



# Country Houses Today

Jeremy Melvin

# Duckett House

**John Pardey**

New Forest, Hampshire 2003

John Pardey belongs to a small group of English architects who are trying to establish a contemporary idiom for rural homes whose scale puts them somewhere between the traditional elitist country house and the mass market dwelling. These homes are perhaps the closest equivalent today to the type of houses in which Jane Austen's characters would have lived. They have similar generic accommodation, with two or three reception rooms and bedrooms that would certainly become overcrowded if more servants than a nanny had to be fitted in alongside a clutch of children. And, like many of Austen's characters, their occupants choose to live in the country even though their income does not derive directly from the land. The difference, of course, is in the architecture: where her lesser clergymen, half-pay officers





Right: Duckett House, New Forest, Hampshire, UK. Pardey's sketches explore the composition of volumes against the landscape setting



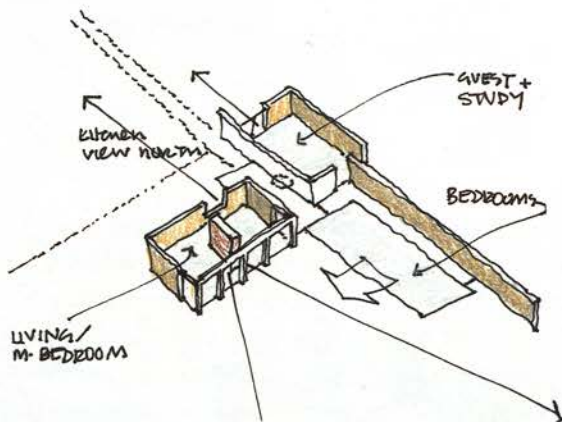
Below: Duckett House, New Forest, Hampshire, UK. The house adopts the forms and materials used for local agricultural buildings, but is strikingly contemporary in its effect

and presumptuous merchants chose to mimic the building style of their grander, landowning neighbours and thereby gain acceptance, Pardey's designs seek to develop an affinity with nature by relating form and materials to their surroundings. In this sense the context they address is physical, whereas Austen's characters and contemporaries were intent on conforming to its social counterpart. This change in approach liberates and enriches the potential for architectural expression, and Pardey's eclectic reading of Modernism and rarefied feel for the vernacular allow him to exploit it.

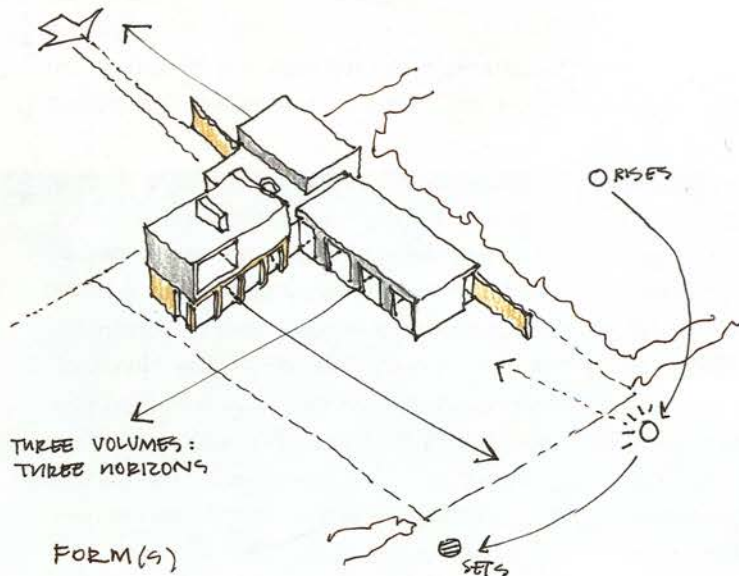
The Duckett House, on the edge of the New Forest close to the southern coast of England, is in many senses typical of this genre of new country houses. Its clients are a professional couple with young children; when they made the not uncommon move from London to the country, they were fortunate enough to find a site with potential to become a rural idyll, while still being close enough to employment opportunities afforded by the prosperous cities on the south coast. The site is attractive rather than spectacular, and there appears little artifice in the surrounding landscape beyond what is necessary for farming. Local agricultural buildings, too recent to be genuinely vernacular, provide the cue for the volumes and, to some extent, the textures of the design, but the house is conceived in a way which is clearly contemporary; its large windows show how that sense of the new continues to the relaxed and comfortable interior. At one edge of the site, though, are some rather run-down agricultural structures and they give a clue to the way the project ran the gauntlet of the British planning system, which often considers any trace of modernity to be threatening even when it has a pitched roof and plenty of timber cladding.

