

‘The Hill at Hobbiton’: Vernacular Architecture in the Shire

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Recently, as editor, I received a paper which contained a common misreading of Tolkien’s watercolour drawing of ‘The Hill at Hobbiton’ (Tolkien, 1937, frontispiece). The author ‘saw’ “seven above-ground structures including three thatched barns and two structures that are large – i.e. the Mill in the foreground and what looks like a Roman villa in the centre of the picture to the left of the road”.

I would like to offer an alternative reading of this picture, based on comparison with primary world architecture.

Firstly, ‘three thatched barns’. These are, I believe not thatched barns but thatched hay-ricks. Hay ricks could be built in the field, or in a rick-yard. In Tolkien’s illustration, the ricks are placed close to the farmyard, where the hay would be needed to feed over-wintering animals¹. The stacks were thatched with wetted wheat or rye straw.

Secondly, ‘what looks like a Roman villa’: Hammond and Scull (1995, p. 104) have identified this building as The Old Grange², the farm which was torn down when the Mill site was ‘developed’ at the end of *The Return of the King* (Tolkien, 1955, p296).

It is possible to trace the development of The Old Grange through the earlier versions which Hammond and Scull (1995) provide.

In #92, ‘The Hill: Hobbiton’, there are three mid-ground buildings:

- a farmhouse with two associated buildings or extensions (these are situated directly above the signpost on the far right of the picture, about half-way down);

- a three-bay house³ with minor building or extension (above the weather vane, virtually in the middle of the picture), and
- a barn-like building with semi-circular opening (on the road from the mill to the ‘farmhouse’).

In #93 there is only one building. It could be the ‘farmhouse’, now seen from behind rather than from the side, as it has a long low extension running back from it, down the hill towards the mill.

In #94 the farm buildings have disappeared, and two round hobbit holes take their place in the composition.

In #95 the ‘farmhouse’ is back on the right, seen from the side, and is now faced by ‘the Old Grange’, a three-bay house with a dovecot behind (there are doves flying around it).

In #96 the Old Grange is now a courtyard farm, ‘the farmhouse’ remains, and another set of farm buildings, similar in form to ‘the farmhouse’ is placed just behind the mill.

The buildings in #97, the final form, are virtually identical to those in #96: the only change is that the dovecot is now located inside the courtyard of the Old Grange.

Readers who live in, or are otherwise familiar with England, will recognise the buildings and landscape in this series of drawings as being inspired by English countryside, and English vernacular architecture⁴.

It is possible to view the drawings of Hobbiton as if they were drawn from life in some English village now unidentifiable, or swallowed by suburban sprawl and redevelopment, drawing inferences from the artist’s record.

¹ During the 1800s, hay was increasingly grown as a cash crop: increasing use of horse transport, especially to service the growing urban populations called for a large supply of hay. Many towns had specialised haymarkets.

² According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a grange was originally ‘a repository for grain’, secondarily ‘An establishment where farming is carried on ... usually the residence of a gentleman-farmer’, and thirdly an out-lying farmhouse ... belonging to a religious establishment or feudal lord’.

³ A bay is the principle compartment in the architectural arrangement of a building. It is marked by the main vaults, or principal rafters of the roof. In houses, each bay is often marked by an opening – a window or a door.

⁴ Various definitions of vernacular architecture exist: they tend to include the idea of buildings which are traditional, built following regional styles, using local materials. Some definitions specify that architect-designed buildings cannot be vernacular.

Building Materials. Most of the buildings do not have clear indication of their materials. The mill is an exception. From its first inception (#91), it has been a stone building. Often, the corners of the tower have distinctive quoins – the stones are of a darker colour. Quoins are used when the general walling is of small stones which do not make neat corners, but here the stones are ashlar (fine squared blocks of masonry, that make good, neat corners) so the quoins are a purely fashionable choice. This darker coloured stone is also used for the windows of the mill, the other above-ground buildings, and Bagshot Row.

