

# Oxfordshire

## TRADE AND NAVIGATION 1540-1700

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.

### Henley and the River Trade



*Jan Siberechts' view of Henley from the Wargrave Road (painted 1698), courtesy of the River & Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames. The barge passing through Marsh Lock carries a cargo of logs and probably malt or barley, while a second barge is visible downstream. By the waterside near the town are stacks of wood awaiting loading. The surrounding landscape features the cornfields, pasture, and woodland singled out by contemporaries.*

During the mid-to-late 16th century, as West plied his trade between London and Culham, Henley's medieval role as a major supplier of wood and grain to London continued unabated. Over a third of London's recorded grain imports were shipped from there during the 1560s–70s, and occasional complaints by the London authorities that grain or timber was being stockpiled at Henley show the importance still attached to the trade, despite occasional downturns. In 1559 the London mayor and aldermen were authorized to ship 6,000 loads of wood stored at Henley and Weybridge 'against the winter', and grumbled that water-carriage charges were being artificially inflated. In 1596 they demanded that corn held up at Henley should be released 'to the great relief of the City, which is at this time in great scarcity'.<sup>1</sup>

Even so the reopening of the river to Oxford and beyond fundamentally changed the position which Henley had enjoyed throughout the later Middle Ages. Now, for the first time in centuries, upstream towns could compete on more equal terms in conveying foodstuffs and fuel to the capital, whilst for goods going inland there was no longer any commercial imperative to transfer to road at Henley. Clearly the economic consequences could have been severe. What seems to have saved the town, as suggested above, were two related developments: first and most crucially the continuing expansion of London, which seems to have supplied enough demand to maintain Henley alongside the other riverside Chilterns ports; and second, the development at Henley (as at several other Thames-side towns) of malting, again geared to the demands of the capital. In

addition, Henley and its neighbouring towns retained at least one natural advantage over their upstream rivals, despite the reopening. Even in the mid 18th century the river above Reading (where the River Kennet joins the Thames) seems to have been markedly shallower, and therefore more difficult for the largest barges to negotiate.<sup>2</sup>

Quantifying these assertions is difficult, since we have insufficient evidence to compare the volume of late medieval trade through Henley with that in the later 17th century. Only with the Parliamentary Reports of the 18th and 19th centuries does that sort of information become available. Judgements have therefore to be based on more general accounts of the river trade through Henley, and on evidence for the town's continuing economic vitality. Certainly Henley's population seems to have continued to rise during this period. In the 1520s, as we have seen, it was probably around a thousand, with perhaps 220 houses. By the 1640s the adult population alone seems to have numbered at least 1,500, and a century later (despite serious mortality from plague in the 1660s) there were thought to be 3,000 inhabitants and 500 houses. Even allowing for exaggeration, this hardly suggests a town in serious difficulty.<sup>3</sup>

The main strands of Henley's 17th-century economy were summarised in some well-known contemporary descriptions. Among the fullest is that of the London cartographer and bookseller Richard Blome, who in 1673 published a famous description of Henley in his book *Britannia*.

Henley ... enjoyeth a considerable trade for malting; its inhabitants (which for the most part are bargemen or watermen) gain a good livelihood by transporting of malt, wood, and other goods to London, and in return bring such commodities as they and the inhabitants of the adjacent towns have need of, at easy rates: and its market, which is on Thursdays, is very considerable for corn, especially barley; which is brought them for their great malt-trade, there being oft-times in one day sold about 300 cart-load of barley.

