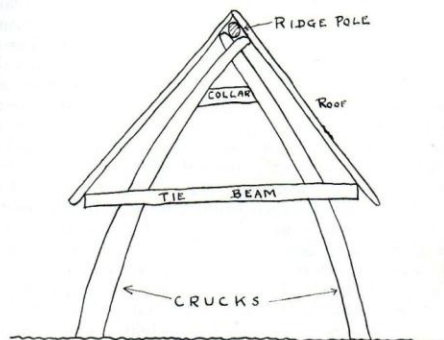


# Half Timbered Houses in Wiltshire



UNTIL about two hundred years ago the type of houses built in various parts of the county depended on the availability of local building materials. Thus in the North stone predominated; in the South flint, chalk, cob and some stone, of which that from Chilmark was the best known.

Bricks were not available in large quantities. As there was no coal mined in the county bricks had to be made in wood-fired kilns, a somewhat inexact process resulting in them being often rather soft and not particularly cheap. Dotted about amongst houses made with these materials are a good number of half timbered houses, the name that is applied to any with a wooden frame, such as those built on the cruck principle with the box frame of post and lintel type of construction.



Whatever material was used to build the house, a large amount of timber had to be used for floors, windows and particularly the roof trusses, which needed to be very substantial in the case of stone tiled roofs as they were very heavy. Timbered houses were probably the commonest type a few hundred years ago but in the last two centuries the building of them has almost ceased and many have disappeared. Some have been encased in brick, or the timbers have been plastered over concealing their original appearance, so there are still a lot more about than the eye can detect.

The earliest and most primitive form of timbered house was probably built with crucks, a method of construction that was improved and made more sophisticated as time progressed. There are probably less than a score of these visible in Wiltshire but no doubt many have been plastered over or exist unseen in such places as barns. A pair of crucks consisted of a tree

— by J. E. Manners —

growing in a suitably bent manner that had been sawn in half and secured by a collar near the top and the feet splayed out as shown in the diagram. Further pairs could be added and the house could be made as long as desired by thus adding further bays.

There is a good example of cruck construction on the road going east out of Pewsey. A better one is at Lacock near the Angel Inn. Only one half of this shows, as another house has been built right up against it. This specimen has a very good elbow which allows the roof to follow its curve fairly closely. If you keep your eyes open it is occasionally possible to discern other cruck built houses, usually partly obscured or encrusted with cement in an effort to preserve them.

Virtually the carpenters made the timbered houses.

The client placed an order for a certain sized house and the carpenter sawed the beams to the required dimensions. All sawing had to be done using a two-man saw with the "under dog" getting covered with sawdust in the pit below. The wooden frames were generally prefabricated in the shop or shed and the framework when ready was quickly assembled on the site, being held together with wooden dowels.

Even today an old wooden house can often be taken to bits quite easily as no nails or glue were used. Unfortunately, too often the lower parts of the beams have rotted away an inch or two due to damp in spite of the houses being generally built on a stone foundation which raised it off the ground. The wood used was invariably oak and was generally unseasoned. It was easier to work in this condition and warping and cracking was the accepted thing. In course of time oak becomes extremely hard and durable and woodworm can do little more than penetrate the outside of the wood, but with the death-watch beetle it is another story, as almost every church in the country can show. Chestnut wood was occasionally used, and curiously enough woodworm does not bore into this.

#### NATURAL ROOFING MATERIALS

Having assembled the framework the roof was put on. This was usually thatch which was cheap and almost any countryman could do the job. A thatched roof had to have a steep pitch to enable the rain to run off. This meant that the rooms underneath were generally not very wide as there was a limit to the size of roof trusses that could be made. Owing to the fire risk thatch was not always popular in towns and was not allowed in Marlborough after the great fires of the seventeenth century. Sometimes the roofs were covered in lime to minimise this hazard. In places houses had stone tiled roofs. Again the pitch had to be steep and this type of

• Opposite: A cruck beam at Lacock. Below: Mediaeval carving on the Joiners Hall at Salisbury.





• Above : Beach's Book Shop at Salisbury showing the warped woodwork.

• Below : The Haunch of Venison at Salisbury, dated 1320.



roof was very heavy requiring a sturdy form of construction.

Clay tiles were often used, being baked in wood-fired kilns. Wooden tiles made of cleft oak were also used extensively and lasted for about a hundred years before needing renewal but any wooden shingles that are seen nowadays are of imported cedar wood. (It is interesting to note that the spire of Salisbury Cathedral originally had wooden shingles). Slates were light and had the advantage of needing a flatter roof, as so often seen in early Georgian houses, but as most of these had to come from Wales few reached Wiltshire as roads were so bad until the coming of the turnpikes and later the building of the Kennet and Avon canal.