The site was a smallholding and planning consent is more likely to be forthcoming for replacing a building – in this case a decrepit agricultural





Left: Duckett House, New Forest, Hampshire, UK. Pardey is a sensitive planner, organising the house to optimise functional relationships, views and orientation to the sun



Below: Duckett House, New Forest, Hampshire, UK. The kitchen/dining room is the heart of the house and making it double-height not only marks its status, but also allows light to come in from unexpected sources







Above: Duckett House, New Forest, Hampshire, UK. Seen from the private garden the house becomes almost transparent

cottage – than for starting on an entirely new site. By the same token there is an incentive to keep even the most tumbledown buildings because at some point, something new might be considered an acceptable trade-off for removing an eyesore. Fortunately, the site is large enough for these structures not to impinge on the house's immediate environment, though they provide useful extra storage and make a convenient point to limit car access. The clients' willingness not to take cars right to the house meant that Pardey could design its approach as a long footpath, and that became an important generator of the concept.

The path makes a straight armature swathing through grass which is not treated as a lawn. Just before reaching the house it acquires a low wall on one side, emphasising the direction and protecting a study from unwanted visitors. From this point onwards the armature helps to define the three basic volumes of the house, each related to a specific function, which interlock in the overall composition. One is the study and a guest bedroom, which together could make a nearly self-contained suite. Another, to the right of the entrance, is the principal volume: two storeys with a sitting room and double-height kitchen/dining area on the ground floor, and the main bedroom above. The third, continuing the axis of the entrance, is a run of four children's bedrooms.

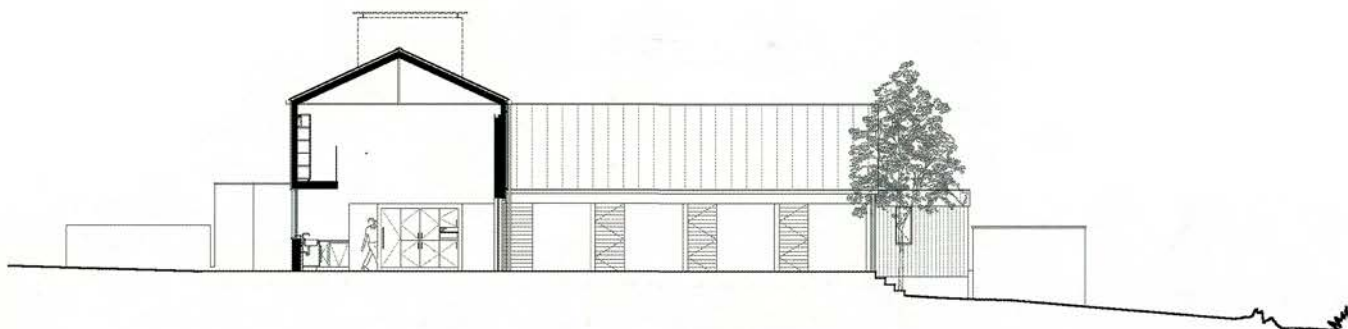
It is a skilful and attractive composition. From the approach it is welcoming and legible, the entrance clearly visible while the massing and windows give clues to the purposes of the various parts. Inside it offers both privacy and intimacy. The entrance sequence of path, porch and hall means that visitors only penetrate in stages, and some parts, like the study or bedrooms, can remain totally private. Yet in the L-shaped angle formed by the

children's wing and the main block, the house opens up to a lawn, which is banked up to be more or less flat. The wall from the sitting room and kitchen is entirely glazed and opens up to the lawn; the children's bedrooms each have a stable door to afford graded privacy from the rest of the family. At first glance the site appears to be mainly natural, but in fact it has been subtly manipulated to reinforce these spatial characteristics.

