

**VCH OXFORDSHIRE:  
ONLINE TEXTS IN PROGRESS: HENLEY**  
This version November 2006  
© University of London



## HENLEY COMMUNICATIONS II

### Roads and Bridges

#### *Early Roads*

Henley stands at the intersection of several early routes, whose importance probably long predated the building of a bridge and the creation of the planned town. The road from Dorchester and Wallingford, which enters modern Henley along the Fairmile, is almost certainly of Roman or earlier origin, and its early course around Bix and Benson has been traced in some detail. Westwards, it connected with a north--south road from Watling Street and Alchester, which ran through Dorchester and on to Silchester; east of the river it may have joined the main Roman road to Silchester from St Albans (Verulamium). Unequivocal evidence of an early river crossing on the route has so far proved elusive: piles have allegedly been seen in the river bed near Phyllis Court, together with traces of a buried road running towards them through the grounds, although a watching brief in 1996 found no significant remains. Nevertheless the road presumably forded the river somewhere in the vicinity, which may provide a context for a substantial Roman building, possibly part of a significant settlement, excavated on Bell Street.<sup>1</sup> Presumably the road continued in use during the Anglo-Saxon period, linking both the royal manorial centre at Bensington and the Alfredian *burh* at Wallingford with the important royal minster at Cookham in Berkshire. Possibly it helped to determine the topography of the large Saxon estate of Bensington, which extended along much of its length, straddling both the Chilterns and the later Hundred boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

The building of a bridge at Henley in or before the late 12th century both reflected and enhanced the road's importance, particularly from the early or mid 13th century as Henley emerged as a major trans-shipment point.<sup>3</sup> By then the road formed part of the main route from London to Gloucester and the Welsh Marches, which passed through Wallingford and Oxford until the building of Abingdon bridge in the early 15th century; thereafter the favoured route for long-distance westwards traffic from Henley was through Abingdon, Faringdon, and Lechlade, or (via

<sup>1</sup> I.D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain* (1973 edn), pp. 166--7; F.J. Malpas, 'Roman Roads South and East of Dorchester', *Oxoniensia*, 52 (1987), 29--33; C. Moloney, 'Excavations and Building Survey at Bell Street, Henley-on-Thames, 1993-4', *Oxoniensia*, 62 (1997), 109--10, 129; M. Henig and P. Booth, *Roman Oxon.* (2000), 36, 50--1, 74--5.

<sup>2</sup> K. Tiller (ed.), *Benson: A Village Through its History* (1999), 19--20, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Below (early bridge); for trans-shipment, below (river transport).

Newbridge) through Witney and Burford, though the Dorchester road remained the chief route from Henley to Oxford.<sup>4</sup> In the 1780s, by which time coaching had 'greatly increased' traffic over Henley bridge, the road formed part of the 'Great Western Road' from London, leading to South Wales and the north-west of England.<sup>5</sup> In the mid 17th century a light carriage could complete the journey from Henley to London in half a day,<sup>6</sup> though laden waggons must have taken substantially longer.

By the 13th or 14th centuries, and probably much earlier, a network of other roads linked Henley with the surrounding towns of Watlington, Wycombe, Marlow, Maidenhead, and Reading.<sup>7</sup> The Reading--Marlow road, intersecting the Dorchester--London road at Henley's central crossroads, must have formed a major route by the time the planned town was laid out; in 1338 a Caversham man transporting goods to London carted them up the Reading road to Henley, and it was up the same road that Royalists attacking the town approached in 1643.<sup>8</sup> Traffic from Southampton, recorded in the 15th century,<sup>9</sup> perhaps also entered Henley through Reading. A road from Hambleden, presumably part of the Marlow road, was mentioned in 1416, and a road from Goring (passing presumably through Rotherfield Greys to Gravel Hill) in 1353.<sup>10</sup> Travel along such roads could be hazardous, particularly along those stretches passing through neighbouring woods. In 1254 and 1262, following a spate of robberies and murders, the road from Maidenhead was ordered to be widened and neighbouring trees cut back, an injunction repeated almost verbatim in 1634.<sup>11</sup> Robberies on the roads from Nuffield and Watlington were mentioned in the 1530s and 1540s,<sup>12</sup> and as late as 1797 Caroline Powys's husband was waylaid by a highwayman on the Oxford road, only 4 miles from Henley.<sup>13</sup>



