

# Discovering Oxfordshire's Buildings

Houses, farms, places of worship, public buildings and workshops can be 'read' for clues to how people lived in the past.

Recording the building is the starting point. This exhibition will show you how to begin.

Look closely – what it is made of, how it was built and how were the rooms used. Then work out when it was built, how it was changed and try to discover what sort of people lived or worked in it.

Being a 'house detective' is fun. The Oxfordshire Buildings Record can show you how. We are all volunteers. We have regular 'recording days' for beginners and experienced members to work together. Our aim is to record Oxfordshire's heritage and create an archive of our reports.





# Set in stone

Oxfordshire has a wide range of building stones. In the north and west are the Cotswolds which produce a top quality limestone. In the south and east the chalk ridges of the former Berkshire Downs and the Chilterns yield flint and 'clunch', a soft stone. Outcrops of rough coral limestone are found in the Thames valley.



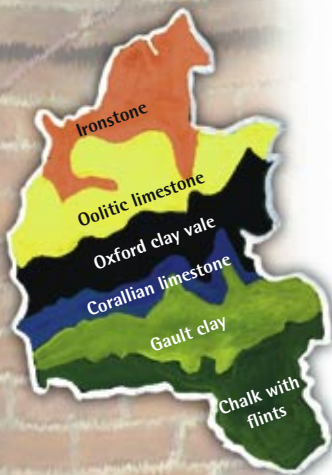
▲ The top band at Lay's Quarry at Long Hanborough was flaggy and suitable for drystone walling. Below this the harder Forest Marble was used for roofing slates. At the base was an excellent hard white limestone.



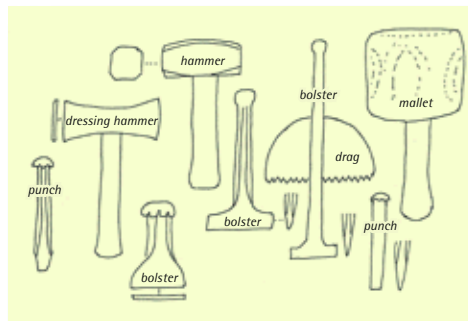
◀ Taynton Quarries near Burford produced a high quality oolitic limestone which was used from the 14th century in many Oxford colleges and in London. In the 1930s the stone was used at the New Bodleian library, Oxford. This air photograph shows the irregular 'hills and hollows' of the spoil heaps.



▲ The 14th century bridge at Newbridge is built of Taynton stone. The blocks were brought by cart from the quarry and floated down the Thames from Radcot.



Masons' tools leave their own marks or signatures on stonework



**Did you know..?**

...that at Stonesfield, the slates were split by frost action



◀ Flint can be used for building walls – but often needs brick courses for stability.

▶ These farm buildings have Cotswold stone slates laid with larger ones near the eaves, smaller ones near the ridge. The triangular hole is to let owls in to the barn.



**Why don't you..?**

...look closely at the stone in a house near you and try to find where it came from



▶ Chalk suitable for building can be found in Uffington, just below White Horse Hill.

◀ The Blanket Hall on High Street, Witney was built in 1720-1 in limestone ashlar.





# Down to earth

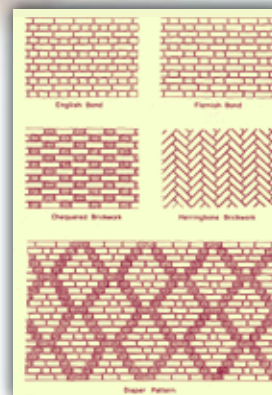
From the earliest times, people built houses by digging up the earth beneath their feet.

There are brick clays all over Oxfordshire.

Oxford city was surrounded by brick clay pits and kilns in the 19th century which produced characteristic yellow and blue bricks.



Brickmakers in Oxford around 1910.



Brick bonds.

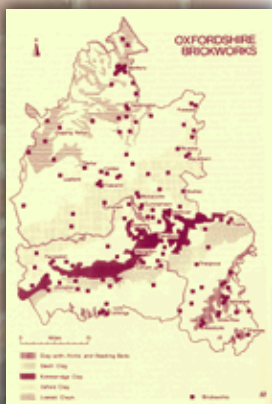


▲ This wall in Blewbury is built of a mixture of chalk, clay, straw and cow-dung called **cob or wichert**. It will last a long time if it is 'well capped' (with thatch) and 'well shod' (on a base of limestone).

