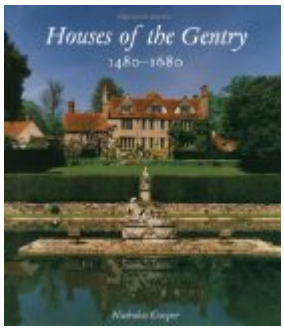
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nicholas Cooper. *Houses of the Gentry: 1480-1680.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xiv + 370 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-07390-4.



Reviewed by J. F. R. Day

Published on H-Albion (June, 2000)

As magnificent as Simon Thurley's 1993 book on the royal palaces (also from Yale University Press), though dealing with dwellings for other extreme of England's ruling classes, Nicholas Cooper's *Houses of the Gentry: 1480-1680* is lavishly illustrated. It is, however, clearly much more than a weight to anchor down coffee tables in the houses of early modern scholars or those fortunate home-owners whose houses made it into the book.

This is a careful historical study of the development of the houses of the gentry from the late middle ages into later Stuart England. While Cooper deals briefly with a few of the "Prodigy Houses" of the magnates of the period, they are cited mainly as influences on the houses of lesser gentlemen; Cooper's focus is on the 'mere' gentlemen, as well as the squires and the knights who formed the bulk of the "Governors" of England. In many cases, their houses were remarkably palatial; in others, they were only marginally distinguishable from the houses of wealthier yeomen.

Cooper begins with discussing medieval gentry houses, typically with a hall and a "high" end and a "low" end which were usually clearly discernable outside the house. Like the magnates they follow, these gentlemen were concerned with rank and visible honor, and their houses reflect this. The hall, which had been central to the medieval house, was thus an important part of a hierarchical plan that usually consisted of a single range of rooms and featured gatehouses and courtyards. In time, this would develop into houses often shaped like E, U, or H, but the hall remained a central feature. It is one of the strengths of Cooper's books that in dealing with the changes in gentlemen's houses over two centuries, he meticulously subordinates any grand theory to the minutia of the particular. The hall was phased out not all at once, but by the piecemeal. A single-story hall would not preclude a later double-story hall built on an earlier form, and in some places the hall would be centrally entered rather than at the former "low" end as had been traditional. As late as Sir Christopher Wren's time, his office provided two designs for the same house, one with a hall entered at the "low" end, and another in which the hall had been replaced by a vestibule leading to a more modern saloon (Plate 316).

Cooper thus traces the evolution of the gentry house from medieval hall to the symmetrical two- and three-pile (room depth) house that set the tone for domestic architecture and the ideal of the smaller country house for generations.

All these changes, along with regional and London developments, are carefully addressed. Cooper's career on the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments has given him a knowledge of these houses that is encyclopedic. Thus when he comes to write on these houses, he is capable of illustrating his points with aptly chosen illustrations and house plans, conveniently adjacent to his text, that allow the reader to see his point both in photography (usually exterior) and house plan. Although he points out that it is difficult to know exactly how rooms might have been used (particularly secondary rooms), Cooper makes use of inventories and other evidence to discuss changes in gentry lifestyles, just as he uses evidence of the hearth tax to discuss relative sizes of gentry houses. In short, any student of domestic architecture should have a copy of this book both for reference and for pleasure.

It is not merely as an architectural historian that Cooper' work is interesting. What he suggests is a change in the mentality of the English ruling class reflected by their building choices. Indeed, while a few designers like Thorpe or Smythson might be considered architects, most of the work was done by local builders, frequently a the owner's more-or-less informed direction. In fact, the most influential architect of the 16th century seems to have been Vetruvius, literally in theory -- not always a practical help but one which underlined the increasing importance of classical influences. Along with this classical influence, perhaps most famously illustrated by the work of Inigo Jones, the increasing impetus towards external symmetry also worked against the medieval notion of a hall entered at its "low" end, frequently with a screens passage to a service court. The search for symmetry lead to several different solutions, but it also meant that the gentleman's house at the dawn of the Tudors looked increasingly different from those built after the Restoration.

This difference suggests more than architectural development, even though theories about change in an age's way of thinking are often rather sweeping and frequently unconvincing. (Like David Cressy, in ***Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*** [1997], this reviewer is not entirely convinced by claims of "the rise of the individual" and similar broad assumptions.) However, by documenting architectural changes so carefully, Cooper does make the point that buildings reflect how people live, and that how people live reflects how they see themselves and their place in society. At the onset of his book, Cooper compares two pictures of families and their houses (Plates 1 and 2): the Tichbornes in front of their house, dating in part to the Middle Ages, are dispensing medieval charity to the community, and the Thurloes in front of a new, symmetrical house, are virtually alone. These two pictures, though of roughly the same period, show two very different view not only of older and new gentry houses (and families) but of the way the gentry thought of themselves. The Tichbornes, an ancient family, saw themselves in a medieval role --a medieval nobleman dispends; his virtue is "magnificence," which even for Spenser remained the summation of virtue. The Thurloes, on the other hand, already look towards the later division of a household, not into the "low" and "high" divisions of the same hall (which even the later Middle Ages was being somewhat abandoned by the family) but a newer "upstairs" and "downstairs." The permutations of this movement from a hall for all to a servants' hall reflects a change, subtle or not, in the idea of how the gentry relate to their dependants, and Cooper's scholarly work on architecture thus has fascinating implications for all students of early modern England.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: J. F. R. Day. Review of Cooper, Nicholas. *Houses of the Gentry: 1480-1680.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4251