Cladding Materials. In the coloured plates, many buildings appear to be whitewashed, or stuccoed. The gable end of The Grange and some out buildings sometimes have parallel lines on their walls, which may indicate weather-boarding, or tile cladding. Whitewash, stucco, weather-board and tile cladding are all used to protect an inferior or unsightly material underneath. The buildings do not show the bulge-out at the bottom which is characteristic of whychert and other earthen walls, so I would guess that under their finish they are timber-framed with wattle-and-daub or brick infilling.

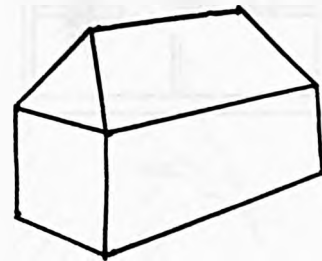
Roofing Materials. The different roofing materials are most clearly shown in #97, 'The Hill: Hobbiton Across the Water'. Three types of roofing are shown: one indicated by vertical parallel lines, one by horizontal parallel lines, and one by looping lines. I believe that the vertical parallel lines indicate pantiles. The horizontal lines might indicate ceramic tiles, slate, sandstone or limestone. The looping lines represent fish-scale tiles - these could be slate ceramic, or wooden shingles. In the coloured plates, the roofs are a bright brick orange, or a slightly yellower tone, showing that they are, in fact, ceramic. It is just possible that the tiles on some buildings with horizontal-line roofs are sandstone (such the calcerous sandstone of Northampton Sand, for example).

The angle of the gable roofs ranges from a little under 60° on the main building of the Old Grange to about 37° on the farm opposite. The roofing material dictates the degree of slope: limestone is never under 45°, but can go as steep as 65°. Sandstone is heavier, so only pitches between 50° and 55° are commonly used. Pantiles will be effective at pitches as low as 30°, and plain tiles as low as 40°.

The roofs of many of the buildings sag: this is associated with age, and the weight of a roof-covering such as limestone.

Building plans. The placing of chimneys shows where the fireplaces are situated, which in turn gives an indication of the layout of rooms.

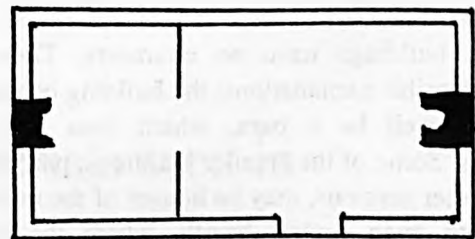
In Tolkien's pictures, chimneys are placed either in the gable walls, or in the cases where the roof is hipped, within the house, passing through the roof at



A hipped roof

the top of the hip. The former gives a well-known floor plan – Brunskill's type i, two-unit plan with cross-passage, and two fireplaces, which he describes thus (1978, p. 104):

consisting essentially of one structural cell divided by a partition into a larger and a smaller room ... [the larger] performed the function of the hall but was never open to the roof, having a bedroom or loft above; the smaller room acted as a private space ... Sometimes the smaller room had a fireplace, though this was more likely to be a later addition than an original feature.

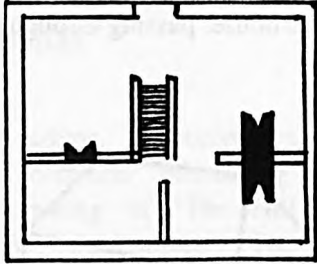


Type i

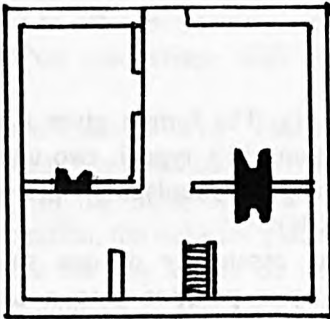
After Brunskill, 1978

A house with two chimneys is rather more commonly a feature of a 'double pile' plan, such as Brunskill's type d or e (1978, p. 113). Here the basic form is four

rooms, and moving the chimney from the gable walls to a more central position means that three or all four rooms may have a fire place.



