

Henley Archaeological & Historical Group

NEWSLETTER No 166 October 2026

Message from the Chair

Matters involving HA&HG in the last month alone give some idea of the range of our activities.

As well as the start of our new lecture season with a well-attended talk on the preservation of Abingdon Abbey, a box of papers concerned with the development of the St Marks and St Andrews Roads has turned up in a loft; new research is shedding fascinating new light on one of the grandest buildings in the town; an Ordinance Survey map has emerged giving wonderful detail of the appearance of the town in the third quarter of the nineteenth century which we hope will find its way to our archives; and an American correspondent tells us that an ancestor who owned property in "Beggaridge in the parish of Henley" in the 1620s (does anyone recognise the name of the place) was on a pilgrim ship to North America later in the century. And that's before we even get to 'lights on the bridge' and the possibility of a new museum in the town.

The newsletter this time covers our fiftieth anniversary falling this year, and *People and Places*, the celebratory anthology of HA&HG's research, into the history of town and its surroundings back to archaeological times. Get your copy for Christmas if you've not already acquired it! The last few months have been busy, with plenty to celebrate. Thanks to Annabel, editing the newsletter, and other members of the committee who appear in it, Susanna and Chris, together with all who contribute to our Group.

And indeed a principle feature of the newsletter this time is the importance of those contributions. We are indeed <u>your</u> group, drawing on volunteer efforts for everything we do: for example operating our archives, undertaking new research, identifying the kernel of a new museum in the collection of the former River and Rowing Museum, and presenting and celebrating the history of our town and its surroundings through publications and website.

We'd like to build up our body of volunteers, helping generally, for example to run the stall at the May Fayre, and to host the conference of local history societies, Oxpast, as we did earlier this year, but also in particular specialist areas. So we show how you can get

involved. Do please consider how you might offer a skill, or simply availability to help when called upon. Talk with any member of the committee – also all volunteers – at any opportunity, for example at the next speaker meeting, on the forthcoming outing to the Ashmolean in Oxford, or at the Christmas Party we are planning for the middle of December. Or email. Our addresses are listed at the end of the newsletter. We'll include a feature on this in future newsletters.

The bottom line is that we are entirely dependent on you as members for the contribution we make and the impact we can have. But there are plenty of other points of interest in our autumn newsletter, I hope you enjoy it.

Michael Redley

H.A. & H.G. Autumn Outing

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Our next outing on 3 December to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford is full. If you are still interested in going please email Alexis on hahg.members@gmail.com, she will add you to the waiting list.

Henley Archaeological & Historical Group Committee Appeal for support

At any one time there are several H.A. & H.G. activities on the go. We would love to see more Members join us both for your enjoyment and because we really need your help.

The Committee meets every two months and works well as a team together with certain responsibilities, such as the Chair, being accepted by individuals. Much of the work revolves around creating a programme of lectures for the year, organising monthly meetings and outings, writing and producing the biannual newsletter and the Journal. The Group is always glad to hear from Members who'd be interested in joining the Committee in any capacity. Financial, admin and IT expertise are valuable, as well as historical interest. Currently we are actively looking for a Meetings Secretary and anyone interested in this role should get in touch with Michael by email: michael.redley@appleinter.net.

We also have projects running in parallel with the regular diary. The research and seminar on Henley in WWII was a great success. Analysis of the River & Rowing Museum's collections is a key activity at present (see more below). Are we trying to be too ambitious? I think not, because we are only following the interests of members. But there are times when our resources get stretched very thin.

So do you have a skill and some time that you can offer to support the work of the Committee? We are not asking for ongoing regular commitment, but it would be of great value if we had a small band of members that we could call upon when necessary.

What skills do we need?

- Ad hoc help manning a stall or serving drinks
- MS Office competent with Word or Excel
- Basic data entry into a computer
- Book-keeping
- Website updates – easy after 10 minutes training
- Website maintenance. Some experience needed here
- Website development. Elementor anybody?!
- Can you write news items?
- Are you familiar with the work of museum curators?
- Do you have experience of surveying timber structured buildings?
- Do you have experience with social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram?

Archive Group
Help with cataloguing our existing collection and new donations is always welcome. We've catalogued over 2,000 items and there are still boxes to be opened. You can contribute as frequently as you would like and at times that fit with your diary. Contact: simonlunn1@gmail.com

Museum Collection Database Project
The River and Rowing Museum have given us a copy of their database of over 10,700 objects belonging to the Henley Collection. This will form the basis of any future Henley museum and/or future displays. Help us to review the collection database, learn about what is there and contribute to the stories we can tell about our important local history. Contact: annabel_lyell@yahoo.co.uk

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The Haves and Have Nots; an intersectional approach to the embodiment of identity of Corinium

By Susanna Venn

Corinium, under modern day Cirencester, was the second largest walled town in Roman Britain, and its role in that society has been the topic of much debate over the years. In antiquarian times, archaeologists delighted in digging up the odd coffin, the odd mosaic and similar which demonstrated the richness of the town's history. In the 1950s, with building projects requiring land to be dug and prepared for houses and roads there was an explosion of finds, and serious interest in ensuring that archaeology was respected and preserved for the town. The Corinium Museum in the centre of town

today is a focal point for this interest, with incredible displays going back to the Neolithic which portray the outstanding history of the area.

