

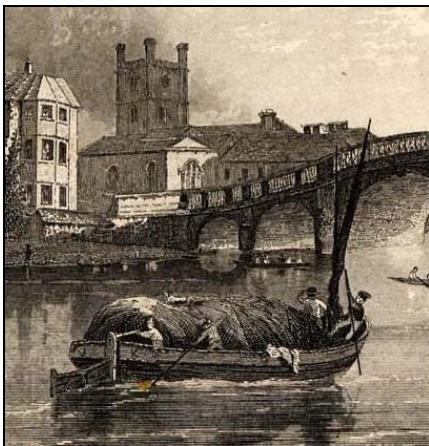
Oxfordshire

HENLEY'S BARGEMEN

This is an **edited extract** from our forthcoming EPE paperback *Henley-on-Thames: Town, Trade and River* (Phillimore 2009), by Simon Townley. See the book for full text, illustrations and maps.

Henley's Bargemen 1540-1700

By the end of the 17th century Henley's bargemen seem to have comprised the largest single occupational group, with numbers (based on births and burials in parish registers) probably rising. But it was not an entirely homogenous group. A few, as at Oxford or Reading, were part-owners of barges and presumably worked as contractors for local wood or grain merchants, drawing on hired labour or family members. Lawrence Green (1568), Thomas Doe (1592) and James Guille (1665) each owned a quarter share of a barge, while Nicholas Savage (1639) owned a set of barge poles. Some others had no equipment, and were perhaps hired barge-hands rather than barge-masters, although as a group they were not obviously poorer than those with their own barges. Possibly some of them worked with business partners or relatives, or even hired barges. The barges themselves were most likely built in London, where several Henley bargemen apprenticed their sons to shipwrights in the late 17th and early 18th century.



Bargemen poling an 'improved' Kennet or Thames and Severn canal-type barge at Henley bridge c.1800. (Engraving from W.G. Fearnside, Tombleson's Thames [1834])

Taken as a whole, Henley's bargemen were not especially wealthy. This was, after all, a service trade reliant on the malting and timber industries, and much of the resulting profit seems to have been siphoned off elsewhere. The average value of their goods, as recorded in probate inventories, was around £26 before the Civil War, and around £15 later on – a fall which perhaps reflected increased competition on the newly opened river. Yet neither were the bargemen particularly poor. Most seem to have had houses of at least 3–4 rooms with adequate if basic furnishings, and at least two (like Thomas West in Wallingford) had shops. Nicholas Savage had £80 loaned out on bond, suggesting a tidy disposable income.¹

In Oxford the barging community developed an increasingly separate identity, and by the 18th century was often viewed with suspicion. In Henley there is no particular evidence for this in the 17th century, although the nature of the work, with long periods spent away in often dangerous conditions, must have created a strong sense of cohesion. Presumably there was a distinction between the relatively prosperous barge-masters and the wider community of bargemen and river-workers, whose reputation for roughness and violence, whether deserved or not, found its way into national legislation. A 1695 Act made barge-owners liable for any damage caused by the 'rude and disorderly persons ... managing the said barges', whose activities were alleged to include illegal shooting and fishing, damage to locks and weirs, and stealing beer and cider from the cargoes. In Henley nothing in the corporation minutes suggests that disorderly behaviour was seen as a major problem, and what rulings it passed to regulate the barge trade were fairly routine. In 1585, for instance, the corporation instituted fines for the masters or owners of barges sailing on a Sunday, while in 1665 bargemen were forbidden to import goods from London during the plague. On the other hand the presence of such a large river community may well, as in some other towns, have contributed to the town's markedly Whiggish politics during the later 17th century, as we shall see in the next chapter.²

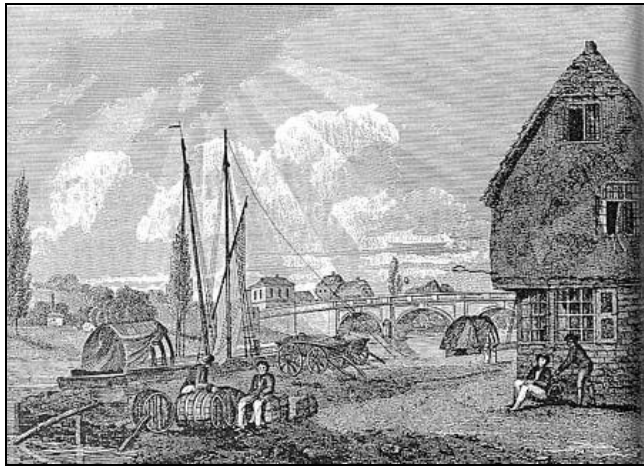
Barges and Bargemasters 1700-1830

As vessels became larger, barging seems (like many industries in the period) to have become more capital-intensive. By mid century barges capable of carrying up to 200 tons were becoming commonplace (Panel 8), with the very largest bargemasters running at least 1 or 2 vessels and sometimes 3 or 4. Clearly such a venture required substantial capital and could be extremely lucrative. John Burton, a pamphleteer strongly opposed to the huge increase in barge size, complained that 'a few overgrown barges ... engross the whole business of the country adjacent', allowing masters to inflate prices. The bargemaster 'considers himself rather as a Merchant than a Carrier ... refusing to carry goods but on his own terms'.

