

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2004

Henley - Ancient and Modern

An audio-visual presentation by Geoff Briggs and David Bounds about Henley Ancient and Modern formed the subject of the Wargrave Local History Society's April meeting.

The programme had been compiled over several years, to show historic aspects of Henley, and to record what it looked like at the 'turn of the century'. It was also evident that a number of features have already changed since the start of the new millennium. The 'tour' began with a view of the town instantly recognised as Henley - whether on postcards, books or jigsaws - the Angel public house and Henley Bridge. Signs on the bridge record the town's links to Falaise, Lechligen and Borama - and warn 'engine drivers' that only one loaded truck may be taken at a time over the bridge.

Our 'guided tour' then took us to the Fairmile - where once it is thought a Roman road ran from Dorchester, to cross the Thames by a ford close to the Phyllis Court Club. The latter is on, or close to, the site of one of the oldest manor houses in the area, and although the present house dates from 1870, the site includes the remains of a medieval moat, and a wall (now with moorings alongside) built by Oliver Cromwell. From there it is not far to the bridge - the present one of Headington stone replaced one that had lasted for about 600 years until 1774 - despite Civil War damage in 1642. Although the remains of the 1170s bridge suggest it was built of stone, by 1690 much of it was of timber construction - probably oak from Windsor Forest, which stretched this far at the time. On the town side of the bridge, the Red Lion and St Mary's parish church lie close together - the Prince Regent is reputed to have eaten 14 mutton chops at one sitting in the Red Lion! Behind here is the Chantry House - built around 1400, - looking to be 3 floors on one side, but 2 on the other, due to the slope of the land - it once housed the Grammar School founded by James I.

A good impression of the layout of the town was given by several views taken from the top of the church tower, looking down stream, upstream and towards the Town Hall. The road leading that way - Hart Street - had at one time been 'High Street'. It takes its name from the White Hart, a mock Tudor fronted building which had been a public house for 500 years. Next door, the Catherine Wheel was formerly one of the 4 main coaching inns in Henley. The Town Hall itself was opened in 1901 - the previous one being taken down and re-erected at Crazies Hill. There are several pubs close by, and the former Kings Arms now houses the Citizens Advice Bureau, with the Tourist Information Centre in the attractively converted stables behind. Also close to the Town Hall is the engineering works of Stuart Turner - one of the best known Henley companies, who started in 1908, and were well known for small engines, although they now specialise in pumps. The area in front of the Town Hall, named Falaise Square in recognition of the link with the French town in 1974, had a double row of stalls (called Middle Row) until 1781, with butchers on one side and fishmongers the other.

Aspects of the river included the Rope Walk - which seems to date from the 16th century, when ropes were made for the barges. Moving to the Red Lion lawn took us to the waters edge, past the Henley Royal Regatta headquarters, the 'Baltic House' (one time home to the Baltic Exchange), Hobbs Boatyard and thence to Marsh Lock - site at one time of 2 mills. The pound locks had been designed by Humphrey Gainsborough - one time Congregational minister in the town - and the lock cottage records the heights of floods in 1875, 1894 and 1947. Returning to the town, pictures of the building of the River and Rowing Museum in 1996 were followed by some of the items exhibited inside. The programme concluded with a look at Henley in Royal Regatta week, and the celebrations to welcome home the 2000 Olympic gold winning rowing team.

Many other places of note - old, such as Friar Park, or new, such as the Perpetual buildings - were included in our photographic tour of Henley, and copies of the presentation are also available on video tape, at the River and Rowing Museum in Henley.
