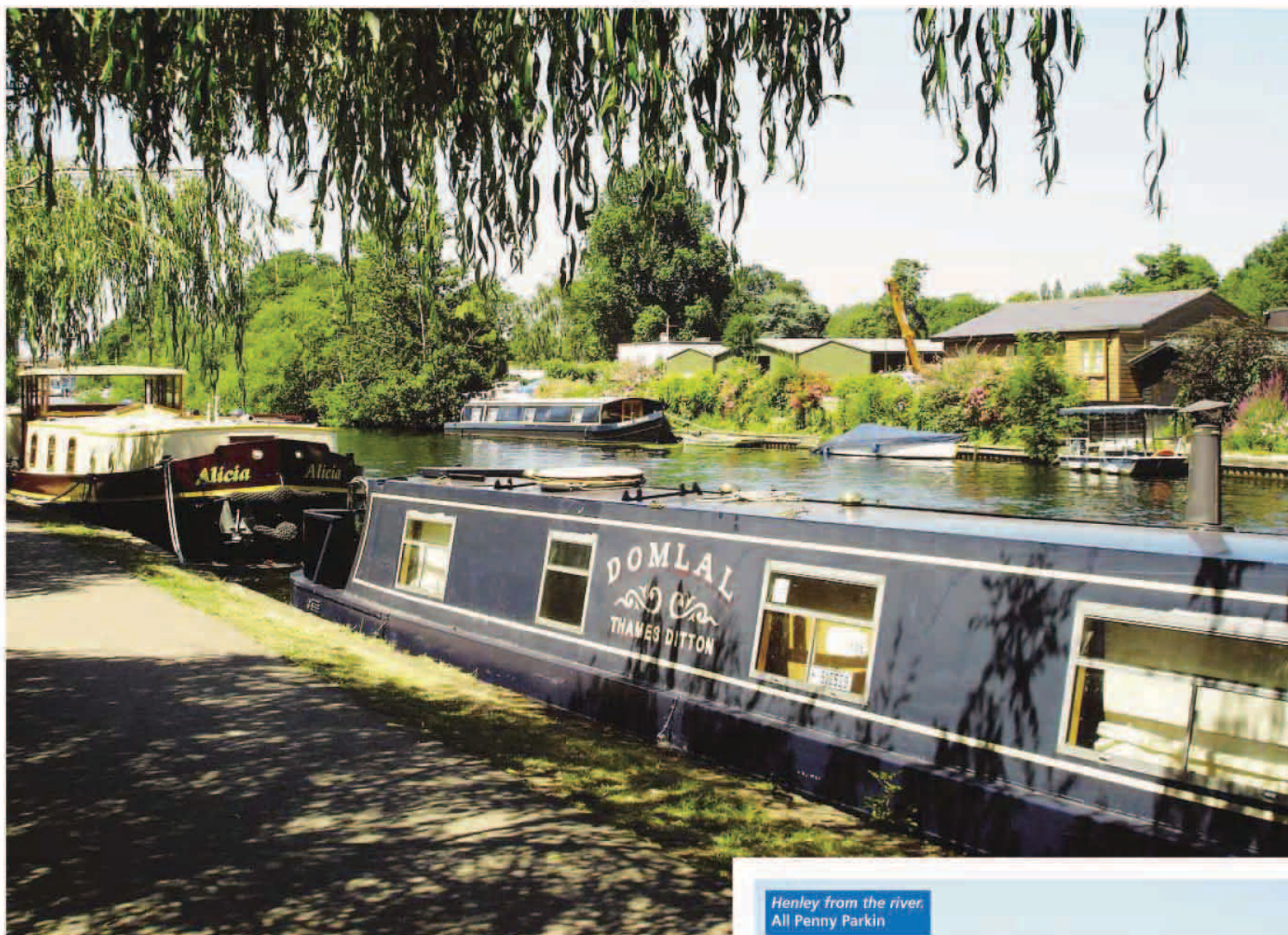


A stately passage

– from Henley-on-Thames to Windsor



A picturesque view from the towpath at Henley.

Henley-on-Thames will always be associated with its annual regatta, an event which provoked Charles Dickens to describe the ancient market town in the Chilterns as the 'Mecca of the rowing man', writes Penny Parkin

THE ancient Oxfordshire market town's association with its annual boat race may well lead it to be overlooked as both a town worthy of exploration and a place from which to hire all kinds of pleasure craft. So on the hottest July day this year, I decided to put the record straight and hired a motor launch from Hobbs of Henley to explore Henley and its environs from the river without having to row my way into the record books.

