

15/2/88



# 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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Your Chairman and Committee take this opportunity to extend to Members and friends their belated good wishes for the coming year. The Society in fact saw 1988 off to a happy start at the party on January 14th held jointly with the Berkshire Archaeological Society. The theme was 'The Civil War'. Although 17th Century dress proved rather too difficult for some, there were some striking costumes, both Cavalier and Roundhead, to be seen. There was as usual a magnificent feast many of the dishes being prepared from authentic recipes of the period. During the evening we were given a brief but interesting description of the foods then available including the surprising range of fruit and vegetables and described some of the culinary methods of the day while Sue Read organised a Treasure Hunt based on a map of the town's Civil War defences.

The theme for next year's party will be '19th Century Rural Berkshire'. It should not be too difficult to improvise a costume so come Gentlemen as Squire, Parson, Farmer, carter or ploughboy. For the ladies there is an equally wide range from which to choose - shepherdess, dairymaid or Lady of the Manor to name but a few.

The Society is about to embark upon the second half of the year's programme with, it is hoped, something to interest everybody. There is however great deal more available to interest the local historian in the form of exhibitions, day schools and excursions. Full details are given in the body of this newsletter.

The New Year marks the beginning of your Society's financial year. The Hon. Treasurer will be glad to receive your subscription for the year 1988/89 as soon as possible. For your convenience a payment slip is included with this issue of the Newsletter.

**COMING EVENTS**

There will be much to interest the local historian by way of meetings, courses and displays over the coming months of which the following is but a part.

Let us however start with a formal notice:

**NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING:**

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will take place at the Abbey Gateway Room at 7.30 pm on Thursday, 17th March.

**AGENDA**

1. Minutes of A.G.M., 1987
2. Chairman's Report.
3. Receive and adopt the audited accounts of the Society
4. Election of Officers and others members of the Committee.
5. Appointment of Hon. Auditors for the coming year. .
6. Any other business.

Nominations for the posts of Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer and for membership of the Committee are invited. Names in writing please to the Secretary by March 1st.

The formal business of the evening will be followed by items of interest contributed by Members. Coffee and biscuits will be served.

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**Our own programme of meetings for the Spring and early Summer:**

Thursday, 18th February      **Prisoners of War - Mr P. Chamberlain.**

Thursday, 17th March      **Annual General Meeting and Members Evening.**

Thursday, 21st April      **The Royal Mail in Berkshire**  
Mr John Brooks

Thursday, 19th May      **Church Monuments of Berkshire -**  
Dr Brian Kemp.

Particulars of the Summer evening walkabout meetings, one of which will take in a part of Reading whilst the other will be a little further afield, will be announced shortly.

There is still time to register for the One Day courses provided by the W.E.A. and the University of Reading. These are open to all and are thoroughly to be recommended:

**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, A study of the documentation and visible history of the 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

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Further particulars of these and other 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.

**EXHIBITIONS AT READING MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY**

**DECORATIVE DELIGHTS**

On view in the Art Gallery until April 2nd is a selection of items from the Museum's collection of decorative arts many of which are rarely seen on display.

The exhibition includes a range of ceramics ranging from an 18th Century enamelled box bearing the legend "A present from Reading" to a bowl by Alan Caiger-Smith of the Aldermaston Pottery specially commissioned by the Museum. In addition to the pottery there are items from the textile and costume collections on display as well as a range of Huntley & Palmers biscuit tins and advertising material and much, much more.

This is without a shadow of doubt a truly delightful exhibition

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**AT BLAKE'S LOCK MUSEUM**

In contrast to the above, the special exhibition at Blake's Lock Museum reflects life in Reading during the two World Wars. It was the supporting role of the people at home which did much to win the First World War. The tremendous work of the Reading War Hospitals and the dual task of Huntley & Palmers providing munitions for the troops and munitions for the army were contributions of national importance. It was for the families whose husbands and fathers, sons and brothers were in the front line a time of a time of fear, patience and hope

In the Second World War the whole population was part of the front line with the towns of southern England under constant threat of attack. Relics of the years 1939-45 together with reconstructions of a garden air raid shelter and A.R.P. Wardens Post will rekindle memories of daily life in wartime.

>>>>>> **ADMISSION TO BOTH EXHIBITIONS IF FREE** <<<<<<<

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**THE CHAIRMAN'S QUIZ**

- (a) Where was Hooker's Green?
- (b) What connection had Mr Pooter with Reading?
- (c) Where is (or was) Gas Lane and why was it so called?

