

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

## A definition

The term 'country house' conjures up a wide variety of images ranging from the great stately mansions of sites such as Haddon Hall, Derbyshire, to small timbered houses such as Peel Hall, Ince. The differences in scale, design and layout between such buildings is so great that one may come to wonder how it is that a single phrase can be applied to such disparate structures.

Haddon Hall, with its double courtyard, 'amongst the finest examples of the developed Medieval great house in England' (Hart 1982, 154), was completed in the 16th century by Sir George Vernon, known as 'The Petty King of the Peak' (Alexander and Crossley 1976, 116), and was run along the lines of a minor palace. Peel Hall, Ince, (see chapter 6) consists only of a small, cruck-framed hall whose builder is unknown, and is typical of 'the medieval home of the manorial or the yeoman farmer class... ..based on the open hall' (Ryder n.d., 25).

These differences, however, conceal a common attribute: each structure was the home of the independent landowner and farmer who exercised control over tenant or labourers, and each building is, as well as a home and workplace, the physical manifestation of the status and aspirations of a ruling elite which ranged from the yeoman to the noble. Moreover, each building owes its origins to the common root of the country house, the Anglo-Saxon 'high house... ..the hall towered up, lofty and wide gabled' (Beowulf, 1), which formed the 'communal room in a medieval home where all the inmates lived, fed and slept' (Briggs 1959, 156).

Even buildings such as Haddon Hall are, however, only a link in the chain of development for the country house; by the 18th and 19th centuries the area of Greater Manchester had within it palatial, purpose-built country seats such as Heaton Hall.

It is clear then that the term 'country house' applies to a wide range of structures, and in this volume the authors have accepted as axiomatic that they are studying the homes of the independent landowner and farmer who formed the greater part of the rural ruling elite.

## The purpose of the volume

This volume arose from Manpower Services Commission sponsored excavations conducted by the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit on the site of two medieval houses; Peel Hall, Wythenshawe, and Dukinfield Old Hall, the remains of which were threatened with destruction. It became clear from background research on such buildings that there was no general recognition of the fact that the County

had originally contained large numbers of such halls and that, with the onset of urban growth accompanying the Industrial Revolution, many had been destroyed. It was evident that the country houses of Greater Manchester were an undervalued and diminishing historical asset. In order, therefore, to make the best possible use of the results obtained from the excavations, and to foster an understanding of the value of these sites, this volume was commissioned.

The initial problems encountered in producing this book were two-fold: firstly, there was no coherent list of, or source of information about, what buildings had existed; secondly, the subject was so wide ranging that it was not immediately obvious what aspects of the buildings, and the social and economic systems that supported them, should be studied.

The gazetteer, (chapter 6), is an initial attempt to solve the first of these problems, in offering a provisional list of the country houses of Greater Manchester, together with some basic information about each building.

The problem of deciding which aspects of the houses to study proved to be difficult to solve, as there are a number of potential approaches to be considered. The architecture of the buildings alone is a record of changing tastes and aspirations; the internal layout of the rooms reflects changing social structure; the different types of pottery excavated mirror changes in fashion and trade, and the number and type of outbuildings reflect evolving social and economic attitudes to agriculture.

An idea of the variety of possible approaches to the subject is illustrated by the following passages:

'It is not too much to say that these houses represent an association of beauty, art and nature - the achievement of centuries of effort - which is irreplaceable, and has seldom, if ever, been equalled in the history of civilisation'.

(Gowers 1950)

'Buildings and settlements are the visible expression of the relative importance attached to different aspects of life and the varying ways of perceiving reality'

(Rapoport 1969, 47)

Given this diverse range of possible approaches, and the writers' hoped-for wide readership, pragmatic choices have had to be made as to what should be included in the volume. It is hoped that the reader will not be

too discontented with the variety of the studies presented in this book; they constitute a great deal of original work, and in their individual subjects and approaches, demonstrate the interest that exists in country houses and so the value of these increasingly rare buildings.

Chapter 2, dealing with the history of the houses, records the development of the social and economic life of Medieval and Industrial Greater Manchester, and how this was reflected in the changing design of both the country house and its setting.

Chapter 3, Recent Survey and Excavation, deals with the archaeological investigations that have taken place on a number of house sites, and reviews the results of this work from an archaeological perspective.

The chapter on moated sites illustrates how detailed and exhaustive work on the physical and documentary remains of a particular type of house site can reveal hitherto unexpected patterns of development in the area.

Chapter 5, the Development of the Country House, contains a synthesis of the foregoing contributions together with idealised reconstructions of a number of houses.

The gazetteer records known houses and sites, whilst the final chapter looks, in general terms, at the future of the buildings.

### **The sources of information**

Without a doubt there exist within the County houses or sites that are not included in the gazetteer. As it is hoped that this volume will raise a general interest in the subject, this introduction will conclude with a brief resume of available sources of information, in order to make clear what kind of data the studies in this volume are ultimately based on, and what resources the owner or local historian can use to find out more about a particular building.

