

SIMPLICITY CARRIES MATTICK

by RODERICK GRADIDGE

OVER the past 30 years the character of the English village has changed far more than that of English towns and even cities. In many villages the squire in the great house, the vicar in the vicarage, and even the village postmistress in her general shop, have all disappeared. Nor is the rich farmer to be found: he has moved out from his old farmhouse, which, with its barns and yards, was an important and cohesive part of ordinary day-to-day village life, to live in a new house set apart from the village.

All too often, few original inhabitants remain, and the old cottages have been converted for weekend use. Surviving villagers often live on housing estates, the first wholesale building that most villages ever saw. Nowadays, little council housing is being built, but something worse has taken its place: estates of "heritage houses" or "retirement homes" (the titles seem interchangeable), built by speculative builders and designed in a strange style, half rural, half modern. They are usually built of red brick, but are sometimes faced with flint in an attempt to be vernacular, though there is of course little effort to follow local building traditions: slate appears in tile country and machine-made brick is universal. Only in stone country is the attempt made to follow local materials but, here, reconstituted stone, which is a fancy name for concrete blocks, is substituted for the real thing.

Throughout the country most of these "heritage houses" are decorated with timber boards on their low-pitched gables to give a suggestion of half-timbering. The curved heads of the stained and unpainted wooden windows perhaps suggest a cottage tradition, as do the strips of lead in diamond patterns fixed to them, but in neither case do they look authentic.

Into this rather depressing world has come Stephen Mattick, architect, developer and working builder, designing, building and selling authentic "home-made" village houses. The results are some of the best things that have happened to villages, and for that matter architecture, since the Second World War.

Mattick trained as an architect in the 1960s, at the height of the modern madness, and found that he got little out of his training. So, like many others at that time, he dropped out. He toured the world for 10 years, ending up in America, where he built a house for a friend. About 17 years ago, he came back to his native East Anglia, and since then he has been buying, converting and then selling barns in a small area south and east of Cambridge.

Between 1980 and 1981 Mattick made alterations to Church Farm at Horseheath, in the extreme south-east of Cambridgeshire. This commission led to what are probably the best of the Mattick houses to date as his satisfied client went on to commission two new houses for his family's use. It is in these that Mattick's importance as one of the most interesting house architects of today can most clearly be seen.

Of the two houses at Horseheath, once again one is plastered and pargetted. Both have been built with the same small team of builders: Mattick himself, two labourers with all-round ability, one of whom is an expert layer of flint walls (a rare accomplishment today), a carpenter and a bricklayer. The houses here are bigger. They are set down not in any formal relationship but casually, as if they had been at the end of the lane from time immemorial, and grown bigger over the years as the owners prospered.

The pargetted house has a Classicising showfront (Fig 5), with sash windows formally placed in the façade, but Mattick does not allow the façade to be too formal, and places his front door, which has pilasters and a Classical hood on volutes, informally to one side of the central window. One is reminded of the young Lutyens, who gave just this quality of casual asymmetry to some of his earlier Classical designs. Over the front door is a pargetted wreath, and a decorative band runs above its ground-floor windows.

As one moves away from the showfront, the vertical sliding sashes turn to horizontal sliders, and then there are casements in the lower pantiled service wing, which is set slightly back from the main body of the house but with an outhouse projection that brings the roof sweeping down low. From this low, sweeping roof a strong chimney punches up. Again one is reminded of Lutyens, the master of sweeping roofs and tall chimneys.

As one turns the corner on the other side of the main front, one reaches the enclosed back garden that so many Mattick houses have. Here the fenestration changes again. The main house still has sash windows, and there is a fine bay window with a French door in the middle; but in the wing, part of which is pargetted in panels, there is a whole series of different windows, seemingly laid out irregularly to come where they are needed in the rooms. The horizontal sliding sashes for the bedroom have simple, thin glazing bars, contrasting with the sturdier bars on the front.

There is a good, straightforward, country-style glazed door with a simple timber hood. The two French windows, though, are much more sophisticated. Here Mattick has used an elaborate version of a favourite East Anglian trick with glazing bars. While the centre of the space is glazed normally, the borders are edged with a narrow strip of glass glazed in much smaller slip panes, breaking up what might otherwise be very bland glazing.

The other house at Horseheath breaks new ground for Mattick, as it is built of flint with red-brick dressing (Fig 7). It is his most fluent design to date. Here he is not just reproducing traditional forms, but is designing in a vernacular idiom with a freedom reminiscent of the great Edwardian Arts and Crafts architects such as E. S. Prior and Detmar Blow, both of whom at the turn of the century designed highly original houses in East Anglia, using just these materials.

As to layout, two separate short blocks are placed beside each other, only just touching. One block has a crow-stepped gable; on the other the brickwork framing to the flintwork is more elaborate. Although both blocks have pantiled roofs, the link between them is rather surprisingly of slate, almost as if it had been insensitively added at a later date. Although this is quite as big a house as its neighbour, it has much less architectural detail. There are no Classical allusions and no sash windows, no doubt because the materials in which the house is built are less tractable. All the windows are simple casements, and the front door is punched into the wall without any emphasis. The back door by the garage is within an arch, recessed so that logs may be stored.

"What would be the point of cutting corners?" asks Mattick. "In that way all the pleasure goes out of building." So the houses are full of extravagant little details, things one never sees today in speculative building, or for that matter in most "architect-designed" houses. His floors are made up of different-width boards in the old tradition. The boxes to the sash windows have bead mouldings, and, because he does not like to see sharp external corners to plaster walls, these are the birdsmouth beads that one sees on Victorian buildings.

Naturally, all the houses have great open fireplaces, as must be obvious from the number of chimneys that project from the roofs, and although Mattick puts in central heating, he does not expect it to be used. His own house is usually lit with oil lamps, because he prefers the quality of light that oil gives.

If Mattick can design and build in this sensitive manner in the late 1980s, why can no one else? Why can no other designer get the true feel of a country house, or rather a house in the country? Why can none of our new and much vaunted Classicists come within a mile of the work of this simple, yet sophisticated, country architect/builder?

Photographs: Tim Imrie.

Note:

The last paragraph in the first column is incorrect. The owners of Church Farm, Nita and Stuart Miller, did not commission two new houses. They were built on two plots adjacent to Church Farm, with the flint house for the Cornish family of Park Farm and owners of both plots, and the other by Siobhan and Tom Harrison, who were living in Cardinal's Green.



5—This house at Horseheath is the most formal of all Mattick's houses



3—Classical details on a house at Horseheath, Cambridgeshire. (Below) 4—Pargetting on the house in Figure 1 by Steve Welsh of Laxfield who does all Mattick's pargetting



The knapped flint, brick and pantiles of this house at Horseheath were much used by Arts and Crafts architects

