



The History of Reading Society

The object of the Society is to cultivate interest in and to encourage research into the history of the town of Reading.

Secretary

Mrs E. Naish
19, Denmark Road,
READING RG1 5PA

Tel: 872166

Chairman

Mr James Gafford
15, St. Andrews Road,
Caversham,
READING RG4 7PH

Tel: 474308

Non-Treasurer

Lt.Cdr G. Naish
19, Denmark Rd.,
READING RG1 5PA

Tel: 872166

NEWSLETTER - SUMMER 1987

An event of minimal importance in the history of Reading but of no small gratification, to me took place when I was appointed Chairman to succeed Mary Southerton. The founding fathers (and mothers) who drew up the Society's constitution decreed that Committee members should enjoy only a limited tenure, so Mary had to go. She has presided over our meetings for three very successful years and, even though out of office, will not be idle you may be sure.

As if this was not enough, Sue Read who has served us so efficiently as Hon. Secretary for six years has had to resign from the post owing to other commitments. Her wide knowledge of available speakers has been behind most of our lectures and a replacement has not yet been persuaded to volunteer for the job. Mrs Elspet Naish has however kindly consented to step into the breach for the time being. Sue has now been designated 'Consultant' and your Committee has been careful not to define too particularly the limits of the appointment.

"Perhaps you can tell me. I have often wondered why..." Who has not heard this from someone who knows that you are interested in Reading history? It is followed by a question about some feature in the town which has puzzled them and it is often far from easy to look up the appropriate reference, and the opportunity passes. Yet the ability to call upon a store of sometimes trivial detail concerning Reading's past gives a certain feeling of belonging. Here are three examples, the first of a series if I can manage it.

- by J.E.G.
- (a) Why Stanshawe Road?
 - (b) Who is commemorated by the Fifteenth Century style cross in St. Mary's churchyard?
 - (c) Where was Broken Brow?

Your own queries will be welcome and your Committee will try their skill at solving them. Also feel free to comment, correct or contradict. Answers elsewhere in this newsletter.

James Gafford.

---ooo000ooo---

Mr A. E. RIVERS

Members will be pleased to learn that Mr Bert Rivers who suffered a fractured pelvis in a distressing accident earlier in the year is making a good recovery and is once more able to get out and about. We wish him a speedy return to his former good health and vigour.

A member of long standing, Mr Rivers has spent much time in the local library indexing local newspapers. In appreciation of his services to this Society and to local history in general, your Committee at its last meeting was please to include his name on the roll of Honorary Members.

---ooo000ooo---

FAREWELL TO 'THE MERCURY'

It with a sense of loss that we learn the 'The Mercury' has ceased publication after more than two and a half centuries of service to the County. Dating from 1723, this was one of the first of the county newspapers. In its earlier years preference was given to national and international news but before long it was to become a truly local paper.

The editions of this paper which are available to readers in the local Reference Library both on microfilm and in the original will long remain a mine of information for the researcher into local history.

CROSSING THE THAMES

Our town owes its prosperity to its being an important centre of communications. Travellers westwards from London have always been able to cross the Kennet here with the minimum of difficulty whilst those going from south to north or vice versa have been able to cross the Thames at Caversham.

The first written record of a bridge at Caversham is to be found in a document dated 1231 - although we can be fairly certain that there had been one at this point for some considerable time before that. We know that by the 13th Century responsibility for its upkeep was shared between the Abbot of Reading and the lord of the Manor of Caversham both of whom levied tolls for that purpose.

Three bridges are known to have occupied this site. The original was of stone with many narrow arches, several resting on small islands in the river; the Thames in medieval times being wider and shallower than is the case today. Referred to in many old documents as 'the great bridge' it must in its day have been an imposing sight. On the bridge were two chapels where a traveller might pause to rest and pray. The chapel on the northern side was dedicated to St. Anne whilst that on the Reading side was known as The Chapel of the Holy Ghost. Both appeared to have served in the additional capacity of toll house.

At some time part of the bridge on the Reading side of the river was taken down and a draw-bridge installed so that larger river craft might pass through. Early in the Civil War this section was broken down as a security measure. This was however to prove to the disadvantage of the Earl of Essex, commander of the Parliamentary forces, when in April 1643 he was obliged to stand helplessly by whilst a strong force of Royalists rode across Caversham Heights in the direction of Sonning where they were able to place quantities of arms aboard barges to reinforce the king's army. Soon after the end of the war repairs were put in hand but the old structure was never again really safe and there are many reports of serious accidents there. The old bridge was however to remain in use until 1868 when the increase in both road and river traffic made its replacement imperative. In that year it was demolished and replaced by a wrought iron structure, less picturesque but safer and altogether more convenient. Whilst work was in progress vehicles and pedestrians were taken across the river by ferry.

In 1911 when Reading's boundaries were extended to take in Caversham it was part of the agreement that the bridge should be widened to at least 45 feet to provide an effective means of communication between Reading and Caversham. The Corporation's plans for rebuilding were however delayed by the outbreak of war and work did not begin until 1924 when the old iron bridge was replaced by a ferro-concrete structure of two shallow arches.

The formal opening of the bridge by HRH The Prince of Wales which was to have taken place in May, 1926 was delayed for a month on account of the General Strike. The Prince finally came on June 25th to unveil the commemorative plaque.

