Oxfordshire

HENLEY'S ORIGINS

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.

Before the Town

Medieval 'new towns' were by definition new creations. But not all were laid out on vacant sites, and none were set into an entirely empty or undeveloped landscape. How much is known about the area around Henley before town's creation?

Among the most important factors determining settlement are roads. The Fairmile preserves the line of a major Roman road from Dorchester, which must have crossed the river at Henley, and perhaps connected with roads to Verulamium (now St Albans) and Silchester. Its presence helps explain a sizeable 2nd-century Roman building excavated west of Bell Street, which may or may not imply a small Roman settlement. Almost certainly the road remained an important route into the Anglo-Saxon period, though where it originally crossed the river is unclear. Possibly it branched eastwards through what are now the grounds of Phyllis Court, fording the river to run up the opposite bank along the line of modern field boundaries. Alternatively the Fairmile could have continued to the site of the present bridge (Figure 9), which was probably an early crossing point long before the bridge was built. There may, in fact, have been two or more fords. Either way, Henley was almost certainly the site of a major crossing point from a very early date.[1]

From the late Anglo-Saxon period, written evidence takes us a little further. In the 8th century the Henley area belonged to the Crown as part of a vast royal estate centred on Benson, some 10 miles away across the Chilterns. By the time of Domesday Book in 1086 much of this estate (including Bix, Badgemore, and the Rotherfields) had been granted to neighbouring local lords, but the Crown hung onto the area around Henley itself, which remained a detached outlier of the Benson estate into the 13th century. The boundaries of this residual royal estate are not recorded, but like the later parish of Henley it probably ran from the low-lying meadows by the river up to the valuable woodland and wood pasture of the Chilterns hills. The place name Henley means '(at the) high wood pasture', and presumably it was the area's rich agricultural resources, combined with the river crossing, which persuaded the Crown to retain control over Henley, even though in the 12th century it was sometimes leased or granted to powerful noblemen or royal servants for fixed periods.[2]

How the 11th- and 12th-century estate at Henley was organised is not recorded. Probably there was a small rural settlement, which may have been obliterated when the planned town was laid out. If so it may lie under the modern town, where fragments of late 11th- or early 12th-century pottery have been found. The church's location certainly

seems to predate the town's creation, since the dimensions of the medieval churchyard bore no relation to the highly regular plots of the planned medieval town to its west (below). By the mid 12th century and possibly much earlier there appears to have also been a small royal lodge or manor house on the site of Phyllis Court and the area to its south, known later as Countess Garden (Figures 9–10 and 23). The first written evidence dates from the early 13th century, but King Stephen issued a royal charter at Henley in 1142, and from the 1150s Henry II may have used it as an occasional stopping-off point on journeys between London and his residences at Benson or Woodstock. For the rest of the time it perhaps provided a base for bailiffs and farm staff running the residual royal estate. Other features of the pre-urban Henley landscape are similarly hinted at in the modern layout. The wide wedge-shape of West Street, Gravel Hill and Hart Street looks strongly reminiscent of an ancient droveway, perhaps for funnelling livestock from pastures on the west towards the river – the neighbouring parishes' name of Rotherfield means ‘open grazing for cattle’, and describes the mid-Saxon landscape. If so, this was a pre-existing feature taken over into the later town plan. A second droveway may be preserved in the line of Greys Road and Friday Street, while the intersecting north–south road from Reading to Marlow and London almost certainly existed by the late Saxon period.

And yet the pre-urban estate may not have been entirely agricultural. In the angle between the Fairmile and the manorial enclosure is a large triangular area, now built on, but in origin probably a large triangular green at the manor house entrance. If so, not only would it have created a grand vista to the house, it may also have provided a forum for trading: an embryonic, unofficial market typical of many future towns.[3]

A Royal Foundation?

Some time before the early 13th century a planned town and market place were laid out south of the royal lodge or manor house. The written evidence is suggestive. In 1177–8 Benson manor (including Henley) fell back into royal hands after a lease of 20 years, and the Crown took its agricultural management back in hand. The following year Henry II set aside an unspecified amount of land at Henley 'for making his new buildings', for which the sheriff's annual account for the Henley estate records a rent allowance of 2*s*. 6*d*. (i.e. the land no longer yielded this income because it was used for other purposes). Conceivably this refers to urban development, though given the small sum involved it more likely reflects expansion or rebuilding of the royal manor house. Around the same date, an impressive new bridge appears to have been built or rebuilt at the end of what is now Hart Street, possibly in stone – a major investment which is unlikely to have been undertaken in isolation. None of this proves that the town was created at the same time, but the concentration of activity is striking, not least because Henry II is known as a founder of new towns. His borough of New Woodstock was being laid out at the gates of Woodstock park at just about this time.

