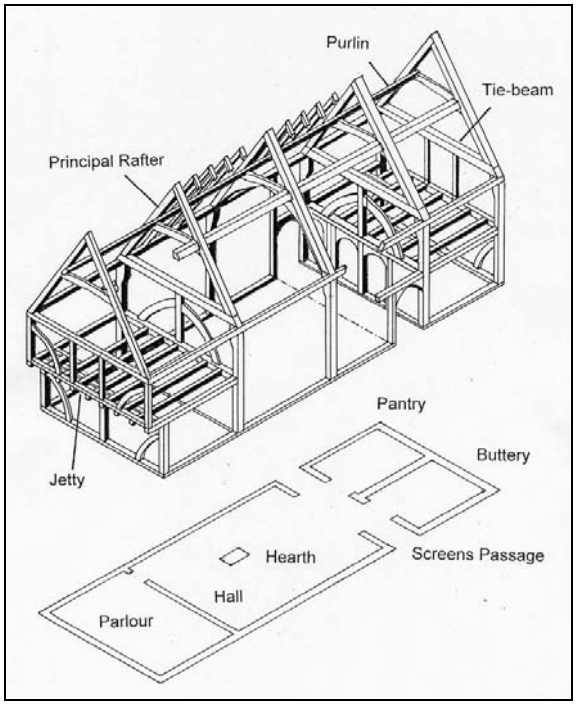
Oxfordshire

BUILDING IN MEDIEVAL HENLEY

In the Middle Ages most buildings were constructed from local materials. Timber is widely available in the Chilterns and was the most natural building material. Chalk and flint are also plentiful, though chalk is not generally suitable for exteriors, and flint needs square-cut stones or bricks to stabilise the angles of buildings. Flints were, however, used extensively for cellars and foundations, and the *Old White Hart* has a chalk-lined cellar. Good building stone had to be expensively imported, usually by river, and was confined to important buildings such as the church or the medieval bridge, where flints were used with regularly cut stone blocks or *ashlar*.

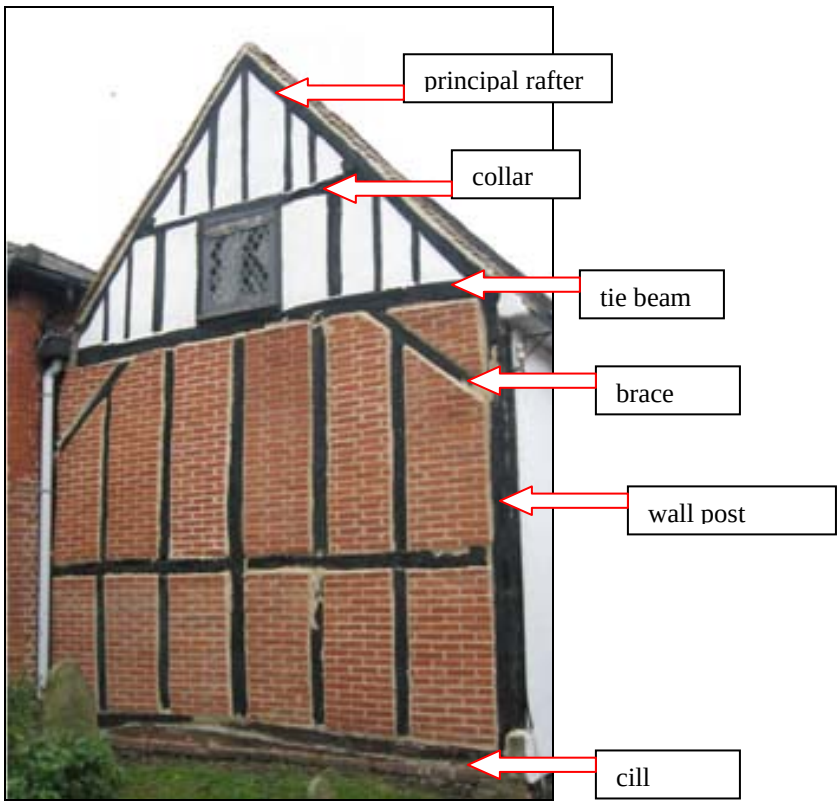
Timber

Only a small proportion of Henley's medieval buildings survive, so that caution is needed when generalising about their construction. The town's surviving timber-framed houses are in the box-frame tradition (see below), in which cut and squared timbers were prepared, marked up, and assembled as roof trusses or panels. These were erected on site, and the framing forming the side and end walls was usually filled with wattle and daub. Many such houses were *jettied*, the joists of the upper floor carrying the upper storey (or storeys) out beyond the ground-floor rooms. This gave greater stability, and added space to the prestigious upper floors away from the street.



Generic drawing of a timber-framed medieval house, with a central hall and hearth, and two-storeyed cross wings at either end. Many of Henley's medieval had a broadly similar form, though the details varied, and in towns, where there was pressure on space, not all were built lengthways along the street. The former Bear Inn on Bell Street, for instance, has a former medieval hall at the back, which has been dated by dendrochronology to 1438.

