

What factors contributed to the 'Great Rebuilding' in vernacular architecture in the 16th and 17th centuries?

The Great Rebuilding is a phrase used to describe an alleged revolution in the development of buildings for those who occupy the lower social rankings. The dates of intensive building activity have been suggested as between 1558 and 1625 by Parkinson and Ould in 1903 and between 1590 and 1640 by Steer for (Barley 1955). The evidence was brought together by W G Hoskins in 1953 to show that a Great Rebuilding took place between 1560 and 1640, with the greatest building activity to have been between 1575 and 1625. This change in vernacular architecture is described as having developed from buildings with limited life span, to those with an indefinite lifespan (Brunskill, 2004). The process is also described by Hoskins, in his 1953 article, as moving to homes with “more warmth; more light; more space and better ventilation; more privacy”. Rebuilding took place in urban and rural areas, but Hoskins surmises that the evidence is more prevalent in rural areas due to the extensive rebuilding generally required in urban development (1953). The Great Rebuilding probably began with the manorial/minor gentry in the south of England in the 13th and 14th century, filtering down through the social rankings and up the length of England right through until the 18th century (Brunskill 2004). There are a number of potential factors that stimulated this building process including population expansion, improved security of tenure, greater wealth, development of building techniques and materials and an increased sense of privacy and rank, but there is a need to define whether these elements were the cause of the increased building activity or whether they were an effect. It would also be important to establish whether there was actually a period that could be described as a Great Rebuilding, or if this period only describes a peak in a building cycle that has peaked and troughed throughout history.

Brunskill (2000) describes the Great Rebuilding as a period of time when older substandard houses were destroyed and replaced, where the older buildings were incorporated into a new and improved structure. Hoskins (1953) believed there was not only the reconstruction, rebuild or enlargement, but a time when buildings were erected for the first time on a site. Hoskins' evidence of a rebuilding process covers a wide area starting with Carews Survey of Cornwall in the 1580's, which describes the houses of husbandmen and very basic, one room earthen properties and Hoskins compares this

with his own observation of mediaeval parishes in Devon which he believes show evidence of much rebuilding and reconstruction of both small and large farm properties. Hoskins cites studies from F W Steer, Bailey, Sir Cyril Fox and Lord Raglan and Whitaker who cover between them areas of the Cotswolds, Monmouthshire, Lancashire, Suffolk and the West Midlands, and suggest that there was a gradual structural change to vernacular buildings that took place during the late 16th and early 17th centuries, which included such modernisation as inserting ceilings, staircases, partitioning, windows, fireplaces, plastering and the increase in decoration.

Those who were instrumental in the Great Rebuilding tended to be the larger husbandmen, yeoman and lesser gentry. Hoskins (1953) states that “most all rural population except the very poorest” were enjoying a more comfortable domestic situation which can be inferred from the increased number of furniture, fittings and equipment listed in household inventories during the period. The husbandmen, yeomen who were freeholders tended to have nominal and unchangeable rents. Labour costs were low and not prone to rise, and especially not in line with the rising prices that could be charged for goods. The gap between costs and profits widened from the 1540's and farmers could begin to accumulate wealth. After investing initially in their farms, in the 1560's farmers began to invest in their family home. Again inventories can give evidence of the ‘ready’ money available and how this increases over time (Hoskins 1953). This suggested increase in wealth could have contributed to the desire for a better and more permanent family home, a supply of money to ‘spare for the graces of living’ (Hoskins 1953). Barley, in his article for *The Economic History Review* (1955) looks at Probate Inventories and Glebe Terriers, amongst other records, to test these claims. He used unpublished probate inventories of Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire to study the personal wealth and homes to try and establish an increase in wealth and rooms which support the theory of a Great Rebuilding.

Taking Barleys’ analysis of Lincolnshire inventories and using the Median Value of wealth he established, it is clear that there is ‘no spectacular movement’ in the levels of personal wealth associated with a Great Rebuilding, rather a steady growth in the average wealth (Barley 1955).

