

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2002

The River and Rowing Museum

Jane Bowen, from the museum, began by explaining that The River and Rowing Museum is - unusually - housed in a modern building, and that they are keen for it to fit in with its surroundings. It therefore has a pitched roof - to match local barn architecture - and the Marsh Meadows around the site is being naturalised by the Henley Wildlife Group.

She then showed us that many different techniques were needed to 'tell the story'. A trireme, for example, no longer existed - but by the use of a model, visual displays and a full size reconstruction of a section, it was possible to show such a boat was powered by 170 people. The museum also houses a number of original craft - such as the first boat to win the Oxford v Cambridge Boat Race in 1829 (rowed at Henley at that time), and various later boats showing the development of outriggers, streamlined hull shapes, and the use of modern materials like carbon fibre. Several of these will be included in the special summer exhibition *Design for Speed* this year.

Another gallery at the museum traces the history of the River Thames, and takes the visitor on a 'journey' from the source downstream. In the limited space available, this is a 'selected' account, but it is hoped to add a computer resource on a wide range of specific topics of the history of the river and the area close to it. This gallery also has some craft in it - such as a Saxon 'dug out' log boat, found in the river bed at Henley in the 1960s, a Canadian canoe and a Thames skiff - and information on mills - with models to help interpret the history - and other 'paraphernalia' associated with the river. The third main gallery traces the history of Henley itself - as to why it came to be situated there, and also how it might have been 'by-passed' by a canal from Sonning to Monkey Island, as a way to avoid the many flash locks on the Thames - the invention of the pound lock meant that the canal project was never built. The museum has a 'Genius and Gentility' exhibition on until June 9th - about people such as Humphrey Gainsborough, the engineer who saw to the installation of 5 pound locks from Hurley to Sonning - and also the 'important' houses close to the river, such as Park Place. The Henley Gallery also houses the steam launch, *Eva*, the 'Henley Sword' - which dates from the Iron Age, and many other interesting local items.

The rest of Jane's talk was about the recently acquired painting by Jan Siberechts, called *Henley from the Wargrave Road*. Siberechts was the son of a sculptor, and produced a number of paintings from about 1670 for the Duke of Buckingham at Cliveden, but these were all lost in a fire about 100 years later. The Henley picture dates from 1698, and is an artistic interpretation of the scene, rather than a precise representation. It shows the town of Henley nestling in the hills in the mid distance, with the site of Marsh Lock in the foreground, and travellers on horseback along the Wargrave road. The origins of the picture are being researched - it seems certain that being of that size it will have been commissioned, but not yet clear by whom. It also seems that Siberechts painted at least 5 landscapes of the Henley area - one very similar to that which the Museum now owns. By tracing the ownership of these, and also who the landowners were at the time, however, it is hoped to find out for whom it was painted.