Drawing by David Clark



The gable end of a box-framed building in Church Avenue. The tall rectangular panels have been infilled with bricks, which probably replaced earlier wattle-and-daub. The frame consists of tall corner posts; a horizontal cill beam at ground level, on which the posts and studs stand; a tie beam holding the posts together at eaves level; and principal rafters forming a triangular roof truss (one of several trusses along the length of the building). A collar runs between the principal rafters, bracing the truss.

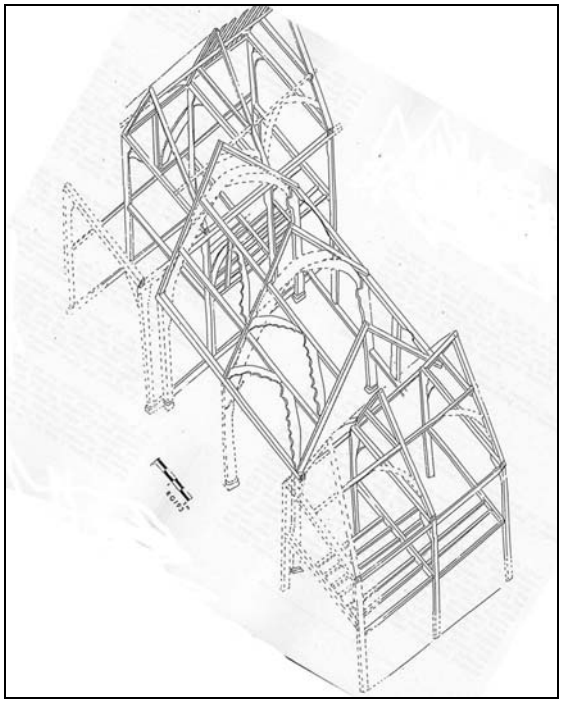
This fine 17th-century house near the bridge and church (48–50 Hart Street) must have been built for a prosperous inhabitant, with its impressive ***double jetty*** *(or overhang) and elegantly moulded* ***bressumers****. The drawing shows it before 19th-century alterations.*

Roofs

Medieval roof structures took various forms. Henley's roofs display an eclectic mix, which perhaps reflects the varying influences experienced in a trading town. The commonest is the *side purlin roof* (below), but at Baltic Cottage (built in 1438), the *Old White Hart*, and 20 Bell Street (*Ye Olde Bell*) there are examples of a *crown-post roof*. Timber lends itself to elaborate carved decoration, and examples can be seen both inside and outside Henley's higher-status medieval buildings (e.g. the Chantry House). At 76 Bell Street, dated to 1405, mighty arched braces rise from posts carved to resemble stone pilasters with capitals, supporting a roof structure embellished with cusped wind braces (see drawing below).

Part of a traditional side-purlin roof, with a vertical crown strut and two raking struts supporting the collar. The purlins run horizontally along the length of the roof, supporting the common rafters. Added strength is given by the wide curved wind-braces, and by the arch-braces just visible below the long tie-beam. The high-quality framing shown here is hidden inside 44 Hart Street (Speaker's House). The brick stack is a much later insertion.

A 15th-century crown-post roof in 20 Bell Street (Ye Olde Bell), similar to those in Baltic Cottage and the Old White Hart. The slender, octagonal crown post stands on a tie beam; its four curved braces support the crown plate and collars, which in turn run between the rafters, bracing the roof. Such roofs are common in Berkshire, and may once have been more widespread in Henley. However they used more timber than other types and are usually found in high-status buildings.



Like many of Henley's medieval timber houses, that at 74–78 Bell Street is hidden behind a later brick façade. The former hall (dated to 1405) is in the central part, now painted pink, and was originally open to the roof. The former cross wings to either side were always two-storeyed. Entry was through the passage on the hall's south (right) side. The drawing (by Ruth Gibson) shows the house's medieval construction; dotted lines show timbers which have disappeared, but whose presence can be inferred from standing remains.

Brick

Brick was available from the numerous kilns around Nettlebed, which drew on local resources – clay, sand, and wood (for fuel). Around 1430 the duke and duchess of Suffolk used brick for the almshouse and school which they founded at nearby Ewelme. In Henley, bricks were first used for chimney stacks in timber buildings, helping to safeguard against fire. By 1531 they were being used as walling material at the *Old White Hart*, in combination with timber framing. Even so, it was not until the late 17th and 18th century that brick became the dominant building material in and around Henley.

The north entrance gate of the Ewelme Almshouses (c.1430–50) shows the virtuosity of 15th-century brickmakers and bricklayers, who used a variety of moulded and shaped bricks to decorative effect.

Early handmade bricks at Ewelme School. Their size (only 1½–1¾ inches thick) and the wide lime-mortar joints are typical of the period, and can help us to date early brick buildings. Here the bricks are laid randomly, without any recognizable bond. (For 1530s brickwork laid in a regular English bond, see Item on the White Hart).

Granary Cottage at Thameside: a unique example of the combined use of flint, stone, brick and timber. All except stone are materials which are easily found locally

.

Account based on architectural investigation by Ruth Gibson

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