

# Oxfordshire

## LATE 19TH-CENTURY HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS

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.

Large-scale domestic building did not resume until the 1880s, by which time agricultural depression in surrounding rural parishes was prompting new waves of immigration. Combined with increased life-expectancy, the need to re-house former slum-dwellers, and rising real wages, this created a demand for speculative artisan housing which transformed the town's southern part. By 1896, Emily Climenson was noting that 'a quite new town is springing up, with avenues of ... artisans' cottages'.<sup>1</sup>

The first of these new streets was Queen Street, linking Friday Street with the railway station. First laid out in 1879 by Robert Owthwaite (who also chaired the Sanitary Board), it was slowly developed in the 1880s with 'cottages of a superior class', on plots 15 ft by 60 ft with small front and back gardens. Most of the houses have bay windows, and all have rear extensions for the kitchen and scullery: amenities absent from earlier working-class housing. The facades, of red brick from local brickworks, were often enlivened by bands of blue and white or buff brick, and further enriched with terracotta detailing bought 'off the peg' from local manufacturers. Many more houses of this type went up under the direction of two brothers, Thomas and William Hamilton, the dominant builders of working-class housing in late Victorian and Edwardian Henley. William's first recorded development was in Albert Road (south of Greys Road) in 1883, and in 1892 he took leases of a triangular plot at the corner of Reading and Harpsden Roads south of the station. This led to the growth of what was in effect a self-contained suburb of artisan housing, with its own pub (the Three Horseshoes) in the 'Old English' style favoured by Brakspear's brewery. Thomas Hamilton, meanwhile, was developing Kings Road (west of Bell Street) and the connecting York and Clarence Roads, and in 1896 laid out Park and Marmion Roads next to his brother's housing development in the Reading Road. His houses were generally better built than William's, which were criticised for having walls of only half the required thickness, and insufficient lime in the mortar. But both brothers' houses still survive, and when William died in 1931 he owned some 200 houses in the town, and was the largest ratepayer. Less typical (and unusually ornamental) were cottages put up at 47/49 Gravel Hill by the Henley Cottage Improvement Association in 1890, another response to a growing need.<sup>2</sup>

Housing for the growing number of middle-class residents was provided in Caxton Terrace (1885) in Station Road, and on the higher ground south of Holy Trinity church. Robert Owthwaite acquired 104 acres west of Reading Road in the 1850s, but the time was not yet ripe for building and the ground was not laid out until after his death in 1887. Two parallel streets – St Marks Road and St Andrews Road – climbed the hill, with another (Vicarage Road) bisecting them and a shorter street (subsequently named Hamilton Avenue) further north. More streets were laid out higher up once development acquired momentum after

1900. Restrictive covenants ensured that shops and pubs were kept at bay, and the area eventually acquired an exclusive social character that it has never lost. Here there was no single developer, the plots being sold off by Owthwaite's trustees to individual purchasers, of whom many were builders. Nonetheless development occurred very slowly, and by 1897 only the lower ground near the Reading Road had been covered. Larger houses higher up began to appear soon afterwards, some of them by George and Richard Wilson (of whom the latter married Thomas Hamilton's daughter). Some of their stone-fronted houses include inventive decorative detailing of Art Nouveau character, and one semi-detached pair (31–33 St Mark's Road) carries Richard's initials. Such houses were bought as investments and let to people like George Orwell's parents, whom the writer deftly characterised in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as members of a 'lower upper middle class'.<sup>3</sup>

The most spectacular *fin-de-siecle* house in Henley was Friar Park (Figure 104), built c.1890 as a luxurious weekend retreat for the London solicitor Frank Crisp. Designed by the little-known M. Clarke Edwards, it is an architectural fantasy in red brick, stone and terracotta, mixing English, French and Flemish motifs in lavish, undisciplined profusion. But the house achieved fame (and even notoriety) mainly on account of its 62-acre grounds, complete with topiary, 25 glasshouses, a gnome-ridden grotto, and a rock garden overlooked by a miniature Matterhorn. Crisp also supported (and perhaps influenced the designs for) the new Congregationalist church of 1907, which is architecturally a cousin of Friar Park, its lantern-like tower still announcing the approach to the town from the Reading direction. And it was another Nonconformist, the builder Charles Clements, who between c.1885 and 1901 developed Norman Avenue just south of the Congregationalist church: a street of eccentrically-detailed red brick houses whose ornamentation and carved stonework again recalls Friar Park. Here, the Henley middle-class house reached its architectural apotheosis.<sup>4</sup>

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## REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup> Climenson, *Guide*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> **Queen St:** *Henley Advertiser*, 13, 17 Sept 1879. **Hamiltons:** ORO BOR 3/A/VI/LM/2, 14 May, 9 July 1883; A/VII/CM/2, 13 Mar, 9 Oct 1889, 11 June 1890; A/VII/CM/3, 16 Nov 1892 etc; A/VII/CM/4, 21 June 1899; *HS* 25 Dec 1931. **Gravel Hill:** datestone.

<sup>3</sup> **Caxton Terrace:** Sheppard, F, *Henley in Old Picture Postcards* (1983), 38; datestone. **Owthwaite:** ORO, QSD/A/47; *Henley Advertiser*, 8 Oct 1887. **St Mark's estate:** ORO BOR 3/A/VI/LM/2, 13 Mar. 1889; A/VII/LC/4, 26 April 1899 and passim; *Royal Commn on Liquor Licensing Laws* (Parl Pps 1898), 74; OS Map 6", Oxon. LIV.SW (1900 edn, revised 1897).

<sup>4</sup> **Friar Park:** Climenson, *Guide*, 93–4; Crisp, F, *Gilde to Friar Park* (1908); Mowl, T, *Historic Gardens of England: Oxon.* (2007), 119–32. **Norman Ave:** *HS* 23 Aug. 1920.