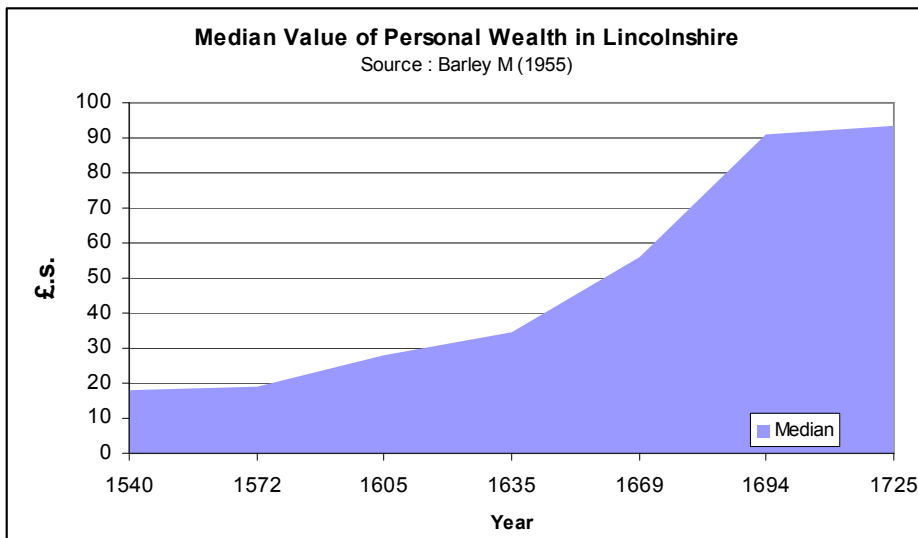


Figure 1: Graph developed from M Barley (1955) analysis of Lincolnshire inventories (Table 2: *Farmhouses and Cottages*)

Machin (1977) believes that the hundred years ending 1650 saw a level of prosperity for the relatively small number of large arable farmers, moderate prosperity for small arable farmers and financial difficulty for pastoral farmers. He then posits a turnaround from 1650 where there was financial difficulty for all arable farmers. This meant that only the larger and more effective farmers survived through this period, but that most pastoral farmers continued to accumulate wealth. This gathering of wealth combined with the long term interest in property and security of tenure could explain the boom in constructing vernacular style buildings.

There is a theory of a building cycle extrapolated from a variety of factors including dated buildings, values of imported timber, brick production and grain/all agricultural prices. Machin brings together this comparable data to attempt to establish a building cycle (1977). A definitive answer is practically impossible due the lack of availability or accuracy of much of this data during the period we are interested in. It may be possible to overlay the cycles that can be defined, back over earlier periods to cover earlier periods and establish a building cycle that occurs throughout history, as opposed to a single explosion during the late 16th early 17th centuries. The establishment of peaks and troughs in this comparable data can be correlated to peaks in building activity, but more research is required to confirm the effects of increased yields on building activity.

Machin also takes a study of dated houses in seventeen counties in England and Wales and plots them into a table. Then the data for the total from each decade is plotting onto a graph there is pyramidal look to the data. Machin writes that there were building booms in the 1590's, 1640's and 1740's that were broken by famine, agricultural depression or civil war. The period defined by Hoskins as the Great Rebuilding pales into comparison with the number of houses that can be dated after this period. Whilst basing a theory on dated inscription on houses is problematic and prone to misinterpretation, due to the alternate reasons that a dated inscription may be incorporated into a property e.g. marriage, redevelopment etc, Machin's data is suggestive of a cycle that peaks during the late 17th century.

