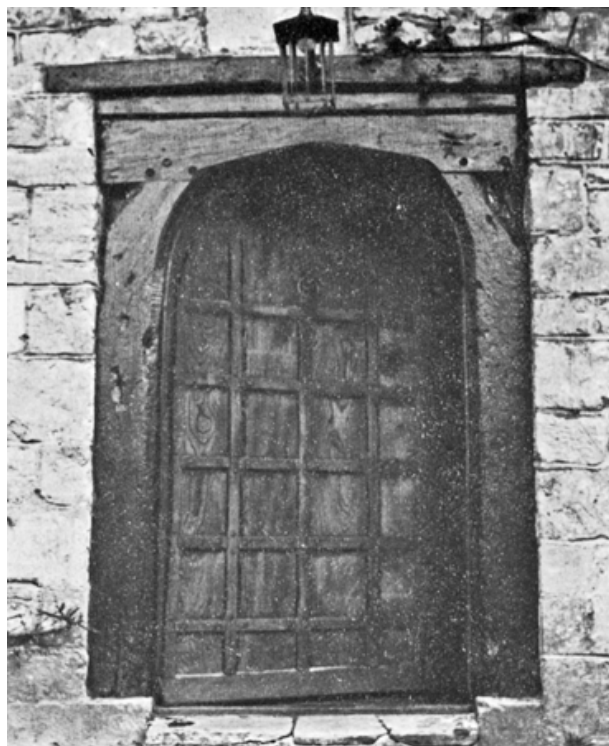


Plate 15. Old Cider House, Ilton.
Late medieval false four-centred doorway.

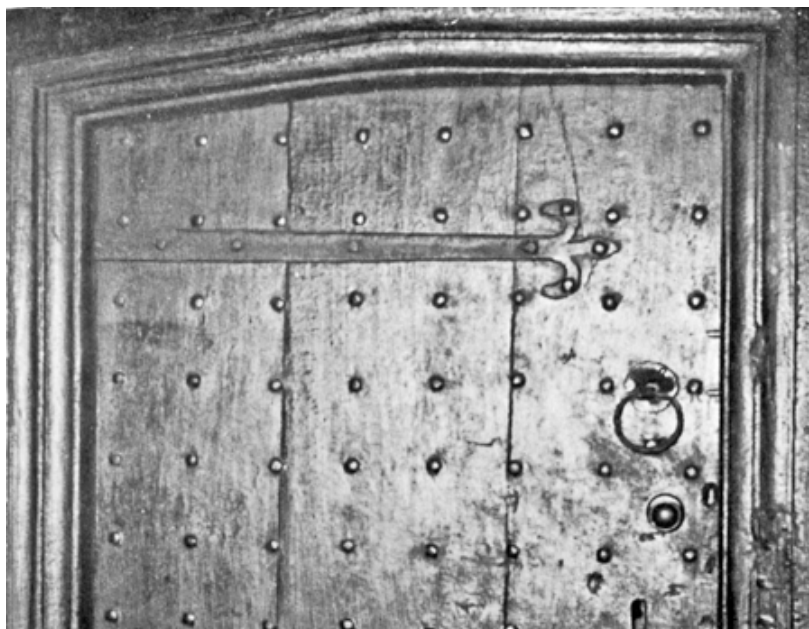


Plate 16. Broom's Farmhouse, Isle Abbotts. 17C peaked-headed doorway with double ovolo moulding.



Plate 17. Manor House, Croscombe.
Hall window of c.1400. (Note blocked door
opposite end of cross entry to that shown in
Plate 9.)