



## *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.

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Due to circumstances beyond our control it was not possible to hold a meeting in September. The first meeting of the season will take place at the Abbey Gateway at 7.30 pm on Thursday 15th October when Mr A.C. Taylor will present an illustrated talk "Reading past and present." Particulars of future meetings are set out on the leaflet accompanying this newsletter..

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**WHITHER THE HISTORY OF READING SOCIETY?**

An open letter from your Committee

Dear Members,

It is customary for the Chairman to open the Newsletter with a short message. On this occasion your Chairman, James Gafford, has kindly agreed to forego this privilege and to allow the Officers and members of the Committee to address you in his place. Whilst we hesitate to sound a sour note we feel that we must ask the question: "Whither the History of Reading Society?". In short, where do we go from here? Founded 1978 at a time when many of Reading's historic landmarks were disappearing in the face of urban growth and redevelopment the Society set out to keep alive an awareness of the town's past. Its aims are set out the head of this page. Are we as a Society in 1987 fulfilling that purpose? Somewhere along the way, it seems to us, something has been lost. Our membership is falling off to such an extent that we may soon find it difficult carry on. One consequence of falling numbers is likely to be a lack of funds making it difficult to pay our way. The rent of the meeting room, speakers' fees and expenses and the cost of producing and distributing the newsletter are all quite considerable.

Do you as Members feel that your Committee is offering you what you want? If not, then you must please tell us what you require. Please be as frank and outspoken as you wish. To the present we have tried to bring you a selection of speakers covering as wide a field as possible. Do you wish this to continue or would you favour a more varied program - for example more visits to places of interest, meetings with other societies, a greater range of social activities or sessions of the 'workshop' variety at which all present take an active part? Please let us know.

We are disappointed that so few members are prepared to share in the running of the Society. There are vacancies on the Committee still to be filled. It was with the greatest of difficulty that we were able to recruit a secretary to take the place of Sue Read who had reached the end of the term of office permitted by the constitution. It is difficult even to persuade anyone to come forward to assist with the simple but necessary job of serving the coffee at the end of each meeting. Contributions to the Newsletter are rare. When in a recent issue a simple competition was set there was not one single entry.

The active support of each and every Member is needed if this Society - your Society - is to stay alive. It is appreciated that not everyone has a great deal of time to spare but even a little help is always appreciated. One way in which everyone can assist is by encouraging others to come along and hopefully to enrol as new Members. If everyone were to bring just one guest the Membership would soon be doubled to the benefit of all. The answer to the question "Whither the History of Reading Society?" is one that can be answered only by yourselves. It is **your** Society. We as a Committee are working on your behalf but we can carry on only with your active support and assistance.

Yours sincerely,

James Gafford, Graeme & Elspet Naish, Jim Chase, Amyas Crump, Nigel Denton, David Quartermaine, Peter Southerton.

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#### THE FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

The Annual General Meeting of the Friends of Reading Abbey will place at The Abbey Gateway Room on Friday, October 23rd at 7.30 pm

Following the formal business, which will be brief, Mr James Gafford will speak on the Hurry paintings.

All are welcome



### ANNUAL EXCURSION 1987

Some forty members and friends embarked upon the annual excursion which this year was to the Roman Palace at Fishbourne followed by an guided tour of the city of Chichester. The weather, after a week during which the prospect of a dry day seemed more than doubtful, was at its best and the journey into Sussex was a sheer delight.

The Roman Palace at Fishbourne is no ordinary archaeological site. Here, the remains of a range of buildings which in their time served as both a home, believed to have been that of Cogidubnus, the ruler of the local tribes and an administrative centre have been preserved under the cover of a structure which with its walkways allows good views of what remains of the living quarters with an impressive range of mosaic floors and system of hypocausts (underfloor heating) which appear never to have been used, the villa being destroyed by fire not long after its installation. Clearly to be seen also is evidence of jerrybuilding on the part of the original contractor. We can see all too clearly how his failure to fill in a watercourse which once crossed the site has resulted in the collapse of the floor. To help bring the site to life visitors may watch a video presentation of the history of the Palace as recounted by persons who had lived there in Roman times.

Not all of the site is indoors. Parts have been excavated and again covered to ensure protection from the weather. In the grounds is to be found an experimental garden where plants cultivated in Roman times are again to be seen. How the Romans afforded their crops from the ravages of indigenous rabbits is still a problem which the present day gardener has to solve. Nearby is a small farm where Roman type animals are being bred.

In what was once the back garden of a private house adjoining the site the task of uncovering hitherto unknown parts of the Palace still continues. Here we were able to see in progress the excavation of an area of mosaic floor and other traces of building work. In connection with this Mrs Joan Hutchinson has sent a cutting from 'The Guardian' of Monday, July 13th. In this article, Mrs Lorna Chatfield who in her younger days lived in that very house tells how after having learned about the Romans at school with her seven year old sister, Ruth, and a boy who was staying with his grandmother next door, decided themselves to search for Roman remains. Digging with a plasterer's trowel they uncovered three stone steps and an area of black and white mosaic which extended from their garden under the wall which formed the boundary of a pasture belonging to a local farmer. The children were excited but not so the farmer who demanded that they should not tell anyone. He didn't want any archaeologists nosing around and causing an upheaval on his land - he had his living to think of! Reluctantly the children did as they were commanded and filled in their trench. The remains were to lie undisturbed until 1960 when a workman cutting a trench for a water main uncovered traces of former habitation which when laid bare were to prove to be one of the most important finds of the 20th Century.

Next Summer the Sussex Archaeological Society's team will extend their excavations to the precise area where the three children made their small discovery forty years before.

