

At the centre of the world: Henley and the Olympic Regatta of 1908

Introduction

THE STANDARD VIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT of Henley in the nineteenth century, as seen in the Victoria County History and other publications, is that having lost the coaching and river transport trade it previously depended on due to being bypassed by the initial development of the railway, Henley then developed as a resort and commuter town, particularly once it gained a branch line station in 1857.¹ Central to the town's development as a resort was the Royal Regatta, and the apogee of this development was hosting the Olympic rowing in 1908. For a week at the end of July that year, with the cream of the world's rowers and a great concourse of international visitors in town, Henley – proclaimed by William Anker Simmons, who had organised the town's role in the 1908 Olympic Regatta, as 'this small, perhaps, but well-known-all-over-the-world Borough' – seemed to be at the centre of the world.²

However, this view obscures the reality that many in the town, and in particular on the Town Council, were not entirely sold on Henley's focus as a resort. They were intent instead on modernisation for its existing inhabitants, assimilating the new suburb to the south of the town, wider streets fitted for the motor car, a modern sewage system, a modern commercial hub and smart public buildings, and sources of stable year-round employment. This point of view, which can be called 'municipalism', looked on the Olympics with a cost-benefit eye unconvinced that it came out on top, particularly when the teetotalism of many of its leading exponents was taken into account. Drink-fuelled disorder was an aspect of the annual mid-summer festival which inhabitants lived with. On the other side of the debate, additional factory chimneys in the town would spoil the idyllic backdrop to the Regatta. The Olympics in fact represented a tussle between alternate views that would not be wholly solved before being subsumed into the First World War. This article will use mainly local, regional and national newspapers to examine the internal politics of the town, with the contrasting views of its own identity.

'This small borough'

Like many places, Henley went through a transformation in the nineteenth century. Its population had grown considerably. Still only 6,000 in 1900, after stagnating over the middle of the century it grew 30 per cent between 1881 and 1911 – or roughly at 10 per cent every ten years. As a small market town with

its own hinterland, Henley's occupational structure in 1901 was heavily loaded towards retailing, brewing, hospitality, transport, and building, which was the largest single source of employment. Some living within the borough still worked in agricultural jobs, mainly labouring, and there was no industrial employment to speak of.³ However, Henley had also begun to develop as a commuter town. A branch line had arrived in the town in 1857 from the Great Western Railway's main line at Twyford. The new southern suburbs were beginning to fill out to accommodate the growing population, particularly Newtown and the St Marks Estate, outlined on maps of about 1900 but with new housing yet to be built.⁴ By Edwardian times, there was a marked early and late rush to and from the station by commuters setting off for, and returning from, London and Reading. The left turn over the bridge from the Berkshire side was known as a particularly dangerous place to stand during the morning 'rush hour', as motor cars racing for the station took the corner, and the Corporation debated whether to introduce a lower speed limit, or whether doing so would be to the detriment of the 'trade of the town'.⁵ By then, the town had become a municipality, bolstered by a new Royal Charter for elective local government that began in 1883, instilling it with self-confidence and self-importance.⁶ The town also maintained its importance as a political centre. After the third Parliamentary Reform Act of 1884, it successfully fended off the rival claim of Watlington to be the political centre of the South Oxfordshire constituency, whose MP was now to be known as 'the Member for Henley'.⁷ The Council deployed compulsory purchase and borrowing powers to widen and straightening the roads within the town. Some striking Victorian buildings, including a new Town Hall which opened in 1902 in place of a Regency building at the top end of Market Place, added a sense of well-being.⁸

The men who had presided over these developments were mostly members of the new political establishment, traders and shopkeepers in the town, often Nonconformists and Liberal in politics, who ousted the old Anglican establishment of the previous 'closed' corporation. They promoted teetotalism, a serious shock to a town in which brewers and publicans had hitherto exercised a strong influence.⁹ The Henley and District Beer, Wine, and Spirit Retailers' Protection Society held meetings in response to defend their interests,¹⁰ and the debate between the two sides, played out in the letters sections of the local press, saw 'the hardest and most thorough-going election fight which ever took place in Henley' in the County Council election contest in 1889 between the Liberal Charles Clements and the Conservative Archibald Brakspear.¹¹ But Charles Clements remained the acknowledged leader of the 'modernisers' locally, a teetotaller, though himself the son of a publican, and born in humble circumstances in 1844 (Fig. 1). He was a builder, who, with considerable



Fig. 1 Charles Clements in one of his later stints as Mayor of Henley (Henley Town Council).

energy and skill, led the movement to improve the physical fabric of the town and to establish decent housing for its working-class inhabitants.¹² The greatest project spearheaded by Clements was the construction of Henley's sewer. This project, begun in the early 1880s, culminated after several false starts in an effective system in the first decade of the twentieth century.¹³

The debate locally throughout this period had been how the new facilities needed by Henley could be afforded. The ‘municipalist’ solution which ultimately prevailed was to grow the tax base of rate payers. Charles Clements fought – almost alone to start with – for the extension of the borough, arguing that the higher rateable income of a bigger town meant that it could take advantage of low-cost loans available from central government to afford better facilities for all its inhabitants, with rates actually falling at the same time. The extension of the town boundaries was granted in 1892.¹⁴ However the use of ratepayers’ money was always controversial. Initial suggestions that the sewers should be publicly funded resulted in petitions and a protest meeting.¹⁵ The rebuilding of the Town Hall prompted complaints that it was exacting ‘upon the already overtaxed and overburdened ratepayers of Henley-on-Thames another heavy expenditure to those already taxed far heavier than most prosperous large towns in England’.¹⁶ The hall was paid for in the end largely through donations by rich benefactors living in and around the town.¹⁷ Charitable donations helped to keep the ‘municipalist’ project on course by taking some of the strain off the rate payers. But it did not alter the principle that the town should set its own objectives, and find the means to pay for them.