Henley-Nettlebed road, 1675  
(J. Ogilby, *Britannia*)

<sup>4</sup> Peberdy, 'Henley', 45; *VCH Oxon.* IV, 284; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1553--8, p. 50 (no. 96); J. Ogilby, *Britannia* (1675), pp. 28--9.

<sup>5</sup> Henley-on-Thames Bridge Act, 21 Geo. III, c. 33; Henley-on-Thames Bridge Amendment Act, 48 Geo. III, c. 111 (Local and Personal).

<sup>6</sup> Spalding (ed.), *Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke*, 189.

<sup>7</sup> Peberdy, 'Henley', 41.

<sup>8</sup> *Cal. Close*, 1337--9, 573; Samuel Turner, *A True Relation of a Late Skirmish at Henley-upon-Thames* (1643).

<sup>9</sup> O. Coleman (ed.), *Brokage Bk of Southampton 1443--44*, I (Southampton Rec. Ser. 4, 1960), p. xxxii; below, econ. hist.

<sup>10</sup> *Cal. Inq. p.m.* XX, p. 178 (no. 571); T.R. Gambier-Parry (ed.), *Charters relating to Goring, Streatley and the Neighbourhood, 1181-1546*, II (ORS 14, 1932), p. 157.

<sup>11</sup> *Close*, 1254--6, 9; 1261--4, 120; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1633--4, 545.

<sup>12</sup> *L&P Hen.* VIII, XI, p. 86; *Cal. Pat.* 1548--9, 246.

<sup>13</sup> E.J. Climenson (ed.), *Passages from Diaries of Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys* (1899), 297.

## **The Early Bridge**

The existing Thames crossing, at the east end of Hart Street, may have been preceded by a ford further north near Phyllis Court.<sup>14</sup> A suggestion that Henley could have originated as a 10th-century bridge-*burh*, created to defend against Viking penetration of Wessex along the Thames, lacks archaeological or documentary evidence,<sup>15</sup> and the earliest unequivocal indication of a bridge is the remains of two stone arches abutting the existing structure at either end, one (on the Berkshire side) excavated in 1985, and the other forming part of the cellars of the Angel Inn. Both have been dated on stylistic grounds to the late 12th century, suggesting that the bridge may have been built in connection with the creation of the planned town and the possible extension of the royal manor house;<sup>16</sup> the dating has been questioned in the light of later references to bridge repairs or rebuilding,<sup>17</sup> though a bridge certainly existed by 1225, when the king granted custody of it at pleasure.<sup>18</sup>

The 12th-century bridge may have been entirely stone-built. A large masonry block discovered on the riverbed in midstream, with diagonal tooling similar to that in the end arches, has been interpreted as part of an ashlar-faced cut-water, and in the mid 16th century Leland reported that stone foundations remained visible beneath the bridge at low water. By then, however, the main span was of timber, and may have been so for some considerable time, the earlier bridge having apparently collapsed at an unknown date.<sup>19</sup> In the 1690s the timber structure linked two stone arches at the Berkshire end with one at the Henley end;<sup>20</sup> the latter was presumably that later embedded in the cellars of the Angel, and one of the former was presumably that found in 1985. Possibly they had been reconstructed in 1498, when funds were collected 'for making two arches of the bridge', though if so they may have been reassembled using old materials.<sup>21</sup> The bridge's crucial importance to the town was reflected in numerous grants of property and rents towards its upkeep from the late 13th and early 14th century, the origin of the 'bridge rents' held by the borough assembly and later by the corporation, and administered by the bridgemen as elected

<sup>14</sup> Above.