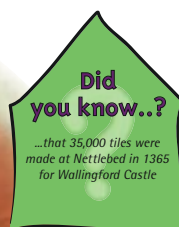
▶ Bricks and tiles have been made in Oxfordshire at Nettlebed and Crocker End since the 14th century. This brickwork at Ewelme dates from 1437 and was probably done by workmen from East Anglia or the Low Countries.



▶ Brick is used decoratively to fill the panels of this timber-framed building in Blewbury, and for the impressive chimney stack. The grey glazed bricks are a common feature of Oxfordshire brickwork. Local red tiles, originally made by hand, cover the roof.



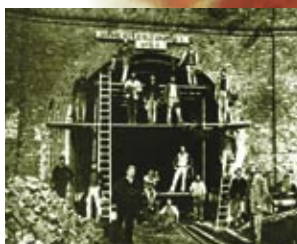
◀ Polychrome brickwork with terracotta tiles in the Iffley Road, Oxford. The Oxfordshire canal brought cheap coal from the Midlands in the 1790s. This fired local kilns and brick replaced stone as a major building material. The canals also brought cheap and durable Welsh slate which replaced thatch and stone roofs.



▶ Early bricks were made by hand in moulds. No two bricks are the same.



◀ Workmen repairing the Wheatley tunnel on the Oxford to Princes Risborough line of the Great Western Railway in 1883. Wooden scaffolding.



**Why don't you..?**

...measure the sizes of the bricks in buildings from various times. Why do you think they are different?



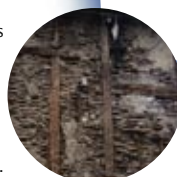
# You've been framed!



▲ This barn at Northmoor has a **cruck** frame.

A jettied **box-framed** manor house in the Vale of White Horse. ▶

Spaces between the timbers were usually filled in with a mixture of clay, hair and cow slurry called 'daub', coated on hazel twigs or 'wattles' wrapped round upright staves.



## Did you know..?

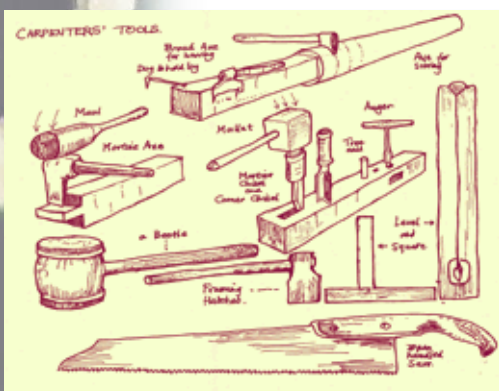
...that medieval carpenters worked mostly with unseasoned 'green' oak

Timber framed buildings are found mostly in the clay vales where stone was in short supply. There are two main traditions, box- and cruck frames.



◀ Woodeaton church roof is of two dates. The right hand bay is a trussed rafter type of the 13th century. Some of the timbers are missing. To the left the purlins and wind-braces give a 15th century date.

▶ Chalgrove Manor, a hall house in three parts of different ages. The crossing (to the right) is the oldest part. The hall – in the centre – replaced an earlier one in 1490. The other cross wing was added about 1506.



▲ Some carpenters' tools have been in use for centuries.



◀ Carpentry joints show regional traditions and can help in dating. This free-tenon joint is found over a long period in Oxfordshire.



▶ Thatch was the most common roof covering for timber-framed buildings

The chamfered stone plinth of this 15th century house at South Leigh supports the sill beam (the base timber) of the close-studded wall.



## Why don't you..?

...use the clues in this panel to find timber frames hidden away behind later fronts where you live



◀ This façade dating from ca.1820 was added to a 15th century timber-framed building in the market place at Abingdon. You can see some of the timbers as dark marks behind the buff-coloured render.



# How old is it?



The question we are asked most often is "when was my house built?"

