

REVIEW

ERIC SANDON: *Suffolk Houses, a study of domestic architecture*. 344 pp., 389 numbered plates plus many unnumbered, 10 pages of colour photographs, 94 figures. Baron Publishing, Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1977, £15.

This is the first large-scale book on Suffolk houses and its author will be known to many as an architect of long standing in Ipswich. It is a high-quality volume, with all the hallmarks of an art publication: a wealth of photographs, some in colour, scattered throughout the text, main headings in ornamental lettering, lavishly wide margins. In addition to the excellent photographs there are several of John Western's meticulous drawings, and some pleasant old prints are reproduced. All in all, the presentation is strongly reminiscent of an extended copy of *Country Life* and there is no doubt that it will give visual pleasure to many people.

The book is divided into seven sections. In the first five, following a brief introduction and an equally brief survey of the background, the author deals with the planning, structure and design of local houses. Section 6 contains extended descriptions of one hundred selected houses, and section 7 various appendices. The Curator of Moyse's Hall Museum and the County Archaeologist contribute brief but authoritative articles on the houses of the Roman occupation and the Saxon village of West Stow respectively. The whole period from the Conquest to the present day is covered by the author himself; it is doubtful whether anyone else would have attempted so dauntingly wide a range.

Mr Sandon does not claim to present more than an introduction to the subject, and he is quite clearly addressing the non-specialist reader, interested mainly in the visual and external aspects of local buildings. At this level he succeeds in drawing attention to the great wealth and variety of houses which exist in Suffolk and in collecting together a good deal of information about them. He has delved into an interesting selection of sources, although he tends to use the material gained thereby in a somewhat uncritical manner.

With such a wide subject, it is inevitable that the treatment should be uneven, reflecting the particular interests of the writer. Mr Sandon is clearly happiest in dealing with aspects of brick; his sections on the production and use of bricks and the design of brick buildings are interesting and informative. Local architects are also usefully covered. By contrast, the section on timber use is superficial, and he seems unaware of the important work of Dr Oliver Rackham on the management and supply of building timber. Indeed, he tends to approach timber buildings generally with a series of preconceived ideas about their development, an attitude fatal to analysis. Nevertheless, as a practical architect he has perceptive things to say about some aspects of structure and maintenance.

The choice of buildings for the Exemplar in Section 6 is necessarily individual. Mr Sandon has put together an attractive selection, but he has divided them up in a most confusing way, using groupings like 'Manor Houses', 'Country Houses' and 'Farmhouses' which relate to status rather than to size, materials and type. Inevitably there is a good deal of overlap, many farmhouses being also manor houses, for example, and in the 'Manor Houses' section in particular, aristocratic, supra-vernacular and vernacular buildings are jumbled together. Abbas Hall, Great Cornard, a complex 13th-century timber-framed house which could be classified as a manor house or as a farmhouse is sandwiched between Clare Priory and Ixworth Abbey in the 'Monastic' section because the land on which it stands was once monastic property. Both the cottages described in detail on pp. 295-298 are not true cottages at all, and on the page of coloured photographs which follows half the buildings shown are farmhouse types, not cottages. One question, too, the logic of putting parsonage houses into

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the same section as former monastic buildings. Items in the Exemplar are not put in alphabetical order, and the quality of the coverage varies enormously.

There is a tendency for subject-matter to be fragmented in the text; the additional lack of an index makes it doubly difficult to track down useful points. It is astonishing that neither author nor publisher should have felt this to be essential. The Bibliography is very full, but so subdivided under subject headings that a number of books are mentioned several times, surely unnecessary detailing.

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