<sup>15</sup> Peberdy, 'Henley', 17--19; below, origins and devt of town.

<sup>16</sup> COS, SMR, PRN 2215; J. Steane and J. Andrews, 'Henley Bridge', *S. Midlands Archaeol.* 15 (1985), 77--9; B. Durham, 'Henley Bridge', *ibid.* 16 (1986), 101; A.H.G. Cottingham, *The Hostelries of Henley* (2000), pp. 34--5. For town and manor house, below, origins and devt of town; manors (residence and manorial sites).

<sup>17</sup> Steane and Andrews, 'Henley Bridge', 77--9, citing the 'making of two arches' in 1498.

<sup>18</sup> *Rot. Litt. Claus.* II, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> B. Durham, 'Henley, St Anne's Bridge', *S. Midlands Archaeol.* 19 (1989), 52; Leland, *Itin.* (ed. Toulmin Smith), V, 71. Oaks for its repair were granted from Windsor Forest in the 1230s, and an inhabitant left timber for the same purpose in 1504: *Close*, 1231--4, 461; 1234--7, 146; *Oxon. Wills* (ORS 39), 84.

<sup>20</sup> As depicted in Jan Siberechts' paintings of Henley in the Tate Gallery, London (c. 1690), and in the River and Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames (1698).

<sup>21</sup> Briers (ed.), *Henley Borough Recs.* 121, 132; for lesser repairs, *ibid.* 63, 147, 166, 175, 199, 205, 210, 226. The 'arches' could conceivably have been timber, though the word suggests stone.

borough officers.<sup>22</sup> A hermit authorised to collect alms in 1496 was probably primarily responsible for the chapel of St Ann on (or by) the bridge, rather than for the bridge itself.<sup>23</sup>



**Henley bridge in 1698**, from Jan Siberechts' painting from the Wargrave road (Henley River & Rowing Museum)

The bridge evidently suffered during the Civil War: in January 1643 Parliamentary troops entering the town were delayed because 'the bridge was not quite laid down',<sup>24</sup> and in 1645 a rate of nearly £50 was charged on the inhabitants after the bridge was 'broken down by military forces'.<sup>25</sup> In 1712 it was again 'very slight and ... frequently down', and by 1719 the timber part had reportedly been rebuilt and the stone arches at the east end destroyed, presumably leaving just the surviving buried arch.<sup>26</sup> During the following decades the timber structure was repeatedly damaged by floods and, though patched up, seems to have become increasingly unstable: during major repairs in 1754--6 the corporation briefly supplied a ferry, and during exceptional floods in 1774 the bridge was allegedly 'carried away'.<sup>27</sup> It had been repaired by early 1777, however, and although 'decayed and ruinous' seems to have remained in use until its demolition around 1784--5, during construction of the new stone bridge immediately along its north side.<sup>28</sup> By then the bridge's aesthetic as well as structural shortcomings seem to have concerned some local gentry, Sambrooke Freeman of Fawley Court arranging in 1769 for the structure to be covered with boards representing a bridge at Florence, probably the 16th-century Ponte Santa Trinita.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For the bridge rents, below, local govt (town property); for early grants, ORO, BOR/3/A/IX/1/1--2, 10, 14, 19--20.

<sup>23</sup> Briers (ed.), *Henley Borough Recs.* 5, 117, 173; E.A. Jones, 'Hermits and Anchorites in Oxon.' *Oxoniensia*, 63 (1998), 66--7.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Turner, *True Relation of a Skirmish at Henley-upon-Thames* (1643).

<sup>25</sup> Burn, *Hist. Henley*, 43; the context implies that this was not the drawbridge at Phyllis Court mentioned elsewhere.

<sup>26</sup> C.E. Doble (ed.), *Hearne's Colln*, IV (OHS 34), 28; VI (ORS 43), 324.

