

# Oxfordshire

## HENLEY AND THE RIVER SINCE 1830

These are **edited extracts** from our forthcoming EPE paperback *Henley-on-Thames: Town, Trade and River* (Phillimore 2009), by Simon Townley. See the publication for full text, illustrations and maps.

### Rail and River (1830-1914)

The impact of the railway on the Thames river trade was marked and immediate, fulfilling fears expressed as early as 1834 when the Thames Commissioners asked the City of London 'what steps have been taken towards opposing that most useless and mischievous project the Great Western Railway'. By 1849 toll income from river traffic below Staines had fallen by 50%, and despite piecemeal attempts to cut costs the Commission found it increasingly difficult to perform basic maintenance. In 1866 it was finally wound up, to be replaced by a new Thames Conservancy which since 1857 had been responsible for the lower river.<sup>1</sup>



*A Thames barge at Greenwich in London, photographed in 1911. By then commercial traffic on the river had been in sharp decline for decades, undermined by the railway, and was vastly outnumbered by pleasure craft. Despite differences in rigging and shape, the barge is not entirely dissimilar from those depicted in 17th-century paintings. (Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive)*

This did not spell the end of commercial barge traffic on the Thames, which continued to carry a substantial body of freight (particularly coal) into the early 20th century. In 1905 well over a million tons was carried on the river. Much of it, however, was confined to the lower reaches, and the story of Thames barge traffic remained one of gradual decline, balanced by a corresponding increase in the volume of pleasure craft. By 1887 tolls from pleasure boats on the river accounted for 76% of the total, compared with under 30% twenty years earlier, and by 1906 there were over 11,000 registered rowing and sailing craft on the Thames, along with 863 launches and 173 houseboats. Henley's experience largely mirrored this general picture. Robert Webb & Sons, barge builders and timber merchants, ran a weekly barge to London into the 1880s, and a handful of barge workers were recorded into the early 20th century. Nonetheless by the

1890s the town's river trade was dominated by pleasure boats, and in 1893, when increased railway goods-rates prompted renewed enquiries about river transport, this turned out to be impractical in the absence of sufficient trade for a regular weekly run.<sup>2</sup>

## **The River in the 20th Century**

Despite the long-term decline of heavy water transport, commercial use of the Thames continued beyond the Second World War, enjoying something of a renaissance during the war itself when merchant traffic above Teddington increased to over 600,000 tons a year. But the revival was short-lived, and by the early 1970s commercial traffic upstream had all but ceased. By contrast, use of the river by pleasure craft continued its inexorable rise, with the Henley stretch between Marsh Lock and Boulter's Lock the busiest on the river. By 1979 traffic here was already reckoned to be at 'saturation point', with long lock queues on summer weekends, occasional conflict between anglers and motor launches, and regular use not only by rowers but by canoeists and sailing boats.

This was, however, just one aspect of a wider post-war development of tourism around Henley and the south-west Chilterns. In the 1970s Henley lay within the English Tourist Board's Thames and Chiltern Region, which received some 5 million tourist trips a year, with tourists spending around £100 million and 33,000 people employed in related jobs. Henley's share – outside Regatta season at least – was relatively small, though by then it was already well established as a base for exploring the area and as a stopping point for visitors to Oxford and Windsor, with 5 hotels, several B&Bs, and up to 27,000 overnight visitors a year. As with economic development and housing, planners sought to find a balance between encouraging tourism and improving facilities, while opposing development which might threaten the town's character. Boat hire and river trips from Henley continued as earlier, while Mill Meadows by the river (run by the town council) remained popular with residents and visitors alike, with its leafy open spaces and its bowling greens, playground, refreshment facilities, and new multi-purpose pavilion (opened 1992). Tourism received a further boost with the opening in 1998 (by the queen) of the prestigious River & Rowing Museum, a multi-million pound scheme supported by Martyn Arbib of Perpetual and other local sponsors.<sup>3</sup>

The Royal Regatta, meanwhile, despite periodic financial problems, ended the 20th century as a major business seemingly going from strength to strength. The immediate post-war achievement (according to one former rower and long-term Steward) was 'to recreate the gracious, perfectionist, privileged yet popular ambience' of earlier Regattas, and later Chairmen worked to modernise the event and win younger adherents while simultaneously retaining its traditional appeal. From the 1920s the organisation gradually acquired much of the land required for its stands and amenities, and in the 1980s corporate entertainment helped further boost its finances, so that by 1989 some 10% of its income came from hospitality tents. By 2005 the total cost of mounting the Regatta amounted to some £1.76 million, with income exceeding this by £485,000. At the same time the Regatta has remained a major sporting event, attracting a record 386 entries (42 of them from the USA) in 1988, staging up to 100 races a day, and now held (since 1986) over a 5-day period. Nonetheless its appeal as a high-class social event remains paramount. In the words of the former Steward quoted above, 'were it not for the immaculate lawns and flower beds, the Pimms and champagne bar, and the military

band playing the Knightsbridge Suite and Iolanthe, the magic might fade and the cash registers cease to ring'.<sup>4</sup>

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Thacker, F S, *The Thames Highway* (1968 edn), I, 181–9, 218–39.

<sup>2</sup> **River traffic:** Wilson, D G, *The Thames: Record of a Working Waterway* (1987), 91–109; *Royal Commission into Canals and Inland Navigations, 2nd Report, Mins and Evidence* (Parl. Papers 1907 [Cd 3718], xxxiii (1)), 336 sqq. **Henley barges:** Kelly (1883), 581; Karau, *Henley Branch*, 21; TNA: PRO, RG13/1369 [1901 census].

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, D, *The Thames: Record of a Working Waterway* (1987), 97–109; SODC, *District Plan: Henley* (Jan. 1979), 47–8, 130–5, 141–4; *Local Plan* (Dec. 1993), 193–9, 222; *HS* 18 June 1993, 10 July 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Burnell, *Regatta*, 10, 54–65, 151–3; Whitehead, *Henley*, 100.