Daniel Defoe, famous as the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, painted a similar picture a few decades later, describing Henley's 'great business ... by the trade of malt and meal and timber for London', which was shipped on 'great barges ... as the other towns do'. The reference to 'other towns' is significant: like Blome, Defoe emphasized that this was an economy in which riverside towns such as Reading, Maidenhead, Marlow, and even Abingdon all shared. In addition, the Chilterns towns benefited from the export of a 'vast quantity' of local beechwood, 'without which the city of London would be put to more difficulty than for anything of its kind in the nation'. Uses included cart wheels, turnery, chair-making, and (perhaps most important of all) fuel, both for private and industrial consumption and for the royal palaces – indeed Thomas West was supplying wood to the royal purveyors as far back in the 1570s, reflecting Elizabeth I's dislike of coal. Defoe's list of upstream cargoes traded through Reading and presumably Henley included coals, salts, grocery, tobacco, oils and heavy goods – again, not dissimilar from the goods traded earlier by West, save for the newly introduced tobacco.<sup>4</sup>

Unpublished documentary sources amplify the picture. Among the most useful are the probate documents (wills and associated inventories) which survive in increasing numbers from the late 16th and early 17th centuries. A rough count of the trades pursued by those making wills between 1530 and 1700 shows 30 of them (around 13% of specified occupations) directly associated with the river, among them 26 bargemen and 3 fishmongers. Another 29 (over 12%) were maltsters, and 3 were timber merchants or woodmen (Figure 47). The real proportions were much higher, since people did not always accurately describe their own trade: many maltsters, for instance, simply called themselves yeomen in their wills. A more detailed survey of the period 1698 to 1706,

based on data from the parish registers, has concluded that over a fifth of the working population were bargemen, and over a tenth were maltsters. Another 14% were labourers, of whom some presumably loaded or unloaded barges at the Thames wharfs, helped haul vessels upstream, or worked in the maltings.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Malting and Timber***

By the 17th century, then, malt, grain and timber were the mainstays of Henley's economy and downstream river trade. How far back did this go, and how were these industries organized? Unmalted barley had, in fact, been one of the high-quality brewing grains shipped through Henley to London throughout the Middle Ages. For medieval people ale was an important source not only of safe liquid intake but of nutrition, and in the later Middle Ages, as living standards rose, its consumption seems to have increased. By the late 14th century rural manors on the edge of London's supply zone were increasingly malting their own barley before sending it on to London, which (because malt is less bulky) reduced their transport costs. By the 16th century Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk had become the most important malt-producing counties in England, playing a key role in supplying the capital's expanding brewing industry.<sup>6</sup>

Henley fits into this pattern, although here there is no clear evidence for large-scale commercial malting before the 1590s, when John Kenton was supplying malt to London and Windsor. This we know because the Windsor brewer John Alley alleged that Kenton had defrauded him, charges which Kenton vociferously denied. By the 1630s Henley had at least nine maltsters, some of whom had other interests as well, and in the late 17th and 18th centuries the number was even larger, possibly as high as 40 by around 1700. Wills and probate inventories not only help us to identify the maltsters, but give some indication of their wealth and business operations. John Grant, for instance, who died in 1662, left 60 quarters of malt in store worth £93, credits of £180 for 'maults at London', and £120 in ready money – a huge sum which had perhaps been recently paid him for a malt consignment, and which suggests a very substantial business. William Elton (died 1674) left 110 quarters of malt and was owed over £100 from business contacts, many of them also in London. Other examples abound.<sup>7</sup>

Over all, the inventories suggest that Henley's 17th-century maltsters were among the town's most prosperous inhabitants, although much of their wealth (as in these examples) was usually bound up in their business, either in malt and grain, money owed, or in some instances as a part-share in a barge. Malthouses often adjoined their houses, which was normal for industrial premises in the period: indeed the Oxford antiquary Robert Plot reported that many malt kilns in Henley were ingeniously built up against kitchen chimneys, allowing the same fire to serve both. Nonetheless, the household furnishings recorded in some maltsters' inventories suggest both domestic comfort and a degree of social aspiration (see Chapter 6).<sup>8</sup>

