

# Oxfordshire

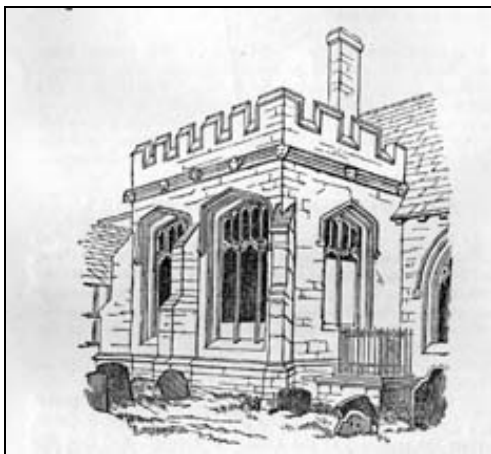
## CHANTRIES AND POPULAR RELIGION IN MEDIEVAL HENLEY

### The Life of the Community

As with many towns, much of the evidence for Henley's medieval communal life revolves around religion. Henley church was relatively wealthy, its land and tithes worth over £13 a year in 1291, and for the most part it was served by high-status rectors who did not always live in the town. There seems, however, to have been a fairly large church establishment. Assistants were mentioned frequently, and in the early 16th century there were at least 5 chaplains besides the rector, alongside additional clergy in lower orders.<sup>1</sup>

### Chantries

Some priests were employed in the various chantries and religious fraternities recorded in the town. Chantry priests were normally engaged under the terms of a parishioner's will to say masses for his soul, but in Henley chantries associated with the chapels of the Blessed Virgin and of St Catherine in Henley church assumed wider communal significance, and from the 14th century were administered directly by the town's merchant guild. The chapel of the Virgin became effectively a guild chapel, and it may be significant that it was built shortly before 1311, just around the time that the guild was establishing its autonomy. St Catherine's chapel acquired additional communal functions in the late 15th century, when the town's weavers (reflecting St Catherine's association with spinners and other craftsmen) kept a taper burning before the altar there.



*Henley church: St Leonard's chapel, endowed by John Elmes in 1460*

Around the same time a group of townspeople established a Fraternity of the Altar of Jesus, similar in purpose to the religious associations found in many late medieval towns. Members, who included women as well as men, paid a small fee, and the Fraternity acquired its own vestments, plate, and altar images: probably it was housed in the church's south-east chapel, which was rebuilt around that time. Individual townspeople also enriched particular side-altars or endowed chantries, among them the prominent merchant John Elmes (died 1460), who built the chapel of St Leonard on the

church's north side. Four 'priests' chambers' in the churchyard were mentioned in 1553, though whether they formed part of the surviving medieval structure on the churchyard's east side is unclear.<sup>2</sup>

Henley's guild records hint at the popular religious festivals common to most towns by the later Middle Ages. In the early 16th century there was an Easter 'Resurrection Play' presumably dramatizing the events around Christ's tomb, while 'gear' for a Corpus Christi 'pageant' and procession was mentioned in the 1530s and 1540s. At this the consecrated host would be processed along the streets, probably accompanied (as in some larger towns) by banners, lighted tapers, images of saints, and possibly floats.

Other diversions, though still tied to the religious calendar, were of a more secular nature. In 1498 the burgesses agreed that the warden should perambulate the town's main streets over Christmas 'to drink, make merry and visit his neighbours' houses', an attempt, perhaps, to promote social cohesion at a time when the guild's authority was under pressure. Games at Hocktide (the second Monday and Tuesday after Easter) included a version of the popular 'wife gathering', at which groups of local men 'captured' local women (and vice versa) and released them on payment of a fine for the church coffers. Whitsuntide games included a King Game or Play, probably involving election of a 'mock' king or queen for the day, and from the 1490s to 1520s there was a Robin Hood game, found also at nearby Thame. On such occasions the normal rules of social precedence and propriety were temporarily suspended or inverted, albeit in carefully controlled ways and with proceeds going usually to the church. By contrast, everyday gambling, dicing and cards were frowned on by the town authorities, probably as much for the risk of violence as on moral grounds. Thus in 1510 Nicholas Wellington undertook to prevent 'dice, cards, and other illicit games' from being played on his premises, under pain of imprisonment and a 10s. fine.<sup>3</sup>

Read a fuller account of [Henley's religious life](#) on the VCH Oxfordshire website

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<sup>1</sup> **1291:** *Taxatio Ecclesiastica Anglie et Wallie ... circa AD 1291* (Record Commission, 1801), 30. **Rectors:** JS Burn, *History of Henley* (1861), 133–7 (not fully reliable). **Assistants:** e.g. Salter, H E (ed.), *Subsidy Collected ... in 1526* (OHS 63, 1909), 249; Hamilton Thompson, A (ed.), *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln 1517–31*, II (LRS 35, 194?), 65; Briers, P (ed.), *Henley Borough Records* (Oxon. Record Soc. 41, 1960), 87, 164. A [full VCH Oxfordshire account](#) is in preparation.

<sup>2</sup> **Chapels of BVM and St Catherine:** Oxon. Record Office, BOR/3/A/II/1, f. 7; *ibid.* BOR/3/A/IX/1/22, 25, 28, 33, 51 etc; *Cal. Pat.* 1381–5, 526; Briers, *Recs.* refs at 240; Burn, 126–7, 134, 149, 175, 178–9. **Weavers:** Weaver and Beardwood (eds), *Oxon. Wills* (ORS 39), 63. **Fraternity:** Briers, *Recs.* refs at 241; Burn, 183–6. **Elmes chantry:** Oxon. Record Office, BOR/3/A/II/1, f. 3 and v.

<sup>3</sup> **Henley:** Briers, *Recs.* (index refs for church, festivals, games). **Background:** Hutton, R, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* (1994), 25–48, 66–7.