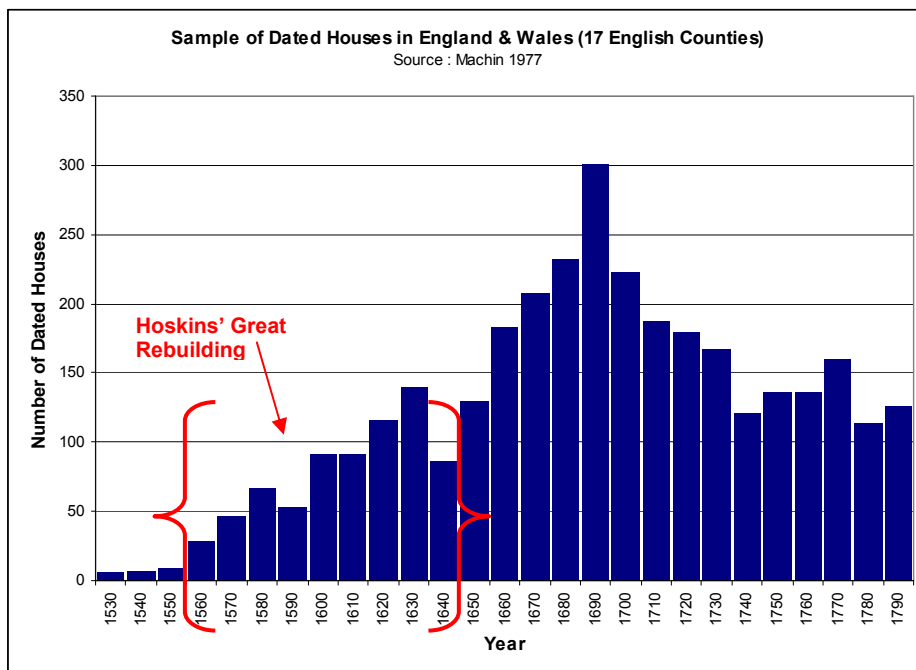


Figure 2: Sample of Dated Houses in England & Wales. Taken from Table of 17 English Counties (Machin 1977)

One of the reasons suggested by Hoskins for the increase in building activity is that there was a growing desire for more privacy within the home and a withdrawal from the common life. The use of coal increased throughout half of the country from the middle of the 16th century, and as the techniques improved, cheaper glass became more widely available. This made smaller, separate rooms a real possibility as they could have “more warmth; more light; more space and better ventilation” (Hoskins 1953). Rooms in a home became associated with specific uses, reducing the reason for all of the residents to gather in a single hall. Therefore this substantial change in a building

plan meant that the pre-existing mediaeval dwelling had to be redeveloped in order to accommodate the installation of a chimney, the installation of a second floor and the other necessary developments to turn a single-storey single-room home into a multi-level, multi-room home.

Barley also recorded the number of rooms described in the inventories. His analysis shows a steady growth in the number of rooms which suggests that there was a process of development and rebuilding of existing properties. The table shows a huge reduction in homes with no rooms specified and an increase in properties with more than three rooms identified, which again suggests that there was some development, whether partitioning or rebuilding, took place during the period.

	1540	1572	1605	1635	1669	1694	1725
None	57	25	18	11	1	4	
One	6	23	6	9	5	3	1
Two	6	17	19	15	15	7	3
Three	7	10	19	10	16	19	12
Four	5	5	9	19	13	11	11
Five	4	2	7	8	8	10	16
Six	1	2	2	4	8	7	13
Seven	1		2	2	9	11	6
Eight	1	1	1	2	2	5	7
Nine or more			3	4	5	6	9

Figure 3: Lincolnshire inventories analysed according to numbers of rooms. Taken from Barley M (1955) analysis of Lincolnshire inventories (Table 2: *Farmhouses and Cottages*)

The suggestion that there was an desire for privacy in the home is an assumption that is based on a variety of reasons including advent of commerce, the distinction of rank gaining importance, enclosure destroying the common fields and the civilisation process making people more sensitive to the feelings of others (Dyer), but there is evidence that this is a process that began in the 1300's. Dyer cites Oschinsky's study of Walter of Henley (1971) that showed that lords refused to eat with their households as early as 1240. Astill and Grant (1984) provide evidence that there were upper rooms in small rural buildings in the early 14th century, that there were dispersed settlement patterns, evidence of peasant homes surrounded by ditches, that had locked doors and contained locked chests to protect valuables.

