

Oxfordshire

THE CHANTRY HOUSE: AN ARCHITECTURAL CONUNDRUM

The Chantry House is a late medieval timber-framed building north-east of the church. Its two main floors open onto the churchyard; below is another floor which, because of a drop in ground level, faces only eastwards to the river, and is reached through the yard of the *Red Lion* inn. The name associates it with medieval [chantry priests](#), but originated only in the 20th century. More likely the building had commercial uses associated with the river. Certainly it is the finest timber-framed building in Henley, and on the churchyard side was clearly designed for show.

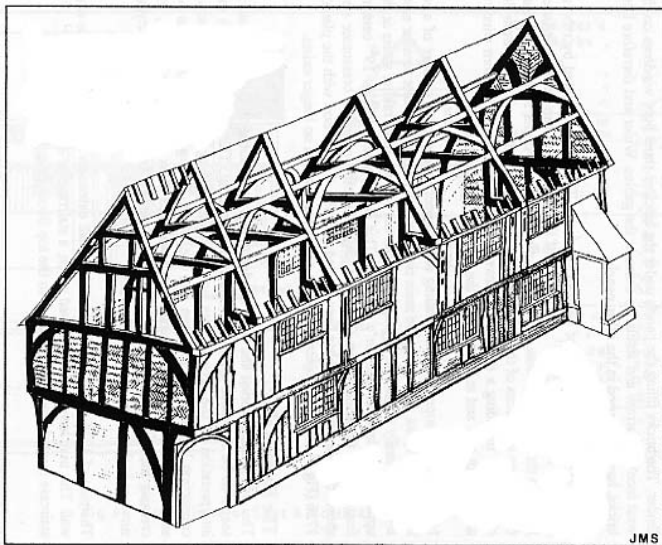


Figure A *The Chantry House from the north-west. The lowest floor (see Figs B and E) is only exposed on the east because of the drop in ground level, and so is not shown here. The quality of the framing, with its large curved wall- and wind-braces, can clearly be seen. (Drawing by John Steane)*

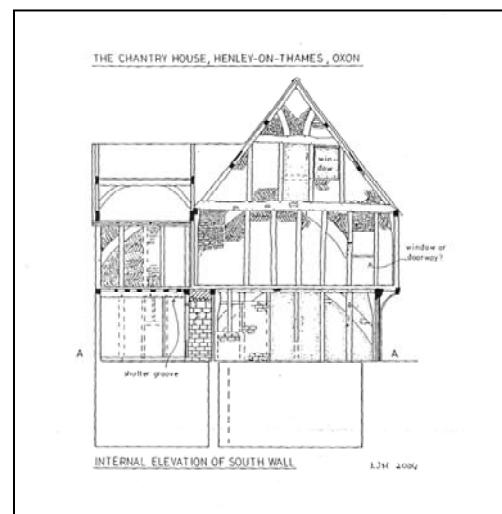


Figure B *The timber frame of the south gable, where it adjoins the Red Lion. One of the curved braces was positioned to allow for a connecting doorway to the Red Lion or its predecessor. (Drawing by Linda Hall)*

Written Evidence

Title deeds survive from 1445, when the Henley merchants John Elmes and John Deven bought 'a building and vacant plot' east of the churchyard. Probably this included the site of the Chantry House, which was almost certainly not yet built. The deeds are largely silent until 1552, when Deven's successors sold a building called the School House, and four tenements or chambers called the priests' chambers. This could have been a single building in dual use, but more likely refers to two separate buildings. Either way the Chantry House's two upper floors were used as schools until the 1770s, while the ground floor was let to the *Red Lion*, which later acquired the whole building. In 1923 it was sold for use as a parish room.

The Building

Dendro-dating of the building's fast-grown timber proved inconclusive, so only stylistic dating is possible. Some investigators have suggested it was built as early as 1400, but more likely it is mid or late 15th-century (Figs C and D). Investigation in 2004 concluded that the five-bay top floor was originally divided into four separate chambers and a landing (with stairs from the middle floor), with a well-lit corridor on the river side: an arrangement found in many medieval inns, including the Old White Hart at Henley. The top floor had a storage loft above, destroyed when the large school room was created. The main entrance to the middle floor was through an impressive doorway towards the churchyard (Figs C and D); a separate stair or hoist-opening connected it to the open-fronted ground floor at wharf level. The building's southern end connected with the *Red Lion* or its predecessor, since the timber framing allowed for a connecting doorway. (Fig. B).



Figures C and D *The Chantry House from the west (churchyard) side, showing the projecting first-floor jetty with its elaborately moulded primary timbers: jetty plate, bressumer and braces (all supporting timbers), and a Tudor-type arched door head. All these mouldings are typical of the 15th and early 16th centuries. The large doorway gave access to the main floor, which consists of a large room and may have been used as a trading floor.*

Origins and Use

What can we surmise about the building's use? Nothing unequivocally links it with the four priests' chambers, which may have stood elsewhere in the churchyard. Until 1923 it does not seem to have been church property: on the contrary it lay outside the churchyard amongst a complex of granaries, woolhouses and malhouses. Elmes and Deven were leading merchants with commercial premises nearby (Elmes's granary was mentioned in 1470), and most likely this was a speculative development, intended to give visiting merchants a meeting place and accommodation for their goods, pack animals and themselves. A north-south lane between the building and the churchyard formerly linked Hart Street with New Street, which helps explain the imposing west facade: the middle floor, entered from this side, would have been the most important

room, perhaps the trading floor. The relationship with the *Red Lion* buildings further suggests large-scale commercial development, involving adjoining riverside properties.

Whatever its origins, the building's only proven use is as a school house from the 16th century, and it was still known as the Old Grammar School in the 1920s. The modern name reflects 19th-century speculations about its use – speculations which on closer scrutiny seem to be supported neither by the documents nor by the building.



Figure E *The three-storeyed riverside elevation, originally double-jettied, and with a long row of windows to the top floor. The projecting wing was a near contemporary addition. The ground floor was originally an open-fronted storage space or shelter, with a substantial flint retaining wall at the back, and posts supporting the front jetty of the first floor. The porch and most windows are modern.*

Account based on architectural investigation by Ruth Gibson; documentary research by the VCH/EPE team and the Henley Historical & Archaeological Group. Deeds for the Chantry House are in Oxfordshire Record Office (Acc. 4443, box 1, bdle 1/).

Further Reading: Hall, L, and Moir, J, 'The Chantry House, Henley-on-Thames: Report and Survey' (TS Report for PCC, 2004); Steane, J, Gibson, R, and Cottingham, A, *The Chantry House and the Oldest Part of the Red Lion* (Henley Hist. & Archaeol. Group 1994); Dunn, M, *The Chantry House at Henley-on-Thames: Archaeological Analysis of a Late Medieval Timber-Framed Building* (BEAMS Ltd 1999).

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

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