For Henry to have created a new town at Henley in the 1170s would certainly make sense. The economy was expanding during the renewed stability which following the civil wars of the mid 12th century, and a significant number of towns seem to have been created or expanded during the period. Locally, trade along the river appears to have been flourishing in response to increased demand from London (see Chapter 3), and Henley may have participated in it. The grant of an annual fair between 1199 and 1204 (when the manor was briefly held by the great Norman lord Robert de Harcourt) does not necessarily imply urban status, but may nonetheless reflect an attempt to capitalize

on the town's early success. By the 1260s Henley had a guild merchant (a corporate body of leading traders and craftsmen) headed by a warden, which was already accumulating a small amount of corporate town property. From then on, its development as an urban centre closely involved with the Thames river trade becomes increasingly visible.[4]

So far as the town's origins are concerned, this is as far as the documents take us. But further hints are contained in the town's layout, before an increase in written documentation puts us on slightly firmer ground from the late 13th and early 14th century.

Analysing the Town

Medieval towns like Henley were planned with meticulous regularity, with house-plots of specific dimensions laid out along new or existing streets and market places. The plot boundaries have often remained remarkably stable, so that measuring their size and shape can help us judge which parts of a town formed part of the original layout, and which (with different dimensions) were possibly added later. Until tested by archaeology or confirmed by documents the results can only ever be conjectural, though over the last 50 years the technique has grown increasingly sophisticated as the body of towns for comparison has grown larger.[5]

In Henley, the plot layout suggests that the first phase of the new town comprised a wedge of land along what is now Market Place and Hart Street (both called High Street in the Middle Ages). Possibly it was laid out around an existing droveway as suggested above, which would have provided both a natural axis and a wide enough space for stalls and trading. Long narrow house plots were laid out to its north and south in the usual fashion, while a series of smaller plots seems to have been created along what became Bell (or North) Street, leading up past the manor house (Figures 10 and 23).

On the north, this early layout probably extended as far as the manor house's southern perimeter on the line of modern New Street, which may have followed the remains of an ancient earthwork called Grim's Ditch. On the south it most likely extended to the town ditch or brook, just north of modern Friday Street; the brook was mentioned frequently in medieval documents, and gave its name to Brook (or South) Street, the medieval names for Duke Street. Westwards the town adjoined the rural estate of Badgemore, whose boundary (mentioned in medieval property deeds) ran across West Street and Gravel Hill. 'Walls' mentioned in that area (see Figure 23) were probably low earthen banks or ditches designed to mark the town's edge, keep out stray animals, and help with toll collection: certainly there were never any town walls in the generally accepted sense.

These early plots along Market Place and Hart Street seem to have been 1½ perches (7.5 m.) wide, the perch being a standard medieval measurement of 16½ feet. By the 14th century the frontages were more varied – the result of 200 years of subdivision and amalgamation – but even so, most are still clearly recognizable as multiples or divisions of those original plots. Their length varied from around 19 to 32 perches (96–161 m.), providing space (as in other medieval towns) for outbuildings, livestock or crops. Dating them is difficult, but their size and shape are consistent with a town laid out around the 1170s, and they are unlikely to be much later. The Bell Street plots were very different: 2 perches wide but only 10–16 perches long. Nonetheless their

relationship with the Hart Street plots suggests that they were contemporary, and they seem far too regular to be later impositions. Bell Street was bound to be a major thoroughfare, linking the market place with Northfield End and the manor house, and it was in the lord's interests to develop it as fully as possible.[6]

Duke and Friday Streets, by contrast, seem to have been developed a little later and in a more piecemeal way. The small, narrow plots fronting Duke Street had no attached land at the rear, and seem to have been cut from the earlier burgage plots running back from the market place, whose holders probably hoped to sublet them. The street remained unusually narrow throughout the Middle Ages, scarcely sufficient for two carts to pass side by side, and was widened to its present extent only in the 1870s when the entire west side was rebuilt. House plots along Friday Street show no sign of planning, and may have developed as an area of squatter settlement along the town's southern fringe. But by the early 14th century the street was extensively built up, and by the 15th it contained some relatively large high-status houses, parts of which survive. The northern side was taken into the town before c.1300, presumably following an agreement between the lords of Henley and Rotherfield Greys, though its southern side remained in Rotherfield Greys parish until modern times. The street's name was probably derived from medieval fishponds at its eastern end, Friday being a fasting day when fish traditionally replaced meat.[7]

Near the river the planners may have incorporated a pre-existing church or chapel, since the medieval churchyard (51.5 m. wide before 19th-century enlargement) bore no obvious relation to the regular 1½-perch layout further west. Its odd position, jutting into and partly obstructing the way to the bridge, may have been seen as an advantage, helping to control access into the town and collection of tolls from market traders, much as gates and bars commonly did (see Figure 82). Nonetheless the arrangement is unusual, and was even more pronounced before road-widening in 1782. The church began as a chapel subservient to Benson, but creation of the town lent it an entirely new urban status, and by the time it emerges into the written record around 1202 it was well on its way to becoming a fully independent parish church with its own rector and endowment. The rector's house lay on the opposite side of Hart Street, occupying a large plot near the river. Unlike the churchyard this was apparently made up of four 1½-perch plots combined into a single unit, which had perhaps been given for this purpose by the king soon after the town's creation. The rectory house was certainly established there by the 1240s, and around 1305 the rector extended the grounds southwards to Friday Street through a series of piecemeal purchases.[8]