Hoskins believes that population growth began as an effect of the increases in home improvement, but then became a cause (1953). The enhanced privacy in the home and the improvements in lifestyle in the home may have increased the birth rate, which then led to a demand for more housing. An analysis of population rates shows that there was a steady increase in the population until the end of the period, where it began to drop (Sharpe, 1997). There is no obvious explosion in population growth either caused by or causing the Great Rebuilding, rather a steady increase until 1651, when the population began to decrease.

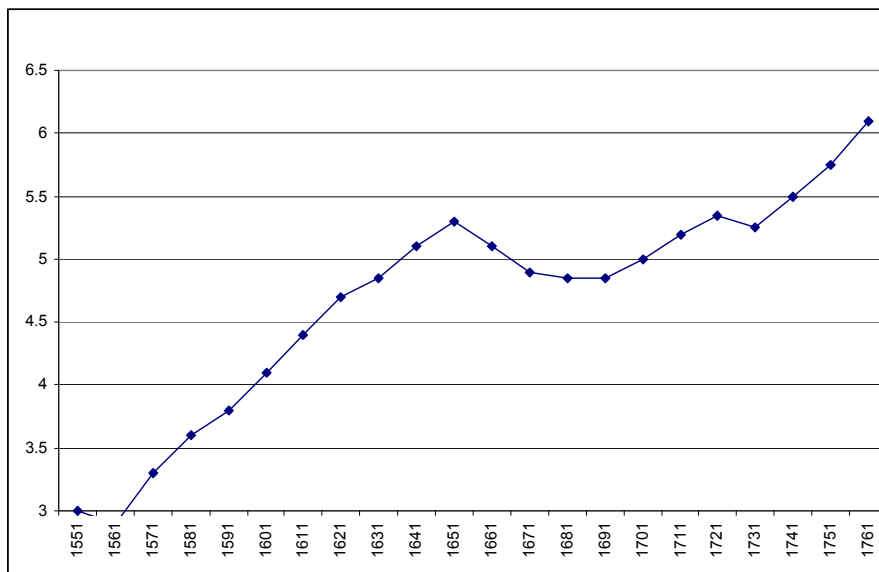


Figure 4: Estimated size of the population of England 1551-1761 Source : E A Wrigley and R S Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (London 1981) Table A3.3 pp 531-4 Redrawn from Sharpe 1997.

There is evidence that there was an increase in building activity from 1560 until 1640 throughout Britain, proven by examples in wills and inventories that wealth increased; that possessions and room types/numbers increased and changed; studies show that population increased; that various materials became more accessible; even a developing sense of privacy and rank led to the desire and capability to build bigger, better and more comfortable property, a question is raised as to whether the period defined by many as the Great Rebuilding can be classified as such. There are further studies that question Hoskins' argument and infer that his 'Great Rebuilding' was a single peak in a complex cycle of building relating to a huge variety of economic and social factors (Cooper, 2001). Riden (1998) admits there should be a time described as a Great Rebuilding, but extends the period to 1700, but he also describes other upswings in the building cycle, namely during the Napoleonic Wars and due to the increase in prosperous farming. Machin (1977) theorises that the Great Rebuilding

was more likely circa 1700 rather than circa 1600. Any analysis using date-inscribed property can be misleading because houses are often initially built, then improved and then altered over time, so this can make determining a definitive date difficult. There is much more research that needs to be embarked upon, using the existing evidence to define whether there is a building cycle and also to describe what social and economic factors may have caused any upswing in vernacular building.

Hoskins himself defines a sequence that perpetuates – “savings – rebuilding and enlargement – decreased mortality and higher fertility – rise of population – new building and development of congestion – rise in mortality rates” (1953). This suggests he was aware a cycle of building and rebuilding throughout history and diminishes the probability of a single “Great Rebuilding”, although the factors for any individual wanting to improve their living conditions remain the same – availability of money, increase in family size (or desired increase), security of tenure and availability of materials.

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