Yet little is known of the people who lived there. These stories are best told by looking at the remains of the people themselves and this is where my research comes in. Corinium has the reputation of a wealthy, artisan town. Building work was continuing into the 3rd Century CE (unusual for the time period) and the large numbers of mosaics, pavements and villas in the area suggests there was great wealth. But not everyone would have enjoyed this wealth, and the gap between rich and poor is often overlooked.

Different facets of identity (such as biological sex, age, religion, economic status and gender) overlap in an individual and as a result the lived experience will change from person to person. A child of a wealthy family will for example experience diet, education and health very differently from a child raised in poverty. These differences are reflected in the bones; and it is this embodiment of identity that I am interested in. Add in the burial rites and location within a cemetery, and an understanding of individuals' experience starts to take shape.

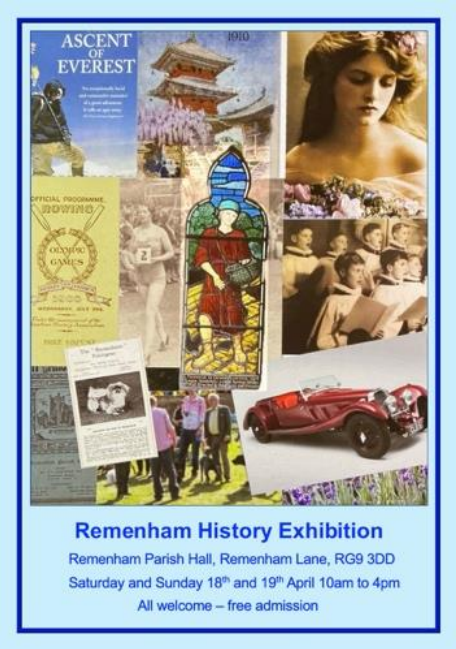
Over the next few years I will be investigating the 600 or so individuals who were buried in Corinium to establish their identity within the town. It may be that the skeletons reflect the wealth that is expressed in the grand buildings and fine mosaics. It may also be that there are many that show the opposite, with skeletons revealing famine, disease and trauma in life.

The burial rites of the Romans are known to have been varied; with individuals buried prone, supine, crouched, decapitated, lead coffins with pipes attached (presumably to give the dead a glass of wine on occasion!), some buried with seemingly no shroud or coffin. All of these rites can be found within one cemetery and will tell us something about the identity of those buried as well as those who buried them.

My research will hopefully supply a new angle on the understanding of Roman Corinium through the experience of individuals among its population. As I go through the cemeteries, my findings will hopefully shed a new light on Roman life in Britain. I shall endeavour to update HA&HG with interesting findings!

Remenham Revealed: From Archive to Exhibition

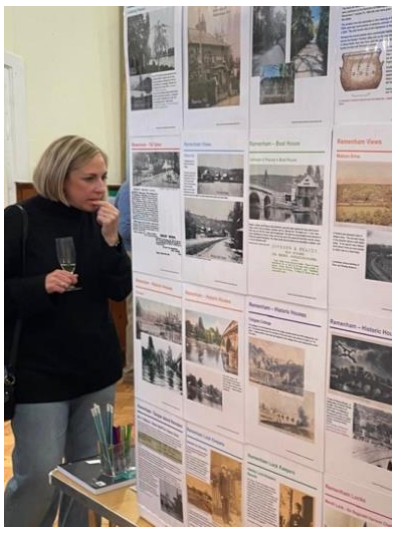
By Madeline Duffy



In September 2025, a small group of volunteers set out to answer a simple question: did the parish of Remenham have enough history to fill an exhibition in the village hall? Six months later, the answer was an emphatic yes. The resulting exhibition attracted around 300 visitors over one weekend (not bad for a parish with a population of 500) and revealed a remarkably rich and varied past. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with visitors commenting on both the wealth of local history on display and the wide range of topics and exhibits.

The creative use of basic materials kept costs down while still creating an impressive display, and many locals lent items such as pottery made in the parish, books, programmes and photographs. The committee met regularly, sharing research and developing display boards as new discoveries emerged.

The event was promoted through a postcard drop to every household in the parish, banners at key locations, notices in the parish newsletter and coverage in the Henley Standard.



Research and Sources

Initially, there was concern that there might not be enough material in such a small parish to fill the hall – how wrong we were! By the time of the exhibition, we had just enough room to house all the articles and exhibits.

Sources for the exhibition included the British Newspaper Archive, parish magazines, Royal Berkshire Archives, materials from our local historian Jim Bland, the Oxfordshire History Centre, River & Rowing Museum,

British Museum, Reading Museum Archives, Henley Library and the Hoffman Library at Leander Club.

Local interviews proved invaluable, inspired by the River & Rowing Museum's oral histories. These led directly to a trove of information on the Aston Ferry from the children of the last man to operate it. Stories of bombs falling on the village during the Second World War, life before mains water and electricity, and the local policeman pursuing children who had raided the rector's fruit trees helped visitors imagine life in earlier times.

