

Vernacular Architecture Group

Recommended reading – booklist

This list aims to be short enough to be manageable for beginners who are not following a structured course led by a tutor. You are strongly advised to contact one of the VAG-affiliated [regional and local vernacular architecture groups](#) for advice on studies that might be essential to add to the list below.

Some books are out of print and expensive even from online resellers, but some are available from local groups, or in reference libraries and as e-books. Often they have gone through more than one edition – try to obtain the latest. Additionally, [Shire Books](#) publish pamphlets and short books which provide a cheap, basic introduction to many related subjects.

1. INTRODUCTIONS AND OVERVIEWS

Good starters, even though some of them were published a long time ago:

- ***English Vernacular Houses: A study of traditional farmhouses and cottages***
Eric Mercer, Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England (RCHME), 1975, 246 pages. The classic work on vernacular architecture in England.
- ***Illustrated handbook of Vernacular Architecture***
R W Brunskill, Faber, 1978, 248 pages. Perhaps the best overall introduction to our subject.
- ***Houses of the Welsh Countryside: a study in historical geography***
Peter Smith, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, 1975 and substantially revised 1988, 723 pages. Welsh domestic architecture from the late Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution.
- ***The Traditional Buildings of England***
Anthony Quiney, Thames and Hudson, 1990, 224 pages. A popular introduction.
- ***Medieval Housing: The archaeology of medieval Britain***
Jane Grenville, Leicester University Press, 1998, 230 pages. Covers evidence from the buildings themselves, from excavation and from documentary sources.
- ***The Archaeology of Buildings***
Richard K Morris, Tempus, 2000, 194pp. Covers fabric and materials, recording and interpretation.

2. THE VOCABULARY OF VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

- ***Recording Timber-framed Buildings: an Illustrated Glossary***
[Council for British Archaeology](#), 1996. An essential little book; it gives the recommended nomenclature, explains each term, and illustrates it in the assembly of which it forms part. Don't be without it.
- ***Surrey Domestic Buildings Research Group (DBRG) Illustrated Glossary***
[Illustrated Glossary](#) of terms available as a compact PDF. It is also on the DBRG website pages.
- ***Pevsner's Architectural Glossary***
Excellent app for tablets and smartphones, based on the Pevsner hardback book which defines and illustrates general architectural terms. However, it touches only slightly on vernacular terms. Perfect if you're in a church or a great house though.

3. HOW TO RECORD A STANDING BUILDING

There is no national handbook for beginners on what to do and how to do it. We suggest:

- ***A Practical Guide to Measuring and Drawing a Timber-framed Building***
Susan J. Brown, Essex Historic Buildings Group, 1997, A4 size, 40pp. Simple drawing-up advice and examples; sturdy enough to take on site. In printed form only, £5 + P&P at cost, order by email to Elphin Watkin, elphinwatkin@gmail.com
- ***Guidelines, Forms and Templates for Recording a Vernacular Building***
Yorkshire Vernacular Buildings Group, 2009, a series of A4 PDFs, complete with recording forms. [Free guidelines, forms and template PDFs](#)
- ***A step-by-step Survey Guide for Historic Buildings***
Peter Marsden and Andrew Muir, Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society, Historic Buildings Group, 2011, A4, printable PDF, 18pp. A thorough set of advice notes. [Free PDF](#)
- ***Recording Standing Buildings***
Barbara Hutton, revised 2013, A5, 44pp. Beginner's guide. In printed form only, £6. Order by email to office@rescue-archaeology.org.uk
- ***Drawing for Understanding - creating interpretive drawings of historic buildings***
Historic England, 2016, A4 PDF, 98pp. Aimed at professionals but very valuable for beginners [Free PDF](#)
- ***Understanding Historic Buildings***
Historic England, 2016, A4 PDF, 64pp. Aimed at professionals. [Free PDF](#)

See also section 2 above, The Vocabulary of Vernacular Architecture.

4. MATERIALS

- ***Discovering Timber-framed Buildings***
Richard Harris, Shire Publications, 1978, latest reprint 2006, booklet of 96 pages. A short but essential introductory booklet on timber-framing.
- ***English Historic Carpentry***
Cecil A Hewett, Phillimore, 1980, 338 pages.
- ***Brick Building in Britain***
R W Brunskill, Gollancz, 1990. Excellent 3-D diagrams explaining the various brick bonds.
- ***Traditional building materials***
Matthew Slocombe, Shire Library, 2012, 104 pages.
- ***Building in England down to 1540: a documentary history***
L F Salzman, Oxford, 1952, 629 pages. Examines the documentary evidence for building methods, materials and prices.