At Chichester we had the bonus of a coach tour around the city including a visit to Goodwood Park where an international dressage competition was in full swing, and glimpses of Boxgrove and Tangmere. Conducted by two most competent City Guides we saw many of the treasures of the County Town of West Sussex before entering the Cathedral. The return journey by a different route to that of the outward journey completed an enjoyable and memorable day.

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#### WHY IS THERE A FOX?

At the last meeting before the Summer break I was asked by a Member if I know why there was a sculpture of a fox over the gateway to one of the houses in Castle Street opposite the Police Station. At the time I was unable to answer the question but thought that it had merely been set there as an additional adornment. As is so often the case a little investigation can throw up an interesting story.

The house in question, number 55, Castle Street, a building listed as of historical and architectural interest, goes under the name of Talbot House and the animal in question is not in fact a fox but a talbot - a heraldic hound of great antiquity. This house which dates from the eighteenth century was once the home of the widow of the Reverend William Talbot, a much loved vicar of St. Giles. The house was successively occupied by a number of prominent citizens including Mr William Weedon, the county Coroner, and Mr James Cusden, proprietor of a local printing firm. In her book 'Coley - Portrait of an Urban Village', the late Mrs Phoebe Cusden, Mayor of Reading in 1946-7 and an Honorary Member of this Society, describes that gentleman as a patriarchal figure with a luxuriant beard. An ardent winter bather he was often to be seen with his son, Albert, and two fellow tradesmen, Mr Kedge the Castle Street draper and Mr Watson the Minster Street china merchant, sallying forth on winter mornings for their regular swim. Breaking the ice on Christmas morning, followed by breakfast, was something of a ritual for them.

Peter Southerton

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#### THE CHAIRMAN'S QUIZ

- By J.G.
- (i) Why Vastern Road?
  - (b) Where were (i) Sunninge Avenue; (ii) Albion Street; (iii) New Street?
  - (c) Who sculpted the Queen Victoria Statue and what other examples of his work are in Reading.

Answers on back page.



## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

The outing to Chichester was a most enjoyable occasion and our local guide revealed many features of the ancient city which a casual observer might miss. Only when he drew our attention to fire-marks on some buildings did his accuracy falter

Nobody loves an insurance company and when we hear, as we usually do, that the sight of the badge of Fire Office X was the signal to the firefighters of Company Y to go home and let the house burn down, we nod knowingly and accept it as fact without question. But can this have been true? Was there a fire engine for every company in every town where property was insured? Were half a dozen pumps dragged to every fire, only for five of them, if not the lot, to go away again?

During the 18th and early 19th Century when many fire offices were founded, it was unlikely that there would have been more than one appliance, if any at all, in a small town and probably this would have been maintained by the parish or a local estate if an insurance company engine was not justified. The firemen were volunteers, normally working at their normal trades and they were called out in emergency by such signals as the "crossing" of the church bells. They received a fee for each fire they dealt with and the fire-mark indicated where to send the bill.

Next time we hear this old (hot) chestnut we may nod knowingly, but we shall know better.

James Gafford..

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## ANOTHER JOTTING FROM THE DIARY OF AN UNKNOWN CITIZEN

October 10th 1816. *A meeting at the Bluecoat School. There were only fifteen boys in the school who, according to the rules of the School, should have been apprenticed at an earlier age, but the Chamberlain (Mr Andrews) forgot to do it. Yesterday, the Master, hearing a great noise among them, went and demanded the cause; they refused to tell him; he gave them ten minutes to consider it; they still remained mute; he sent them to bed without their supper; this morning fourteen of them ran away.*

Published by the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield in 1887 under the title "Reading Seventy Years Ago, a diary of events 1813-1819" these are extracts from an old diary in which an unknown writer chronicled everyday events in the Borough of Reading.

### ONE DAY SCHOOLS

The University of Reading in association with the W.E.A. is again offering a wide variety of One Day Saturday Schools of interest to the local historian. The following are but a few of those on offer:

#### BUILDINGS AND RECORDS: WHITEKNIGHTS AND SHINFIELD

5th March, 1988 - 9.30 am - 5 pm

The tutors for this course are Mrs Joan Dils and Miss Jane Wight, both of whom played an important part in the setting up of the History of Reading Society.

A study of the documentation and visible history of Whiteknights estate and the adjacent village. Whiteknights is important in garden history for features now sadly overlaid by modern building, but fortunately recorded by contemporary artists. Fee £5.00

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#### ARCHAEOLOGY IN BERKSHIRE IN 1987

19th March, 1988 9.30am - 5 pm

A review at non-specialist level of archaeological developments in the county in 1987, from prehistory to industrial archaeology and buildings.

Fee £3.00 (Reduced fee for members of the Berks Archaeological Society).

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#### BERKSHIRE IN MAPS

21st May, 1988 - 9.30am - 5pm

A fascinating variety of maps portray many of the aspects of Berkshire's history. We shall explore both the history of the maps themselves which date from the 14th Century to the present day, and the history that can be, and has been, discovered from them.

Fee £5.00

Tutor: Mrs Judith Hunter

Further particulars of the courses together with application forms can be obtained from **The Extramural Office, Room G 15, School of Education, The University, London Road, Reading RG1 5AQ.** Telephone: 875234.

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#### THE CHAIRMAN'S QUIZ - ANSWERS:

- (a) The vasterns were waste or common lands outside a town.
- (b) Former names of London Road, the last two referring to the western end.
- (c) George Blackall Simmonds. The Maiwand Lion and the statue of Palmer. (A well-known statue entitled 'The Falconer' in Central Park, New York, is another example of his work.