‘Gigantic water picnic’

So there was in Henley by the end of the nineteenth century a ruling group which had built it up with some success to fend for itself as a modern town. They were not greatly sympathetic to middle-class self-indulgence or the consumption of alcohol in large quantities – both characteristics of Henley’s Royal Regatta. Nor was their outlook altogether sympathetic to sporting activities. In a talk on ‘Work and the Dignity of Labour’ in 1904, Charles Clements ‘urged his hearers to take a deeper and truer interest in their toil and not to give so much thought to athletics, and other forms of recreation’:

The passion for athleticism was a growing danger to the nation. He was afraid that men now-a-days spent all too much time in pursuit of athletics and gave too little thought to the work by which they earn their daily bread.¹⁸

There was also a concern about the capability of the town’s economy to support its growing population. In a review of the economic prospects in 1896, William Coates, one of the leading Nonconformists, and a draper in the town who had been Mayor in 1889, said that he would like to see ‘erected in Henley a new Town Hall...a recreation ground [and]... a good factory in Henley to give employment to the men and boys who were growing up in the town.’¹⁹ It must ‘not depend too much upon visitors’ or the ‘many gentlemen living in the neighbourhood [who] spent their money in other towns’.²⁰

This no doubt included the many who came to the town for the annual Royal

Regatta, which a sporting paper described disapprovingly in 1903 as ‘a gigantic middle-class water-picnic’.²¹ Spectators were drawn to Henley’s waterside early in July each year, as the sporting-minded complained, not for the rowing at all, but for more frivolous pursuits:

The curse of Henley regatta is the picnicking...this ostentatious display of female finery, of flowers, of fruit, of wine, of viands, is a modern innovation, and sign of the luxurious selfishness of the times – a selfishness which is exemplified in a total disregard of the competitors, and in the *bon mot* uttered on a houseboat, that "the regatta would be perfect were it not for those horrid rowing men."²²

Despite the economic benefits, these Liberal councillors occasionally saw the Regatta as something of an outside imposition. For example, in January 1899, they debated rights of way along the towpath on the Berkshire side of the river which had been interrupted during the last Regatta. In 1896, the Council had granted a lease to the Leander Club, previously based on the river at Putney, to build a new upriver club house near to the bridge in Henley, an undertaking which was described at the time as something ‘the people of Henley should hail with pleasure’.²³ However, after the clubhouse was actually built, it was reported to the council that ‘there was a good deal of antipathy against the Club for stopping people going in front of the Club at Regatta times’. The club had temporarily blocked the footpath so that it could move boats to the river bank and back again. A gate across the towpath had been ‘slammed in the face of the crowd’, angering one gentleman so much that he declared that he would ‘next year...take a party and smash down the gates’. A councillor complained that ‘these rowing men are going to rule the place, it seems to me’, and the meeting proposed writing a requirement for public access at all times into the Leander Club’s lease, including during the Regatta period. Only one councillor, William Anker Simmons (who as we will see had been Mayor when the lease was signed), spoke up for the Regatta, arguing that they were over-reacting to a situation which only occurred once a year, and reminding his colleagues on which side the town’s bread was buttered:

It would be suicidal to oppose the Regatta Stewards. Henley Regatta made Henley, and without the Regatta Henley would not be what it is, and they could not look forward to the future that they could now. To take the course suggested would be to make them the laughing stock of the rowing world.

It was agreed that the lease would not be changed, but that it should be stated that ‘there was a right-of-way from Henley Bridge along by the river to Remenham, and 40 Leander Clubs or Regatta Committees [sic] could not deprive the public of the use of it.’²⁴

Despite its huffing and puffing, the Council did still appreciate the business the Regatta brought to the town. By the 1890s, American university crews raced

almost every year, amid enormous interest in the rowing world, running British crews close for the premier prize for eight oared boats – the Grand Challenge Cup – although it was actually first taken abroad in 1906 by a Belgian crew from Ghent.²⁵ The added interest put important money into the town through visitors renting properties for weeks over the summer.²⁶ However, this was threatened when the British rowing authorities debated in 1901 whether to ban foreign competition. A hilarious doggerel verse in a sporting paper portrayed them discussing among themselves the horrid prospect that their lucrative foreign visitor trade might disappear:

Second Townsman

‘This is grave news indeed
 Last week I hired my house
 To lodge the Mongol eight from far Cathay
 At modest fee, whereby I hope to live
 Relieved of further thought for this year’s rent
 Now this exclusion of the foreigner
 Spells ruin.’