<sup>27</sup> ORO, BOR/3/A/V/BM/8, pp. 151--2, 175; *CJ* 38, 138--9; Burn, *Hist. Henley*, 297.

<sup>28</sup> ORO, BOR/3/A/V/BM/8, pp. 423, 445, 455--6, 477, 479, 501--2; BOR/3/A/XIX/BB/7, 18 May 1782, 7 Nov. 1783, 2 Jan. 1784, 4 and 18 Nov. 1785; *CJ* 38, 138--9; Henley Bridge Act, 21 Geo. III, c. 33.

<sup>29</sup> F. Sheppard, 'Henley Bridge and its Architect', *Archit. Hist.* 27 (1984), 321, citing BOR/3/A/V/BM/8, 14 Aug 1769.

***Eighteenth-Century Improvements and the New Bridge***

From the early 18th century the chief roads through Henley were gradually improved by local turnpike trusts and on private initiative, inspired by a general increase in traffic, and particularly by the growth of coaching. The road from Maidenhead to Henley bridge was turnpiked in 1718,<sup>30</sup> and the Henley--Dorchester road (continuing to Oxford via Abingdon) in 1735--6.<sup>31</sup> The south--north route from Reading to Marlow, continuing to St Albans and Hatfield (Herts), was turnpiked in 1768, with imposing toll houses in the form of classical lodges erected on Henley's northern edge near the entrance to Phyllis Court, probably through the influence of Sambrook Freeman as lord and owner.<sup>32</sup> Some of the ancient buildings blocking Hart Street were apparently demolished around



***Former toll house near Phyllis Court, on the Marlow road; possibly designed by Wyatt***

the same time, presumably to improve access, and were replaced with a weighing engine to weigh carts and waggons for tolls;<sup>33</sup> before then, traffic from Oxford to London reportedly passed along New Street and along the riverside (which often flooded), presumably to avoid the worst obstructions.<sup>34</sup> The same year the steep gradient from Henley bridge up Remenham Hill, on the Maidenhead road, was substantially reduced by the construction of a cutting and embankment, the engineering overseen by the Congregationalist minister of Henley, Humphrey Gainsborough. Presumably the scheme was instigated by the turnpike trustees, though General Henry Seymour Conway of nearby Park Place may also have been involved: around 1763 he had already improved the Henley--Wargrave road (part of the route from London to Bath) by building a stone bridge over the Happy Valley, a picturesque combe on his estate.<sup>35</sup> The importance of such improvements

<sup>30</sup> *CJ XVIII*, 728; *LJ XX*, 607, 662.

<sup>31</sup> Henley, Dorchester, and Culham Turnpike Act, 9 Geo. II, c. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Reading--Hatfield Turnpike Act, 8 Geo. III, c. 50; W.E. Bruce, 'The Origin of the Phyllis Court Lodges', *Henley Standard*, 16 Feb. 1972 (copy in COS, ORCC file 58).

<sup>33</sup> ORO, BOR/3/A/IX/1/633; BOR/3/A/V/BM/8, pp. 475--6, 514.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* BOR/3/B/II/24/1c, defendants' case; BOR/3/B/II/24/19. Other obstructions, including Middle Row, the Guildhall, and Bishop Longland's almshouses, survived much longer: below.

<sup>35</sup> Sheppard, 'Henley Bridge', 320.

was reflected in membership of the trusts: that for the Dorchester turnpike in 1735 included the mayor and corporation of Henley and Gislingham Cooper, then lord of Henley and Fawley, as well as other leading townsmen and landowners.<sup>36</sup>



*Henley roads in the 18th century, from maps of Richard Davis (1797, left), and John Rocque (1761, right)*

