

Oxfordshire

THE OLD WHITE HART: A MEDIEVAL HENLEY INN

Though many Henley inns are recorded from the 15th century, only the (Old) *White Hart* (mentioned from 1428–9) retains substantial medieval work and a traditional courtyard plan. The existing lodging ranges date from the 1530s, but as the plan is typical of many other medieval inns it may have been built in this form at the outset. Recent investigation (including dendrochronological dating) has increased our understanding of how the buildings evolved, shedding new light not only on the White Hart but on Henley's wider economic fortunes.



Figure A *The courtyard of the Old White Hart, looking south to the carriageway and Hart Street. On the left is one of the 16th-century lodging ranges with its projecting first-floor gallery (now filled in), and a projecting former privy. On the right is the 16th-century hall, originally open to the roof but with a brick fireplace in its south wall.*

Courtyard and Front Range

Like most medieval inns, the White Hart is arranged around a courtyard entered through a gateway from the street (Fig. A). The front range is the oldest part, with a street frontage of some 75 feet (probably 3 medieval burgage plots). Below is a vaulted chalk-lined cellar with chamfered ribs, probably dating to c.1300. In the roof above the present carriage-arch area are remains of two medieval crown posts, both of which were once painted, and which have sooting from a former open hearth below. The present large carriage arch was probably built with the lodging ranges in 1530–1, and most likely replaced a narrower passage.



Figure B *Chalk vaulting in the cellar under the front range: one of the White Hart's earliest surviving parts.*

The Tudor Lodging Ranges

New lodging ranges were built around three sides of the courtyard in 1530–1, running back around 290 feet from the street. Together they contained some 22 guest chambers, built above stables and service rooms and reached from an external timber gallery, which may have run uninterrupted around the whole yard. The gallery probably also served for watching public entertainment, and projected over the yard by up to a metre – further at one point in the east range, where it accommodated a privy for guests. Despite this luxury the chambers seem to have had no fireplaces, although horses below would have generated warmth. The decay of the ceiling beams in the former stables may have resulted from the destructive ammonia vapours generated by the animals.

Most of these ranges are of narrow, hand-made ‘Tudor’ bricks (Fig. C). Presumably this represented a major investment, as bricks were still a luxury: this is the earliest known brickwork in Henley. The gallery walls, however, are timber framed.



Figure C *1530s brickwork in the west wall, laid in English bond (alternate rows of headers and stretchers), and with a diaper pattern picked out by using over-fired ‘blue’ bricks. This became increasingly fashionable during the 16th century. Though brick later became ubiquitous, this is the earliest that has so far been discovered in Henley. (Photo Derek Toms)*

The Hall

Part of the new west range had no upper chambers. Instead there was a two-bay hall, open from floor to apex, with a central arch-braced truss with decorative mouldings. The hall had two long windows high up in the brick west wall, and a wide brick arch for a fireplace in the south gable. Possibly it replaced the earlier smoke-filled hall in the front range, which was remodelled to provide the upper rooms and wider carriageway that modern travellers required.



Figure D Part of the former hall on the courtyard's west side, originally open to the roof, and heated by a fireplace in its south wall. The projecting joists may have supported an open gallery, giving access to first-floor chambers further along the range.



Figure E Part of the roof structure of the hall range, with (right) three carved balls on a corbel in the hall. The balls may represent St Nicholas of Bari, patron saint of wayfarers – appropriate in an inn for travellers by road and river.



Figure F *Remains of the former fireplace in the hall's south wall.*

The White Hart and the town

What prompted these improvements, which must have required a considerable financial outlay? The names of the owner, innkeeper and builder are unknown, but the investment fits with other evidence for an economic upturn in 16th-century Henley, as the grain trade revived and population increased. With merchants and other consumers drawn to the town's shops and market the White Hart occupied a prime location, and continued to serve the town and its visitors into modern times.

Based on survey work by Ruth Gibson and members of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record and Henley Archaeological & Historical Group; dating by the [Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory](#) (report 35/2008)

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



Figure G *The street front of the White Hart was entirely remodelled in the 20th century, and gives little clue to the medieval remains behind. The 16th-century carriageway remains, however.*

COPYRIGHT

All rights, including copyright ©, of the content of this document are owned or controlled by the University of London. For further information refer to <http://www.englishpastforeveryone.org.uk/Info/Disclaimer>