First Townsman

‘Doubt it not friend. The Transatlantic draft,
 The Dutchman’s guilder and the German’s gold
 Are all that stand between ourselves and work,
 The golden age is past.’²⁷

Henley’s Town Council greeted with applause the news that at a special meeting of the Stewards, the ban on international competition had been decisively rejected, an outcome that Charles Clements, Mayor for that year, ‘thought that the people of Henley...would be pleased [with]’.²⁸ The motion that it was ‘inexpedient’ to ban foreigners was proposed and seconded in the meeting by two local grandees living on large estates close by, William Makins, a barrister and company director, and Frederick Smith MP, heir to the W.H.Smith railway newsagents, stationers and booksellers, who were well plugged in to opinion in the town (Fig. 2).²⁹

Although often eclipsed until early in the twentieth century by the prevailing ‘municipalism’, there was always another point of view in the town, held most notably by the owners of residential property which could be sold to incomers seeking a pleasant place to live. This was that Henley should look to its natural assets – its location, the beauty of its setting and the evidence of the world’s recognition of it in the continuing popularity of the Royal Regatta – as the source of its future prosperity. The principal advocate of this view was William Anker Simmons, the town’s leading land agent, valuer and auctioneer (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2 Greenlands, one of the big houses based around Henley and the home of Frederick Smith MP, it later hosted a reception during the Olympics (postcard from the collection of John Pither).

Ambitious, energetic and personable, Simmons had joined the Town Council in 1885, and emerged gradually as leader of its Conservative faction. His father and grandfather, founder of the land agency firm of Simmons and Sons, had also played similar leading roles in the group in the old ‘closed corporation’.³⁰ With his close connections with the county landed interests, Simmons was chosen as Mayor of the town when its turn came to host the Oxfordshire Agricultural Show in 1896 and 1906.³¹

His wider vision for the town gained ground when he was Mayor from 1905 to 1908. He told an audience that Henley, in the days of his grandfather and father a great malting centre and



Fig. 3 William Anker Simmons as Mayor of Henley (Henley Town Council).

corn market, now had 'to look to the pleasure seekers for the trade.'³² In his view, the Regatta was a vital element in this. At a meeting in the town in 1902, he recalled a time when he and a friend were the only men on the water in punts:

He asked them to now calculate the number of punts to be found at the Henley Regatta. He could also remember when there was no such thing as a houseboat at the Regatta. Compare that with the wonderful array of houseboats they saw nowadays. All those things had been rapid steps in the right direction in regard to the trade of Henley because it would be quite impossible for the Regatta to prosper, and for all those things around them to prosper, without improving Henley.³³

Simmons had been something of a rower himself in his younger days,³⁴ and, as we have already seen, he had stood up for the Regatta against its critics on the Council. It was during his first stint as Mayor in 1895-6 that the Leander Club signed the deal to build its up-river club house and boathouse on land owned by the Town Council by the bridge in Henley.³⁵ The favourable terms offered by the Council, under the guidance of the Town Clerk, John F. Cooper, who was also Secretary of the Stewards, helped to attract the club to Henley. Having in their midst 'the first boat club almost in the world', as Simmons described it, was, he believed, a most wonderful opportunity for the people of the town:

A large number of men and women would be brought here from May to October, and it would be one of the best things that could possibly happen for the trade of the town.³⁶

The Olympic Regatta comes to Henley

From the mid-1890s, as the problem of the town's sewage was brought gradually under control, owners of land on the large St Marks Estate, on the slopes along the Reading Road south of the town, began to release it in small parcels for development. Auctions held in the town were attended by the very traders and small businesspeople, now investing the profits of trade in land, who had supported 'municipalism' in the previous generation. Simmons told a meeting in the town in 1898 that the sale of St Marks Estates as a residential development, 'one of the finest residential sites possible to conceive', had been 'hopelessly marred', but that as other land was progressively released by its private owners, citing in particular the Bolney estate, forward progress would be resumed.³⁷

Meanwhile, Simmons solicited the support of the new property owners and the younger generation by promoting the town's assets as an outward-looking residential centre. From the late 1890s there was a pick-up in organised sporting activities in the town. A swimming club had been founded in 1894,³⁸ while Simmons was chairman of the 'First Annual Athletic Festival' in 1896, where 'Members of any recognized Sporting Club in Henley' were invited to take part in handicap races and a tug of war.³⁹ Supported by a significant private donation,

the YMCA established a smart, new headquarters near the railway station in 1901, with well-equipped football, cricket and gym facilities in the centre of the town.⁴⁰ The prowess of local runners by 1904 encouraged the *Henley Standard* to urge the formation of an athletics association, complementing the existing football and cricket clubs, to better enable local runners 'to do fuller justice to their powers'.⁴¹ In a speech in 1907, Simmons called for the improvement of bathing places in Henley, and 'offered congratulations on the advent of the golf links' saying 'it would be a great benefit to the town'.⁴²

