

# Oxfordshire

## IMPROVING THE TOWN

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.

Corresponding efforts to tackle Henley's physical infrastructure – slum housing, poor sanitation and narrow streets – did not seriously begin until the 1860s, several decades later than in large cities. Alderman Simmons, four times mayor, wrote in 1919 of the town as he remembered it in that decade: 'There was no water supply – everyone pumped from their own well – scarcely a house in the town possessed a bathroom, and the nightly rumble of the sewage carts ... was a reminder of the cess pool system of drainage'. Matters began to improve with the appointment of a Local Sanitary Board in 1864, and in 1865 the Board adopted model by-laws framed by central government to rectify some of the worst abuses. These led to provision of effective sewerage, the clearance (albeit slowly) of the noxious courts and yards behind the main streets, and the framing of regulations insisting on minimum standards for new building and for the width of new streets. A piped water supply was installed in 1880–2, and by 1890 the Medical Officer of Health could report that only 53 houses were still unconnected to sewers. The gift in 1885 of a Gothic drinking fountain in the market place (since removed to the churchyard entrance) marked this significant development. The most important street improvement took place in 1872–3, when Duke Street was widened by the local builder Charles Clements. A picturesque row of timber houses on its west side was replaced with new brick structures designed by the local partnership of Frederic Haslam and William Wing, surveyor to the Henley Local Board. In 1893 the block at the corner of Duke Street and Hart Street was rebuilt on a larger scale, and in 1892 the southern corners to Greys Road and Friday Street were rounded, again by Clements. New three-storeyed shops and offices were built there in 1896 and 1899, completing a process of street improvement begun in the early years of the century.<sup>1</sup>

New public buildings reflected improvements in social provision. One of the new Duke Street buildings was a 'School of Science and Art' or Working Men's Institute (1873–5), of which Wing, a keen local historian, became Hon Secretary. The new National school of 1848–9 on Gravel Hill, flint-built in the plain neo-Tudor style used in the new almshouses around St Mary's churchyard, provided a purpose-built elementary school for 500 boys and girls, its gabled classroom wings placed either side of a two-storeyed central part which contained housing for the teachers. Henley's other new 19th-century schools generally used flint as well, among them Holy Trinity infant school, which recalls a medieval hall with its projecting porch and single schoolroom under a steep-pitched roof. Possibly it was designed by Benjamin Ferrey, the architect of Holy Trinity church and restorer of St Mary's, while the new lower grammar school south of Hart Street (built 1856) was designed by James Brooks, known later as a designer of Anglican churches in London. The workhouse, meanwhile, was extended following its transformation into a Union workhouse, first by the Reading architects Richard and John Billing in 1835, and later by Haslam and Wing, who

respectively added a school in 1873 and more wards in 1886. The Oxford architect William Wilkinson designed a police station for the foot of West Street in 1868, and the same year a new cemetery was opened at the far end of the Fair Mile, its two chapels (for Anglicans and nonconformists) by J.S. Dodd of Reading.<sup>2</sup>

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> **Simmons:** cutting in OxS, HENL/944. **Improvements:** ORO BOR/3/A/VI/LS/5; BOR3/A/III/9; BOR/3/A/V/BM/12; BOR/3/A/VI/LM/1–2; BOR/3/A/VII/2, 10 Sept 1890. **Drinking fountain:** Kelly (1895), 105. **Clements:** HS 24 Sept 1920. **Wing and Haslam:** Gold, S M, *A Biographical Dictionary of Architects at Reading* (1999), 81, 213–6.

<sup>2</sup> **Institute:** Allen, G, *Story of Henley College* (2004), 22, 94. **Schools:** above; Cottingham and Fisher, *Henley*, 164–70. **Brooks:** Dixon, R, 'Life and Work of James Brooks' (Courtauld Institute PhD thesis 1976), 20. **Workhouse:** HAHG Jnl 14 (spring, 2000), p. 2; ORO PLU4/G/2M5; Colvin, H M, *Biog. Dict. British Architects* (2008 edn), 124; *PO Dir* (1877). **Police station:** Oxf. Jnl 16 May 1868. **Cemetery:** Kelly (1891).