Oxfordshire

HENLEY AS AN 18TH-CENTURY SOCIAL CENTRE

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The development of such a large service and retail sector reflected the presence of consumers with disposable income. Some were coach travellers stopping off on the way to somewhere else; others were permanent (or at least seasonal) residents in and around the town, attracted by the combination of swift communications with London and the area's natural beauty. The early 19th-century writer James Brewer highlighted Henley's location 'near the base of a cluster of hills in one of the most agreeable windings of the River Thames', adding that the 'beauty of [its] situation' had 'induced many private families to construct ornamental houses'. The town's prosperity was further 'evinced in the improvements progressively taking place in the habitations of traders of every rank'. Numerous other visitors painted a similar picture, singling out the 'elegant villas' among the 'lofty beech-woods and extensive plantations'.[1]

As earlier, some of Henley's wealthiest and most fashionable figures were landowners living in neighbouring country houses. Several were of high social rank. Park Place, across the river in Remenham, was owned from around 1738 to 1751 by the Prince of Wales, who used it as a country retreat for hunting parties; his successor was the celebrated soldier and politician Henry Seymour Conway (died 1795), who retired there as a country gentleman, indulging a passion for landscaping and pursuing literary and other cultured interests. Decades later a visitor still remembered 'the brilliant society of Field-Marshal Conway's house', which included the likes of Horace Walpole, the philosopher David Hume, and the poet Thomas Gray. Part of the same circle were the Freemans of Fawley Court, where John Freeman (died 1752) and his son Sambrooke (died 1782) pursued similar interests, expanding their estates and reshaping both the house and its grounds with the help of such cutting-edge figures as the landscape gardener 'Capability' Brown and the architect James Wyatt. Their roots, as we saw earlier, were in commerce, and the same remained true of several other landowning families in the area: the Grotes at Badgemore House, for instance, who were London bankers of Dutch origin and acquired their Henley estate around 1785. Others included the Hodges family at Bolney Court in Harpsden, who like the Freemans owned slave plantations in the West Indies. William Caesar, 'a black belonging to Anthony Hodges Esq', was buried at Harpsden in 1778, having presumably been kept as a manservant.[2]

Many of these landowners became involved in Henley life, serving as bridge commissioners, for instance. But Henley's well-to-do were not confined to surrounding country estates. By the time of the first surviving census in 1841 no fewer than 183 Henley residents (over 11% of those whose occupations were given) were of 'independent means', and another 15–20 were in leading professions. This alone explains the large number of domestic servants in the town, and in social and consumer terms prosperous tradesmen or manufacturers like the Brakspears were on a similar level. Though the census evidence is late, the picture fits well with that derived from wills, trades directories and visitors' descriptions in the 1770s–early 1800s, and helps to explain how Henley was gradually transformed into a town of smart sophisticated

streets: a place in which those accustomed to London or Bath fashions might feel at home despite the town's undoubted provincial air. A further indicator is the number of private academies and boarding schools, catering for the sons and daughters of the 'gentry' and the well-to-do. In 1793 Henley had at least 3 boarding schools 'for young ladies' and another for 'young gentleman', alongside the endowed Grammar, Periam and 'Greencoat' schools.[3]

Charity balls and concerts in the town were mentioned from the 1750s, held sometimes in the town hall and sometimes in the more up-market inns. One in 1777, 'for the benefit of M. Vanscor, a dancer at Drury Lane', was held at the Bell, and a gentleman's club met regularly at the Red Lion by the 1790s. These can be traced through local newspapers, but the social round amongst Henley's privileged classes is most evocatively captured through the diaries of Caroline Powys, whose brother-in-law the Revd Thomas Powys was rector of Fawley and a chaplain to George III. Powys described the glittering events she attended in minute detail. By far the grandest was a 'gala week' in January 1777, sponsored by the tenant of Phyllis Court, Lord Villiers. Plays (featuring local gentry in key roles) were staged at a specially improvised theatre at Bolney Court, and grand suppers and balls running into the small hours were held at the Bell Inn and at Fawley Court, where 'ninety-two [including prominent members of the aristocracy] sat down to supper'. The diaries also detail the more routine social round. Like many of their class the Powyses usually spent the summer season at Bath, where they frequented the fashionable Assembly Rooms and mingled with aristocracy. Back in Henley they flung themselves into a winter season of assemblies and other events:

> 'On Friday [17 October 1788] began our winter Henley ball, and was a very full one, the whole neighbouring families making it a point to attend. Got home about four, as there is always a supper and dancing after. We were very gay this autumn, having a very tolerable set of strollers [actors] at Henley; most of the ladies bespoke plays, as Lady Ailesbury, Mrs Damer, both Mrs Freemans ... '

In and between was a more ad hoc round of dinners, balls, and near-daily visits which evokes the world of Jane Austen (a distant relative), 'for except in the most important point of late hours, our most agreeable and sociable neighbourhood never suffer their friends to pass a day solo'. The Powyses were particularly close to the Conways and Freemans, with whom they enjoyed a 'delightful' water party on the Freemans' pleasure boat in 1795. Ten years earlier Mrs Powys left an entertaining account of an impromptu royal visit to Mrs Freeman at Henley Park. The king and his party, she reported, 'talked incessantly, seemed vastly pleased, and knew every family and their concerns in this neighbourhood ... better than [Mrs Freeman] did herself.'[4]

Amateur dramatics played an important role in these social gatherings, and performances by travelling players in the town seem to have been frequent. A purpose-built theatre on New Street opened in 1805, and Mrs Powys was soon there, declaring an actor in Sheridan's 'The Rivals' to be 'as capital a performer as any I've seen in London or Bath'. Nonetheless audiences gradually declined, and from 1813 the building was put to other uses, to be resurrected as the Kenton Theatre only in the 20th century. During its short life its character evidently changed, and certainly not all its early patrons were as genteel as the Powyses: in 1812 a Newbury bargeman admitted having 'wantonly' thrown 'a quart mug with beer in it from the gallery into the pit', and was prosecuted by the manager. The incident is a reminder that for the bulk of the town's

population the world of balls and assemblies was a distant one, and that for most, entertainment remained centred on the town's numerous pubs and alehouses, with their bowls and skittles and card games. Even at such well-appointed inns as the White Hart illegal back-room gambling seems to have been common, sometimes for very high stakes.[5]

A different facet of 'polite' society in and around Henley were the cultural and scientific interests of some of its leading figures, embracing not only architecture, landscape gardening and progressive farming, but new technologies and experimental science. Prominent in these circles were Sambrooke Freeman and General Conway, Thomas Hall at Harpsden Court, and the Congregationalist minister Humphrey Gainsborough, whose interest in road and river improvement has already been mentioned. Gainsborough, described in an obituary as 'one of the most ingenious men that ever lived', was an engineer of note, whose numerous inventions included a tide mill, a condensing steam engine, a refrigerated fish wagon, a drill plough, and timepieces. He enjoyed warm support from local landowners who shared his interests, with whom he corresponded and swapped ideas. Hall in particular, as a fellow Congregationalist, seems to have supported him in practical ways, and may have provided a workshop at Harpsden. The spirit of scientific enquiry and technological innovation, so typical of the period, found other local expressions too, in Robert Brakspear's methodical experimentation with brewing techniques, for instance, and his use of new instruments such as a thermometer and hydrometer. Such shared interests seem to have promoted genuine friendship and mutual regard, though probably within strict limits. Gainsborough called Freeman his 'good benefactor', and his relationship with the local elite probably always remained that of respected protégé rather than genuine social equal.[6]

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