Attracting the Olympic Regatta to Henley was part of this more open and outward-looking approach. The decision that Britain would host the Olympics in 1908 was taken in the summer of 1906, and the original idea was that the rowing, like the rest of the Olympics, would be in London, using the University Boat Race course between Putney and Mortlake. But in December 1906, an anonymous letter appeared in the gentleman's sporting magazine, *The Field*, purportedly from an American graduate of Oxford University, saying that international oarsmen would simply not understand if the Olympic Regatta was not in Henley. The letter concluded: 'The average foreigner has never heard of the Putney or Mortlake course, but Henley is a household word all the world over'.⁴³ In March 1907, the *Henley Standard* reported that '[o]wing to the influence Mr. J.F. Cooper has brought [to] bear it has now been definitely decided that the rowing events in connection with the Olympic Games in England next year will be decided over the Regatta course at Henley'.⁴⁴ Cooper told a dinner in Henley at the time that 'in different ways he had been able to be instrumental' in getting Henley adopted as the venue.⁴⁵ But it was not until shortly before his death in 1927 that the extent of his involvement became known. In a memorandum seen by eminent oarsman and author of books on the Regatta, J.D. Burnell, Cooper admitted that he had written the letter to *The Field*, using the notepaper of an Oxford club, Vincent's, to add credibility. Until then, the Stewards had been disinclined to advance the claim of the Regatta course over the boat race course, but his letter tipped the balance.⁴⁶

Cost-benefit

Simmons accepted office as Mayor for the third consecutive year in 1907-8 specifically 'to promote the success of the Olympic Regatta'.⁴⁷ He sold the idea to sceptical townsfolk by suggesting that the additional crowds for a special event in 1908 would compensate for the disastrous Regatta the previous year when weather had been as bad as anyone could remember.⁴⁸ But it was also suggested that a longer term downward trend from which the town was perceived to be suffering might also be addressed. Each year in the 1890s, Henley had filled up with incomers, national and international, for at least two or three

weeks around Regatta time, as people settled in to enjoy the festivities. Local newspapers printed long lists of visitors and the properties (and houseboats) they were renting.⁴⁹ But from late 1890s local people noticed a marked change, and numbers staying in the town started to fall. In 1898 it was reported that it was ‘many years since there have been such a large number of houses and apartments unlet’ during the Regatta, while daily visitors did ‘not bring much trade to the town’.⁵⁰ There had long been a problem that many visitors arriving by train had gone straight to the Regatta festivities without spending money in the town.⁵¹ But by 1906, the reported number arriving by train for the three days of the Regatta had also fallen from just over 41,000 in the mid-1890s to around 33,000, particularly those travelling on the first day, which went from 10,640 to 6,149.⁵² The cause appeared to be the motor car.⁵³ Now that it was possible to drive from London to Henley and return the same day, numbers of people were evidently no longer staying to spend their money locally as they had before. Before the Regatta in 1908 it was complained that there seemed ‘to be very few visitors staying in Henley and District at present, the prevailing practice being to run down from London and back in the day by train or motor’.⁵⁴

The physical evidence for this was the number of cars thronging the streets at Regatta time as the police struggled to cope with the melee. In 1906, an observer on Henley bridge collected ‘the astonishing information that over 500 cars passed in the hour’, while an enormous car park developed at the Phyllis Court Club ‘and all over the town the garages were full to the utmost capacity, and overflowed into the street and meadows’.⁵⁵ This was a significant change from the stabling of horses for up to three days in 1892.⁵⁶

One possible solution was to provide new attractions to keep visitors in the town after the rowing ended. From 1884 a firework display had been laid on for the final night, although its purpose was to distract the large crowds, which, rather than leaving the town, had often turned to drink-fuelled violence and vandalism against local property.⁵⁷ A great deal of entertainment for Regatta-goers had previously been supplied by the owners of houseboats, which, from the 1880s, emerged as a major feature of the Regatta scene.⁵⁸ Scores of them, brightly decorated and adding to the gaiety of the occasion, were moored along the Buckinghamshire shore almost as far as Temple Island. They often supplied music and threw *ad hoc* parties with food and drink handed out to the Regatta-goers who crowded round in boats and punts. But from the early 1900s, houseboat numbers also began to dwindle, from more than a hundred in the mid-1890s to less than twenty by 1905.⁵⁹ It was argued that ‘if anything in the way of entertainment can be provided to make [our visitors] linger in the town it is only a wise policy to make that as well as the racing a feature of the event.’⁶⁰

Such entertainments would be even more important at the Olympics, with even more visitors hoped for, but it would need to be paid for. Simmons' success at raising private subscriptions for the Oxfordshire County Show prize fund, which had 'entirely relieved the Council of all financial responsibility,' seemed a good omen.⁶¹ At a public meeting in the Town Hall in April 1908, he told the townsfolk that they must make their contribution. It could be in cash – to the fund for banquets, bands and municipal decorations to welcome the international guests – or in kind, by decorating their own houses and businesses, so that the international visitors could see that the welcome was not only heart-felt but 'of a general character'. He coupled this with a stern warning that no funds would be forthcoming from the centre. At Athens, Paris and St Louis, the venues for the three previous Games, there had been:

...a kind of State reception: that the state took care that there was adequate hospitality afforded to those who took part in the games. There was to be nothing of that kind in this country; it was left to individual effort to see that those who visited us were received with that hospitality which he was sure all present would wish to be bestowed.

