

Eileen Argyris



# HERITAGE

Planning for the future requires an examination of our past

# The legend of John Henley



The story of how the Henley Arcade came to be

By COLIN CALDWELL

Like many relative new-comers to Cobourg, I had often wondered how that eminently useful bit of architecture, the Henley Arcade, had come to be.

The earliest shopping instructions I heard were to park on Covert Street, go through the Henley Arcade, and proceed from there.

Little did I guess that through that passage led one of the strongest links to Cobourg's past.

That passage is where the shoe and bicycle repair shop of John Henley once stood. At one point, his store was the oldest continually operating business in Cobourg.

John Henley himself was born in Surrey, England in March of 1890. At the turn of the century, he and his brothers lost their parents to a flu epidemic, and the boys found themselves taken in by the School of Hand Crafts in Merstham. This was a philanthropically run school, designed to provide practical training

and general education for orphaned young men.

Though the practical training seems to have been limited to whatever skills the instructors themselves could boast, it appears the rest of his schooling also left him with an abiding love for literature and music.

John's allotted skill was that of shoe-making, which he practiced at one point on casualties from the Boer War, as well as his brother George's slightly game leg. By 1913, John had met Alice Annie Geal, and convinced her to follow him to Canada.

Settling first in Belleville, John soon was able to bring Alice after him. She arrived in Belleville at the end of August 1913, with the aid of the Salvation Army Traveller's Aid. John and Alice

immediately marched to Belleville's Christ Church Rectory and were married the same day as she arrived.

Soon John was tempted by his brother George to relocate to Cobourg where he set up his own shop on the south side of King Street. From there, he moved the shop once before finally settling in the store on the north side, opposite Second Street. There, the wind blowing up Second Street brought the harbour's coolness to sweep through his open doors, front and back, and John stayed

**The wind blowing up Second Street brought the harbour's coolness to sweep through his open doors, front and back, and John stayed for good**

for good. An old Quebec stove heated the store faithfully through the many winters. John became a permanent fixture in the Cobourg scene. His jaunty ads for "Service While-U-Wait" are a regular feature of *The Cobourg Sentinel-Star* through the 1920s. Many old inhabitants will remember his large, patient craftsman's hands.

With the onset of new materials and new styles, John's business slowly fell off as the years went by. Soon, he found himself doing more bicycle work, reading, writing and playing cards with old friends in the back of the shop, warmed by the stove in winter and cooled by the constant breeze in summer. In summer, he worked in his gardens at his home on Henry Street.

It was the stove that finally did it. After 46 years — the longest stretch of any shop in town — the flues of the stove caught fire one night, in February of 1972.

A homeless man, apparently from Thorold, Ont., had broken into the room upstairs. Slipping into the shop, the man stoked up the fire in the old stove, in order to heat the room above. That was what over-heated the pipes that cold night.

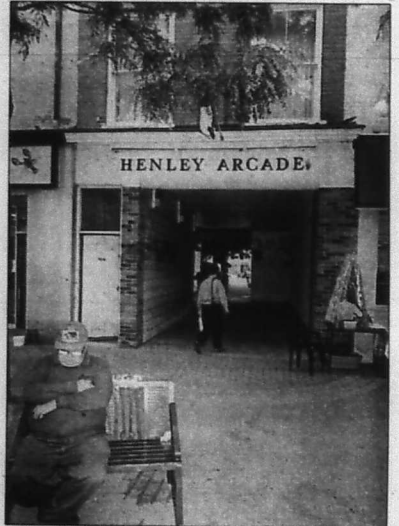
The fire cost John Henley his shop, and the homeless man his life.

*The Cobourg Sentinel-Star* had nothing but praise for the firemen, who managed to rescue the other residents of the apartments, besides preventing the fire from spreading to neighbouring stores.

Later that year, the town council stepped in and purchased the gutted store, to provide access to the new parking lot on Covert Street. They dedicated it to John Henley.

John Henley died in November of 1978, tending his gardens to the last. It is curious to think that the breeze now flows through his store more freely than ever.

Colin Caldwell is a freelance writer and historian who lives in Cobourg.



The Henley Arcade today. PHOTO BY TED AMSDEN

## The lonely morning after ....

Eighty-one-year-old John Henley who operated Henley's shoe repair shop in Cobourg for years, came by his burned out shop Monday morning, almost out of force of habit.

The shop and apartments above, were destroyed in an early Sunday morning blaze in which a young man died.

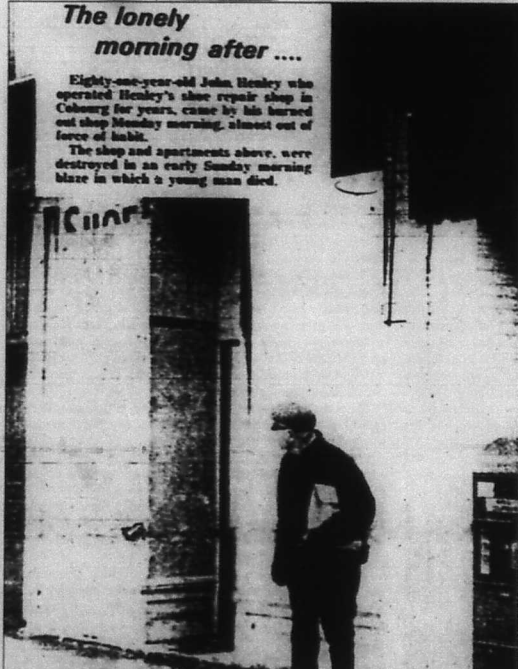


Photo from *The Cobourg Sentinel-Star* on March 4, 1972 following the fire that gutted John Henley's shop.

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**John Henley – The man whom Henley Arcade is named for.**

Many of us walk past and through this passageway from the Covert Street parking lot to our beautiful downtown., on the north side of King Street in Cobourg.

**John Henley** owned and operated Henley's Shoe Repair (and later Henley's Shoe and Bicycle Repair Shop) on the sunny side of King Street at 48A King Street for 46 years.

The shop closed in 1972 due to a fire. Later the same year the Town of Cobourg bought the burned building to create a convenient access point from the centre of downtown to the new Covert Street parking lot.

In recent years, the walkway has had a facelift with the installation of a mural depicting an interpretation of the John Henley's Shoe Repairs and Bicycles storefront.

***Curious to learn more? Check out these articles:***

<https://vitacollections.ca/cobourg-heritage-centre/3592189/page/3>

<https://www.cdhs.ca/histories/featured-articles/5-henley-arcade-the-rest-of-the-story>

<https://www.northumberlandnews.com/news-story/6061712-cobourg-s-henley-arcade-history-remembered-in-murals/>

**1798—We were not here**

**2798—We will not be here**

**1948—We are here on the sunny side  
of King Street**

**JOHN HENLEY**

**Shoe Repairs and Bicycles**