

Margaret Holt - Memories by Kay Coutin

I came to know Margaret soon after moving from Devon to West Sussex in 1979. My interest in vernacular architecture soon led to me joining the Wealden Buildings Study Group. Margaret was at this time taking evening classes on the subject at her home in Haywards Heath. Accustomed as I was to buildings of stone, cob and thatch I had much to learn about the timber-framed tradition in this area to which, thanks to Margaret, I was introduced.

At that time most of those interested had come from varied backgrounds to join the research in this comparatively new discipline. The Weald and Downland Open air Museum was in its infancy. So there were amateurs among the professional architects, surveyors and archaeologists who all contributed to a more systematic study, recording as they went evermore intriguing examples and attempting classification.

Margaret first developed an interest when she was living in a timber framed home of some age in Henfield. She attended talks by Reg Mason, the leading specialist of the day, author of the first account of buildings in the Weald. He inspired her to begin measuring and recording similar houses in the vicinity, as she showed great aptitude. Always an enthusiastic and loyal Sussex resident, Margaret joined Roy Armstrong and Reg Mason when they founded the Wealden Buildings Study Group. When Ray retired (he had begun the study in East Grinstead, as a surveyor, helping to preserve the surviving old houses in the High Street) Margaret was persuaded to carry on his evening classes, supported by either Sussex Archaeological Society or Sussex University. These were soon followed by requests to speak to local organisations, which she illustrated with slides using the projector of the time.

There followed Margaret's increasing involvement in the Sussex Archaeological Society. Her network of friends and colleagues and her charming manner proved effective in extending her influence and enjoyment in this new discipline, linked to the history of this region. For some years Margaret was on the Society's Council.

A question which remained unanswered was the origin of the crown post construction. (There were others such as the 'Wealden' style to be explored later.) It was thought it had developed in France. So, a small party including Margaret, Marjorie Hallam (of the Wealden Buildings Study Group- and Weald & Downland Open Air Museum) and Elizabeth Gowne from Devon and myself drove off to Normandy in my small Renault 5 to investigate in 1989. This successful expedition was hugely enjoyed, especially by those of us recovering from difficult family circumstances, and was a revelation. What! No crown posts!

By various means and unexpected good fortune we met French specialists and academics leading, eventually, to liaison with the British experts. A significant achievement, partly due to a chance meeting at a conference in London and my ability to speak to French to the delegates there and later to the owners of Normandy buildings we were able to visit.

These encounters, and at least 5 later expeditions to Normandy and Brittany extended Margaret's repertoire for illustrated talks and her understanding of vernacular architecture, linking it to the local traditions and social customs.

Although as a member of the VAG (Vernacular Architecture Group?) she attended conferences in other parts of the country and annual meetings in London, her interest remained essentially within Sussex and the area most familiar to her.

Margaret lived for a time at Cuckfield Park. The fine gate house is illustrated on page 90 of "Wealden Buildings". She conducted tours of the building, providing her home baked cakes for the teas. Some of her 5 children lived there too, before setting out on their own. In later life she lived in Haywards Heath with her two youngest sons.

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