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## ABBOTS WALK

Now that the imposing offices to the east of the Abbey Gateway are nearing completion it is appropriate to recall what was there before. At the beginning of the 19th Century much of the old Abbey land had come into the ownership of the Wheble family of Woodley Lodge (Bulmershe Manor) with small parcels of land adjacent held by Henry Vansittart of Kirkleatham, Yorkshire, Colonel Blgrave and Richard Buncombe, timber merchant. From 1834 these plots were acquired by James Wheble and his son, who laid out a roadway to the width of twenty feet. Eventually the whole area was sold to John Weedon, a Reading solicitor (Mayor 1847/8) for development, subject to a condition that no house would be erected there worth less than £400. In 1844, Weedon bought a further piece of land which included the eastern tower of the Abbey Gateway.

By 1846, the name Abbots Walk was in use and, extending at right angles to it on the south side was, Holywell Street, 15½ feet wide and 104 feet long. The land to the north, still in Wheble ownership, was largely a rubbish dump. This was sold to the Reading Board of Health some eight years later and became the Forbury Gardens in the 1860's. During the next seven years a total of twelve houses were erected. The terrace comprising nos. 2-6 was built by Carey Wells of Chelmsford while most of the remaining houses to the east were built by William Silver Darter, plumber and glazier, and Mayor 1850/52. Mr Darter was to become well known as the author of a series of newspaper articles about local life later appearing in book form in 1889 under the title 'Reminiscences of Reading by an Octogenarian'.

Other familiar names associated with these houses include Henry Cowslade, owner of the Reading Mercury, Thomas Deane of Caversham and Thomas Phillips, millwright, of Kings Road. No.1 Abbots Walk, next to the Gateway, on the largest plot of all with its spacious garden, was occupied for many years by William Slocombe, of the law firm Weedon and Slocombe in the Forbury. In 1893 this property was sold to the Governors of Queen Anne's Bounty as a vicarage for the incumbent of St. Lawrence's Church. Gradually, as the properties came onto the market in the present century, they were bought by the Berkshire County Council to be used as offices. Most of them were later demolished and replaced by prefabricated buildings occupied as offices and a staff restaurant.

Abbots Walk is now dominated by the massive MEPC development but it is pleasing to see the surviving 19th century houses at the far end retained and refurbished as a reminder of more spacious days. The site of Holywell Street (or Road) which became the driveway to the County Council car park, is immediately beyond the new building.

(This article has been condensed from a detailed account by Peter Walne, County Archivist, published in the Reading Mercury of 30th May, 1959).

## READING ABBEY - a display in the Abbey Gateway

22nd March - 6th April

For a fortnight our meeting room will house special a special display of material from Reading Abbey which due to the shortage of exhibition space has rarely been shown before. On display will be the magnificent Hurry paintings of important events in the history of the Abbey, and other riches including material from recent archaeological excavations, the internationally important Romanesque sculptured stones of the Abbey cloisters and early prints and paintings of the Abbey Ruins. A sales desk will carry literature and souvenirs of the Abbey including the newly published booklet by the Museum and Art Gallery on the daily life of those who lived and worked in, or just visited the Abbey.

It is hoped that this display will also be of interest to children. For the fortnight of the display (and after) activity sheets for children and teachers will be available from the Museum.

Do come and see for yourself the story of Reading Abbey, the building of the monastery on a 30 acre site beside the town of Reading, the burial of its founder, Henry I, before the High Altar, the daily round of eight offices sung in the Abbey Church, the meetings of Parliament and the tragic end of the monastery and the death of the Abbot.

Opening hours will be weekdays from 10 am to 5pm, Sunday 27th March from 2 to 5 pm. Closed Good Friday, 1st April and Easter Sunday, 3rd April. Admission free.

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It is, I think, appropriate here to mention the of departure this month on early retirement of Mr Colin Sizer who for the past ten years has served as Curator of Reading Museum. Mr Sizer did much to encourage the establishment of the History of Reading Society and has proved a good friend to us throughout. Both he and his Deputy, Brian Baker, who also retired in January, will be greatly missed. Whilst it is with a sense of loss that we see them go we wish them both a long and happy retirement.

### THE CHAIRMAN'S QUIZ (ANSWERS)

- a. The former name of the Abbey Square area.
- b. William Grossmith, soap merchant, carver and gilder, of Minster Street and William Robert Grossmith, child prodigy (The Infant Roscius) and later surgical instrument maker of Castle Street were respectively great-grandfather and grandfather of George and Weedon Grossmith. They were joint authors of 'A Diary of a Nobody'.
- c. A turning off Bridge Street, next to Seven Bridges House, where the Reading Gas Light Company was formed in 1818 near the coal wharves.