

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2021

Hobbs of Henley - Simon Wenham

Wargrave Local History Society held another successful meeting using Zoom in January. In a change to the previously announced programme, Simon Wenham gave an illustrated presentation on Hobb's of Henley.

Simon, who is involved with Oxford University's Continuing Education programme, has a particular interest in the social history of the Victorian era.

He explained that his study of the local boatyard arose from an administrative error which saw him having a summer job working at Salter's boats in Oxford. This led to him studying that company's history for his Master's degree, and then for his Doctorate, which he completed in 2013.

Having completed and published the results of his research work into Salter's boatyard, he met Tony and Jonathan Hobbs, who commented that producing a history of their firm would be a good way to mark its 150th anniversary in 2020. Unlike Salter's, however, Hobb's did not have a large archive on which he could base his research. Unlike many company histories written to mark a significant anniversary, this was not meant to be a promotional volume, but to recount the history of the family and the firm – although considering how long the business has existed, it must have been a successful enterprise.

The founder of the boating business was Harry Hobbs, who had taken over The Ship public house in Henley. As publicans had to hold an appropriate licence, records of who was at a particular inn are available – but these only showed Harry at the Ship from April 1871. Trade directories of the town only referred to boating part of Hobb's business from in the 1930s, when they say it started in 1892, but by the 1950s the year they were founded was given as 1870 – the Hobbs family were not sure what the source of these starting dates was.

Simon therefore set out to find the earliest documented connections of the Hobbs family to the river Thames. He traced them back to 1490 in Hambleton. The earliest written evidence of the family being associated with the river was in 1756, when Margaret Hobbs of Hambleton died, and the records state that her husband Thomas was a wharfinger. The area was well known for its timber at that time, much of which would be transported by river, and so the wharf would have been an important facility locally. A survey conducted in 1798, the Posse Comitatus, set out to count how many fighting men might be available should Napoleon decide to invade Britain. For Hambleton, it listed 15 men called Hobbs – and 6 of those were called John and 4 were William! There was a variety of trades listed, and the 4 wharfingers in Hambleton were John Hobbs, John Hobbs senior, John Hobbs junior and a William Plummer. The Hobbs family were the wharfingers for several generations, therefore, with the last being Henry, who had the wharf at Mill End in 1861 (he died in 1890, his obituary saying that the Hobbs family had held the wharf for over 200 years). He had also operated the nearby ferry across to Aston – the publican at the Flower Pot at that time was James Arlett, whose family later set up a rival boatbuilding concern in Henley.

Another early reference to the Hobbs family was found in documents relating to Burrow Farm, which belonged to Balliol College. Thomas and William Hobbs had taken a lease on this property in 1621 – and the map of the property showed the River Thames running alongside.

A crucial document in establishing the date when Hobb's' boatyard was founded, however, was a large pictorial advert dated 1900 that hung in the company's office. This stated that it was established in 1870 - being within living memory it was likely to be accurate, especially as Henry Hobbs was still alive and presumably verified the date given.

The Henry Hobbs who founded the present boat firm was born in 1841, and had taken over the Ship Inn from the Hooper family – (who ran another of Henley’s boat building concerns). The Ship was close to Henley’s main commercial wharf. In 1875. The incidents reported regarding the Ship in Henry’s time were typical of the time – serving gin out of hours in 1875, or the need to break up a rumpus in 1888, for example. In 1893, Henry caught a thief trying to take equipment from the workshop, and hauled the culprit by the collar to the police station!



Harry Hobbs

There was still some commercial activity at the time, with barges running weekly to London in the 1880s, but by the end of the century they were disappearing quickly. Ferries also continued to provide cross-river links, there being no other bridges across the Thames between Sonning and Marlow.

One of Henry’s early boating ventures was to hire out punts for anglers to use. They would moor mid-stream, sitting in cane chairs in the boat, to catch fish such as trout, carp or barbel. This was a popular activity at the time – one noted amateur angler at the end of the 19th century was A Edward Hobbs, (an eminent architect, but not directly related to Henry), who caught hundreds of trout. He became Hon Secretary of the Henley Fishing Preservation Society, and wrote widely about angling.

. There were tensions, though, as many took to the river as a social event did not always respect the activities of rowers, anglers, and others who used the river – something portrayed by a cartoon in *Punch* in 1869 entitled “Captain Jinks of the 'Selfish' and His Friends Enjoying Themselves on the River”.

In 1897, Hobbs joined with Charles Luker in buying the Henley Standard from its previous owners, although Hobbs involvement was fairly short-lived, as they sold their interest to Charles Luker in 1900.

This late Victorian and Edwardian era was the “Golden Age” of the Thames, and pleasure boating became very fashionable – one of few activities where there was mixing of the sexes. Especially popular was the Henley Royal Regatta, it becoming much easier for visitors to reach the town following the opening of the railway in 1857. The 5,000 or so visitors matched the resident population at the time – a boost for trade, but it put a large strain on the town’s resources. Hobbs have long been an important part of this local boating scene – hiring out various types of craft for the event, so the Regatta is important to the firm financially. From 1919 until 1988, they also undertook the lengthy process of setting out of the regatta course.