Type d



Type e

After Brunskill, 1978

This plan was introduced at the top end of the social scale in the 1600s, and by the 1700s it had worked its way down to the level of cottage and small farmhouse which are shown in the Hobbiton drawings.

Some buildings have no chimneys. There are various possible explanations: the building behind the mill may well be a barn, which does not have chimneys. Some of the smaller buildings, particularly in the earlier versions, may be houses of the medieval type, with open central hearth, where the smoke simply escaped through gaps in the roofing material or through louvres. I can think of no reason why the Old Grange finally has no chimneys.

The courtyard plan of the Old Grange deserves a special mention. As agriculture became more

specialised in the 1700s, more capital-intensive and less labour-intensive, more and more products, and processes, needed specialised buildings. These were, initially, grouped seemingly at random around a farmyard. Forming them into a courtyard brought advantages: cattle could then be turned loose into the yard, where they would trample the manure. Processes could flow from one building to another, without products having to be taken outside. In some cases, the products could literally flow, led by gravity from one stage to the next. Books of plans for model farms were published. One author (Evans, 1994, pp. 80-81) has noted that the courtyard plan, in Buckinghamshire, is particularly associated with estate farms. This may be a reflection of the capital expenditure that such a complex represents.

Windows. Many of the windows appear to be the small square kind which were used from the late 1600s to around 1750, and until around 1850 in minor industrial buildings.

Other features. The gable end of the building behind the mill has four small holes in it: these are ventilation holes or dovecot holes, which confirm the building as a barn.

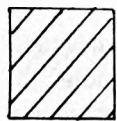
If these were drawings of some unidentified English village, then the evidence of vernacular architecture could be used to indicate the part of the country where its location might be found. The map below (drawn from Brunskill, 1978, pp. 187, 193, 196) shows that there is no place in England where cladding materials, plain tiles and pantiles, and use of stone⁵ coincide. I conclude that Hobbiton is not drawn from any one area – and certainly not from Oxfordshire, Worcestershire or Warwickshire⁶, or even a combination of these – but rather that the artist has chosen attractive features of houses and other buildings found in various parts of south-eastern England.

The dating evidence from the pictures shows buildings no earlier than the 1700s, and possibly as late as the mid 1800s. The Shire is sometimes described with reference to the Industrial Revolution⁷ which occurred towards the end of this span of dates, but I haven't found any references to the preceding Agrarian Revolution. At this point, dear reader, you may dimly recollect hearing the words 'Farmer George', 'Turnip Townshend', or 'Four-crop

⁵ 'Stone' here refers to its use in vernacular buildings such as the mill.

⁶ See Carpenter (1977) for information on Tolkien's association with these counties.

