

# The Medieval House

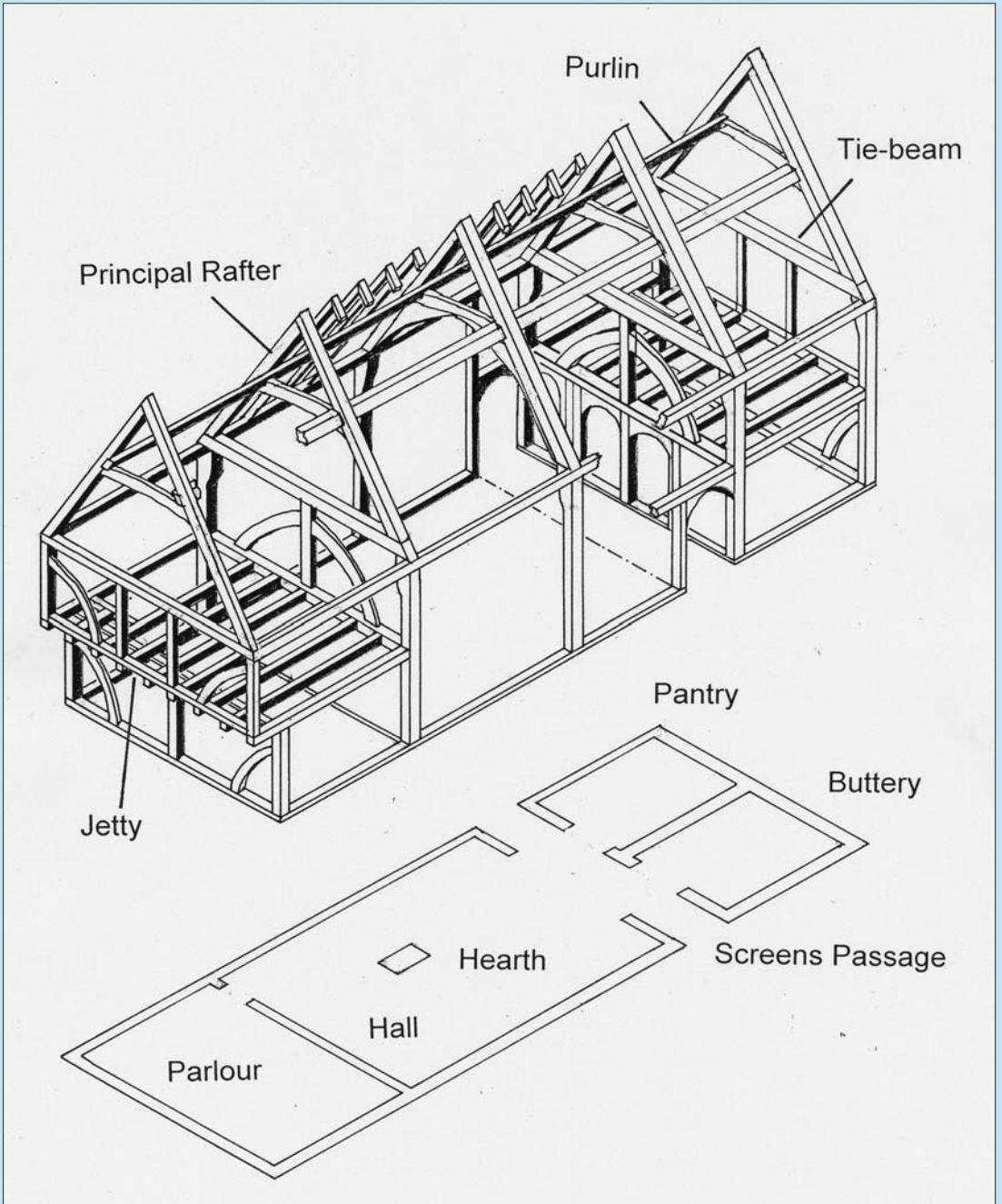


Figure A A typical medieval box-framed house, with an open hearth and a projecting first-floor jetty.

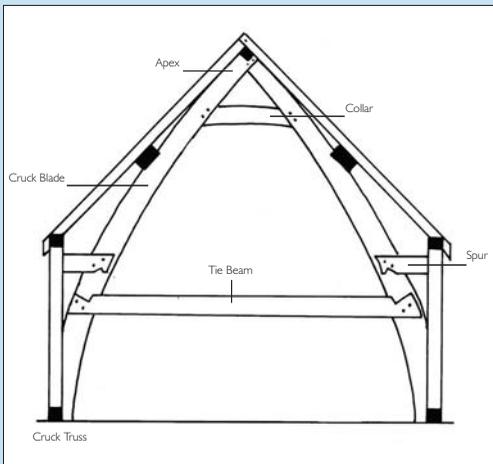


Figure B Cross section of a cruck-framed house. showing the curved 'cruck' blades.

The standard model of the medieval house is a three-unit plan centred on a hall, which was open to the roof and had a central hearth. Smoke rose through the thatch, depositing tell-tale soot on the roof timbers and covering. Entry was by means of a through- or screens-passage giving access to the hall and service rooms, while the parlour was a private room reached from the 'high' end of the hall. In many cases there would have been sleeping accommodation above the service rooms and parlour, reached by ladders or crude stairways. External clues to such hall-houses are off-centre doorways, tall high-end windows, and sometimes jettied wings (protruding at first-floor level) at right angles to the hall, where extra accommodation could be provided.

The hall house was the setting for a hierarchical lifestyle. The head of the household and his immediate family presided over communal meals, sitting at a 'high table', often on a raised dais, at the end of the hall furthest from the screens passage. Food was sometimes cooked on the central hearth, but in higher status households in a detached kitchen to the rear, to reduce the risk of fire and avoid unpleasant cooking smells. Dry foods were stored in the pantry (from the Norman-French 'pan' for bread) and liquids in the buttery (or *bouteillerie*).

In towns, houses built to this standard plan could be built on the street frontage of a burgage plot if it were wide enough. But where plots were narrow or subdivided because of pressure for space (e.g. in the central part of Burford near the Tolsey), this plan had to be modified. Some owners built a taller house, while others created space by building back along the plot. In both cases, a side passage provided light and access.



Figure C A surviving cruck frame in Harwell (Oxfordshire).

## Structure

There are two main medieval timber-building traditions in England, the cruck and the box frame. For a box frame, carpenters hewed trees, cut and squared timbers and made the necessary joints. Numbers (usually in Roman form) were scratched on the pieces of timber so that they could be assembled in the correct way when brought to the house site for erection. The panels in the framework were then filled in, usually with wattle-and-daub. Medieval carpentry in England follows a basic 'grammar', whereby a number of two-dimensional frames fit firmly together to form a house. But there are regional differences (or 'dialects') and improvements in the joints used, which can be studied to place each building in the context of its time and locality.

In the cruck frame (found in England north and west of a line roughly from the Solent to the Wash), pairs of long curved 'cruck' blades form the trusses, and carry the weight of the roof down to ground level. The wall material can be anything which will fill in the area below the eaves. Fewer and less complex joints are found in cruck frames, but there are also some significant regional variations.