Whitehill Garage loaned a valuable book about the Squire motor car, which was manufactured there in the 1930s, together with photographs of some of the vehicles, while a scale model of the car was also sourced for display.



Unexpected Discoveries



Among the most exciting discoveries was the rediscovery of several ancient artefacts long thought lost. Fibulas (brooches), spearheads and bowls had been submitted to the British Museum[1], and whilst a number are not on display, the museum's online catalogue has images of many of them. A chance notation in an old article led to the Reading Museum stores, and an Anglo-Saxon bowl and flints found during excavation for a pipeline at Aston that were in storage.

Stories that captured visitors' attention

There was something for everyone; topics included military activities, events, artists, the Squire car, pubs, estates, the church, local residents, actors and filming, ancient artefacts, the local school, sports and weather.

[1] © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

Photographs of military units building pontoon bridges, wrestling on horseback, competing in "cutting the lemon" and practising tent pegging attracted attention.



One resident provided anecdotes and photographs relating to the explorer Sir John Hunt, who led the successful 1953 Everest expedition.



A photograph of the northern lights over Temple Island was also submitted, which looked stunning and provided locals with a different view of their surroundings.

The school logbooks were a source of considerable mirth to some. They recorded teachers' complaints that some parents believed their children were not being thrashed enough, as well as absences at harvest and regatta time and the constant cycle of inspections.

The River & Rowing Museum, now sadly closed, had historical parish magazines, oral histories, photographs and ancient maps of the parish. Most interesting were some original invitations and documentation regarding a visit by BBC Radio to broadcast a precursor to Songs of Praise from the church of St Nicholas in 1948.


Miss Mills

Remenham Parish Church

SUNDAY, JULY 4th, 1948
at 3 o'clock

B.B.C. RECORDING
of "Sunday Half-Hour"

130

ADMIT ONE

Ticket holders must be seated by 2.50

The parish's distinctive name was a boon when searching the British Newspaper Archive. Reports of the fabulous fetes and events, primarily at Park Place, were rediscovered. Accounts of Queen Victoria's daughters manning the stalls, hot-air balloons, and special trains from London caught the imagination.

The array of sports outside of the world-famous regatta also drew attention. The Henley Swimming Baths on the banks of Remenham, swimming races in the river, walking races, the exercising of the Eton beagles as well as regular air shows in the 1930s demonstrated that there is far more than rowing available in the parish.



A performer from an airshow held in Remenham.

The extreme competitiveness of the annual village fete was also on display – the availability of labour and the large estates resulted in many more classes and entries than we see today, even in some county-level shows. A historic census from the late 1800s even had an orchid grower employed at Park Place, and the estate's success in growing a rare South American bloom only known to have flowered in two other places outside its homeland made the national press.

Lasting Legacy

All of the articles and boards used in the show have been carefully stored and will be reused to create smaller or more targeted 'pop up' exhibitions in the future. There were also lessons learned –a catalogue or guide will be provided at similar exhibitions, and there was demand for a display longer than one weekend.



The research continues. The group has assisted an Australian author and helped investigate the whereabouts of a missing tapestry. New discoveries continue to come to light. References survive to a silver sword recovered from the river near Aston, while a headless statue of St Nicholas uncovered during church restoration work in the 1870s has since disappeared. Photographs of former parish football teams have also gone astray. These serve as reminders that there is still much to discover about Remenham's past.

The next major project is a book on St Nicholas Church, due to be published in the coming months.

The Funeral of WH Smith: 10 October 1891

By Chris Whitehead

The repeal of the newspaper stamp duty in 1854 had given an enormous impetus to the circulation of journals, and W. H. Smith & Son were in a position to derive immediate advantage from it. William Henry Smith (WHS) secured, at what was considered by his father an extravagant outlay, a lease of the blank walls in all the principal railway stations for advertising – revolutionary at the time. This led to negotiations with the different railway companies for the right to erect bookstalls at their stations, and by 1862 he had secured the exclusive rights of selling books and newspapers on all the important stations in England. Profits steadily grew till they became prodigious – and all without resorting to selling the pernicious literature which had hitherto made railway bookstalls notorious.

As well as making a fortune, WHS had a stellar political career. At various times he was First Lord of the Admiralty, Chief Secretary for Ireland, First Lord of the Treasury and Leader of the House of Commons. At his death, he was Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. He refused to accept any honour or title during his lifetime, though after his death his widow was raised to the peerage in his honour as Viscountess Hambleden.

WHS bought the Greenlands Estate, which included a substantial riverside mansion (currently occupied by Henley Business School), in 1868. He made considerable additions to the house, both internally and externally, creating a lovely walled garden and various outbuildings – stables, garages, workshops. Greenlands had 26 servants, and accommodation for them and estate workers was built in Dairy Lane. His improvements to the house received a cool reception from Jerome K. Jerome who joked in Three Men in a Boat that it was *the rather uninteresting-looking river residence of my newsagent*. Be that as it may, WHS became Hambleden's greatest benefactor; apart from improvements and additions to the village infrastructure (a new school, the schoolmaster's house, an institute for the young men and several workers' cottages) he contributed to local charities, such as a clothing club, blankets for the poor, and a savings club. Many villagers depended on the Estate for both their home and their livelihood; the Estate owned 154 cottages (out of a total of about 300) for estate workers.