⁷ E.g. Edward Crawford's *Some Light on Middle-earth*



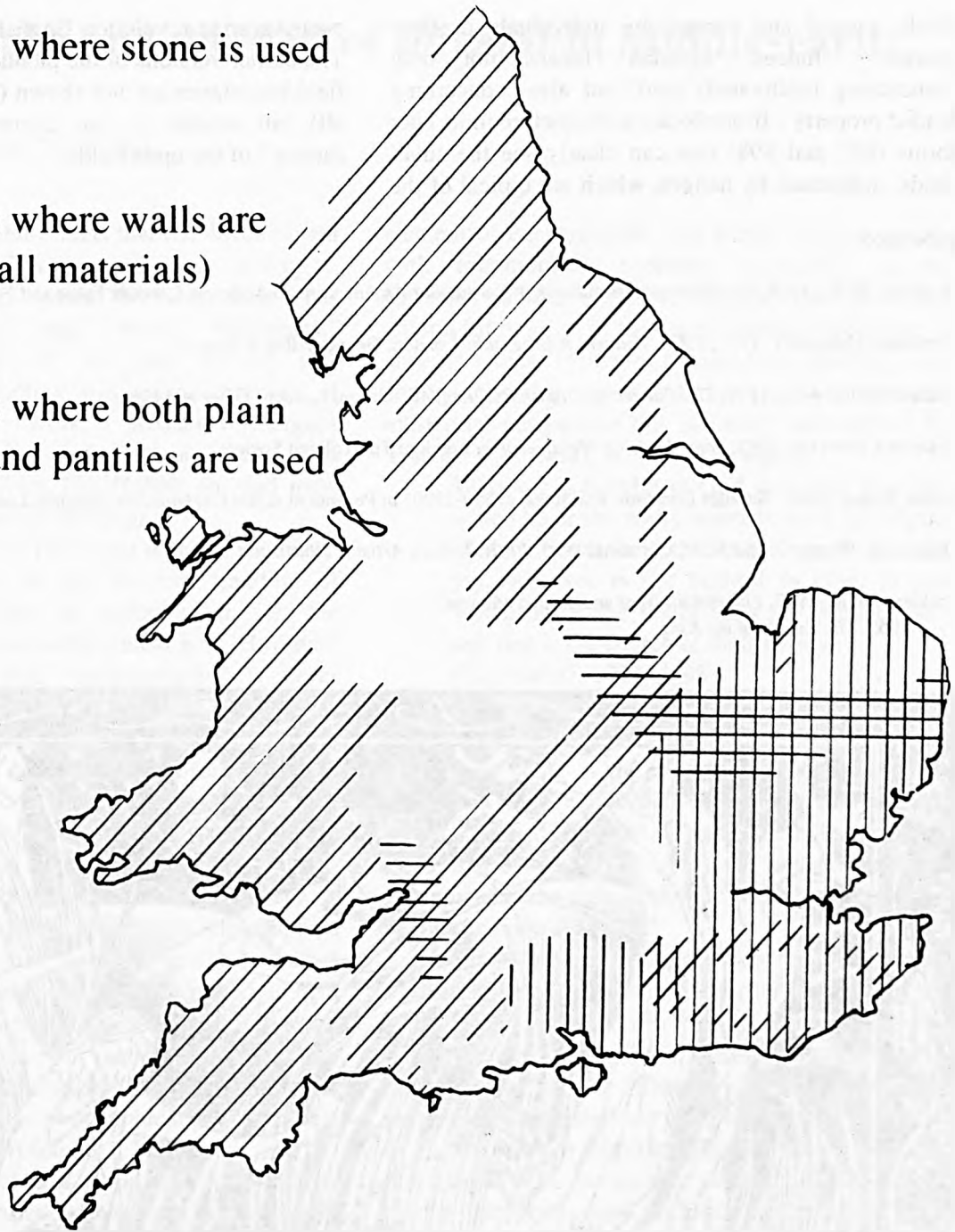
Areas where stone is used



Areas where walls are clad (all materials)



Areas where both plain tiles and pantiles are used



Distribution of building materials seen in *The Hill at Hobbiton*

Rotation' in some long-forgotten history lesson⁸. In brief, the Agrarian Revolution changed the landscape

of lowland Britain from open fields, farmed in common (and feudally owned) to small, enclosed

⁸ For those of you who were asleep during the lesson, or for whom the Agrarian Revolution was not part of the curriculum: Farmer George was King George III, who took a great interest in the Agrarian Revolution, Turnip Townshend promoted the use of the turnip in England as part of the four-crop rotation, a new idea which removed the need for fields to lie fallow for a year, by using nitrogen-fixing plants.

fields, owned and farmed by individuals or their tenants. Indeed 'agrarian' means not only 'concerning (cultivated) land' but also 'concerning landed property'. If one looks at the picture in its later forms (#97 and #98) one can clearly see the small fields, delineated by hedges, which are typical of the

post-Agrarian revolution English lowland landscape. The earlier versions of the picture are ambiguous: the field boundaries are not shown (if they are present at all) but neither is the characteristic 'ridge and furrow'⁹ of the open fields.

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⁹ 'Ridge and Furrow' are distinctive humps seen when earlier ploughed strips have been left under pasture. They look as if some giant had piped earth onto the field.