There were several other boatyards in Henley in the early 20th century, including Sheppard (then by the Red Lion), one by the Angel, Carpenters, Parrotts, Hoopers – as well as Hobbs, whilst Salters Steamers also called there on the way between Oxford and Kingston. There was a wide range of craft available then – skiffs becoming popular, whilst the latest technology being promoted by Hobbs at the turn of the century was electrically powered boats.

Another aspect of the business to grow at this time was pleasure craft to take passengers for trips on the river. The 50ft long Marian was able to carry 50 people (the firm's telegraphic address was "Marian, Henley"). One incident involving this vessel was a collision in 1909 between it and the Windsor Belle. Each owner blamed the other – but it transpired that the captain of the Windsor Belle was not at the wheel at the time, so the court ruled in favour of Hobbs.

Recreational camping was another activity to begin at this time along the Thames. The equipment needed then was relatively heavy, and so boats were hired out to make it easier to carry the tents etc to the site. There were even boats that could become floating tents. The campers, however, caused problems for the local landowners – the crimes reported including using wine bottles to injure livestock, stealing fruit and vegetables, leaving litter, or even "milking cows at 'unholy hours'". The river was certainly a 'busy place' at that time.

Hobbs boatbuilding activities expanded from 1911, when they acquired the Springfield Yard at Goring from Sam Saunders. They had made a number of umpire launches for use at the Henley Royal Regatta, which fitted in well with Hobbs' other work. Hobbs' work expanded to build more stylish craft, including some very elegant slipper launches (some being larger and more graceful than the typical examples from other suppliers), yachts, Broads cruisers, etc. By the 1960s, however, the introduction of fibreglass meant that traditional boatbuilding diminished. Hobbs was able to adapt to the new conditions by opening a chandlery in 1965, as well as providing mooring space – their clients including many well-known personalities such as Vince Hill and Jeremy Paxman.

During the World War 2, despite the Royal Marines needing to take the canoes for training military personnel, Hobbs were able to continue, and – surprisingly - from 1942 leisure boating increased. The river was away from the restricted access coastal areas, and so the river was seen as a safe and accessible alternative location. In the post-war era, leisure cruising gained in popularity, so that during the 1970s there were over a million craft working through the locks each year – Marsh Lock being the busiest of them. This growth in holidaying on the river had been promoted by tv adverts by Hoseasons, there being about 800 such vessels on the river by 1980, including from Hobbs who traded under the Thames Hire banner. Changes in holidaying habits, however, saw this reduce to around 300 by 1990, when Hobbs sold their fleet.

People still wanted to enjoy time on the river, and so Hobbs invested in a larger craft - the 44ft long Maratana. This could provide short trips on the Thames, which stayed between Marsh and Hambleden locks, so avoiding the delays at those points, and thus became very popular. It was the problems of timing boats through the locks that led Salters to cut their through services in 1974. To cater for the increasing trip traffic, Hobbs brought an even larger boat into service in 1983, the Consuta II. Like Maratana, this is a single deck craft, so could still not cater for larger corporate parties etc and in order to provide for this market an even larger boat was added to the fleet. Around 110 feet long, the New Orleans cost about £½ million, came into use in 1991, and offers catering on board.

The hire side of the business then sought to pander to the higher end of the market. An Olympic class of craft was instituted, the name reflecting their origin as boats that had been used to transport VIPs to the 2012 Olympics.

To enable this continued growth, the company had obtained additional premises over time. Having begun by The Ship inn, the site at Station Road was acquired in 1898 – ideally situated to cater for visitors arriving by train and then in 1917, the large yard that had belonged to Sheppard on the Wargrave Road was obtained. Adding extra properties enabled new markets to be explored, and in time there was room to store 100 boats, with different yards for fitting out. As there is a limited amount of river frontage available, it also has kept out competitors.

Harry Hobbs who established the firm was a direct descendant of the Hambleden wharfingers, and 5 of his sons joined the business. His son William (known as Bill) went on to develop it, with his brother Arthur, although the latter later set up a rival concern. Bill became involved with the local community becoming superintendent of the town fire brigade, and serving as Mayor of Henley. His son Richard (called Dick) succeeded him as head of Hobbs, and also became Mayor, serving on 3 occasions, as well as being a member of the Thames Conservancy. His daughter, Margaret, also was Mayor of Henley, Dick's son, Tony,

followed as the company's managing director. Although Tony did not become involved in formal politics, his involvement in many community organisations led to him receiving the Henley Town Medal, whilst he also served as a Royal Waterman, and was awarded the MBE. His son, Jonathan, is the current managing director, and also a Royal Waterman.

Of course, a business depends not only on its owners, but its workforce. The boating trade does not offer all-year round employment for many – so although 25 or so staff are needed in the summer, and 50 for the Regatta, only 10 are kept on for the winter months, so most have another occupation. The work is varied – one commenting that being the driver of an umpire launch is 'the best job' – but then being in the piling gang was 'less glamorous'.

Simon reflected that Hobbs had survived for such a long time because it had made "astute, brave and sensible business decisions", had learnt from their competitors, and diversified to meet changing conditions, now seeing itself as a 'hospitality company', that benefits from, and contributes to, the "Henley mystique", to be, as their motto says, the "Best in Boating since 1870".

Simon's history of Hobbs has been published by Amberley, and apart from the on-line booksellers, is available from bookshops in Henley or at Hobbs' offices.