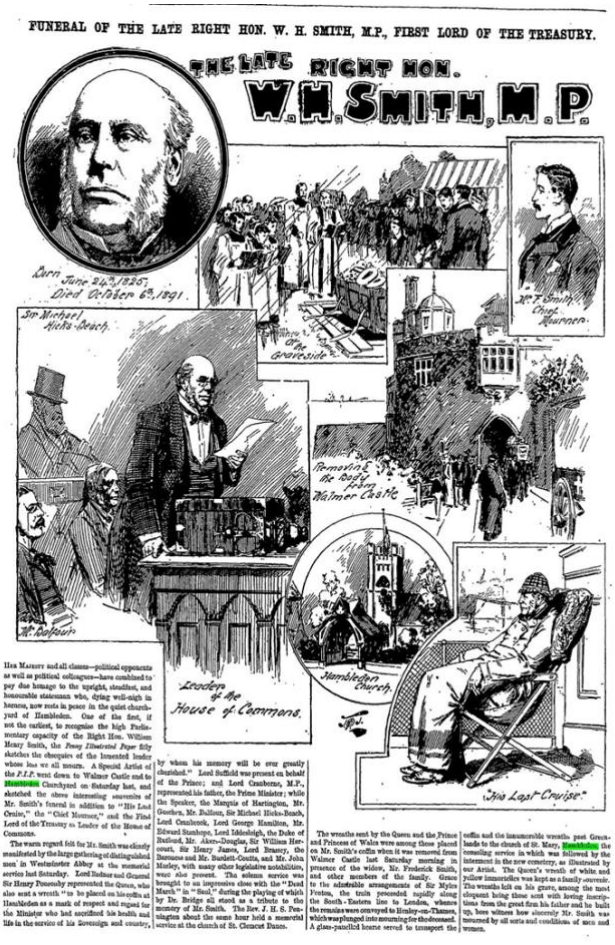
In Henley he was known as the benefactor of the Smith Isolation Hospital on the Fairmile.

WHS' funeral on October 10 ,1891 was the largest event Hambleden had ever known. (It still is!) He had died on October 6 at Walmer Castle near Deal in Kent, his home as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. From there his oak casket was transported by train, via London, to Henley, and then to Hambleden by a horse-drawn hearse. The Huddersfield

Daily Chronical reported that…

…At Henley Station the coffin was placed in a hearse with stained glass panels, and amid demonstrations of respect conveyed to Hambleden, where the interment subsequently took place. As the cortege proceeded along the route, about 100 carriages representing the principal gentry in the neighbourhood joined the procession, which was nearly half a mile in extent, and blinds were drawn at private residences, and in Henley business was partly suspended, the bells of the two local churches tolling in the meantime. Arrived at the lichgate of St Mary's Churchyard, Hambleden, some four miles distant, the corpse was met by the officiating clergy, the Rev. North Pinder (Rural Dean) and the Rev. C M Wetherell (rector of the parish), and the surpliced choir from St Paul's Church, Knightsbridge, who led the way into the sacred edifice, where the first portion of the solemn service was gone through. Afterwards a rather long journey had to be accomplished to the cemetery, which presented a dismal aspect after heavy rain. The service was concluded, the coffin being lowered during a heavy shower; and tears were shed by many of the large number of onlookers present during the singing of the hymn 'Now the labourer's task is o'er'.

The Penny Illustrated Paper produced this graphic





The modest, and sadly untended, grave of WH Smith can still be seen in the Pheasants Hill Graveyard in Hambleden. A rather joyless memorial to a man whose name, until recently, was found on every high street and airport in the country.

The First Flight Over Henley?

By Annabel Lyell

Recently I was handed a copy of the *Wittington House and Estate* booklet which mentions what may be the first flight over Henley. In the booklet is an extract from the memoirs of the Viscount Devonport,

> *"I well remember the occasion on which I saw my first aeroplane. It was during "Henley Week" in 1911, and the house party was seated round the tea-tables on the loggia, and my wife was just pouring out tea, when the sound of a motor, coming seemingly from overhead, became audible.*
>
> *"I do believe it's one of those new flying-machines," someone exclaimed.*
>
> *The whole party of us jumped up from tea and rushed out, waving excitedly, on to the terrace, our black spaniel "Smut" barking furiously. There, sure enough, flying low above the trees, was an aeroplane – a frail-looking, ramshackle affair of wood and "canvas," like a glorified box-kite.*
>
> *The first aeroplane over Wittington!"*

This recollection almost certainly refers to Douglas Graham Gilmour flying in a Bristol Boxkite pusher biplane over Henley Royal Regatta on 7 July 1911. Gilmour