It's almost a shame to set off from Henley without stopping off for lunch at The Angel at Henley Bridge, a picturesque pub from which you can sip Pimms and watch the town's various pleasure craft go by. The Red Lion Hotel is another focal point and a rather prestigious venue with a restaurant for lunch and dinner daily. King Charles I is reputed to have lodged at The Red Lion during the 17th century and the Duke of Marlborough had his own room kept aside here as a stopover point en route to his new residence, Blenheim Palace in nearby Woodstock.

For rowing enthusiasts, the Henley River and Rowing museum is small but well worth a visit before beginning your journey towards Windsor and its helpful, friendly staff will do their best to answer any queries you may have about the river.



A plethora of craft moored at Henley.

The museum tells the tale of the first boat race between Oxford and Cambridge and covers the Henley Regatta. Activities include an 'In the Cox's Seat' interactive exhibit for a first-hand experience of a race – if you can tear the kids away from the gory collection of objects found in the River Thames or the currently popular 'Wind in the Willows' exhibition on the ground floor.

Setting off just before Henley Bridge, the river splits into two channels and winds past Temple Island, best known as the ornate starting point for the Henley regatta course. A 5mph speed limit means that you won't be getting off to a breakneck start, which is perfect for learning how to steer clear of other river users and paddling Henley residents and gives you a chance to admire the opulent riverbank scenery. From the off, the surrounding countryside is peaceful and elegant and the riverbank is lined with manicured green lawns belonging to the picturesque, stately and unusual houses populating the right bank.

Downstream, Hambleden lock offers a change in scenery as you pass the beautiful 16th Century Hambleden water mill at Mill End, which is now converted into plush executive flats. East of the mill is the attractive yet infamous village of Medmenham, which was once a ferry crossing point. The village is the home of Medmenham Abbey, the 18th century home of the Hellfire Club, a scandalous private members' organisation, which caused local uproar. It was founded by Sir Francis Dashwood, Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1762 to 1763 and attended by painter William Hogarth and statesman Benjamin Franklin.

Further on through the historic village of Hurley, which is mentioned in the Domesday book, lies Marlow, a similarly pretty town with an annual regatta which has many attractive pubs including The Chequers, a 16th century inn constructed from old ship's timbers. The town in fact has many



Henley from the river. All Penny Parkin

historic links. Percy Shelley lived here from 1817 to 1818 while he wrote his *Revolt to Islam* while his wife Mary finished her horror story *Frankenstein*. Another famous resident TS Eliot lived at The Old Post Office House from 1918-1919.

Further artistic and prestigious connections along this stretch of river include Cookham, the home of artist Stanley Spencer and Cliveden, which belonged to the Astor family. Kenneth Grahame also lived in nearby Cookham Dean and is thought to have written *The Wind in the Willows* here. It's easy to see how he was inspired by the local countryside and the nearby country pub 'The Old Swan Uppers', named after the custom of ringing newborn cygnets to show that they are the property of the crown. Watching them dip for food it's difficult not to be reminded of the Ducks' Ditty where ducks dabble 'uptails all'.

The theatrics and story telling continue as the river passes Bray Film Studios, which would have seen its fair share of matinee idols over the years and the village of Bray, which has many fine Georgian houses. In fact, the stretch of river between Bray Lock and Boulton's Lock, the next lock upstream, has long been named 'Millionaire's Row' due to its

high percentage of famous and wealthy residents. If you fancy a touch of the high life, Monkey Island Hotel is situated just past Bray Lock and mooring is allowed for restaurant patrons, booked in advance.

On towards Windsor, whose famous castle has been used as a royal residence since Henry I's reign and is one of the Queen's official residences. Windsor houses many pleasant pubs, hotels and restaurants including Wren's private hotel, which used to be the home of Sir Christopher Wren and overlooks the Thames, and if you moor here, it's possible to take a boat trip to Windsor racecourse. Recently the Windsor Eye has been added in Alexandra Garden giving some fantastic countryside and river views. A fitting end to a journey along this regal section of the Thames.

Hobbs of Henley Ltd hire three- to five-seater rowing boats, four-seater motor launches, 12-seater day boats and chauffeured launches and runs one hour river trips from April to September. For further information contact Hobbs of Henley Ltd, Station Road, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire RG9 1AZ. Telephone: 01491 572035, email: boats@hobbs-of-henley.co.uk or visit the website www.hobbs-of-henley.com