

Oxfordshire

HENLEY AND THE RIVER 1700-1830

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.

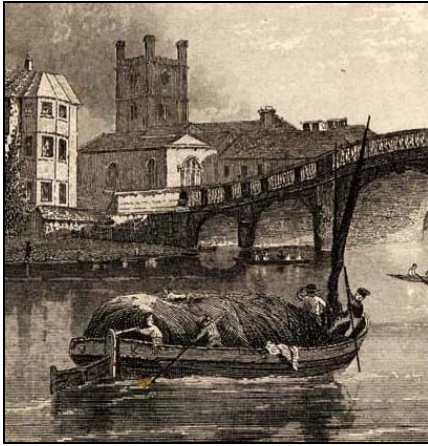


The waterfront south of New Street around 1813, the former Anchor pub in the foreground. Statements by Henley people in the 1780s paint a vivid picture of the bustling activity along this stretch, with barges being constantly loaded and unloaded. However the road flooded frequently, and was newly embanked around 1785. Fortune's or Eylsley's wharf is just off to the left.

If coaching introduced a new, more fashionable phase in Henley's development, its relationship with the river remained the other main plank of its economy. From the early 17th century the Thames was open to Oxford and beyond (see Chapter 5), and in the 18th century it carried a large and regular traffic along the 138 mile-stretch from London to Lechlade in Gloucestershire – further, in fact, following the opening of the Thames and Severn Canal in 1789, which created a continuous waterway from London to the Severn estuary. Government enquiries give some idea of the volume of trade. In 1767 over 56,000 tons of goods passed upstream above Marlow, of which nearly 9,000 (16%) were landed at Henley. By 1788–9 the upstream total was over 70,000 tons, with downward traffic almost half as large again. These huge cargoes were carried in barges of ever increasing size (Panel 8), of which nearly 100 plied the stretches above London in the later 18th century, and nearly 200 in the early 19th.

Some of this trade continued earlier patterns. The Thames still supplied London with beech timber and fuel, and with flour, meal and malt, some of it manufactured in Henley. But by the 1780s trade in both directions was becoming more varied, particularly with the advent of new canals. Freight shipped downriver by the Oxford bargemaster Thomas Court included iron, copper, tin, manufactured metal goods, and bombshells, as well as large numbers of cheeses sent to London from Lechlade. Upstream cargoes included groceries, a wide range of foreign imports (including timber), ashes and rags used as manure, and hides bound for Gloucester or Tewkesbury. Another important freight was coal, shipped down the coast and through London. Underpinning this expanding traffic and the 'canal mania' of the 1780s–90s were the

cost differentials outlined in previous chapters. Whatever the revolutions in road transport, for bulk movement of heavy goods a well-maintained waterway still offered massive savings in the pre-railway age, cutting costs per ton from London to Henley by over 70% according to the agriculturalist William Mavor in 1809. With further improvement, thought Mavor, even those goods carried by wagon might be transferred to barge: fattened livestock, for instance, or perishables sent by road during the summer when waterways were most at risk of delay.¹



Bargemen poling an 'improved' Kennet or Thames and Severn canal-type barge at Henley bridge. (Engraving from W.G. Fearnside, Tombleson's Thames [1834])

How much of this expanding trade flowed through Henley? The only comprehensive figures are those appended to a parliamentary enquiry in 1793, which show that the volume of upstream goods landed there slipped from nearly 11,000 tons (over 18%) in 1781 to a little over 6,000 (9%) ten years later. Probably that reflected increased competition from upstream towns such as Reading and Wallingford, as new poundlocks made access beyond Henley much cheaper. But this still represented considerable business, and statements made by Henley people in the 1780s, during a dispute over loading rights at the waterfront, show the extent to which the town remained enmeshed in the river trade. The landlady of the *Angel on the Bridge* described seeing bundles of flax and crates of earthenware and glass unloaded nearby, while others mentioned the regular landing of coal, rags and casks, pitch tar, and tallow. Some of this was loaded into wagons to finish its journey by road – some tallow, for instance, was for a Benson Chandler, who had commissioned a Henley bargemaster to bring it from London. Others described the unloading of corn, which was no longer only exported through Henley but imported for resale. Barrett March, the wealthy owner of the *Red Lion* inn, built extensive new granaries along the waterfront for this purpose, and the bargemaster Bennett Gleed had a granary which he leased to a man from Kingston-on-Thames. Alongside all this, the traditional export of malt downriver continued. One elderly bargeman recalled working 20 years earlier for a bargemaster from Wooburn (near Marlow), importing coal and groceries to Henley, then returning downstream with consignments of malt from the Henley maltster Mr Riggs.²

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REFERENCES

¹ Mavor, W, *General View of the Agriculture of Berks.* (1813), 420, 427–37, 507, 531; *Report from Cttee into ... Improvement of the Thames* (Parl. Papers 1st ser. xiv, 1793); Griffiths, R, *Essay to prove that the Jurisdiction ... of the River Thames is Committed to the ... City of London* (1746), 158–61; Berks RO, D/EX 1457/1/130. Naruhito, *Thames as Highway* (1989), 32–3, misinterprets the total number of barges.

² *Rept from Cttee into Improvement of the Thames* (1793), p. 11 and Appendices; ORO BOR/3/B/II/24/23, 46, 48–50, 57.