

# Oxfordshire

## THE FIRST SUBURBS

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 rapid population growth in the early 19th century was fuelled largely by immigration from the countryside, and though unspectacular compared with that of towns like Banbury or Reading created a demand for new housing which left a permanent mark on the town. Speculative local builders began to put up new working-class houses after the Napoleonic Wars, a time of considerable building activity nationally, and building continued until the 1840s: between 1811 and 1821 the number of inhabited houses in Henley and Greys increased from 522 to 696, with a smaller increase to 747 in the 1820s. The building of these houses may have helped attract poor immigrants to the town, but seems also to have alleviated some of the worst overcrowding. Between 1811 and 1821 the average number of people per inhabited house actually fell from 5.6 to 4.9, despite the fact that the population rose by some 400. These new properties were also valuable investments, satisfying a demand in the 1830s for 'small and neat houses' with an annual rental value of between £20 and £40. This demand continued until the town's mid-century stagnation.<sup>1</sup>

The largest concentrations of new housing were in West Street and Gravel Hill, both on rising ground west of the Market Place, and further south in Greys Road and Greys Hill. Sixteen brick cottages were erected on West Street's northern side before 1829, and by 1851 there was a large population of labourers here, many of them agricultural workers with large families. Most of the new houses in this area were two-up-and-two-down terraced cottages of brick, sometimes stuccoed, and some, especially in West Street, degenerated into little better than slums. But there were a few larger and better-built houses in and around Greys Hill, which in 1829 was 'a much admired site for building', suitable both for cottages and for larger houses with basements and water-closets, which could be purchased or rented by 'genteel families'. One is Church House, a plain brick villa at the foot of the hill; another, cheek-by-jowl with artisan cottages, is the attractive semi-detached pair at Nos. 22–4, with linear ornament in the manner of Sir John Soane on the stucco facing, and a pretty iron veranda. This essentially late-Georgian style of building continued into the 1860s, judging by 62–6 Market Place, a terrace of three three-storeyed houses built by the Henley Building Company in 1864, and the adjacent row of two-storeyed cottages at 2–32 Gravel Hill (1866).<sup>2</sup>

Given the fragmented nature of land-holding in these parts of Henley, it is not surprising that there was no uniform control over building. Instead, small parcels were sold piecemeal to individual builders. One was the bricklayer John Strange (1778–1845), whose father had built the parish workhouse (Chapter 8). Presumably he was responsible for Strange's Row on West Street, and for a terrace in a yard at 70–76 New

Street, which carries his name and the date 1823. Some later houses were put up by Robert Owthwaite (1804–87), whose long and varied career included cabinet-making and auctioneering. Owthwaite was also the builder of Holy Trinity church (1848), intended as 'a poor man's church' for the 'vast accumulation of houses' nearby, and went on to become the dominant developer in Henley in the succeeding decades.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the town's mid-19th-century stagnation, some new middle-class houses also went up around the fringes. Phyllis Court was rebuilt in 1837 in a nondescript Italianate style, and leased to a succession of resident gentry before becoming a country club in 1906. More interesting architecturally was Rotherfield Court, a large, red-brick, spikily Gothic house built in 1861 for the rector T.B. Morrell, on a secluded wooded site at the top of Gravel Hill. Probably it was designed by the prolific Anglican church architect Henry Woodyer. Surrey Lodge (1866), in the Hop Gardens west of Townlands, is Gothic too, but smaller, while Fonthill next door (probably c.1880–90) exemplifies the later shift to 'Old English' detailing, with copious tile-hanging and ornamental brick chimneys – a style which had a huge influence in Henley. Rather different in character are Oxford Villas, large semi-detached houses built on the Fair Mile in the early 1860s. Loosely Italianate in style, they would be more at home in Ealing than in Henley, and seem to anticipate a suburban development that, when it occurred, took place to the south rather than the north of the town. Equally untypical of Henley, and of slightly later date, is River Terrace, a block of seven three-storeyed stuccoed houses of distinctly urban or even metropolitan character, overlooking the Thames south of Friday Street. Built by the Henley Building Company on land bought from Lord Camoys in 1866, they failed to attract permanent wealthy residents, and some of them later became up-market lodging houses.<sup>4</sup>

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## REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup> **Population:** *Census. 1830s demand: Guide* (1838), 22.

<sup>2</sup> **Greys:** ORO, MS dd Par Rotherfield Greys e 7 (survey and field book, 1815); *ibid.* Greys tithe award and map (1844); *Census. 1829: Berks. Chron.* 20 June 1829. **West Street:** *Census*, 1851. **1860s houses:** abstracts of title 1886 (info. from Hilary Fisher).

<sup>3</sup> **Owthwaite:** Snare, *Dir. Oxon.* (1847); *PO Dir Oxon.* (1847 and later edns); ORO, QSD/A/47 (Greys inclosure award, 1860). **Trinity church:** ORO, MS dd Par Rotherfield Greys c 13.

<sup>4</sup> **Phyllis Court:** Burn, 267; Perkins, A, *The Phyllis Court Story* (1983), 93. **Rotherfield Court:** Climençon, *Guide*, 93. **Oxford Villas:** *Guide* (1866), 24–5. **River Terrace:** *PO Dir.* (1869); *Sale Partics.* 19 May 1887.