

Oxfordshire

HENLEY'S ORNAMENTAL BRICKWORK

The visual appeal of Henley's 18th-century buildings stems partly from the way in which different types of brick were combined for decorative effect. Early brickwork in the area was mostly dark red, reflecting a high iron content in the local clay, though dark grey-blue bricks (produced by over-firing in the kiln) were sometimes used for patterning. But in the early 18th century combinations of different coloured bricks became increasingly fashionable, and as demand increased new techniques were developed. Extra heating produced a glazed (or 'vitrified') effect, while a grey glazed surface might also be achieved by adding salt during the firing process. Red and vitrified grey bricks were sometimes combined to produce a chequer pattern, or could be used to much grander effect, as at 20 Market Place.



20 Market Place, built probably around 1750, where the use of red and grey brickwork creates the illusion of tall pilasters forming part of a temple-like classical portico.

The 'bond' (i.e. the way in which the bricks are laid) was also varied for effect. By 1700, English bond (alternate courses of headers and stretchers) had generally been supplanted by Flemish bond, in which headers and stretchers alternate in each course. But sometimes a more costly all-header bond was used to give a special air of distinction to a facade.

Another indicator of wealth and status was the use of specially sawn 'gauged' bricks for detailing (e.g. in keystones and window arches), and of individually moulded bricks for architectural features such as cornices. A striking example is 13 Reading Road, where the unknown builder introduced classical Doric pilasters supporting a Doric frieze and a dentil cornice of moulded bricks. Gauged brickwork also aimed for an especially smooth effect, achieved by the addition of fine sand to the clay before firing, and by carefully cutting the bricks to make as fine a mortar joint as possible.

Such extravagance slowly disappeared in the second half of the 18th century, as neo-classical restraint replaced Baroque ostentation. This often meant covering the brickwork with stucco (or render) to produce the desired effect of smoothness. But a smooth effect could also be created in brick, especially when it was of a uniform redness and the mortar was concealed by tuck-pointing.



Classical detailing at 13 Reading Road, where slender brick pilasters flank the reception rooms on the two upper floors. The dentil cornice (the decorative projection at roof-level) is similarly of moulded and delicately cut brick, rather than wood. The top-floor windows have decorative aprons below and curved brick keystones above, adding a further note of bravura.



Brick facades could be varied by combining different coloured bricks in varying bonds. The Flemish bond at 54 New Street (left) is accentuated by use of blue-grey headers and red stretchers, a pattern particularly popular in the late 18th and 19th centuries. The more expensive header bond at 18 Hart Street (middle), with all the bricks laid end-on, uses exclusively blue bricks to good effect. Tuck pointing (right) gave the illusion of a smooth regular surface by giving the finished brickwork (including the pointing mortar) a red colour wash, then incising the joints, and pointing up the narrow grooves with lime putty. The effect, when new, would have been quite startling. An Act of 1725 ruled that bricks should be 2½ inches thick, slightly thicker than those of earlier centuries.



This large, flared window arch at 39 Hart Street consists of soft red 'rubbed' or 'gauged' bricks, made of smooth clay and fine sand. The bricks were sawn to achieve the desired wedge shape before being rubbed smooth. They are pointed up with fine lime putty.

Account based on architectural work by Geoffrey Tyack and Ruth Gibson

Read more in our forthcoming EPE book *Henley-on-Thames: Town, Trade and River*, by Simon Townley (Phillimore 2009)

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