#### **Maps and plans**

The Ordnance Survey map of 1830 forms the basis for many of the gazetteer entries. However, from about 1880 the Survey began large scale mapping, and copies of these early maps are often held in local record offices and reference libraries. Where they exist, the Tithe Maps of the same period are particularly useful and the accompanying apportionment will give the name of the owner and occupier of each plot. For the County as a whole there are relatively few early Estate maps; however, these are worth pursuing as they often give rare glimpses of the layout of buildings.

#### **The census**

Where available, the Censuses, compiled every ten years from 1851, give details of the age, sex, profession and origin of the occupiers of each building. These documents are obviously very useful sources as they allow the student to identify and trace the property of

particular families. By and large, these sources have not been used in this volume as the work has been of a more general type than that required in local histories.

#### **Tax returns**

The returns for the Hearth Tax that operated from 1662 to 1685 list the number of hearths in a house and so give some idea of its size. Unfortunately, to make use of these it is essential to know the name of the owner.

#### **Wills and Probate Inventories**

The wills of many owners can be found in the local Diocesan Registry or County Record Office. Under an Act of 1529 a Probate Inventory of all goods totalling more than £5 in value was required, and details of these inventories can also be obtained through local record offices.

#### **Other documents**

Manor Court Rolls, Glebe Terriers, and family estate deeds can prove invaluable sources of information for particular houses, but as the quality and quantity of those that survive for Greater Manchester is very variable, the student is best advised to consult a local historian.

Secondary sources are the printed listings and surveys of the County undertaken by earlier scholars, and these have been extensively used in the compilation of the gazetteer. Details of these appear in the bibliography.

Every borough, town and parish in Greater Manchester has its local historian, whose knowledge of local sources is unparalleled. Any student or owner should consult these people who are usually well known to the local reference librarian.

### **The architectural evidence**

#### **The exterior**

The outside of a house is an obvious guide to its date. However, care and circumspection are needed to ensure that the full history of its development is revealed. The different phases of construction should be identified, firstly by looking at the walls and other relatively immutable parts of the structure, and then at ancillary features such as windows and doors.

The design of timber framed walls, for instance, show a general trend of development through time. Small framed panels, two deep on each storey with short, angled braces, are common in the area in better class houses of the 15th century, and even on smaller houses through to the 17th century. In general, however, light framing with studs running up whole panels and few cross braces is more common after the 1600's. The close panelling with ornamental infilling or ogee bracing seen on many of the better houses in the County, such as Hall 'l' Th' Wood, Bolton, is usually of 16th or 17th century date.

Ancillary features, such as doors, also change

through time, with two-centred and ogee arches being typical of the 14th and 15th centuries. In this area these styles were gradually superseded by the four-centred arch that became especially common in the 17th century. From the early 18th century a wide variety of styles became prevalent, many of which were based on wider architectural forms.

Even windows are susceptible to minor changes; the relatively common stone mullion window with glazed lights and hood moulding, for instance, is rapidly superseded in most areas of the County in the late 17th century, by the cross window with transom and mullion.

Details of the date of such changes in style and construction methods varies from area to area, but the owner should firstly consult the listed building lists which form the basis for many of the gazetteer entries, before consulting a local architectural historian.

#### The interior

The internal layout and decorative features of a house provide a host of clues to its date, as is shown by the survey of Peel Hall, Ince (chapter 3).

Again, changes in features are clues to date. Panelling, for example, shows a clear trend of development, from the late 15th and 16th century type with mouldings scribed on the framework, to the true, or 'carpenter's' mitred form which survived into the late 17th century.

Few detailed interior surveys of buildings have been undertaken for this volume and many that have been done by local historians have yet to be published. A County wide survey remains to be done; however, it is hoped that this volume has helped to identify the buildings of most interest.

#### The archaeological evidence

The Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit has had two Manpower Services Commission sponsored field teams active in the Metropolitan Boroughs of Wigan and Rochdale. These teams, using proven techniques, have discovered a substantial number of sites, and those of relevance have been included in the gazetteer.

Chapter 4, on moats, has also made use of this work, together with data from surveys conducted by the Unit's Field Officer and local societies.

Past archaeological surveys have uncovered a substantial number of new sites, but such work cannot be approached lightly as it requires both skill and finance. Equally, the excavations that appear in summary in chapter 3 have involved a great deal of time and effort. Archaeological techniques such as aerial survey remain therefore outside the purview of most individual researchers. Fortunately, the Unit maintains a computerised database, which can be readily consulted, detailing all known archaeological sites in the County, data from which has been included in this volume.

#### Conclusion

This volume, which has used to a greater or lesser degree, all the sources and techniques mentioned above, represents an ambitious attempt to bring to the attention of the public the historic value of one of the County's increasingly rare types of site. Its success can be measured in two ways: firstly, if people become more aware of the County's past and how it can be studied; secondly, if the public becomes more concerned about what has gone and what may yet disappear.

Much of the work associated with this volume, which is the product of close collaboration, was done by Unit staff supported by the Manpower Services Commission and drawn from the County's long-term unemployed. Whatever the shortcomings of the book, its final success can only be measured by whether it also makes clear to the public both the value of such collaboration, and the skills that reside in the County's unemployed.