From the types of joints and roofs, fashionable features and date stones we can *estimate* the age of a building. *Accurate* dating needs documentation or tree-ring dating (dendrochronology) of timber.



The visible **timber structure** of the Queen's Head, Binsey, Crowmarsh Gifford, dates it to the 13th Century.

This Steventon **scarf joint** is typical of the 1300s.



The **iron latch** from St Margaret's, Binsey, suggests a 17th Century date, note the wooden 'Banbury' lock. The style of doorways may be dated to within 50 years but doors and windows were often changed.

**Date stones** can commemorate a marriage, a rebuilding or may even have been moved to a later building.

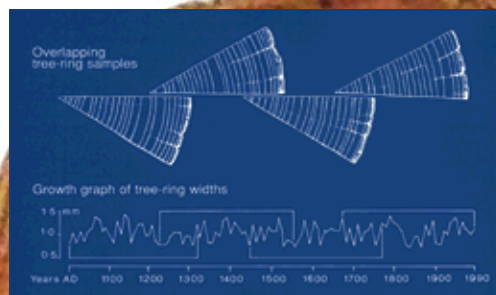
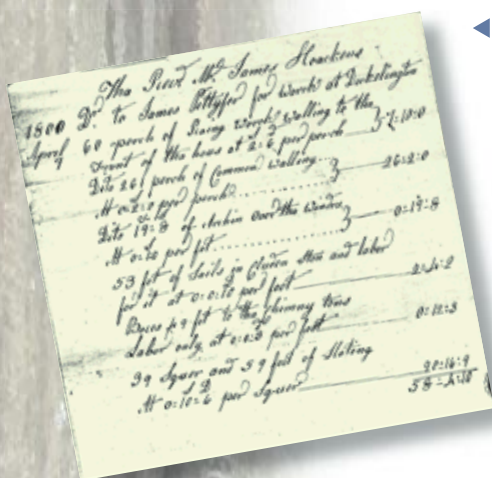


## Did you know..?

...that between 1560 and 1700 many older houses were re-fronted in brick or stone



**Documents** can give an accurate date for work done to a building. The account from James Pettyfer of 9 April 1800 refers to building the rear wing of Ducklington Rectory (above).



Dating of timber by comparing tree rings with reference samples can give a felling date to within 1 year.

Mill Farm cottage, Mapledurham, has been dated to Spring 1335 and is one of the earliest cottages still occupied.



## Why don't you..?

...look for a datestone and try to find out what happened in that year



# A window on the past

Window openings come in many shapes and sizes. The type of window can tell you how old it is.

But people often change their windows, so the house may be older than its window openings, and the wooden sashes may be younger still.



Caversfield, 10th c



Oxford, ca.1050



Brize Norton 13th c.



East Hendred 14th c.



Abingdon early 15th c.



Steventon early 17th c.



Dorchester early 18th c



Chipping Norton, ca.1730 (later sash)



Oxford, ca.1825

**Did you know..?**  
...that glass was so expensive in the Middle Ages that some people took their windows with them when they moved house!

Is this the smallest window in Oxfordshire?

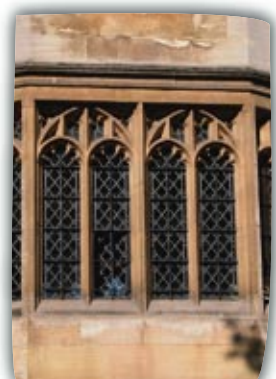
**Why don't you..?**  
...see how many different types of windows there are in your own street



Banbury 'Ipswich' window 1882



Oxford 1903



Oxford 1911-14



# On the town

Buildings in towns share particular characteristics. In Burford, a former wool and market town on the edge of the Cotswolds, OBR volunteers are engaged in a joint research project with the Victoria County History, to find out more about the town and its buildings.



Photo: Patrick Wise



Market frontages in medieval towns were in high demand. Street frontages were built up in a continuous line, with houses and shops standing on long narrow strips called burgage plots. Carved stonework or decorative timber-framing displayed wealth and prestige.

Cellars or undercrofts were another way of maximising space, used for storage and sometimes as separate shops or taverns.