5. REGIONAL AND COUNTY STUDIES OF NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Local studies can make ideal reading for beginners – ask your local Group for suggestions. The following are significant over all or much of England:

- ***The English Medieval Roof: crown post to king post***
Eight articles examining different regions of England. Report of the Essex Historic Buildings Group day school in 2008, ed. John Walker, 2011, 162 pages.
- ***Regional Variation in Timber-framed building in England and Wales down to 1550***
Proceedings of the 1994 Cressing Conference, ed. D F Stenning and D D Andrews, 3rd edition, 2010, 316 pages, Essex Historic Buildings Group, 2012. Eighteen articles.
- ***The medieval peasant house in Midland England***
Nat Alcock and Dan Miles, Oxbow Books, 2013, 326 pages.

RCHME's Kent volumes together are excellent for timber-framing studies:

- ***The Medieval Houses of Kent, an historical analysis***
S Pearson, RCHME, London, 1994.
- ***The House Within – Interpreting Medieval Houses in Kent***
P S Barnwell and A T Adams, RCHME, London, 1994.

6. FARM BUILDINGS

- ***Discovering Traditional Farm Buildings***
J E C Peters, Shire Publications, 1981, 80 pages.
- ***English farmsteads 1750-1914***
P S Barnwell and Colum Giles, RCHME, 1997, 175 pages.
- ***The development of farm buildings in western lowland Staffordshire up to 1880***
J E C Peters, Manchester University Press, 1969, 284 pages. A very local study, but the first systematic attempt to define sub-categories of farm buildings.

7. DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH

- ***Documenting the history of houses***
N W Alcock, British Records Association, Archives and the user No. 10, 2003, 110 pages. The best introduction.
- ***Tracing the History of Your House***
Nick Barratt, The National Archives, 2006, 264pp. Written for beginners, but comprehensive.
- ***Tracing History Through Title Deeds: A Guide for Family and Local Historians***
Nat Alcock, Pen & Sword; the National Archives, 2017, 217 pages.
- ***A glossary of household, farming and trade terms from probate inventories***
Rosemary Milward, Derbyshire Record Society Occasional Paper No. 1, 1986, 62 pages.
Probate inventories always contain many local dialect words, and the best way to identify these is from the glossaries that are almost always included in published editions of inventories. Most counties have at least some inventories in print.

8. HOUSE INTERIORS

- ***Domestic Interiors: The British Tradition 1500-1850***
James Ayres, Yale, 2003.
- ***Old English Household Life***
Gertrude Jekyll and Sydney R Jones, Batsford, revised 1944-5. Puts the people into the buildings; full of photos and drawings of interiors, details and furnishings.
- ***Period House Fixtures and Fittings 1300-1900***
Linda Hall, Countryside Books, 2005, 224 pages. Handy and very comprehensive illustrated reference book.
- ***A Day At Home in Early Modern England, Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500-1700***
Tara Hamling, Catherine Richardson, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017, 311pp.
Explores the relationship between the 'middling sort' and their domestic space in the changing culture of early modern England.

9. LANDSCAPE STUDIES

- ***The making of the English Landscape***
W G Hoskins, Book Club, 1977, 326 pages. Survey of English history traced through the physical evidence of buildings and field patterns.
- ***The History of the Countryside***
Oliver Rackham, Dent, 1986, 444 pages. An essential complement to studies of buildings in the landscape.

THE VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE GROUP

The Vernacular Architecture Group (VAG) is the national body for learners, academics, practitioners, and interested owners.

- ***Vernacular Architecture***

VAG's annual journal of peer-reviewed articles on new studies. All 48 editions are available. Online access for members via the [Vernacular Architecture Online request form](#). Non-members may subscribe to the journal via Taylor & Francis Publishing, details at [Taylor & Francis Online](#), where you can view selected content online free of charge and sign up for alerts.

Suggestions regarding this list are welcome, addressed to webmaster@vag.org.uk

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