The sum of £800 would be sufficient, it was believed, and Simmons invited all there to add their names to the subscribers.⁶²

It was soon clear, however, that whatever the benefits of an Olympic Regatta, there would be further offsetting costs. The first sign of this came when the Stewards barred foreign crews from the Royal Regatta in 1908, so that the Olympic rowing would be the only international event in Henley that year.⁶³ The Leander club also withdrew.⁶⁴ The ban was controversial, with some arguing that it was unnecessary as foreign competitors would have skipped the Regatta to concentrate on the Olympics anyway.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, a much less attractive Royal Regatta for rowers and visitors risked a decline in numbers entering and attending the event, without any assurance that they would return for the Olympic rowing. Indeed Regatta crowds proved to be 'somewhat below the average', while caustic neighbours in Reading gossiped that 'Henley is not so full as usual' due to 'the rivalry of the Olympic Regatta...and the practice of motoring up to London.'⁶⁶

Then, just as serious local fundraising for the Olympic Regatta was due to begin, the Town Council received an alarming message from the engineer in charge of its sewage works. There was a stunned silence for a couple of seconds in the Council Chamber as its implications sank in. He reminded the Council of warnings over some years about sewage backing up in the town's system. Already the two engines the town maintained to pump the effluent were running continuously and together to keep it moving.⁶⁷ Simmons led the way as Mayor, saying that it was now imperative that something be done, whatever the cost, to prevent sewage spilling into the river during the Regatta season:

[H]e could not get away from the feeling that if anything did happen and the sewage once got loose in the town it would absolutely ruin the place. People would not only go out of the town, but they would never come back. If anything got about that the sewage works were wrong people would be frightened away for always.⁶⁸

Councillors agreed that keeping the town free from sewage in the year of the Olympic Regatta was ‘more important than a penny, two penny or four penny rates’.⁶⁹ It was decided to temporarily hire two further small engines over the summer as back-up in case the main ones failed.⁷⁰

Charles Clements argued in vain that the town had managed for years with a risk which was in essence no worse now than it had been in the past; and that alarmist voices, preying on fears centred on the Olympic Regatta when the eyes of the world would be on the town, should not be listened to. He contended that if there was to be additional cost, then it should be incurred on the permanent solution of moving the town’s pumping station from outside the town to the railway station, saving operating costs so that rates could go down rather than up.⁷¹ But his was a lone voice. An additional chimney stack on the riverside would have disfigured the backdrop to the Regatta. As one councillor put it, it would have been like ‘blacking boots in the parlour’.⁷² Being the centre of the world might be gratifying to the rowing fraternity, but it was plainly painful to Henley’s rate payers, now maintaining what Clements said was ‘for its size the most expensive works of any town in the country’.⁷³

Entertainments for the Olympic Regatta

Perhaps because the townsfolk believed they had now done enough, Simmons turned elsewhere for the serious financial support he now needed to stage the Olympic Regatta in Henley. In March 1908, he sent out invitations to the Mayors of boroughs in Buckinghamshire and Berkshire as well as Oxfordshire; from Windsor to Reading, taking in Maidenhead, Wycombe, Wallingford and Abingdon; to join his Welcoming Committee. Their responses were generally positive. Councillors, notably in Reading, pledged funds, and cleared their diaries for the end July.⁷⁴

Grandees with homes in the countryside around Henley were pressed into service, laying on garden parties every day of the week of the Olympic Regatta, day and evening, at which they personally welcomed the competitors – at Park Place, Holme Park in Sonning, at Crowsley Park, Greys Court, Friar Park, Greenlands and Taplow Court. Luncheons, concerts and a ‘grand banquet’ were also held at the Phyllis Court Club, and there were three firework displays, a ball in the Town Hall where ‘river costume’ was part of the dress code, multiple appearances by military bands, and a trip to Windsor Castle.⁷⁵ On the night before the Regatta, Simmons provided an *al fresco* concert from the garden

of his own home, Bird Place, on the river bank opposite the town, where '[b]oth sides of the river were one stream of fairy lights' in 'a sight which would have been a credit to even the most romantic Venetian'.⁷⁶ But attendance by competitors was sometimes sparse. At Holme Park near Sonning, the home of the seed magnate, Martin Sutton, the band had already begun to play under a 'welcome' banner when the news arrived that the Belgian crew, hot favourites for gold in the eights, had just rowed out for the first time, and all the other competitors, who were supposed to be travelling to Sonning by launch, were staying on the river bank in Henley to watch. As a result the garden party was abandoned.⁷⁷ The 'small attendance of the competitors' was also a 'notable feature' of the special church service held on the Sunday, despite them having been 'specially invited'.⁷⁸ Other events were not quite what was envisioned. A municipal reception in Henley Town Hall on the Friday before the rowing clashed with an Olympic ball held in London, meaning that the hoped-for attendance of a thousand people was actually five hundred and fifty.⁷⁹

The decorations on Henley's bridge were said to be the finest in the town, and the route from the station along the river side and up Hart Street to the Market Place was lined with lavish ornamental poles festooned with bunting (Fig. 4 and back cover). Huge flags hung across the roads. The Town Hall at night time was a sight 'worth going miles to see'. An 'artificial floral device' hanging above the crossroads in the centre of the town, was much admired.⁸⁰ But all this was the work of the Counties Welcome Committee rather than the people of the town.⁸¹ Despite a last-minute appeal 'to the residents of the Borough that it would add very largely to the attractiveness of the scheme of decoration and illumination adopted by the Welcome Committee, if they [could] do what they [could] individually, to decorate and illuminate their houses', it seems that few did so.⁸² One of the only buildings to earn a specific mention in accounts of the event was Henley's Conservative Club in Queen Street. There 'the pathway was lined with coloured lights, and the gardens looked distinctly pretty' – not exactly an overwhelming endorsement.⁸³