By the end of World War 1 both Reading and Caversham had grown to such an extent that a second Thames crossing was clearly necessary. At the same time as Caversham Bridge was being rebuilt work started on another bridge a short distance downstream. To be known as Reading Bridge this structure took the form of a single span of extremely graceful proportions. Doubts having been expressed as to the safety of such a slender arch of ferro-concrete it was tested by loading it with as many steam rollers and traction engines as could be mustered. The first private vehicle to follow this cavalcade was the Caversham & Reading Laundry's cart drawn by a horse called Charlie.

Another Thames crossing, the footbridge from Caversham Lock to Lower Caversham which today bears a variety of flood control sluices and gates, is in fact a site of ancient origin. Referred to in documents of the early 17th Century as 'le Clopper' or 'le Clapper' it is still known locally as The Clappers. It was here that in 1896 the bodies of a number of babies, all tied up in brown paper parcels, were recovered from the river. These were the victims of Mrs Amelia Dyer, a deranged individual who offered to take in unwanted children for payment with a view to adoption but whom she strangled and disposed of in the river. For this series of shocking murders she was later tried and hanged at Newgate Gaol.

As Reading continues to grow the road traffic has become such that the provision of another point cannot long be delayed. Just where it will be situated is still a matter of conjecture and will, one can be sure, be the source of much heated debate. My own feeling is that it is likely to be to the west of the town. If any member would care to comment your letters will be included in the next issue of this Newsletter.

Peter Southerton

The Chairman's Quiz - Answers:

- (a) Robert Stanshawe, a Groom of the King's Chamber, acquired part of the land of the dissolved friary of Greyfriars, including part of the quire of the church in 1540. (History of the Church of Greyfriars, Reading. F.G.Spriggs).
- (b) Erected in 1887 to honour Dr Isaac Harrinson (1809-1888), surgeon and philanthropist. His benefactions include contributions towards the purchase of Father Willis organ, north aisle of St.Mary's and demolition of the cottages in the Butts to clear the road centre and open up churchyard frontage.
- (c) Site of Huntley & Palmers biscuit factory. (Tomkins' map,1802)

Further jottings from The Diary of an Unknown Citizen'

The Summer of 1814 saw the end of the war with France. Reading celebrated.

July 2nd Peace with France proclaimed in the Market Place.

July 4th A meeting was held in the Town Hall to consider of a subscription for the poor, when about £60 subscribed and a committee form'd to collect from door to door for their benefit.

Today Mr Bacon, tailor and salesman, Duke Street gave a dinner for all his workmen and women.

July 5th Letchworth and Tiley, tailors and salesmen, in the Market Place, gave a dinner to nearly 500 of their work folks and acquaintances.

Before dinner, one of the tailors dress'd in a French uniform, and seated on a donkey, handcuffed, with a lable on his cap "Emperor of Elba" was led round the town preceded by drums and fifes, and followed by his brother workmen with white sticks.

In the evening a splendid illumination; the streets thronged with people, yet owing to the precautions of our Mayor, the whole passed off with the greatest order and regularity; no squibs thrown in the streets till after one o'clock in the morning.

July 6th Public dinners at the Crown Inn at 10/6 per head; at the Bear Inn at 5/6; at the Lower Ship at 2/6; and at many other places.

July 7th A general thanksgiving for peace.

After service, the children educated at the National School (300 boys and 300 girls) were presented with a pound of plumb cake each, in the Market Place.

July 14th This evening, three oxen were drove into town decorated with blue ribbands and attended by an immense concourse of people with music and handbells. No procession is now complete without a grotesque figure they call Bonaparte, so in this case, Anthony Paine, (a man who has a withered arm) dressed in a ludicrous manner, with a lable on his back in praise of English roast beef, walked before the beast.

July 21. The lower classes of poor people dine in public. 6,000 sat down at 80 tables spread in the streets extending from the top of London Street to the bottom Friar Street. At 3 o'clock the bugle sounded and there was placed on each table roast and boiled beef, veal pies and plumb puddings (all hot) in great abundance. When all were satisfied, and the remains given to the spectators, the bugle sounded to bring on the beer (of which there were 18 gallons to each table).

: SUMMER WALKABOUT MEETING

The last meeting of the season will take the form of a visit to the Abbey ruins. For those of you who are not familiar with the site this is an opportunity to see what remains of a once extensive religious house. For others, an opportunity to view the progress to date of the conservation work which is now in its second year.

Meet Thursday, July 2nd at 7 pm beside the Forbury Lion.

---xxxxxxx---

A note from the Hon.Treasurer.

I am sorry to have to report that there are still a few members who have yet to pay their subscription for the current season. Our annual sub. of £4 for a family or £3 or £1.50 for individuals is, I think you will agree, pretty good value. We work on a very tight budget and one of the consequences of lapsed subscriptions will mean that those who have fallen behind will no longer receive the Newsletter after this issue.

---xxxxxxx---

CHICHESTER AND FISHBOURNE

Fishbourne with its Roman Palace and the walled Roman city of Chichester will be the destination of this year's Summer excursion

Sunday, July 26th.

This is proving immensely popular so book your seat now to avoid disappointment later.

Full particulars and booking form are included with this Newsletter. If you have already booked, why not pass the leaflet on to a friend.