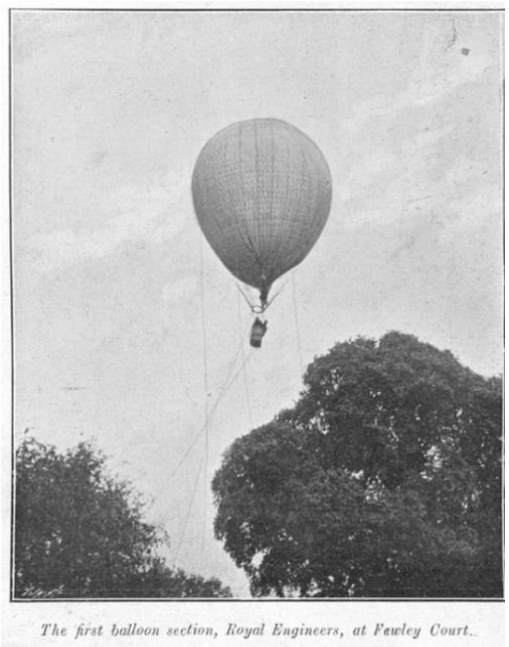
travelled along the Thames, probably past Wittington, swooping down low over the Henley crowds in a move that was later deemed dangerously reckless by authorities. As a result, the Royal Aero Club (RAeC) suspended his Aviator's Certificate for one month for flying in a manner dangerous to the public. This suspension was subsequently overturned by the Court of Appeal who found that the RAeC had no jurisdiction to suspend Gilmour's certificate because it had been issued by the Aero-Club de France.



Mr Graham Gilmour flying over Henley Regatta
From: The Daily Mirror, 21 July 1911

But was this really the first flight over Henley?

To answer that question, I had a look further back. More than a century before Gilmour's flight, nearby Oxford had played a major, pioneering role in aviation, or at least its ballooning precursor. In February 1784, James Sadler, a pastry chef and confectioner on Oxford's High Street had made the first flight in a gas balloon in England, becoming the nation's first aeronaut[2]. While Sadler made more than 40 flights, I don't know if he ever came directly over Henley, although it is quite possible that local Henley residents went to Oxford or London to see his aerial experiments.



The first balloon section, Royal Engineers, at Fawley Court.

Picture from: The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 7 Oct 1905

While free balloon flights remained rare and dangerous, tethered balloons were a popular attraction at fairs and public events. The Remenham Royal Fete at Park Place in 1907 had a "captive balloon" managed by Major Baden-

[2] *King of All Balloons: The Adventurous Life of James Sadler, The First English Aeronaut*, M.J. Davies (2015), Amberley Publishing

Powell, President of the Aeronautical Society[3]. The balloon (which would have been similar to the one shown above) was hugely popular with a steady stream of fete visitors rising some 800ft over the countryside in its basket.

The transition from ballooning to the first recognised powered and sustained flight in the UK arrived on 16 October 1908[4], only 2.5 years before Gilmour's flight. Aviation was in its infancy and by the end of 1911 Great Britain's military possessed less than a dozen efficient aeroplanes and only two small airships. Aircraft remained extraordinary sights and it is unlikely that Henley residents had seen a mechanised flight in the area before.

For the pioneers of aviation, the years from 1909 to 1911 were transformative and described as, "wonderful, amazing, arousing years the like of which we will never see in the air again. Years of extravagant prophesy and wild, unbalanced enthusiasm."[5] Against that backdrop it is easy to understand the excitement that greeted Gilmour's appearance above the Thames during Heney Week in 1911.

Yet aviation advanced at an astonishing pace. Looking back on that nostalgic first sighting in the early 1930s, Viscount Devonport reflected in his memoirs that, "*Now, hardly an hour passes without the familiar drone of planes being heard, and they wing their way across the sky practically unnoticed*." Within just a couple of decades the aeroplane that had halted an afternoon tea party had become a commonplace sound of the sky.

Whether Gilmour's flight truly deserves the title of Henley's first aerial visitor is impossible to say with complete certainty. Balloonists may well have drifted overhead long before 1911. However, for the party gathered on the terrace of Wittington House that July afternoon, there can be little doubt that they felt they were witnessing the future, and perhaps Henley's first encounter with the age of powered flight.

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[3] From research kindly supplied by Madeline Duffy

[4] This is generally accepted as the first British mechanised flight. The plane was designed and built by Samuel Franklin Cody.

[5] *Eighty Years of British Aviation, the Work of the Royal Aeronautical Society from 12 January 1866 to 12 January 1946*, J Laurence Pritchard, National Aerospace Library.

H.A. & H.G. Visit to Abingdon – A Day of Suprises and Riches

By Jane Redley

Anyone navigating Abingdon's slightly tortuous one-way system and looking for parking in the town could be forgiven for completely missing the jewels that are the Abingdon Abbey Buildings. They are tucked away behind Checker Walk, and it was to this hidden spot that the HA&HG group went in June for their summer outing.

To set the scene: these buildings are all that remain of the erstwhile grand abbey (once the second most important in England, after Glastonbury). This consisted of the abbey itself, which is now commemorated and marked out using stone and brick lines in the Abbey Gardens. It stood behind the old gatehouse (reconstructed in 1450 and still a prominent feature of the town) and approached past St Nicholas church (built in 1184) on Stert Street. To the right of the church is the former St John's Hospital, founded around 1138, which is still used as a magistrates' court.

