

Oxfordshire

HENLEY ROYAL REGATTA

extracted from Henley-on-Thames: Town, Trade and River, *by* Simon Townley, *to be published by* Phillimore *as part of the* EPE *paperback series*

Origins and Early History

The origins of the Henley Regatta lie traditionally in the first Oxford–Cambridge university boat race, held on a course from Hambleden to Henley in 1829. Amateur rowing clubs and competitions were becoming increasingly fashionable, and the Thames was a popular venue, both at London and higher upstream. Cambridge's initial challenge was for a rowing match 'at or near London', but the venue was switched to Henley soon afterwards, almost certainly at Oxford's instigation. The Henley reach must have been well known to Oxford rowers, and provided a good clear stretch on neutral ground, easily accessible from London, yet in a scenically attractive setting.

The event created 'an unusual bustle' in the town, with every room booked and visitors flooding in from far afield. Later Oxford–Cambridge matches were held in London, but similar 1-day events (sometimes called 'regattas') followed sporadically at Henley throughout the 1830s, the main impetus coming apparently from London clubs and the universities. Henley's inhabitants were quick to spot the economic potential, providing stands and adding music and fireworks on an ad hoc basis, and from there it was a short step to establishing an annual event, locally managed for the benefit of the town. Leading townsmen and neighbouring gentry set up a subscription in 1838, and the 1839 regatta (featuring university and Eton College boats as well as town crews) proved a popular and commercial success. Thenceforth, despite growing competition from similar events elsewhere, it became an established part of the social and sporting calendar, held generally over two days, and from 1886 over three. A glowing report in *The Times* in 1844 expressed widely held sentiments. 'Of all the towns in England there is not one to which, as regards a flourishing Regatta, Henley ought to yield the palm of pre-eminence ... Placed in the midst of scenery the most delightful, with a beautiful reach of water admirably calculated for such sport ... it can form no matter of surprise that this annual event should constitute one of the chief attractions of the season'.¹

From the outset the Regatta attracted a fashionable clientele. The *Oxford Journal* noted the 'beauty and fashion' crowding the river banks in 1837, and later reporters took to listing the various nobility spotted in the grandstands, or watching from their carriages on the bridge. The university element, too, remained important, though in these early days it was not always so genteel. Alfred Rowland, son of the Congregationalist minister, recalled hoards of Oxford undergraduates and 'others of a far lower grade' driving over on dogcarts, provoking drunken rowdyism, town and gown riots, and worse. 'Sometimes they took letters from the names over the shops and mixed them, wrenched off knockers from the doors, flung the gate of the turnpike on the bridge into the river, ordered a big supper with plenty of drink, and finished ... by overturning the tables and smashing all the glass and crockery ...; seldom did a regatta pass without ... the ruin of some senior girls in the Sunday school'. Not surprisingly Rowland's father

set himself against the event, only to have his manse windows smashed more than once in retaliation.



Henley Royal Regatta around 1853, with packed stands lining the Oxfordshire bank from near the Red Lion, and the bridge crammed with spectators and private carriages.

The Regatta's early management was through a body of Stewards made up of local gentry and the mayor, with a separate Committee of 14 drawn mostly from leading townsmen. Given the costs of staging the spectacle, profits were slim at best. But the impact on the town seems to have more than compensated, and not only at Regatta time. When financial difficulties threatened the event in 1849, some 225 Henley tradesmen petitioned the Stewards to persevere, crediting the Regatta with introducing the town 'to the notice of thousands', and promoting 'so great an influx of visitors during a considerable portion of the year' that it significantly offset 'the injury [which] the trade of the town has sustained from various causes'. The support of influential gentry paid further dividends in 1851, when the town corporation decided to seek royal patronage to help boost the Regatta's ailing finances. Following an approach from Lord Camoys (one of the Regatta's founding Stewards) Prince Albert duly agreed to become Patron, turning the event into a 'Royal Regatta'. Its new status seems to have considerably heightened its social appeal, even though the Prince himself never attended.²

With the opening of the railway in 1857, the town was fully equipped to exploit the Regatta's potential. The first permanent Regatta building (a boathouse) was completed in 1864, and a visit by the Prince of Wales and the kings of Denmark and Greece in 1887, instigated by Lord Camoys' son and successor, lent the event the ultimate fashionable approval. In 1895 over 34,000 were said to have visited over the 3 days, and 'it would be impossible to estimate the whole concourse of people attending, for miles round every house is full to repletion with guests'. An evocative description of the Regatta at its height was published soon afterwards by Emily Climenson, author of the 1896 *Guide to Henley*:

For weeks before the Thames Conservators are nearly driven wild with assigning places for house-boats and steamers, extending now in a line from near the bridge to Regatta Island ... Forty years ago the Regatta was the rendezvous of ... the immediate neighbourhood ... Today it is the world's water picnic. All sorts and conditions of men and women resort to it in thousands, many not caring a straw for the races, but for the charms of the scenery, the kaleidoscopic glow of colour and form, represented by every variety of craft ... the stalwart men, brilliant in their coloured flannels, the beautiful women, ... the creature comforts which are indeed abundant, lavish hospitality being Regatta order from high to low.

