

# Oxfordshire

## RIVERSIDE AND NEW COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

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.

As the Regatta grew in popularity, the banks of the Thames were gradually transformed by new boatyards, boathouses and hotels. The Royal Hotel (south of River Terrace) went up in 1869 on the initiative of Robert Owthwaite, but was not a success; the site was taken over by Brakspear's brewery, and in 1899–1900 the hotel was rebuilt in a conventional neo-Tudor style by the prolific Reading architect G.W. Webb. Probably this was a response to the building in 1896 of the more ostentatiously 'Old English' Imperial Hotel, designed by the London architect William Theobalds. Positioned opposite the railway station, its extravagant half-timbering was well placed to catch the eye of the thousands of visitors pouring into the Regatta by train.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile the character of the river front north of the bridge was changed by the building of inns and boathouses. In 1888–9, a year after the Prince of Wales's visit to the Regatta, Tom Shepherd's boat-building shed went up on the site of the granaries immediately north of the *Red Lion*. The inn itself was the object of 'large and judicious expenditure' on improved facilities in 1889: the *Daily Telegraph* enthused in 1897 that it was 'no longer an old world coaching inn, but a fashionable hotel' complete with billiard room, reading room and two coffee rooms (Fig. 108), and yet more alterations were carried out in 1899 by William Wing, an enthusiastic oarsman. More boathouses, suitably gabled and bargeboarded, were built in the 1890s by Hobbs & Sons on the site of the boat and timber yards north of New Street, and in 1897 the ultra-fashionable Leander Club put up new headquarters, complete with boathouse, close to the bridge on the Berkshire bank of the river. Then in about 1900 Brakspear's completed the ensemble on the Henley side by rebuilding the *Little White Hart* as another 'Old English' extravaganza, its gabled roof-line enlivened by terracotta dragons made at the works of S & E Collier in Reading. A permanent regatta grandstand went up next to the grounds of Phyllis Court in 1913.<sup>2</sup>

The rebuilding of Henley's riverfront was accompanied by the provision of new public, commercial and industrial buildings. Brakspear's embarked on a pub-building spree following a major expansion of the brewery itself, which started in 1886 with the building (by Wing) of a Mineral Water Factory in New Street, and ended in 1899 with new maltings on the opposite side: Henley's most impressive example of industrial architecture (Fig. 110). In 1891 Wing also rebuilt the rival Greys Brewery in Friday Street, taken over by Brakspear's in 1896 and later demolished. The street's semi-industrial character was reinforced by the building of a plain brick factory, used variously for printing and paper-bag manufacture. Two handsome new banks went up in the 1890s: the present National Westminster in Hart Street in 1891, and Barclay's (by W. Campbell Jones) in the Market Place in 1892. Both employed the gabled neo-Tudor or 'Old English' style used later at the Imperial Hotel, and both out-Tudored the town's

genuine 16th- or early-17th-century vernacular of buildings such as Speaker's House at the other end of Hart Street. By contrast, in 1892 the talented Reading architect William Ravenscroft designed the new Masonic Hall in Reading Road in a freely-handled version of the eclectic red-brick style which contemporaries called 'Queen Anne'.<sup>3</sup>

Finally in 1899–1901, following more than two decades of successful municipal activity, came the most impressive of Henley's public buildings: the new town hall. It was designed by H.T. Hare, one of the most successful architects of public buildings in late Victorian and Edwardian England. Hare had recently completed the new town hall in Oxford, but here he abandoned its rich neo-Jacobean style in favour of a more restrained 'Wrenaissance' manner, looking back to the comfortable red-brick style of Henley's Georgian houses, but with a suitably imposing pedimented façade to the Market Place. Inside, and especially in the public hall upstairs, is a rich display of Edwardian Baroque ornament, particularly in plaster. Its style is a typical expression of civic pride in an era which, with hindsight, can perhaps be seen as Henley's heyday.<sup>4</sup>

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## REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup> **Royal:** Sheppard, *Postcards*, pl. 42. **Webb:** Gold, *Reading Architects*, 201–5. **Imperial:** *Builder*, 25 April 1896, 371.

<sup>2</sup> **Red Lion etc:** *HS* 13 Jan 1899; Climenson, *Guide*, 37; Cottingham and Fisher, *Henley*, 15–16; Bodl. GA Oxon b 6, f. 36 (sale partics 1901); Cottingham, 185–9. **Boathouses:** ORO BOR 3/A/VII/CM/3, 11 Jan 1893 and passim; Pilling, J, and Ward, L, *Henley-on-Thames Past and Present* (2000), 58. **Little White Hart:** Cottingham, 154–6. **Grandstand:** Whitehead, D, *Henley-on-Thames: a History* (2007), 127–8.

<sup>3</sup> **Breweries etc:** Sheppard, *Brewery*, 74–9; Cottingham, 305–11. **Banks:** Sheppard, *Postcards*, pl. 27. **Masonic Hall:** Gold, *Reading Architects*, 149.

<sup>4</sup> Aston, J M, *Henley-on-Thames Town Hall* (HAHG, 1975); Gray, A S, *Edwardian Architecture: a Biographical Dictionary* (1985), 204–6.