Going through the gatehouse and round to the right, you reach a set of buildings which were originally part of the main Abbey complex and are also still very well used.

Arriving here for our visit on 3 June, we were met by Greg Bensberg, Chairman of the Friends of Abingdon Abbey Buildings Trust, which has secured a grant to transform these buildings, so that they are fit for the 21st century users and will be preserved well into the future.

Greg took us first to the far right-hand side of the set of joined buildings: the Checker Hall. This was originally built in 1260 as the exchequer for the Abbey. It was then rebuilt in the 15th century, and given a timber roof, before being converted into three cottages by the nineteenth century. It then fell into disrepair before being rescued in the 1950s and turned into a theatre. This, for anyone new to the area, is a revelation: a small and highly atmospheric, Elizabethan style theatre, seating around 90 people.

Returning into the 'foyer', which was probably originally used as the Abbey treasurer's office, our group admired the huge medieval fireplace before going into a second room (possibly used for receipts, with the first used for expenditure). On the wall is a long and fascinating modern frieze, giving the history of Abingdon Abbey and its buildings.

Passing through a doorway, you come into the really impressive large hall, the Long Gallery, dating from 1455 which was originally built as a guest house for visitors to the Abbey, heated by periodic fire places along its length. At the far end we passed through centuries to gaze up at a 16th century wall painting, high on a beam, depicting Tudor roses (symbol of Henry VIII) and Spanish pomegranates (symbol of Katherine of Aragon). The couple stayed at the Abbey in April 1518. There is also a bit of 15th century graffiti, amongst other unauthorised carvings, in the lintel of the fireplace in this room: the Beaufort family portcullis.



Painting in the Long Gallery



Long Gallery

This timber and brick hall with its medieval roof was used after the dissolution of the monasteries as a granary for many years, and later as a brewery. Yet another incarnation is imminent, following the renovation: the room is to have new windows, giving light and protection from the elements, while still preserving the original spirit of the place.

Downstairs, we passed through the Lower Hall, with its ancient tiled floor and low beams, which is still used as a meeting and exhibition place, as well as being the centre of administration by the Friends of Abingdon Abbey.

Leaving the room and turning left under an archway, a few paces take you to a hidden garden, with the Mill Stream on the far side. This peaceful haven allows you to enjoy the largely untouched back of the abbey buildings. Our final stop at these extraordinary buildings was the 13th century under-croft, used as a wine cellar, with its cooling, Cotswold- stone-vaulted ceiling.





Mill Stream at the back of the Abbey buildings

To the historic Crown and Thistle pub for refreshments, where the slow service was redeemed by some delicious fare. From there, we crossed the road to the Abingdon museum where we looked at some archaeological finds from the area made by Jeff Wallis, also a volunteer at the museum. He explained the basics of flint knapping to a captivated audience as we held the stones. After a short wander around the museum (which deserves much more prolonged scrutiny than we were able to give it in the time available) we headed off down East St Helen's Street.

We stopped at the jewel that is St. Ethelwold's house: a community garden (pictures below), open to all for meditation and simply to enjoy nature. This plot and property were described in 1798 as a 'messuage' (dwelling house with outbuildings, courtyard and lands used by a household) and it was here the original Abingdon museum was sited. This was the brainchild of Dorothea Pickering, a school-teacher, who left the house and garden to the people of Abingdon when she died. The house was closed when we visited, but the garden was a complete delight, full of glorious blooms and leading down to the river, with a little summer house to the left where one could sit and draw or write in perfect tranquillity.





Walking on to the end of the road, we came to the thousand-year-old St Helens church. This has a nave altar, with three side banks of seats all facing the middle: something that felt immediately welcoming. The church also boasts a beautiful painted ceiling in the Lady Chapel, dating from the 1380s and depicting the Tree of Jesse.

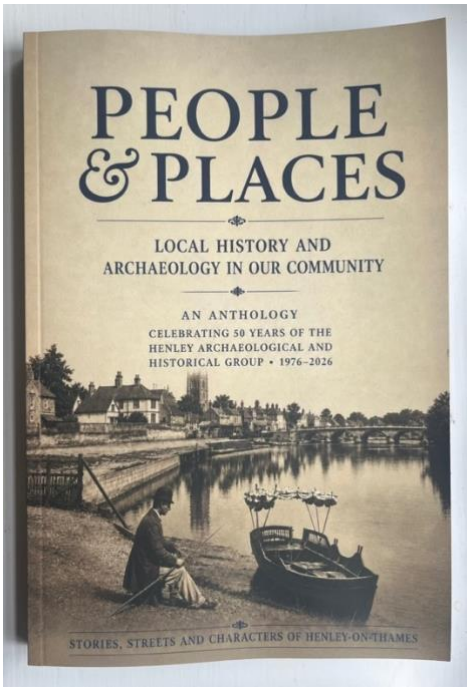
It had been a packed day introducing Abingdon's history. I, for one, need to go back to each of the places we had visited, to spend more time absorbing its many treasures.

Celebrating 50 Years of H.A. & H.G.

