

into the furthest corner of the hut and leave it there.' Leeds seems to have seen *grubenhäuser* almost as a betrayal of civilization.

For nearly thirty years this view held sway, but gradually authorities began to question whether people really had lived in these odd little structures. For one thing, they were awfully small – only about seven feet by ten typically – which would make a very snug house even for the meanest peasants, particularly with a fire burning. One *grubenhäuser* had a floor area that was nine feet across, of which just over seven feet was occupied by a hearth, leaving no room at all for people. So perhaps they weren't habitations at all, but workshops or storage sheds, though why they required a subterranean aspect may well permanently remain a mystery.

Fortunately the newcomers – the English, as we may as well call them from now on – brought a second kind of building with them, much less numerous

but ultimately far more important.

These buildings were much larger than *grubenhäuser*, but that was about as much as could be said for them. They were simply large, barnlike spaces with an open

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hearth in the middle. Their word for this kind of structure was already old in 410, and it now became one of the first words in English. They called them *halls*.

Practically all living, awake or asleep, was done in this single large, mostly bare, always smoky chamber. Servants and family ate, dressed and slept together – ‘a custom which conduced neither to comfort nor the observance of the proprieties’, as J. Alfred Gotch noted with a certain clear absence of comfort himself in his classic *The Growth of the English House* in 1909. Through the whole of the medieval period, till well into the fifteenth century, the hall effectively *was* the house, so much so that it became the convention to give its name to the entire dwelling, as in Hardwick Hall or Toad Hall.

Every member of the household, including servants, retainers, dowager widows and anyone else with a continuing attachment, was considered family – they were literally ‘familiar’, to use the word in its original sense. In the most commanding (and usually least draughty) position in the hall was a raised platform called a dais, where the owner and his family ate – a practice recalled by the high tables still found in colleges and boarding schools that have (or sometimes simply wish to project) a sense of long tradition. The head of the household was the ‘husband’ – a compound term meaning literally ‘householder’ or ‘house owner’. His role as manager and provider was so central that the practice of land management became known as husbandry. Only much later did ‘husband’ come to signify a marriage partner.

The great hall at Stokesay Castle in Shropshire, one of England's most magnificent fortified medieval manor houses.

