



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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NEWSLETTER - SUMMER 1988

The 1987/88 season of lectures drew to a close on May when Dr Brian Kemp, an acknowledged expert on the history of Reading Abbey, gave an illustrated talk on the church monuments of Berkshire. He brought to our attention some of the treasures to be found in parish churches around the county and showed how these memorials not only recall the names of persons long departed but provide a source of valuable historical information relating to the times in which the deceased lived, the composition of their families, artistic tastes and fashions and even contemporary styles of dress.

Before the Summer break there remain the two walkabout meetings. The first of these, on Thursday, June 16th, led by Mr Ken Major will take in the University and the Redlands area. On Thursday, July 7th, we visit Harwell village in the company of Mrs Joan Dils. It is hoped that members with cars will as on previous occasions make any spare seats available to those without means of transport of their own. Further particulars of the walkabout meetings are given overleaf.

Much interest is being shown in the visit to Cheltenham on Sunday, July 24th. This year the town celebrates the bicentenary of the visit of King George IV and the Royal Family and much has been done to make this always attractive Regency town even more welcoming to visitors. A very special effort is being made to win the "Britain in Bloom Competition" and the many parks and gardens alone will make the trip worthwhile. This excursion is not confined to members only. Bring a friend - bring lots of friends.

EVENING WALKABOUT MEETINGS

REDLANDS AND THE UNIVERSITY

Thursday, 16th June

Led by Mr Ken Major, this walk will take in the University (London Road site) and the area of the former Redlands estate. The area is particularly rich in good Victorian architecture. Many of the houses at which we shall look were once the homes of people who played a prominent part in the growth and development of the town.

Meet at 7.30 pm by the front entrance of the Royal Berks Hospital. Duration of walk, 1 - 1½ hours.

HARWELL VILLAGE

Thursday, 7th July

Although the name of Harwell is today synonymous with atomic research, the village of Harwell has a history dating from Saxon times or earlier and has many beautiful buildings ranging in style from ancient cruck cottage to Manor House. The leader of this walkabout, Mrs Joan Dils, a former Chairman of this Society, is a historian with an especial interest in medieval history

Meet in the High Street, Harwell at 7.45 pm. Duration of walk about 1 hour.

COACH EXCURSION TO CHELTENHAM

SUNDAY, 24th July

Our annual excursion which this year is to Cheltenham is open to Members, families and friends. All are welcome! Included in the fare is a tour by coach of the town and surrounding area, admission to the Spa to taste the waters and free admission to the Bicentenary Exhibition. There is in addition an optional guided walk led by a qualified local guide. Snacks or lunches will be available at Pittville Park or bring your own picnic.

The coach departs from the Railway Station at 9 am. passengers can be picked up at Caversham, Basingstoke Road or Bath Road if desired.

The fare - £6.50. Tickets for the guided walk - 50p

To reserve a seat or seats please contact Mr Peter Southerton, 25, Barnwood Close, Reading RG3 1BY (Tel: 576867). A deposit of £2.50 per head is requested, balance payable on the coach.

THE STORY OF ST. EDMUND'S CHAPEL

For many centuries there existed at the west end of Friar Street until it was swept away in 1968 by the Inner Distribution Road, a triangular plot of land. Speed's map of 1610 shows it at the south end of the road from Caversham together with a single, unidentified building. Known originally as St. Edmund's Chapel, it had been built in 1284 by the town's Bailiff, Lawrence Burgess, who spent his last days in it as a hermit. The little stone building with its burial ground remained in use for nearly two centuries but in 1479, a complaint to King Edward the Fourth against Abbot Thorne stated that it had been desecrated and was occupied as a barn. Both Coates and Man in their Histories of Reading, record that the former chapel played an important part in the the defence of the town during the Civil War as the "Invincible Fort." Here there seems to be some confusion as the Fort of this name, also referred to as Harrison's Barn, is now believed to have been situate on Whitley Hill. But there can be little doubt that the ancient chapel with its sturdy construction and commanding position on the road from Caversham Bridge would have become a fortified outpost when the Earl of Essex launched his principal assault upon the town in April, 1643.

About 1770. according to John Man, the old building then known as King's Barn, hewd been demolished and rebuilt about half a mile westward at Battle Farm. There it remained with a roof of thatch until the beginning of the present century when it was partially blown down, revealing some worked stones of an ecclesiastical nature. (This site was at the north end of Beresford Road where Barnwood Close now lies). The stones which included parts of a marble pilaster were salvaged by Reading Museum and stored in the Abbey Gateway in 1906 but today they cannot be distinguished from the many remnants of the Abbey in the Borough collection. The original site was excavated by the Berkshire Archaeological Society but nothing of importance was discovered.

J.G.



THE CHAIRMAN'S QUIZ

1. Where did a martin, a sparrow, an eagle, a linnet and a crane flock together in Reading?
2. In July, 1903, the tramways were electrified. What happened to them in April 1930, August 1932 and May, 1939?
3. Bredstret (1548-9), Flex Lane (1552) and Cutthroat Lane (1688) are mentioned in old documents. What have they in common?

ANSWERS

1. Silver Street. These were all 19th century courts.
2. Bath Road line closed; Early Road line closed; the last tram ran.
3. The English Place-Name Society describes them as unidentified. Any suggestions?

READING ART GALLERY

"PEOPLE AND PLACES"

Reading: Dissolution, Revolution and Jubilation
Daily until September 4th. Admission Free.

As its contribution to the Reading Festival, the Art Gallery is presenting an exhibition of portraits, views and items of local interest. Taking as its starting point the Dissolution of the Abbey the exhibition traces the rich skein of Reading's history through the years of the Civil War, the prosperity of the 18th Century and the era of expansion which followed the coming of the railway through to the Diamond Jubilee, the high point of Queen Victoria's reign.

The works on display range from major portraits from the civic collection to lesser known watercolours and sketches. There are also ceramics, Huntley & Palmers biscuit boxes and a delightful display relating to The Green Girls' School.

The exhibition which occupies the full extent of the Art Gallery has something of interest for everyone. Having once visited you will almost certainly wish to return. It is sad that lack of space does not permit these items - which are indeed part of our heritage - to be on permanent display.

FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

"AS STUPID AS OXEN"

Keith Sanders and May Ayres

The unflattering title refers to Charles Wesley's comment concerning the people of Reading when on the occasion of his earlier visits to the town he found them less than receptive of his message. He was however later to revise his opinions and tells of the crowds who gathered to hear his preaching.

This book which recalls the conversion just 250 years ago of the brothers John and Charles Wesley, the founding of the Methodist Church and the growth of the movement in Reading and features on all the churches in the local circuit has been compiled by the Rev. Keith Saunders of Caversham Heights Methodist Church and Mrs May Ayres, a lifelong member of the Church who over the years has built up a fund of knowledge relating to history of Methodism.

This book which makes a valuable contribution to the record of local history is priced £2.50 and may be obtained from Caversham Bookshop, Reading Central Library or direct from the Rev. Saunders at Caversham Heights Methodist Church, Woodcote Road, Caversham.

FOR YOUR DIARY: The first meeting of the 1988/89 season will take place on Thursday, September 15th. Speaker Mrs Felgate - "Women in Reading"