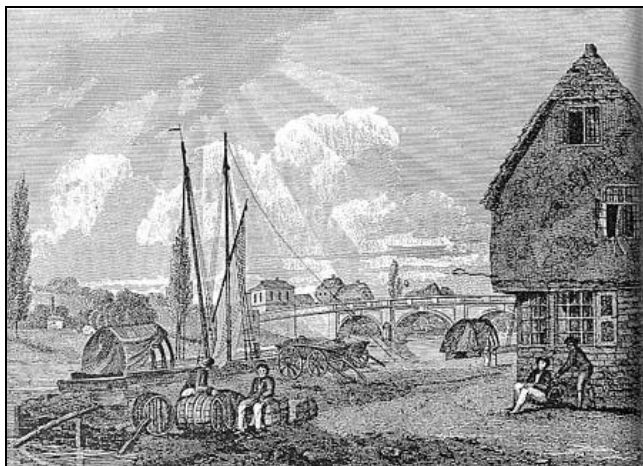


# Oxfordshire

## HENLEY'S WHARFS

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.



*The waterfront south of New Street around 1813, the former Anchor pub in the foreground. Statements by Henley people in the 1780s paint a vivid picture of the bustling activity along this stretch, with barges being constantly loaded and unloaded. However the road flooded frequently, and was newly embanked around 1785. Fortune's or Eylsley's wharf is just off to the left.*

Bargemen landed and loaded their goods along much of the Henley waterfront in the 18th century. Long before then the stretch between New Street and Phyllis Court had been developed as a large commercial wharf called Fortune's, Hawkins's or Eylsley's, after a succession of 17th- and 18th-century tenants. By the 1760s there was a pub there called the Ship, and in the 1780s this was the only Henley wharf to have a crane. The Stonors of Stonor Park had another wharf south of Friday Street, though in the 1690s that seems to have been little more than a large open area in waterside meadows, where timber and other goods were stacked for loading.

The stretch between Hart Street and New Street, where the road sloped gently to the river, had no formal landing facilities, but statements made by inhabitants in the 1780s show that barges habitually stopped there, and that the whole frontage was a hive of bustling activity. Barge tackle was regularly laid on the shore for several days while barges were cleaned and blacked, and freight of all kinds was piled up there awaiting loading or collection. Often it was left overnight, either rolled into gateways or covered with tar cloths, and guarded by a night watchman who received 6d. a night. Coal was unloaded by hand, the sacks carried on men's backs, while imported grain was either loaded onto carts or carried into Barrett March's adjoining granaries. Conversely, farmers selling grain frequently carted it to the waterside for loading onto barges. Barges outside the *Red Lion* were tethered to 'stumps' or posts set in the water, though the campshot there extended no more than 150 feet along the waterfront – roughly the length of a single barge.<sup>1</sup>

Improvements to the waterfront in the 1780s proved tricky, since owners of Henley manor claimed it as part of their property, and refused to allow any development without compensation. This had already caused controversy earlier in the century, when John Smith, a Henley bargemaster, built a landing place between Hart Street and New Street, only to have it torn down on the orders of Sir William Whitelocke. The roadway there flooded frequently, however, and as part of the bridge scheme the corporation decided to press ahead with a new embankment flanked by a riverside wall. The result was a series of lawsuits with Strickland Freeman of Fawley Court (Sambrooke Freeman's nephew and heir), who demanded £5,000 compensation, and separately sued Barrett March, the owner of the *Red Lion* granaries, for landing goods there. That the town was already in conflict with Freeman over fishing rights can hardly have helped, but armed with the 1781 Bridge Act, which authorised new roads to the bridge, the corporation seems to have won its case. The new embankment duly appeared on an estate map drawn up a few years later, commissioned – ironically – by Strickland Freeman.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **Fortune's:** e.g. ORO, MS Wills Oxon. 162/4/28; *ibid.* BOR/3/B/II/16/1–2; Oxf. Jnl Synopsis, 20 March 1783; Cottingham, 212–14. **Stonor wharf:** Henley River & Rowing Museum, Fawley estate map (c.1788), and Jan Siberechts' painting of 'Henley from the Wargrave Road' (1698). **Hart Street to New Street:** ORO, BOR/3/B/II/24/23–4, 46–52, 57.

<sup>2</sup> Burn, 96–7; ORO BOR/3/B/II/24, *passim*; Henley River & Rowing Museum, Fawley estate map (c.1788).