An excited report in the local newspaper described the Olympic Regatta as 'the greatest athletic event the world of rowing had ever seen', involving 'the flower of the world's oarsmen'. The weather throughout the week was glorious. The same breathless reporter said that the Olympic Regatta had given Henley 'glimpses of its old glorious self'.⁸⁴ The President of the World Olympic Association, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, pronounced Henley 'the temple of hospitality and the home of artistic sport.'⁸⁵ Nonetheless, scepticism is not unreasonable about how 'international' the Olympic Regatta of 1908 really was. A number of important rowing countries which had been expected to compete, such as the United States, Australia, France and Sweden, were not in



Fig. 4 Decorations in Duke Street, Henley, for the Olympic rowing. Posters for the Olympic Regatta and associated events can be seen, as well as a poster for the Liberal Fete at Friar Park on the August bank holiday (postcard from the collection of John Pither).



Fig. 5 The British boat from Leander Rowing Club beats the Belgian boat in the final of the eight (postcard from the collection of John Pither).

the end represented.⁸⁶ Only eight nations provided crews for any of the events – Canada, Hungary, Belgium, Norway, Italy, Holland, Germany and Britain – and even some of those had late withdrawals, leaving a ‘depleted programme’.⁸⁷ ‘[F]rom the spectators’ point of view’ it was ‘hardly enough...to sustain the interest’.⁸⁸ And in only one event – the eight – was there a non-British finalist (Fig. 5). British crews in the end won all the gold medals.⁸⁹

There was a cosmopolitan element among the spectators, including Frenchmen, ‘with their animated gestures’, and Belgians, ‘glorying’ in the prospect of a rematch with Leander. There were even ‘quaint looking turbans’ in the crowd.⁹⁰ But the contemporary accounts overall leave the impression that the town of Henley was decidedly underwhelmed by the Olympic Regatta. Numbers arriving by train were significantly lower even than for the Royal Regatta three weeks earlier. For the ‘finals’ day, numbers passing through the station were actually lower than for the August bank holiday which occurred the following week, when large crowds of around four thousand attended the Liberal Party’s annual fete in the ground of Friar Park.⁹¹ Similar to the complaints that the ‘town [did] not now get the hundreds of influential visitors to take up residence several weeks prior to the Regatta it used to’, serious disappointment was expressed because ‘so few visitors’ had ‘taken up residence in the locality’ during the Olympic week. Simmons’ fundraising appeared not to have raised

as much as had been hoped, as his reception committee required a last minute grant of £300 from the British Olympic Council.⁹² Numbers for the two regattas together were higher than for the Royal on its own. But Simmons' ambition for a bumper year was not fulfilled. It had been rumoured that the Princess of Wales might attend on the last day to present the prizes.⁹³ In the event the wife of Lord Desborough, the President of the British Olympic Association, did the honours.⁹⁴

In fact the Olympic Regatta's biggest entertainment took place not in Henley at all but ten miles downriver at Bourne End. It was 'the grandest river fete ever seen on the upper Thames', given on the day after the racing finished by an American multi-millionaire who owned a house there, George Kessler, who had made his fortune dealing in champagne. The banquet and light show for the competitors, international visitors and British dignitaries dwarfed everything Henley had managed. As convenor of the 'Welcome Committee' and at Kessler's request, Simmons chaired the banquet, accepting praise from all sides for Henley's part in the proceedings. A full-sized replica of the Parthenon on the banks of the Thames, by French specialists in recreations and illusions, was so real that spectators had the impression they could climb a grass-covered hill to the real building.⁹⁵ Eminent guests were shipped in by special train, and thousands thronged the local railway station, the route to Kessler's home and the river banks from Bourne End to Cookham to take part in the event. Enormous numbers of visitors took to the river in boats decorated with Chinese lanterns. There were bonfires on the surrounding hills and searchlights in the sky. Under the headline 'Thames on Fire', *The Berkshire Chronicle* described the scene thus:

Tall and spreading trees for miles around were lit up with fairy-lamps, electric lights, in ever varying hues whilst on the water thousands of craft gaily decked formed a procession and floated past the Bourne End. It seemed indeed as if all the fair women and brave men in the Thames Valley had met to take part in the revels. No scene to approach it has ever been witnessed in England, and no similar scene could be possible elsewhere.⁹⁶

The final cost to Henley

In the aftermath, on the face of it, it seemed that a great deal had been achieved. Between them, Simmons, his organising committee and the neighbouring Mayors were able to raise £1,200 to spend on hosting the international visitors.⁹⁷ Archibald Brakspear of the town's brewing firm and a leading local Conservative, and Lord Desborough, chairman of the organising committee, both said that the success of the Olympic Regatta had been due to Simmons' mastery of the detail, and his effectiveness at fundraising. His energy, charm and persuasiveness had mustered a respectable coalition of regional forces,

raised a substantial sum of money from outside the town, and put a very acceptable face on the welcome accorded to the foreign athletes and the bigwigs, national and international, who, albeit only briefly, visited the town. As the town's ambassador, he had also put it firmly in the centre of events.⁹⁸ It was decided to mark his contribution with a gift. A collection made around the town, with a maximum of one guinea set to donations, raised a grand total of £155, an enormous sum which bought a grand piano, a canteen of silver, and an illuminated address on which were inscribed the names of all the contributors.⁹⁹ However, once it was all over, Simmons 'had broken down and was seriously ill' as 'a result of his arduous labours'.¹⁰⁰ His place at the first meeting of the Council after the Regatta was taken by the deputy Mayor, Charles Clements, who said that the strain of bringing the Olympic Regatta about at Henley would have crushed a lesser man.¹⁰¹ Simmons himself stated that if 'he had known the amount of work it involved, he certainly would have hesitated to undertake it'.¹⁰²

