

Hilary Fisher, *From Tillage to Terrace: a study of the southward expansion of the town of Henley into the adjoining parish of Rotherfield Greys*; privately published, 2021, 240pp, illustrated, maps.

Away from the river Thames and Henley's attractive main streets, there is a fascinating but less frequented area to the south and west of the town centre where development began in the 19th century. John Umfreville's article about the Henley builder, Charles Clements, published in this journal in 1998, introduced one of the principal characters behind the growth of this area, and volume 16 of the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire (VCH), published in 2016, provides an admirable introduction to the suburban development of Henley. The VCH was able to draw upon Hilary Fisher's extensive knowledge of the area, and to use relevant resource material which she had added to the local collection in Henley Library. Hilary Fisher has now been prompted by restrictions on research during the coronavirus pandemic and 'the inexorable march of Anno Domini' to draw a line under her research and publish the results of a study she began 40 years ago.

In her foreword, Hilary Fisher bravely acknowledges that, 'to render it a more fluent and easier read, this work should have been severely edited', but she has opted instead to publish the greater part of her findings. She decided that a chronological account of developments during the second half of the 19th century was impossible, and, after setting out the economic and administrative context in which suburban development took place, she divides the area into four quarters in which the history of every street and many individual houses is described. Along the way, she introduces many of the people involved in the development process, providing numerous 'boxes' which feature useful biographical data about local landowners, builders and tradesmen. Reproductions of original maps, some incorporating valuable explanatory details about land ownership and property boundaries, guide the reader through each section, and the book is well illustrated by contemporary prints and photographs. Fisher recognised that her arrangement of the material would inevitably lead to some repetition, and we are, for example, informed on page 58 and again on page 135 that the curvature of today's Station Crescent reflects the presence of a turntable which protruded in front of the station until 1903! The text is also regularly punctuated by references to other chapters, but there is a very full place, name and subject index, and detailed referencing enables the reader to establish the sources of her information. The footnotes at the end of each chapter bear witness to the prodigious amount of research which has involved in particular the study of two local newspapers, the *Henley Standard* and the *Henley Advertiser*, and Henley borough records as well as census returns, private archives, manuscript and printed maps, directories and sale catalogues.

From Tillage to Terrace will clearly appeal most to a local audience, and although the book contains a modern street map for the benefit of outsiders, Hilary Fisher assumes in her foreword that 'the reader has some basic knowledge of the topography of the Henley of today.' For those suitably equipped readers, the main part of the book begins with an account of development in the North East Quarter between Friday Street and Station Road. In this quarter and those that follow, Fisher again eschews a chronological approach, presenting her material in chapters covering blocks of property; in this section, for example, four chapters cover land south of Friday Street, Riverside and Station Road North, Queen Street and the east side of Reading Road between Friday Street and Station Road. This quarter was key to the future of Henley since the belated arrival of the railway in 1857 promised prosperity for a town which had lost its historic role as an important coaching centre and riverside port.

Henley Corporation subsequently helped to fund the riverside road to the railway station in 1862, and Fisher records the story that the local businessman and builder, Robert Owthwaite, built the Royal Hotel in anticipation of the Great Western Railway opening a racecourse on Henley's riverside meadows. Owthwaite lost a considerable sum through the failure of the hotel, but he bounced back to initiate the building of Queen Street, a new street between Friday Street and the station, in 1879. Fisher's North West Quarter takes the reader west of Reading Road to the area around Greys Hill where there had already been sufficient development by the 1840s to justify the building of Holy Trinity Church in 1847-8. Apart from some later infilling, the principal additions here in the Victorian period were South Hill Gardens, Albert Road and Norman Avenue. Local builders, the brothers Thomas and William Hamilton, and Charles Clements feature prominently in Fisher's useful account of these developments.

The South East Quarter covers the area south of Station Road and east of Reading Road where, inevitably, the railway formed a dominant presence from the 1850s. Surprisingly, perhaps, the proximity of the station did not deter Robert Raxworthy, a wealthy ex-farmer, from building Upton Lodge on three acres of pasture land south of Station Meadow in 1860 after Henley Corporation's initial attempt to let the land on building leases had proved unsuccessful. Fisher shows that land further down Reading Road remained undeveloped until 1890 when Thomas Hamilton purchased the site of what became Park Road; emboldened by the speed with which his houses here were occupied, he acquired adjoining land in 1896, and soon extended his building operations down to Marmion Road. Fisher's South West Quarter completes the development area and takes in the rising ground west of Reading Road and south of Norman Avenue. The ubiquitous Robert Owthwaite had gradually acquired much of this farmland, and he tried unsuccessfully to sell it for building in 1872. Just before he died in 1887, he sold part of the estate nearest to the town to Christopher Deane, a London solicitor, and, through judicious research in local newspapers and sale catalogues, Fisher has been able to detail the complex story of the development of what became known as the St Mark's Estate. Sainly street names, St Mark's Road and St Andrew's Road, were perhaps adopted to raise the tone of the suburb in the absence of a church in the immediate vicinity. Housebuilding here continued well into the 20th century, and William Hamilton was heavily involved as a builder, even to the extent that Hamilton Avenue is named after him. Hamilton also acquired land between Reading Road and Harpsden Road in the mid-1890s where he built a series of streets and terraces named after places he had visited in North America.

What seems to be missing from a book which presents so much interesting information is any real analysis of the findings. We do not, for example, find out how many house plans were passed each year, how many houses each builder erected or how many properties builders sold or retained for letting. We do not discover the extent to which non-local purchasers of building plots became actively involved in development. We get glimpses of the tensions between builders, many of them councillors, and the local board or borough council over the enforcement of the building byelaws, but we do not know how often such issues arose or how much these local bodies were dominated by members of the building trade.

Hilary Fisher clearly views this book as a springboard for further research leading to a revised edition. In that context, it seems appropriate to consider how else her work might be enhanced and made accessible to a wider audience. Despite the author's reservations, a chronological approach to Henley's suburban development would seem to offer a clearer picture of what was actually happening on the ground during the period. Extending the coverage to 1914 would be worth considering since development in the area was very much

ongoing at the turn of the 20th century; the VCH records, for example, that there were 82 houses in St Mark's Road in 1911 compared with just 21 in 1901. The VCH also examines the social geography of Victorian Henley, indicating the potential value of an extended study of the origins, occupations and lifestyles of the people who moved into the new houses. Tanis Hinchcliffe's study of North Oxford contains a gazetteer of all the houses on the St John's College estate, and Fisher could provide similar information - date of house plan, date of occupation, names of builder, owner and first occupant - for Henley properties from the sources she has already explored, from electoral registers, and from the District Valuation Books which followed the 1910 Finance Act. All this perhaps suggests consideration of a briefer, more analytical companion volume rather than a full revision of *From Tillage to Terrace*, but Hilary Fisher has already supplied Henley residents, and anyone interested in the town with a rich fund of information derived from a multiplicity of sources. She has also demonstrated the glorious idiosyncrasy of a process that left Albert Road as a cul-de-sac contrary to the council's wishes (pp. 106-7) and frustrated developers by preserving the Harpsden footpath through the St Mark's Estate (pp. 175-6).

Malcolm Graham, December 2022