Development of the waterfront was presumably as central to the scheme as the creation of a market place. Lords of Henley manor had interests in London's Queenhithe (the main offloading place for goods conveyed downstream) by the late 13th century, and in the early 14th century claimed wharfage dues from London boats landing at Henley. By then there were several granaries along the riverside, both north and south of the bridge. In 1354 one had a cellar built into the bridge arch, and in 1405 that or another granary adjoined the small freestanding chapel of St Anne by the bridge entrance, which was associated with collection of alms towards the bridge's upkeep (Panel 1). As in the 17th and 18th centuries some sections of the waterfront may have been reinforced with timber revetments.[9]

Yet not even a new town such as Henley was entirely urban. North of West Street around the modern King's Road was an area of agricultural land known by the 14th century as Hen or Hemp Field – a reminder that in medieval towns urban and

agricultural activities often co-existed. Medieval property deeds show that most houses around modern West Street held long strips of land in Hen Field, running up to Grim's Ditch from the backs of their gardens. These look like burgage plots in all but name, but the terminology is unusual, and the field seems to have been viewed differently from the rest of the town: certainly the plots there would have been exceptionally long, up to 272 m or 54 perches. Presumably the area was a pre-existing field taken into the town at its creation, and possibly it still included land outside it. In 1424, for instance, the town paid for a common gate and style into Hen Field, which therefore cannot have been entirely divided up into private burgage plots. The field was still mentioned in the 1490s, and was perhaps only finally absorbed during the town's expansion in the 16th or 17th century.[10]

Medieval Expansion

Like many successful medieval towns, Henley was gradually extended as its trade and population grew. Piecemeal development along Duke Street and Friday Street has already been mentioned, but other extensions were clearly planned – if not by the Crown, then by some of the powerful and wealthy lords who held Henley manor for much of the 13th century. The first addition was probably the south side of New Street. The name alone shows that it was a later creation, and property deeds confirm that it existed by 1307 and possibly by the 1260s. Here the plots were much wider (3 perches or 15 m.), reflecting their distance from the town's commercial heart where pressure on space was greatest; they were, however, quite short (only 12 perches or 60 m.), since they had to be carved from the back gardens of existing houses on Hart Street. The street's north side, where the plot sizes are different, may not have been developed until later, since it backed onto the manor house perimeter.[11]

Other changes arose from the division and partial abandonment of the manor house site after 1300. Henley's 13th-century lords included such national figures as Richard earl of Cornwall (died 1272) and his son Edmund (died 1300), whose numerous residences included nearby Wallingford Castle. Even so the manor house at Henley was still being kept up in the 1290s, when the hall and lord’s chamber were re-tiled and a new hedge was laid around the perimeter. From the early 14th century, however, the Henley estate was split in two. A royal grant to the earl's widow in 1301 seems to have included the whole of the town up to modern Bell Lane, together with a sizable amount of land including Henley park. But a large block of land to the north remained associated with Benson manor until *c.*1340, when the Black Prince granted it as a separate estate called Fillets (from an Old English word for hay). As a result, the manor-house site itself was apparently sliced in two. The northern part went with Fillets manor, which from the mid 14th century was centred on what became Phyllis (or Fillets) Court. The southern part, known later as Countess Garden, went presumably to Cornwall's widow Countess Margaret, whose successors, with vast estates elsewhere, allowed the buildings to fall derelict. By 1381 the site was 'spoiled and dilapidated’, leaving only a garden and pasture.[12]

This partial abandonment of part of the old manorial centre left the way open for a final expansion of the town. On New Street's north side, 4-perch plots were laid out probably in the earlier 14th century, running back to the edge of the vacant manorial garden. Bell Street's northern end may have been redeveloped then or soon after. Both sides include some high-status 15th-century houses, of which one (dated to 1405) occupies an unusually wide plot backing onto Countess Garden. Possibly it was the first house on

the site, reflecting renewed expansion around the former manor house area. Long before then, the borough boundary was extended northwards to take in this part of Bell Street, much as it had earlier been extended to take in Friday Street. Henceforth the boundary ran along Bell Lane (the dividing line between Henley and Fillets manors), crossing the road to include plots laid out on Bell Street's west side (Figure 23).[13]

These changes marked the last major expansion of Henley until the 19th century, though piecemeal growth continued along its fringes – in the area between the town brook and Greys Road, for instance, which remained outside the town. Expansion up West Street and Gravel Hill was also a piecemeal process, captured in 14th-century property deeds which show houses spilling over the town boundary into Badgemore, and in a run of small 15th-century houses along Gravel Hill, built possibly for craftsmen processing rural produce. The houses' date suggests that fringe development revived within a century of the Black Death, and from the late 15th century to the early 19th, as population grew, the process continued, with piecemeal building along West Street and south of Friday Street. Even so, it was the 1880s before wholesale suburban growth finally swamped the historic core created by Henley's medieval planners.[14]

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