Our group was first established in 1976 and it felt important to mark and celebrate 50 years of our own history. It was lovely to see several dozen Members, the entire HA&HG Committee, representatives of kindred bodies, the Henley Society and the South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group, and many key figures in Henley including the Mayor and several councillors at our drinks. The weather was kind and we were able to raise our glasses to the past 50 years outside, in the courtyard of Chantry House. Speeches were given by our Chair (copied in full below) and the Mayor, Ian Reissman.



The Mayor's speech congratulated our Group on reaching this half-century milestone and noted HA&HG's significant contribution to exploring Henley's history and making our findings publicly available. The Mayor also explained that following the closure of the River and Rowing Museum nearly one year ago, he hoped there would be good news on a new museum to showcase the town's rich history before too long. The HA&HG Committee will be following their plans closely and will report back to Members in due course.



To commemorate our first 50 years, Michael introduced HA&HG's anniversary publication *People & Places* at the event. Edited by Chris Whitehead, it condenses half a century of HA&HG's research papers into a single anthology. This book recounts the history and archaeology of Henley from the earliest handaxes of ancient humans all the way through to events and recollections of the First and Second World Wars. This book is on sale at the Bell Bookshop in Henley for £15 or Members may buy copies for £10 by contacting Alexis on hahg.members@gmail.com.

Our Chair's Speech, Outside the Chantry House

Good afternoon everyone. I am Michael Redley, currently chair of Henley Archaeological and Historical Group, and on behalf of the committee of HA&HG, I wanted to thank you all - Mr Mayor, town councillors, representatives of other Henley organisations, and of course members of HA&HG - for accepting our invitation to celebrate our fiftieth anniversary of doing history in the town.

Councillor Riessmann, who is here with me, has kindly agreed to say a few words. But let me say something first very briefly about our first fifty years.

Survival
I thought I had better look back to begin with at the old records – which is what historians do, after all - to try to work out how we have managed to survive for so long. It is something for a voluntary group of our type to have made it to its 50th year. And it's clear that this has required on occasion much paddling under the water. And it was by no means a foregone conclusion that we'd get this far!!

But persistence there was. One of our current committee members – Peter Anderson – attended the inaugural meeting in 1976 and has been on the committee more or less continuously ever since. By comparison, I – a comparative 'newby' – am actually the seventh chairman we have had. And I found looking at the old records that the Group has reinvented itself several times over the last fifty years.

What we have done
The intrinsic interest of the past of our wonderful town and its surroundings has inspiring successive generations of townspeople to join in in different ways.

It began mostly with archaeology, digging sites around the town and within it. The recording of buildings - barns in the countryside and houses in the town - inspired another generation. Written and published records – parish registers, wills, turnpike minutes, and local newspapers back to early Victorian times, for example – have drawn in another and different sort of interest.

And our finding have been put 'on the record' in increasingly sophisticated ways - originally just newsletters produced on a cyclostyle machine, then in an annual journal, in published volumes, like Anne Cottingham's *Hostelries of Henley*, and Hilary Fisher's *From Tillage to Terrace*, and plaques about the town, and a website managed expertly by David Feary which is accessed from around the world.

Our discoveries
What have we discovered? Over fifty years, many small findings of course accumulate into a significant corpus of knowledge about the past of the town. We wanted to mark this in our anniversary year by collecting together in a single volume a representative sample of the research our members in all their variety have done over the years. And here it is – an attractive book called *People and Places*. It covers the archaeology, the building and the documentary research. It's a selective anthology, but it also includes

an index of all the research, which you can look back to in its original form on our website.

We owe this volume to our Treasurer, Chris Whitehead, who had done the spade work to get it ready for us to announce today. It's a cracking good read, as well as a memorial to historical pioneering from 1976 to the present day. It will be available to buy from tomorrow in all good bookshops, price £15. I hope you'll all make it your business to acquire a copy. A notice will be coming round shortly to members offering you your copy at a princely discount, and a price, therefore, of £10.

Engagement
We are proud of what HA&HG has done and continues to do as a volunteer body for the good of the town. This has included work on planning enquiries, and contributions to national projects like the Victoria County History. I am delighted that Robert Peberdy, one of the principle professional contributors to that volume, whose research on medieval Henley is an important foundation of modern understanding, is with us this evening. Our historical expertise also contributed to the creation of the local history collection, the Henley Gallery, in the former River and Rowing Museum, which closed a year ago this month. Roger Kendal, a pioneer who can't be with us today, played a leading part in the creation of the Gallery.

I'd also like to mention our own most recent project, completed last year, on the Second World War in Henley. Our seminar and publication was a contribution to the 80th Anniversary of VE Day.

Local support
We have always been extremely grateful for support for our work from local bodies, not least Henley Town Council. The most recent example involves our project to precisely date the town's rich collection of late medieval timber-framed buildings by the scientific process of tree-ring dating. A grant has been indispensable to carry this work forward. And we were very proud that our members, Ruth Gibson, was recently awarded the Council's Town Medal for her historical work on the built heritage of the town.

Toast
So just before I hand over to Councillor Riessmann – hoping that you've all found you way to the drink of your choice – can I ask you all, please, to lift your glasses in a toast to HA&HG – 'Fifty this year'. I give you HA&HG – Henley's local history, past and future.

