Throughout Britain and its empire from the late-seventeenth century, people looking to secure their position began to construct small classical houses. Their proliferation over the course of the century from 1680 is a central feature of the architectural and cultural expansion of Britain. Before embarking on a detailed analysis of the material culture of gentlemen and investigating the strategies they employed to build status, this chapter describes the houses and people at the heart of this study. Because small classical houses have received scant attention in Britain, a key sample of eighty-one small classical houses built before 1780 in Gloucestershire, as well as an associated group of 134 genteel builders and owners, is central to the analysis. Building on this cohort is a considerable literature that documents small classical buildings in other parts of Britain and its North American colonies. From this investigation of nearly two hundred houses and families in the British Atlantic World, patterns emerge that yield significant insights into the interplay between architecture and social status.

The first section of this chapter highlights the geography, socio-economic diversity, and widespread connections of Gloucestershire and Bristol in order to draw comparisons with other areas of Britain and the American colonies. The second section sets out a chronology of the construction of 'gentlemen’s houses' and maps their distribution in Gloucestershire and elsewhere in the British Atlantic world. The final section develops the link between artefact and person through an examination of the builders and owners associated with ‘gentlemen’s houses’, describing their backgrounds, life-cycle, professional and business activities, office-holding and religious affiliation.

Identifying some of the basic characteristics of houses and owners outlines their development and suggests several important themes. Early builders in England were almost exclusively from the lesser landed gentry, but in the 1720s a significant shift occurred in the number of building campaigns, the location of new houses, and the owners who built them. Construction in areas that were hubs of trade, commerce and administration, such as port cities like Bristol and in the cloth manufacturing district of the Stroudwater Valleys, highlighted this change. After the 1720s, the builders and owners of gentlemen’s houses came from an
increasing mix of gentry, professional and mercantile backgrounds and comprised a flexible and dynamic segment of society. These findings articulate with greater specificity the permeable boundary between the gentry and commercial and professional worlds and provide a basis for analysing the qualities and interactions of these houses and their owners in subsequent chapters. This shift signals heightened social mobility from the second quarter of the eighteenth century for those who built houses of this sort.

Gentlemen’s houses in the west of England

Social and economic conditions in Gloucestershire reflected processes at work elsewhere in British Isles, such as the continued prevalence of agriculture, early industry and textile manufacturing, domestic and international trade, political diversity, and relations between a few great landowners, the gentry, and commercial elites. Of the eighty-one small classical houses built in Gloucestershire during the period, eleven are demolished or destroyed, leaving seventy houses (86 per cent) extant. As the next chapter makes clear, numerous permutations of the small classical compact box dotted the landscape. Whilst not completely exhaustive of small classical houses built in the county between 1680 and 1780 – some may have been destroyed or altered – this group comprises a substantial representation of the form.2

This group of buildings and owners in Gloucestershire has numerous strengths. Two early county historians, Sir Robert Atkyns (1712) and Samuel Rudder (1779), published volumes that provide useful comparison at either end of the period, which help to assess change during the course of the eighteenth century.3 Individually, many of these houses have not been studied extensively, while as a group they have not been assessed at all.4 Investigating a significant number of hitherto neglected houses and drawing upon considerable and largely unexplored documentary and material evidence rewards their study amply.

The geographic, social, and economic diversity of Gloucestershire opens up further avenues for treatment of material culture and social status. The county served as a point of intersection in the west of England, bordering eight other counties and stretching from the Midlands in the north to the West Country in the south, and nearly linking the Home Counties to Wales from east to west.5 Samuel Rudder noted the remarkable variety of landscapes, with ‘three grand divisions of Coteswold, Vale, and Forest’.6 The Cotswold hills run from north east to south west, dominating much of the landscape of the county, with a sharp escarpment on their western edge. Beyond this escarpment, the Vale is the low-lying area focused around the River Severn. In the western reaches of the county, nestled between the Severn and the River Wye, the Forest of Dean was a distinct region often more closely associated with Wales than with England.

Gloucestershire was largely a rural county, but important centres of economic activity existed by 1680. The north Cotswolds had a traditional focus on sheep and wool while the commercial centre of Bristol became increasingly important in the eighteenth century.7 The Forest of Dean relied heavily on its coal and iron