But this was also a high-risk venture. Particularly on the unimproved river it was not uncommon for vessels to run aground or sink with complete loss of their cargo, bringing dire consequences for the bargemaster or 'cost-bearer'. The Henley bargemaster Walter Powney was one of three in the town to place a notice in the *Oxford Journal* in 1784, warning that they would not be held responsible for loss of goods if their barges were sunk by accident. Nonetheless Powney was bankrupt four years later, for reasons which were not given.³

For Henley no comprehensive list of 18th-century bargemasters has been found, though the town seems to have followed the general pattern. Those identified were all substantial townspeople, and often expanded into related activities. Successive members of the Usher family were not only bargemasters but landlords of the *White Horse* inn, which adjoined Henley bridge and the waterfront. Others set up as coal merchants or acquired interests in Henley's wharfs. William Soundy, for instance, whose father was a maltster, advertised in 1791 as a bargemaster, wharfinger and ironmonger, and a few years earlier acquired rights in a coal and coke business at Henley's Bridge Wharf. Yet others had property in the town, among them John Smith (died 1715), who left his 'boats, tackle, sails [and] oars' to his sons together with houses on New Street and Friday Street. Their own homes were presumably respectable and well-furnished, though not

much is known about them as there are few probate inventories for this period. William East (died 1774), however, lived in a brick house at the lower end of New Street, towards the river.



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.

How many bargemasters operated from Henley at any one time is difficult to establish. Probably it was never more than half a dozen or so, with several families (such as the Ushers, Smiths and Jacksons) continuing for several generations. Alongside them were bargemasters from neighbouring towns, who also operated through Henley: men like William Mills of Reading, or the Marlow master William Langley, who in the 1790s ran three barges of between 66 and 146 tons between Henley and London. In some instances women continued the family business after their husband's death. Sarah Jackson was described as a bargemaster and publican in 1774, though at the time she was in Oxford Castle for debt.⁴

Such bargemasters owned the boats and fixed the contracts, and in some instances may have physically captained the vessel. But working such huge barges required significant amounts of skilled labour, and the larger body of bargemen recorded in and around the town presumably worked for them. Though tough physical labour this, too, was a 'lucrative' occupation according to William Mavor, requiring 'not only strength and activity but considerable experience and local knowledge'. Unfortunately we have no Henley bargemen's inventories for the 18th century to test this, and only a very few wills, making it difficult to know more. One who died in 1711 had a feather bed and a 'great chest' and was owed £44, though a near contemporary lived in a small rented cottage, and made only a few negligible family bequests. Even less is known of the 'halers' who hauled boats upstream, and the wharf-side labourers who helped to load them; halers seem to have been billeted along the river, and none are explicitly recorded living in Henley.⁵

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27/1/5, 173/4/18. **Shipwrights:** Ridge, C Harold (ed.), *Records of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights, I: 1428–1780* (1939).

² **Oxford:** Prior, *Fisher Row*, 129–33, 170–6. **1695:** 6 & 7 Wm III, c. 16. **Corporation byelaws:** ORO, BOR3/A/V/BM/5, f. 2; BOR3/A/V/BM/6, p. 301.

³ Burton, J, *The Present State of Navigation on the Thames Considered* (1767); Wilson, D, *The Thames: Record of a Working Waterway* (1987), 40, 66; HIH Prince Naruhito, *The Thames as Highway* (1989), 81–4; Oxf. Jnl Synopsis, 17 Feb. 1784, 10 May 1788.

⁴ **Ushers:** Cottingham, 256. **Soundy:** Oxf. Jnl Synopsis, 8 Nov. 1788; *Univ. Brit. Dir.* (1791). **Smith:** TNA: PRO, PROB 11/550, f. 114 and v. **East:** Oxf. Jnl Synopsis, 11 Aug. 1774. **Mills and Langley:** ORO, BOR/3/B/II/24/46; *Rept from Cttee into Improvement of the Thames* (1793), pp. 26–7. **Sarah Jackson:** Oxf. Jnl Synopsis, 9 July 1774; TNA: PRO, PROB 11/903, ff. 284–5. **Bargemasters in 1812:** Berks RO, D/EX 1457/1/130.

⁵ **Bargemen:** Mavor, *Agric. Berks.* 432; TNA: PRO, PROB 11/524 (Wm Cocke); PROB 11/552 (Nic. Jennings). **Halers:** Act for Improving the Thames, 11 Geo. III, c. 45; Prior, M, *Fisher Row: Fishermen, Bargemen, and Canal Boatmen in Oxford, 1500–1900* (1982), 135–6.