

Nat Alcock – 'Cruck Building: England Wales and the West Country

On 17th October, 2020

On 17th October as part of the Early Dunster series of webinars, Nat Alcock gave a lecture on cruck buildings.

Nat Alcock is an Emeritus Reader in the Department of Chemistry, University of Warwick. In parallel with his scientific career, he has made a lifelong study of vernacular architecture and social history, and he has published 18 books and more than 60 papers in these fields. These include most recently a major regional study, *The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England* (2013; with Dan Miles), and *Cruck Building: A Survey* (2019, jointly edited with P. S. Barnwell and Martin Cherry). He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and past president of the Vernacular Architecture Group. In 2011 he was appointed OBE for services to vernacular architecture.

His work has included the first major studies on vernacular architecture in Devon and Bedfordshire, and at a national level the examination of cruck and base-cruck construction, and the application of dendrochronology and radiocarbon dating to buildings. He is particularly interested in the correlation of documentary and architectural evidence for buildings, especially using probate inventories, and is the author of the handbook, *Documenting the History of Houses* (2004; British Records Association), and co-author of two CBA Practical Handbooks: *Recording timber-framed buildings: an illustrated glossary* (1996), and *Fixtures and Fittings in Dated Houses, 1567-1763* (1994). He has also published two guides to the use of title deeds by local and family historians, most recently: *Tracing History through Title Deeds: A guide for family and local historians* (Pen & Sword, 2017).

Nat Alcock's lecture did not discuss the Dunster cruck buildings specifically, but covered the importance of crucks in English architecture, allowing Dunster to be placed into the historical framework of cruck building.

Nat described a typical cruck - a curved timber, one of a pair, which support the roof of a building, historically used in England - and asked why cruck buildings are of such interest. Most cruck buildings occur in the western half of England and into Wales - of those surveyed 3204 are houses and 1080 are barns. They date between 1262 – 1742, though most are in the 1400-1600 period. Any cruck buildings dating from pre 1300 are of particular interest. This information is taken from dated crucks.

Nat went on to describe the variety of different ways that crucks are structurally integrated into the buildings. Structures can be full crucks, raised crucks or principals with curved feet. It is possible to mistake base crucks with aisled buildings, which can look similar to the uneducated eye.



A Raised Cruck in a Dunster House

Nat asked the interesting question of why crucks had fallen out of favour as a buildings style. The issue is the lack of height of the second floors. As fashion dictated that second floor living became a way of life, so the cruck frame prevented the easy movement around the upper floors. Consequently it was necessary to either stop building crucks, or make major adjustments to the upper structure.



A Dunster Example of a Jointed Cruck Blade

Jointed crucks are more prevalent in the West Country than anywhere else in England, apart from Cornwall; in Devon there are 300, West Somerset has 450 and Dorset 162. The development of the jointed cruck meant that it was no longer necessary to find a long and curved piece of timber suitable for making a pair of crucks.

This fascinating finished allowing time for questions from the audience.