The decision to build a **new stone bridge**, financed by tolls rather than from the increasingly inadequate bridge rents, was taken by November 1780, when the corporation ordered the town clerk to prepare a petition to parliament; the new bridge was to be erected 'as near as may be on the north side of the present bridge', with 'liberty to erect a toll gate' and provision for lighting, watching, and paving. The proposal led to protracted wrangling between the corporation and local gentry demanding representation on the trust, among them Sambrooke Freeman of Fawley Court, who procured his own design and pressed for the bridge to be moved to the end of New Street; the proposal was successfully challenged on the grounds that it would divert traffic away from the trading area and seriously prejudice the town's market, serving no purpose but to improve the view from Freeman's house. William Hayward of Shrewsbury was engaged as architect in September 1781, possibly with Conway's support, and work began early in 1782, soon after John Townsend of Oxford was contracted as builder; the old bridge, abutting on the south, seems to have survived until around 1784 or 1785 when work was well advanced, and was sold off piecemeal.<sup>37</sup> The new bridge was usable by summer 1785 when a fence was installed 'to prevent cattle and passengers going over at night time', and lamps and a toll house were added soon after; the bridge was

<sup>36</sup> Henley--Dorchester Turnpike Act, 9 Geo. II, c. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Sheppard, 'Henley Bridge', 320--9; ORO, BOR/3/A/V/BM/8, s.a. 1780--6; BOR/3/A/XIX/BB/7, s.a. 1781--6. Both Hayward and Townsend died before the work was completed.

officially completed in April 1786.<sup>38</sup> Carved heads of Thamesis and Isis on the keystones of the central arch were provided by the sculptress Mrs Ann Damer (d. 1828), daughter of General Conway, who continued to take a close interest in the bridge's design.<sup>39</sup>

The Act of 1781 provided for demolition of buildings in Henley to provide 'commodious avenues' to the bridge, replacing the narrow twisting route between Bishop Longland's almshouses and the churchyard, and around the medieval buildings which still blocked the western part of Hart Street and the market place. Various properties around the bridge were removed, and part of the churchyard was taken into the road, though the last of the market place encroachments were not removed until the 1790s, and the almshouses not until 1829--30.<sup>40</sup> Associated improvements along the waterfront north of the bridge, where the road was in disrepair and often flooded, were made c. 1785.<sup>41</sup> The main crossroads was improved in 1808 when a further Act allowed the rounding of its north-east and south-east corners, though Duke Street (part of the Reading road) remained a narrow lane little more than the width of a single carriage until the demolition of its entire western side in 1870.<sup>42</sup>



***The western arch of Henley bridge (completed 1786), with the church and Angel Inn***

The bridge remained a toll bridge until 1873, some of the proceeds being diverted to improve street lighting and paving along the main route through the town; the tolls' removal was delayed by a catastrophic fall in revenue following the opening of the Great Western railway in 1840, which prompted the commissioners to halve the number of street lights maintained by them.<sup>43</sup> Of the main turnpike routes, the Dorchester road was disturnpiked in 1873 and the Reading--Hatfield road in 1881.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> ORO, BOR/3/A/XIX/BB/7, 1 July, 8 Aug., 7 Oct. 1785, 7 Apr. 1786.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 6 May 1785; Sheppard, 'Henley Bridge', 325.

<sup>40</sup> Henley Bridge Act, 21 Geo. III, c. 33; Sheppard, 'Henley Bridge', 320, 326; below, devpt of the town. For Hart Street buildings removed earlier, above.

<sup>41</sup> ORO, BOR/3/B/II/24/1c, defendants' case; BOR/3/B/II/24/19.

<sup>42</sup> Henley Bridge Amendment Act, 48 Geo. III, c. 111 (Local and Personal); G. Tyack, 'The Rebuilding of Henley-on-Thames', *Oxon. Local Hist.* vol. 3, no. 2 (1989), 72--3, 82; A. Cottingham and H. Fisher, *Henley-on-Thames, a Pictorial History* (1990), no. 140.

<sup>43</sup> Sheppard, 'Henley Bridge', 326.

<sup>44</sup> Disturnpiking Acts, 36--7 Vic. c. 90; 43--4 Vic. c. 12.