Thank you all very much. Let me now ask Ian Riessmann to say a few words to complete our celebration.

Good Reads from Our Members

As we head towards Christmas perhaps this list will give you some gift ideas or a good read to enjoy by the fire over the festive season.

Please contribute! We would love to hear about any history or archaeology books that you have read recently. The books do not need to be newly published. The review need not be long or fully comprehensive – a short description of why you liked the book is sufficient. There will be "Good Reads" in our October and Spring newsletters so that you all have some additional book ideas to add to your own reading lists. Please send your book reviews to annabel_lyell@yahoo.co.uk. Happy to receive reviews at any time – they will be placed in my newsletter file for the next publication. Here are some of the books that Members have enjoyed recently.

Neil MacGregor, *Germany: Memories of a Nation*, Penguin Books, 2014
From: Michael Redley

To complement the usual guidebook when you go to Germany on holiday, you may want a volume for your rucksack explaining the country and its past. With one serious qualification, MacGregor's book is it.

Brilliantly illustrated, including clear maps, it presents Germany's history, in contrast to that of other European countries, including our own, as '…so damaged that it cannot be repaired but rather must be constantly revisited'. 'The descent' into Hitler's horrors, and the survivors' reactions turn out to be only the most recent influences on the troubled collective memory of the modern nation. Yet the overall message is one of hope. And the way it goes about explaining the significance of the past for the present it is thrilling. Instances and illustrations are so vividly and widely drawn – from victory monuments to sausages, iron and Martin Luther to Snow White, that it is impossible to look at Germany the same way ever again.

The qualification is that the book is one of the heaviest for its size I have ever encountered. Carrying it any distance in a rucksack should only be attempted by travellers with weight-lifting qualifications. Otherwise highly recommended.

Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England*, The Bodley Head, 2008
From: Chris Whitehead

This book was published some years ago but loses none of its relevance for that.
It aims to make 14th-century history vivid and engaging rather than simply presenting statistics and official records. Mortimer argues that history becomes meaningful when readers can imagine the experiences of ordinary people, such as those affected by the Black Death. To achieve this, he uses surviving evidence, including the Paston Letters and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, to recreate everyday medieval life. He describes everything from travel and food to social relationships, danger and entertainment.

Mortimer's use of the second person and present tense places readers directly into the medieval world, although this style can sometimes feel awkward. Nevertheless, his expertise as a historian and archivist ensures that the imaginative approach remains reliable and well researched.

Overall, the book combines scholarship with humour and vivid detail, revealing a medieval society that was dangerous, communal and often unpleasant, while also offering surprising and entertaining facts about the period.

Mary-Ann Ochota, *Hidden Histories – A Spotters Guide to the British Landscape*, Frances Lincoln, 2018
From: Andrea MacGregor

I have found this book an informative read and a good go-to when seeking information about a perplexing feature of the historical landscape. It has clear illustrations and explanations, and, as stated in the Sunday Times, it "covers a satisfying variety of different subjects from pathways, bridges and old houses to hedges, churches, graveyards and field patterns ".

Alison Weir, *Katherine Swynford: The Story of John of Gaunt and His Scandalous Duchess*, Vintage, 2007
From: Annabel Lyell

Katherine Swynford was one of the most important women of the 14th Century. As the mother of the Beauforts, she became the ancestor of the Yorkist kings, the Tudors, the Stuarts and every other British sovereign since. The mistress and finally the third wife of John of Gaunt, her story is remarkable not only for her place in history but for the author's ability to tell her story where no primary source of her life exists.

Although the book is, in some respects, as much a biography of John of Gaunt (the fourth son of Edward III) as it is of Katherine, their intertwined lives were surrounded by many of the great figures of the time including Katherine's brother-in-law, Geoffrey Chaucer. This book is a detailed and interesting history of the second half of this turbulent century, and the enduring love of a couple which survived public condemnation and the religious constraints of their time.

Simon Winchester, *The Map That Changed the World*, Penguin, 2001
From: Elizabeth Toms

I would like to recommend a book called *The Map That Changed the World* by Simon Winchester. It concerns William Smith the canal builder. He produced a coloured map of the strata of the British Isles published in 1815. The map hangs to this day at the headquarters of the Geological Society in Piccadilly. I have a copy of the map should anyone like to see it.

Our forthcoming lectures

All lectures will be held at Chantry House, doors open 7pm for 7:30pm start
Details available on the website: https://hahg.org.uk/lectures-coming/

2026

3 November	Recent Archaeological Discoveries in Buckinghamshire, Lucy Lawrence
1 December	History of Marlow, Geoff Wood

2027

5 January	Roman Scotland: Life on the Edge of Empire, Rebecca Jones
2 February	Marching through Marlow (provisional title), Simon Cains
2 March	AGM, lecture TBC
6 April	TBC
4 May	History of Remenham (provisional title), Madeline Duffy
1 June	The Orange Way (provisional title), Stuart Parks & Amanda Westcott

H.A. & H.G.
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Our Website

Please visit our web site: ***hahg.org.uk*** for the latest news, updates on coming lectures, planned visits and for access to our archived information.