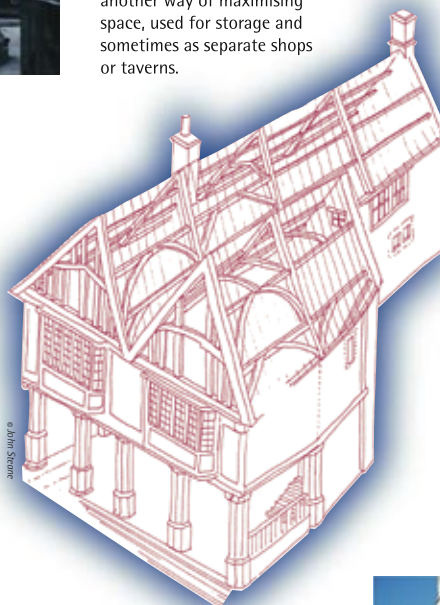


Workshops and cramped cottage yards often lie behind street frontages, entered through passage entries known in parts of Oxfordshire as *turries* or *tchures*.

## Why don't you..?

...find an interesting town building and research its history?

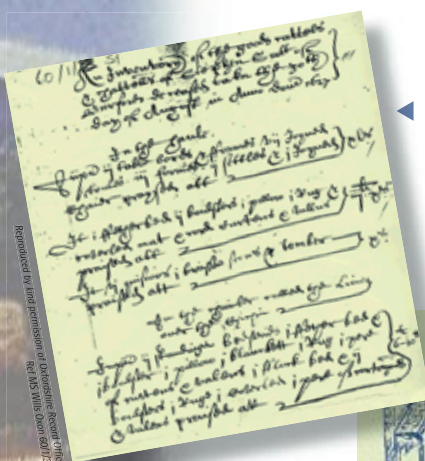
Inns, market houses, and guildhalls also characterise towns, often located on prominent sites. The **Tolsey** in Burford was built about 1500, serving as market house, court house, council chamber, and lock-up.



© John Storie

## Did you know..?

...that the Victoria County History (VCH) has published histories of over 200 Oxfordshire towns and villages. Visit [www.oxfordshirepast.net](http://www.oxfordshirepast.net)



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This inventory describes rooms in a Burford inn in 1627; it lists furnishings in the hall, and in 'the chamber called the Lion' over the kitchen. The George Inn (below) is documented from 1485, though its distinctive carriage entry is early 17th-century.



© Raymond Moody



Smart London fashions found their way to most provincial towns, sometimes treated in idiosyncratic ways. This house's distinctive classical frontage masks a much earlier building behind, as with many Burford houses.



# Down on the farm

Farm buildings like barns, granaries and shelter sheds are reminders of a past way of life.



Crops were kept in the barn and threshed on the floor – some stone or wooden floors survive.



Many buildings are converted to other uses. If they can be used as workshops, little change is needed, but when a barn is converted into a house, much of its character can be lost.

We aim to record all the buildings on a farmstead before they are demolished or converted.

## Did you know..?

...that the grain store or granary was usually near the house for security



As agriculture changes, old farm buildings may not be needed. Some may simply fall down through neglect.

Others are altered as equipment gets bigger.

The arched doorway in the end of the medieval barn at Great Coxwell was put there in the 19th century.



Recording individual buildings allows important features to be recognised and conserved during alterations. OBR have recorded barn roofs of a type found only in South Oxfordshire and neighbouring areas. The picture shows a 'cranked inner principal' roof in a barn near Radley.

## Why don't you..?

...visit Cogges Manor Farm near Witney and explore old farm buildings for yourself

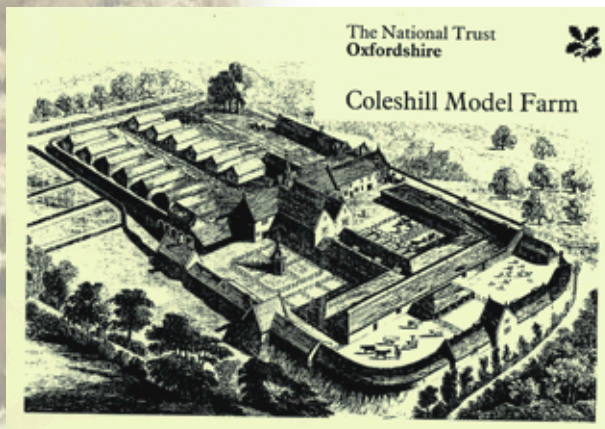


The relationship of the buildings to one another reflects the pattern of farming carried out there.

