

Paul M Hunneyball. *Architecture and Image-Building in Seventeenth-Century Hertfordshire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004. XIV + 218pp+ 12 maps and plans + 42 illustrations. \$99. Review by Dr Martyn Bennett, Nottingham Trent University.

It can be argued that seventeenth century Englishman and Englishwoman were obsessed by their image. Twenty-first century celebrities and their obsessions about personal presentation and style are often advanced as modern phenomena created by paparazzi and the constant glare of visual media. Yet this is not an original phenomenon. In the early modern period, image did not merely keep you in the gaze of an easily bored public; it gained a person power, prestige and social status. The key to becoming gentrified was conducting yourself in a manner becoming a gentleman. The trappings of gentility from livery to a magnificent tomb were about presenting an image, both expected and exceeding, without vain display, the image of a gentleman.

There was no more suitable way of self presentation than creating a home or public edifice that presented an image to a wide public. Paul Hunneyball's fascinating study explores this phenomenon through a close study of Hertfordshire: a compact county north of London through which many of the important roads north and south passed. This book looks at the nature of building, of patrons and architects and the men who built the houses of the county, the town houses of the urban gentry and community projects such as almshouses. The author also looks most importantly at the way that architectural taste percolated down to sub-gentry levels.

Hunneyball explores the way patrons, whilst using architects and artistic advisors, were intimately involved in the creation of the county's major houses. This was also possible for ecclesiastical building, where the wealthier benefactors were concerned. Whilst precise relationships differed from project to project and depended upon individual characters and trust between patron and architect, the patron was most often the dominant partner. The same is often true of funerary monuments, especially because as many as a third of them were constructed during the lifetime of the eventual dedicatee whilst others left instructions behind.

Building of course entailed innovation and Hunneyball devotes two chapters to this issue. Innovators, Hunneyball argues, were the serious patrons amongst the builders of Hertfordshire. Many patrons could impress the onlooker with size and scale and with the clear opulence of a building, but real impressions were related less to these simple material concepts than to innovation. Such innovation included importing ideas about decoration from the capital, but could also run to the installation of sash windows from the 1660s onwards. Not all innovations were adopted wholesale. The four side symmetry of Balls Park for instance was too bold for some and two-sided symmetry sat more comfortably with other patrons.

Renovation offered a cheaper way of entering the fashionable housing game, especially given the costs of demolition and completely rebuilding a house. Local workers were often employed on such work despite variations in quality and the generally inferior standard of work in the eyes of those looking with a capital perspective. New work

therefore could have some of the gloss knocked off simply to account for the abilities of local architects and builders. Stagenhoe is one building that Hunneyball selected as a prime example of this. Clearly based on the grander Balls Park, Stagenhoe was built by a very different hand: the inspiration is clear to see, but the result involved a reinterpretation of classical design, whilst restraint and balance were lost.

The book explores the concept of architecture as a mirror of society. It thus points out that whilst men such as the Bishop of Salisbury might look to London for styles upon which to base his new almshouses, the architectural requirements of communal buildings were not the same as those of the homes which benefactors built for themselves. Houses the author argues were not static representations of the ambitions of one builder, but performed the role of a palimpsest as succeeding generations responded to societal change and expectations.

The overall result of the rebuilding of Hertfordshire was the dissemination of classical styles into the county community. This not only represented the difference between the social elite and their neighbours, but also helped define the functional meanings of classical architecture in the rural landscape. Naturally these messages were read and understood at sub-gentry level. In some cases they were emulated, but, Hunneyball argues, they were not dependent upon the tastes of the elite.

This is a book written in a monograph series and as such is rather pricey. This is a pity for what Paul Hunneyball says and the material he uses to do so deserve a very wide readership. The contribution to understanding the environment of seventeenth century England and the societies which inhabited it is not to be underestimated. It is a book to be pocketed on a trip to Hertfordshire – useful for understanding that which is often viewed rather than read, but which really should be read as closely as any text. Paul Hunneyball has read these buildings for us, but they will bear re-reading. This book is highly recommended and is a great exponent of the notion that understand architectural world, look around you.