Other touches in the plan show a sensitivity to how the house might be used. The position of the children's bathroom at the end of their wing suggests a relationship with the garden that might just, for the very young, provide a substitute for a swimming pool. Along the corridor, too, a small widened section – some double the width – makes the sort of place that children can take over for their games, with just the kind of secret views they so enjoy.

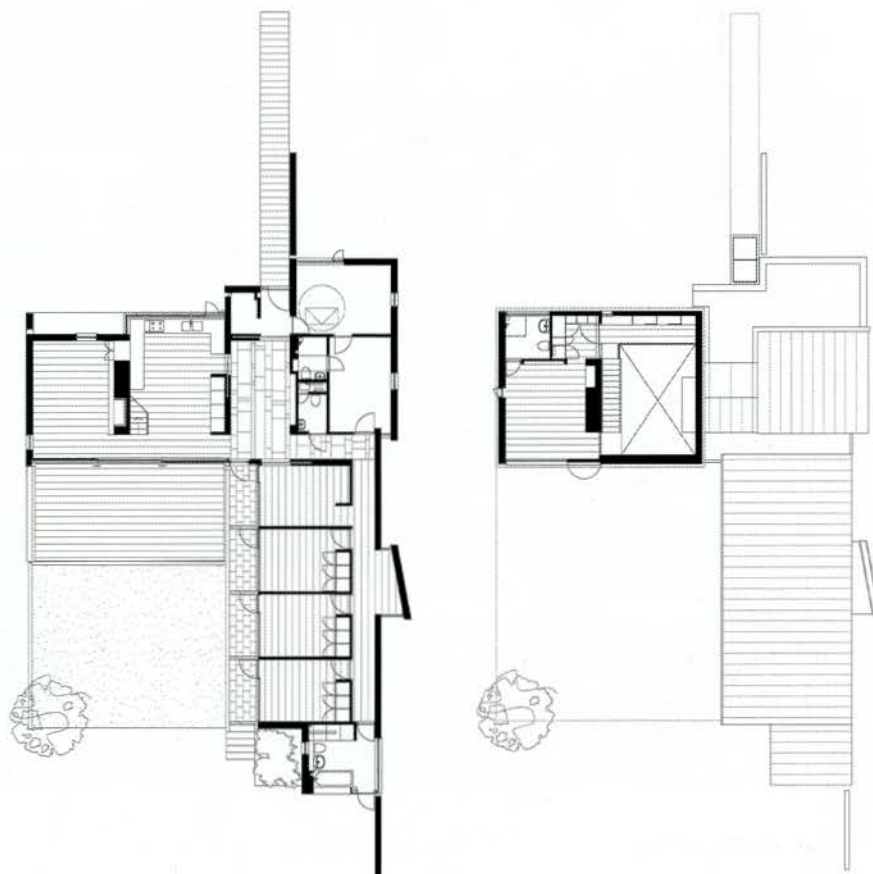
In the Duckett House and others that explore similar themes of composition, Pardey begins to set out a new typology for medium-sized rural housing. Its forms are derived from the vernacular, and its materials combine large areas of glass with more traditional render and timber, a device that helps to ease a path through draconian and conservative planning regulations. More significantly, it also opens the door to imaginative layouts and configurations of space that cater well for family life in the twenty-first century, and help to bring that social organism into some sort of relationship with the environment where they have chosen to live. As many of these families will have faced the choice of a five-metre-wide terraced house in a London suburb, the contrast is great – and will become greater if Pardey's typological essays are not compromised by conservative planners.

Below: Duckett House, New Forest, Hampshire, UK. Section through the double-height kitchen/dining area, with the children's bedroom wing in elevation





Right: Duckett House, New Forest, Hampshire, UK. Plans, of the ground floor (right) and first floor (far right). Each part of the house has a clearly delineated function



Below: Duckett House, New Forest, Hampshire, UK. Without revealing the interior or compromising privacy, the composition marks the point of entrance.