Pigeons from this dovecot at North Newington provided meat and fertiliser.



The 'model farm' at Coleshill was an attempt at factory farming in the 1860s. Food for the animals was processed in the central building and fed to them by a tramway system.

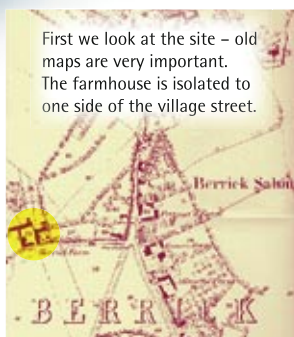


Alas, time is not on our side: the pace of change is increasing.

In three months in the summer of 2004, six major developments involving demolition of redundant buildings and conversion of others to houses were planned in West Oxfordshire alone.



# House detectives at work



First we look at the site – old maps are very important. The farmhouse is isolated to one side of the village street.

The materials are clunch (chalk) with brick dressings – the brickwork suggests a front of around 1600, with four striking gables. But the doors are not symmetrical and the roof-line is in two parts, so things are not all they seem to be.

At Lower Berrick farmhouse we made a detailed study of the building, then looked at a range of documents. Finally, tree-ring dates were found for the main timbers. This is the story of the house and its builders.



Inside the left hand roof are paired rafters in the medieval style. Tree-ring dating showed this was built around 1550.

The right hand side was quite different – a later floor had been put into a grand first-floor room with well-made arch braces and decorative carving. Tree rings gave a date of 1613.



## Did you know..?

...the roof is the part of a house least likely to have been changed

It was a large house – 6 hearths. The only house of this size in the hearth tax of 1665 was owned by John Hambledon. He died in 1671 leaving a large amount of property.

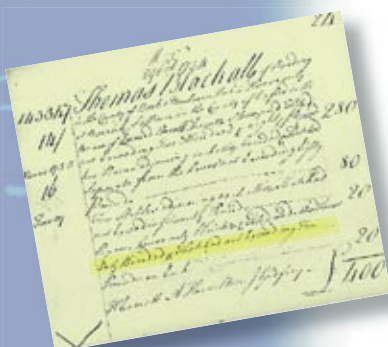


But it was probably his father – also John – who extended the house and created the stone gabled front in 1613.

The plaque shows him as a churchwarden when work was done on the church in 1615. He probably also built the original timber-framed house of 1550, the year in which he inherited the farm.

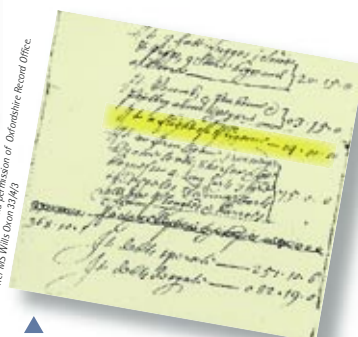
## Why don't you..?

...research the history of a house – yours or a friend's



The fire insurance mark has the policy number. The policy of 1755 shows it was owned by a merchant from Reading. A tenant farmer lived there.

Notice that there was a pigeon-house on the property. The 1876 map shows some buildings which are not present today – one of them may have been a dovecot.



John Hambledon had a 'flight of pigeons' when he died – is this the proof that Lower Berrick Farm was his house?



# Signs of the times

Look closely at a building and you may find signs and markings that can help to tell its story. You can feel the presence of the people who made them, even if we cannot fully understand what they mean. You can imagine the builders at work, the way the owners used their buildings and get a glimpse of the beliefs and superstitions of the past.



▲ Timber frame buildings were pre-fabricated. The carpenter marked each piece so that it could be fixed into the correct position. The marks are based on Roman numerals but often they were adapted by adding lines and circles.