Rather less romantic was the pollution accompanying this annual concentration of houseboats, whose occupiers habitually dumped uneaten food and the contents of their water closets directly into the Thames. An article in the *Lancet* described the river's appearance in 1886 as 'simply scandalous', with 'decomposing salad leaves, some rotten fruit, ... lobster shells ... and a dead roach'.³



A typical crush of pleasure boats at the 1896 Regatta, viewed from one of the luxury houseboats which lined the banks for weeks on end. Some were up to 70 feet long, with 10–12 beds and a kitchen: 'to all intents and purposes a house'. (Photo copyright Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive)

Amidst the social whirl, the rowing itself might easily be overlooked. Rowing men were not even represented on the management committee until 1881, and only in 1894 did a rower (the appropriately named H.T. Steward) become chairman. Yet from the first the Henley Regatta excited considerable excitement among the rowing fraternity, and as its social standing grew, so, too, did its reputation amongst the burgeoning number of rowing clubs, particularly after the introduction in 1886 of a new and fairer course. By then, with the first entries from the United States, it was becoming an international event, and in 1908 it received the ultimate accolade when Henley was chosen as the venue for the Olympic Regatta, held two weeks after the Royal Regatta itself. The honour was to be repeated 40 years later, making Henley the first town in the world to stage two Olympic Regattas.⁴

River and Regatta in Modern Times

Despite the long-term decline of heavy water transport, commercial use of the Thames continued beyond the Second World War, enjoying something of a renaissance during the war itself when merchant traffic above Teddington increased to over 600,000 tons a year. But the revival was short-lived, and by the early 1970s commercial traffic upstream had all but ceased. By contrast, use of the river by pleasure craft continued its inexorable rise, with the Henley stretch between Marsh Lock and Boulters Lock the busiest on the river. By 1979 traffic here was already reckoned to be at 'saturation point', with long lock queues on summer weekends, occasional conflict between anglers and motor launches, and regular use not only by rowers but by canoeists and sailing boats.

This was, however, just one aspect of a wider post-war development of tourism around Henley and the south-west Chilterns. In the 1970s Henley lay within the English Tourist Board's Thames and Chiltern Region, which received some 5 million tourist trips a year. The Henley Royal Regatta, extracted from *Henley-on-Thames: Town, Trade and River* (extract copyright University of London)

year, with tourists spending around £100 million and 33,000 people employed in related jobs. Henley's share – outside Regatta season at least – was relatively small, though by then it was already well established as a base for exploring the area and as a stopping point for visitors to Oxford and Windsor, with 5 hotels, several B&Bs, and up to 27,000 overnight visitors a year. As with economic development and housing, planners sought to find a balance between encouraging tourism and improving facilities, while opposing development which might threaten the town's character. Boat hire and river trips from Henley continued as earlier, while Mill Meadows by the river (run by the town council) remained popular with residents and visitors alike, with its leafy open spaces and its bowling greens, playground, refreshment facilities, and new multi-purpose pavilion (opened 1992). Tourism received a further boost with the opening in 1998 (by the queen) of the prestigious River & Rowing Museum, a multi-million pound scheme supported by Martyn Arbib of Perpetual and other local sponsors.⁵



The Royal Regatta Headquarters of 1986, one of two outstanding modern additions to Henley's townscape in the final decades of the 20th century.

The Royal Regatta, meanwhile, despite periodic financial problems, ended the 20th century as a major business seemingly going from strength to strength. The immediate post-war achievement (according to one former rower and long-term Steward) was 'to recreate the gracious, perfectionist, privileged yet popular ambience' of earlier Regattas, and later Chairmen worked to modernise the event and win younger adherents while simultaneously retaining its traditional appeal. From the 1920s the organisation gradually acquired much of the land required for its stands and amenities, and in the 1980s corporate entertainment helped further boost its finances, so that by 1989 some 10% of its income came from hospitality tents. By 2005 the total cost of mounting the Regatta amounted to some £1.76 million, with income exceeding this by £485,000. At the same time the Regatta has remained a major sporting event, attracting a record 386 entries (42 of them from the USA) in 1988, staging up to 100 races a day, and now held (since 1986) over a 5-day period. Nonetheless its appeal as a high-class social event remains paramount. In the words of the former Steward quoted above, 'were it not for the immaculate lawns and flower beds, the Pimms and champagne bar, and the military band playing the Knightsbridge Suite and Iolanthe, the magic might fade and the cash registers cease to ring'.⁶

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