One of the best examples in England of a half timbered house is Porch House in Potterne, on the main Salisbury to Devizes road. This fifteenth century house has been preserved very close to its original form. Porch House has its vertical posts, called studs, comparatively close together, which is generally an indication of an early built house, wood becoming scarcer and more expensive as time went on and therefore used more sparingly. Its roof is of stone tiles and it has leaded windows with diamond shaped glass. Glass in the fifteenth century was still expensive and somewhat opaque and only the rich could afford it. In fact when you moved house you took it with you and there is a case of a stately home where all the glass was taken down when the owner was away for any length of time.

The house next to Porch House looks a better one at first glance, but the attractive circular patterns of the woodwork came at a later date when ornamentation was thought desirable and of which there are very few examples in Wiltshire, though often seen elsewhere. Its steeply pitched roof suggests it may have been originally thatched. Both these houses are built with jetties, which means the upper floors project forward, in this case about two feet. Various suggestions are put forward in explanation of this form of construction which is very common. In towns it meant that space could be saved, but you still get jetties in country-built houses where space saving is not necessary; as there were no gutters it was to stop rain running down the walls; and as floor rafters were usually laid flat, the same way as the floor-boards, the floor was liable to bounce badly and the jetty prevented this happening.

## WATTLE AND DAUB

The filling between the wood frames or studs was nearly always wattle and daub. Wattle was wood interwoven like a hurdle or wicker basket and daub was a mixture of clay, chalk, dung, chopped straw and cow hair mixed together and applied like plaster. This might have been finished off with a primitive type of plaster, the main ingredient of which was burnt chalk. There is a good example of wattle work on the Kings Arms Inn at Salisbury where the daub has been removed and a glass panel put in its place showing the original wattle work. This can be seen from the road.

Ornamental woodwork is rare in Wiltshire but an exception to this is in the Joiners Hall in Salisbury, considered by many to be the best of the half timbered buildings in the town. Its oriel windows with leaded glass are supported by finely carved mediaeval figures and all the exposed wood is carved. It now belongs to the National Trust.

half timbered houses, notably John A'Porte house built in 1426 and restored in 1930. The outside was all plastered over at one stage but has been restored to something like its original look. Beach's Book Shop is another spectacular old house and has particularly thick beams showing. Its bressumer beam that holds the jetty rafters is contorted by age and one end is about eighteen inches lower than the other. Presumably the supporting timbers became wet and rotted at one end to cause this. One of the oldest dates to be seen is on the "Haunch of Venison" in Salisbury. It states "Built about 1320", but its exterior appearance has obviously been altered considerably since then, as sash windows were not introduced until nearly four hundred years later.

A house with daub and wattle infilling was a very uncomfortable place to live in. The wall was only two or three inches thick and with the wood either expanding or shrinking depending on the dampness, the house could not be made draught-proof. The cure for this took various forms such as panelling the rooms inside or covering the outside with plaster, weatherboarding, wood shingles or clay tiles, which is what happened some fifty years ago to the three hundred year-old Polar Bear Inn at Devizes. This half timbered building has a stucco front and by its appearance it looks as if it could have been built yesterday. The Yew Tree Hotel in Devizes, which is also timbered inside and is built with a jetty, suffered a similar treatment whereas the little jettied timber houses in nearby St. Johns Alley have been left much in their original condition.

Occasionally timbered houses were encased in some form of weather protection right from the start in which case the timbers were left in a rough condition as they would not show. Oak looks best if left unpainted, as in course of time it develops an attractive silver-grey hue which can be seen so well in the Joiners Hall at Salisbury. However, nowadays most of the beams are painted black to contrast with the white of the panels and give the magpie look.

#### 'NOGGIN'

Timbered houses are frequently seen with brick filling between the beams. This is called "nogging" and is sometimes patterned in herring bone or fancy patterns. A house near the green at Steeple Ashton shows this well. Brick infilling has nearly always been put in later to replace daub and wattle, often setting up unwelcome stresses due to the greater weight. If bricks had been available in the first place it is improbable that a wooden frame would have been used.

Further north in the county in places such as Lacock, Malmesbury, Bradford-on-Avon, Atworth, Box, etc., the local limestone was readily available and although this material was usually used, timbered houses appear here and there, sometimes only in the upper storey. In whichever part of the county a house was built the chimney had to be built of either brick or stone and in many cases were added at a later date rather clumsily.

Small half timbered houses with thatched or stone roofs are now much sought-after and are carefully restored, looked after and modernised by their proud owners. The result is that many are falling into good hands and are being carefully preserved. In many cases they have already stood for three or four hundred years and will certainly outlast many of the dwellings you see being put up today which call themselves houses.



● Above : Porch House at Potterne, one of the best examples of its kind in England.



● Above : Porch Cottage at Potterne showing its decorative woodwork.

● Below : Ye House of John A'Port at Salisbury.