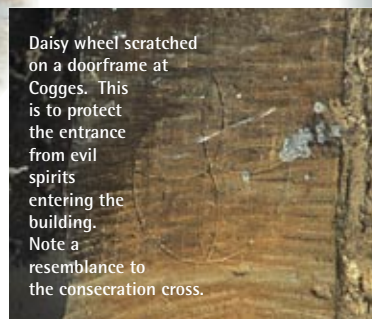


▲ Masons put their own marks on the stones they laid so they could be paid the correct amount for the work they did.



▲ If a building caught fire the brigade would search for the insurance mark and only if they found it would they put out the fire!

Other signs are there to protect the building and its occupants.



Daisy wheel scratched on a doorframe at Cogges. This is to protect the entrance from evil spirits entering the building. Note a resemblance to the consecration cross.



▲ Consecration Cross on an internal wall of a church. It marks the spot where the building was consecrated by the bishop.



The most intriguing are secret markings which may relate to rituals of which we have no other record.

▲ Ritual markings near a fireplace. The combination of Vs and Ws may invoke the protection of Mary Virgin of Virgins.



▲ A coat of arms scratched onto a door post of a medieval house in Thame. Is this the "name" of the occupier?

▶ The merchant mark of Simon Wysdom on one of his houses in Burford, from the late 16th century.



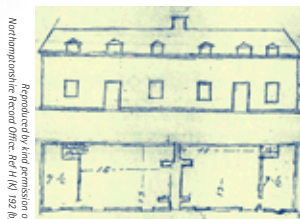


# What about the workers?

Grand houses and buildings designed by known architects are often studied in detail, but the humble cottages of the workers have, until recently, had less attention even though they form most of the historic housing stock in the country. Many fell victim to 20th century slum clearance.



◀ This row of cottages in Thame dates from the 1840s. The original 12 were reduced to 6 in the 20th century. Look closely and you can see how this was done.



Nuneham Courtenay village was rebuilt beside the A420 in 1761 by Lord Harcourt who replaced the old village which was close to his new mansion.

◀ Lord Harcourt's own drawing of his new houses at Nuneham. Some have survived with little alteration.



Workers' housing can be found in most towns and villages and examples of these need to be recorded before they are renovated, altered or demolished.



▲ Members of the OBR recording Church Cottage in Long Wittenham. The medieval building became three workers' cottages in the 19th century.

◀ Sketch of the cruck frame at Church Cottage, Long Wittenham.



## Did you know..?

...that the removal of Nuneham was the subject of the poem "The Deserted Village" by Goldsmith

## Why don't you..?

...take an active part in recording Oxfordshire's buildings by becoming a member of the OBR

Chinnor Windmill just before being fitted with new sails in 1899.



Vernacular workshops are in particular danger. Those behind the owner's house are often removed during garden improvements.

◀ Mr Tarry's carpenter and joinery workshop High Street, Thame. The ground floor was originally open to store the timber. This type of building is becoming increasingly rare. Of the 12 that existed in Thame in the 1930s this is the only one left.



◀ A shepherd's hut. These mobile shelters were homes for shepherds during the lambing season. They would have been occupied for weeks or months at a time.



# The changing face of Oxford

Many Oxford buildings such as the colleges are Listed and so protected for the future. But most buildings in the familiar 'townscapes' of local communities have no such protection.



The buildings are small scale, often built with locally made brick in the 19th century, and fit in with the other buildings nearby. They are where ordinary people live, work or enjoy themselves. They reflect the way of life in a local community.



But they are increasingly under threat.



Rare now are painted advertisements like these in Walton Street.



Oxford has lost most of its historic shop interiors. Traditional pubs are closing or being converted. Small local workshops are being replaced by houses or student rooms.



In most cases there is no time to do more than make a photographic record: this was done at the former funeral parlour in Bainton Road.

Houses are also under threat. Many are being demolished to create blocks of flats, some for the growing university science area: 44 Banbury Road, an attractive Victorian house was demolished in 2003.



And before it was knocked down, we photographed the interior of the repair shop in Castle Street to show the layout of machines and workbenches.



**Did you know..?**

...that in 1895 there were 36 pubs or beer sellers in Jericho. In 2005 there were 6. Where the building survives, all the rest are now houses