The glamour of the Olympic Regatta quickly faded, and the harsh realities of small country town life and the danger of ignoring them immediately reasserted themselves. The following week, on 11th August at 2pm in the afternoon, a serious fire broke out in the town. The plume of smoke brought townsmen hurrying from the top end of the St Mark's Estate, and a large crowd gathered to watch. Two thousand fabric-covered chairs, imported for the entertainments associated with the Olympic Regatta and stored temporarily in a building at the



6. FRIDAY-STREET, HENLEY-ON-THAMES.

Fig. 6 Friday Street, with the Anchor Pub visible, site of the fire (postcard from the collection of John Pither).

river end of Friday Street, had somehow caught fire.¹⁰³ A Reading newspaper had fun at Henley's expense over the difficulty of locating 'the "seat" of the conflagration'.¹⁰⁴ But locally the fire was a serious shock. It spread rapidly through one of Henley's many garage car parks to the rear of buildings opposite the railways station, and nearly engulfed The Anchor public house at the river end of Friday Street (Fig. 6). Eventually the blaze was brought under control, but a huge amount of damage had been done. It was recognised that a far larger catastrophe, potentially involving old flammable timber-framed buildings along Friday Street, had only narrowly been averted.¹⁰⁵

The Town Council's post-mortem on the fire revealed a number of concerns about different aspects of town life. The tiny local police force had been slow to react, and failed to control the traffic and hold back the crowd which impeded the attempts of the fire brigade to tackle the blaze. It was suggested that the town's volunteer fire brigade had been slow to get to the scene and inept at tackling the blaze. Local people rallied to its defence, although as a local institution to which many older citizens had belonged in their younger days, there was always a reluctance to be critical of it.¹⁰⁶

However, the heart of the problem, as it turned out, was the poor water pressure in the town's mains. Much like the issues with the sewage system, a crucial local utility – this time privately owned – had suffered from under-investment, jeopardizing the water supply needed to meet the town's peak demand during the Regatta period. Complaints emerged from the owners of new houses on the slopes of the southern suburbs who complained that domestic supplies were faltering at best, and, for baths required for visitors during the Regatta period, had sometimes been non-existent.¹⁰⁷

Conclusions

These various failures could have happened anywhere. But taken together, they confirm the absurdity of the pretension of the small town of Henley in seeing itself as at the centre of the world. To be in the limelight with the Olympic Regatta in 1908 had proved expensive for the people of the town, upsetting the balance in cost and benefit carefully maintained by the 'municipalists' on Henley's Victorian Town Council. The political calculus appears to have shifted over the period, with a trend away from the Liberalism of the late Victorian times as local traders and business people invested in the residential land which came on the market from the 1890s. But the problem of the town's size relative to the costs imposed upon it by being 'the centre of the world' was brought to the surface by the Olympic Regatta of 1908, but not resolved. The implications were still being worked through in the politics of the town when the First World War swept away an old world of luxury and leisure, substituting for it a harsher reality.

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Notes

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- 2 *Henley Standard*, 13th November 1908, 'Presentation to Alderman W. A. Simmons', speech by Alderman Simmons, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19081113/118/0008>, accessed 13th Sept. 2024.
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- 4 Fisher, Hilary, *From Tillage to Terrace*, (self-published, 2021), 23-198.
- 5 *Henley Advertiser*, 30th July 1904, 'Henley Town Council: General Purposes Committee', recommendation that 'the attention of the County Council be called to the excessive speed at which motor cars are driven through the town and the consequent danger arising therefrom, and that they be asked to get a speed limit of eight miles an hour adopted in the Borough', <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002294/19040730/086/0005>; *Henley Standard*, 3rd March 1905, 'The Speed of Motor Cars in Henley: Evidence Taken by the Corporation', <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19050303/087/0005>, both accessed 13th Sept. 2024.
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- 7 *Henley Advertiser*, 20th December 1884 'The Redistribution Scheme Boundary Commission', <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002294/18841220/055/0004>, 7th March 1885, 'Leader', <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002294/18850307/038/0004>, both accessed 13th Sept. 2024.
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- 9 Redley, Michael, 'Mayors and municipal government in Henley up to the First World War'; 'Total abstainers: Teetotalism in Henley before the First World War', (both unpublished).
- 10 *Henley Standard*, 17th March 1893, 'Licensed Victuallers' Annual Dinner: The Direct Veto Bill', <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/18930317/055/0005>; 12th March 1897, 'Licensed Victuallers' Annual Dinner', <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279>