The timber trade is well illustrated in the inventory of George Cranfield (d. 1667), a timber merchant whose estate of nearly £385 included stocks of ash, oak, beech and willow. Although based in Henley Cranfield operated on a large scale, buying in timber from Hambleden, Turville and Fawley (in Buckinghamshire), and leasing or owning wharfage at Sonning, Maidenhead, Hambleden and Medmenham, as well as at Henley and London. Timber shaped for ship building was presumably destined for the London naval dockyards. Cranfield cannot have been unique, though not all those involved in

the trade expressly called themselves timber merchants. The prosperous trader Ralph Messenger, for instance, was called 'gentleman' at his death in 1668, though his will and inventory show him leasing woodland and stockpiling large quantities of timber and malt presumably for shipment. Back in the 1570s, Thomas West and his father were similarly involved in leasing a wood for felling, and sold timber and billet for over £400. Yet not all wood sales required a local middle man. Ten thousand loads of firewood cut from Henley and Fawley woods in the 1630s seem to have been sold directly to a London woodmonger called Mr Brown, the carriage costs of £1,000 (presumably by river) met by the vendor, Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke. Even so, Whitelocke made a handsome profit of £3,000.<sup>9</sup>

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## REFERENCES

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<sup>2</sup> **Depth above Reading:** [John Burton], *The Present State of Navigation on the Thames Considered* (1767 edn), 17; and see Prior, *Fisher Row*, 127.

<sup>3</sup> **1641:** *Oxon. and North Berks. Protestation Returns and Tax Assessments 1641–2* (ORS 59, 1994), 53–7, listing 718 adult males. **1731:** SMR, PRN 5027 (doc. file, transcript from time capsule). **See also:** ORO parish reg.; TNA: PRO, E 179/255/4, part 1, ff. 127–30 (hearth tax); *Compton Census*, ed. A. Whiteman, 242; *Visitation of Thomas Secker, 1738* (ORS 38, 1957), 78.

<sup>4</sup> **Blome:** *Britannia* (1673), 189 (and see 38–41). **Defoe:** *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. Cole, G D H and Browning, D C (1962), I, 291, 298–300. **West:** Prior, 'Accounts', 77.

<sup>5</sup> **Wills:** ORO, Henley wills and inventories, indexed in Cheyne, E and Barrett, D M, *Probate Recs of ... Oxford 1516–1732* (Brit. Rec. Soc. 93–4, 1981–5); percentages given are of the c.230 wills which describe occupations precisely, excluding 'gentlemen' and 'yeomen'. **1698–1706:** Dils, J A, 'Henley and the River Trade in the Pre-Industrial Period', *Oxon. Local Hist.* 2 (6) (Spring 1987), 182–92; ORO, parish reg. transcripts.

<sup>6</sup> Galloway, J A, 'London's Grain Supply: Changes in Production, Distribution and Consumption during the Fourteenth Century', *Franco-British Studies*, 20 (1996), 31–3; Brown, J, 'The Malting Industry', in Mingay, G E (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VI (1989), 516–17.

<sup>7</sup> **Kenton:** TNA: PRO, C2/ELIZ/A2/52; cf. *ibid.* C1/911/15–16. **Henley maltsters:** Dils, 'Henley and River Trade', 184–7; Umfreville, J H, 'The Emergence of the Malting Trade in Henley-on-Thames, 1493–1697', *Oxon. Local Hist.* 5 (2) (Winter 1997–8), 12–17; Henley wills and inventories in ORO and TNA: PRO. **Grant and Elton:** ORO MSS Wills Oxon. 26/4/16, 20/4/14.

<sup>8</sup> Plot, R, *Natural History of Oxon* (1677), 265.

<sup>9</sup> **Cranfield:** ORO MS Wills Oxon 162/4/28; Dils, 'Henley and River Trade', 186–7. **Messenger:** TNA: PRO, PROB 11/327; PROB 4/11040. **West:** Prior, 'Accounts', 76–7. **Wood sales:** e.g. Spalding, R (ed.), *Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke, 1605–75* (Recs of Social and Econ. Hist. ns 13, 1990), 117–18, 799, 803; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1672–3, 219.