- /18970312/082/0005, both accessed 13th Sept. 2024. Archibald Brakspear, William Anker Simmons, Charles Roberts (landlord of the Catherine Wheel Hotel) and several members of the Hobbs boat building family were notable dinner attendees.
- 11 *Henley Standard*, 20th August 1909, ‘Sudden Death of Mr. Archibald Brakspear’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002279/19090820/085/0005>; *Henley Standard*, 19th March 1897, ‘Correspondence: Licensed Victuallers and Temperance’, letter from Charles Clements in response to the report of the victualler’s association dinner, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/18970319/090/0005>; *Henley Standard*, 26th March 1897, ‘Correspondence: Licensed Victuallers and Temperance’, letters from William Anker Simmons and F.J. Pinniger in response, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/18970326/059/0005>, all accessed 15th Sept. 2024.
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 - 15 Redley, ‘Sewering Henley-on-Thames’, *Oxoniensia*, 84.
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 - 21 Burnell, R.D., *Henley Regatta: A History* (London, 1957), 118, fn 1.
 - 22 *The Field*, 13th July 1889, ‘The Late Henley Regatta’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002446/18890713/209/0024>, accessed 18th Sept. 2024.
 - 23 *Henley Standard*, 10th April 1896, ‘Henley Town Council: A Clubhouse for the Leander’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/18960410/052/0005>, accessed 21st Sept. 2024.
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- 25 *Henley Advertiser*, 7th July 1906, ‘Henley Royal Regatta: Enormous Crowds Enjoy the Carnival in Lovely Weather’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002294/19060707/061/0005>, accessed 19th Sept. 2024; Burnell, *Henley Regatta: A History*, 129.
 - 26 *Henley Standard*, 9th July 1897, ‘Residences of Crews’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002279/18970709/079/0005>, accessed 1st Oct. 2024.
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 - 29 *Henley Standard*, 29th November 1901, ‘Foreign Entries at Henley: Meeting of the Stewards’ attended by Charles Clements and Archibald Brakspear, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19011129/022/0002>, accessed 19th Sept. 2024.
 - 30 Redley, ‘Mayors and municipal government in Henley up to the First World War’, 22-23.
 - 31 *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette*, 10th November 2024, ‘Civic Honours: The New Mayors in Oxford and District’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000989/19051110/091/0007>, accessed 22nd Sept. 2024. Simmons was also a fellow of the Institute of Surveyors, and at various times chairman of the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire branch of the Surveyors' Institute, of the Farmer’s Club in Whitehall, and secretary of the Henley and District Agricultural Society.
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 - 33 *Henley Standard*, 31st January 1902, ‘Royal Jubilee Lodge A.O.D.: Annual Banquet’, speech by Alderman Simmons ‘The Town and Trade of Henley’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19020131/055/0005>, accessed 21st Sept. 2024.
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- 42 *Henley Standard*, 15th November 1907, 'The Dinner: The Mayor and Sir Frank Crisp Enthusiastically Received', speech by Alderman Simmons, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19071115/023/0002>, accessed 22nd Sept. 2024.
- 43 *The Field*, 15th December 1906, 'Oarsmen and the Olympic Games', <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002446/19061215/234/0033>, accessed 15th Sept. 2024.
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- 45 *Henley Standard*, 15th November 1907, 'The Dinner: The Mayor and Sir Frank Crisp Enthusiastically Received', speech by J.F. Cooper, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19071115/023/0002>, accessed 22nd Sept. 2024.
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- 47 *Henley Standard*, 3rd April 1908, 'Notes in Lighter Vein', <https://www>.

- britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19080403/161/0008, accessed 28th Sept. 2024.
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 - 52 *Henley Standard*, 3rd July 1908, ‘River and Regatta Notes: The Passenger Traffic’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002279/19080703/153/0008>, accessed 26th Sept. 2024. The change was partly offset by the addition of a fourth preparatory day, although 2,097 travelled by train on this day in 1906.
 - 53 *Henley Standard*, 6th July 1906, ‘Henley Royal Regatta: The Passenger Traffic’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19060706/100/0008>, accessed 27th Sept. 2024.
 - 54 *Henley Standard*, 19th June 1908, ‘River and Regatta Notes’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19080619/127/0008>, accessed 24th Sept. 2024. It should be noted that this statement is followed by a list of people staying in the town that seems a similar length to those of the preceding decade.
 - 55 *Henley Standard*, 6th July 1906, ‘Henley Royal Regatta: A Record Meeting’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002279/19060706/054/0004>, accessed 24th Sept. 2024.
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- 62** *Henley Standard*, 3rd April 1908, ‘The Olympic Regatta: Great Welcome to Foreign Competitors and Visitors’, speech by Alderman Simmons (The Henley Corporation did contribute ‘fifty guineas from the Borough Fund towards the expenses’), <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0002279/19080403/109/0005>, accessed 28th Sept. 2024.
- 63** *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 21st December 1907, ‘Next Year’s Henley Regatta’, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001857/19071221/068/0038>, accessed 21st Sept. 2024.
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- A. Upson (Mayor of Maidenhead), R.S. Wood (Mayor of High Wycombe), William Colebrooke (Mayor of Reading), E.H. Dee, L. Hannen, A. Holbrow, R.H. Manton, A.J. Taylor, W.H. Willis, Arthur S. Turner (hon. sec.), J.C. Walker (hon. treasurer), and Charles Clements (chairman).’
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