

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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Summer 1992

CHANGE OF VENUE

The History of Reading Society is on the move. For the next (1992/1993) season of meetings, the venue is changing to the ABBEY ROOM in the CENTRAL LIBRARY, Abbey Square.

Access to the Abbey Room is from the library rear entrance in Abbey Square.

MR. BERT RIVERS

Nigel Denton

Mr. Bert Rivers who is an Honorary Member of the Society and formerly a regular contributor to the Newsletter, reached the age of 90 on Monday 13 April. Many members of the Society were able to sign a greetings card at the Annual General Meeting.

Mr. Rivers is keeping well and looking forward to his hundredth birthday in the year 2002.

1992-1993 PROGRAMME

17 September 1992 **Local History Library (Reading)** by Margaret Smith.

22 October 1992 **Local Postal Services in Reading** by J. Chapman.

19 November 1992 **Street Lighting Before 1837** by Dr. C Slade.

17 December 1992 **The Early Years of the University 1890s - 1926** by Michael Bott.

14 January 1993 **Party**

25 February 1993 **Prehistoric Berks/Reading** by Paul Frodsham.

25 March 1993 **Berkshire County Council - 100 Years** by Joan Dils.

15 April 1993 **Museum of Reading** by John Rhodes.

20 May 1993 **Excursions** by Ann Middleton.

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

Nigel Denton

Every year on the 18th June, the Friends of Reading Abbey hold a picnic in the Abbey ruins to commemorate the arrival of the monks on that day in 1121.

The Friends are donating one of a new series of interpretive boards to be placed in the Abbey ruins. It is hoped that following the recent restoration works that the ruins will be "opened" to the public by the Mayor during this summer possibly at the Reading Waterfest on 4th. July.

The Borough Council, as custodian of the ruins, is keen to have guides to show parties around. If any members are willing to help out with this, please contact Sally Swift at the Civic Offices.

As the History of Reading Society is affiliated to the Friends of Reading Abbey, members can attend their meetings. Apart from the annual picnic, there is the Annual General Meeting followed by a talk on the Abbey and a meeting in February or March on a related topic.

1992 SUBSCRIPTIONS

Some 1992 subscriptions remain unpaid. If there is a membership renewal form with this newsletter and you wish to complete it, the Hon. Treasurer would be pleased to hear from you.

THE GREAT IDEA

Tom Farmer

When the fight was over, after much fist flailing, Victor had me on the ground and was sitting on my chest. I realised at the age of eleven it was bad strategy to call someone names who was bigger and stronger than you.

It was a few days later that I had my "Great Idea". It was to go down to Basildon and see my Gran but I needed a companion: someone with a wheeled conveyance who would enjoy the adventure. Whilst I had a scooter, some of my pals had only hoops and wheeling a hoop would take more energy when we needed something which would take less. Then I thought of Victor who had transport, namely one roller skate.

I approached him. "Hi! Victor", (he disliked being called Vic after our little set-to) "how about us going to see my Gran?" He knew her and had often spoken to her as had all my pals. "Where does she live?" "Lower Basildon". "Where's that?" "Oh near Pangbourne". Actually it was about two and a half miles further on. It took a little while to explain all the details and a good deal of persuasion but when he said "When are you thinking of going?" and I said "How about this afternoon?" he nearly wrecked it all by saying, "I shall have to ask my Mother". "If you do that she will say no - parents always do". He finally agreed to come.

This happened about the end of the Great War 1914-1918 and my parents kept a shop near Battle School, Reading. Ever since her husband died, Gran lived six months in the winter with us and the other six months in the summer with her eldest son, my Uncle Tom, at Lower Basildon.

Of course there was not the traffic in those days and tram-cars ran as far as the Pond House. We made steady progress past the Pulsometer works but then Victor started asking awkward questions.

"How far is it to Pangbourne?" "You come to Purley first where my other Gran lives, then it's the next place after that." So it went on - it was never far to the next village and Victor was getting a bit doubtful about the adventure. I was also finding it harder going than I expected, for Victor could go faster than me and my leg was going like a piston to keep up with him.

Eventually we arrived at Pangbourne and the river. "You said it was just past Pangbourne." "So it is, you just go up this hill look and over the railway bridge and it is the other side." He didn't say anything but the expression on his face said it all. When we got over the bridge there was not a house in sight. "It's just around the next corner." I said and rather to my surprise we came to the lodge gates to Basildon Park. "I was born in there" I said. "What in there? pointing to the lodge." "No, in the park" I replied. I don't know whether he thought I meant the Mansion or under a tree.

Actually my mother was the cook and she married the gardener. We lived in a bungalow in the park where my grandfather was the head gardener.

A little further on and at last we reached my Uncle's. He kept a nursery and Aunt Lizzie looked after a shop and off-licence and it was she who answered my knock on the door. She looked at us in amazement, "What on earth are you doing here" and then she saw the scooter and skate. "You didn't come all this way on those?" Uncle Tom when called, was similarly affected but more amused at our appearance. "Where's Gran" I said. "Up in a greenhouse" he replied. "You'll give her a shock" and sure enough we did; she could not believe her eyes. She was dressed in a long dark skirt over which was an apron and on her head was an old straw hat. Although she was nearly eighty, she still helped in the nursery. She had three other sons but I was the only grandson and consequently was spoilt whenever she got the chance. Coming to see her in such a way must have pleased her no end.

We all went down to the house where Aunt Lizzie had got some lemonade and cake ready for us. She was also ready for some information and to give us some advice. "Your mothers will be worrying where you are", and Uncle Tom said "You will have to go back the the same way as you came, there is no other way". There were no buses in those days so it was one-leg power again. With a big hug and a kiss from Gran we set off for home.

A FISHING TRIP THAT WAS DIFFERENT

Ron Harris

It was Wednesday 10th February 1943 and for some reason which I cannot remember, I had arrived home early from school. I decided I could get in an hour or so fishing by the "Horseshoe Bridge" at the mouth of the Kennet. I quickly made some bread-bait and set off from my home in Amity Road.

I had just reached the tow-path by the railway bridge, when the noise of a low-flying aircraft took me out of that angler's state of mind where the world only exists as a backdrop to the all-important fishing.

The aircraft came into view and I was fascinated by the big black cross on the fuselage. Almost immediately, there came the stutter of a machine gun aimed at the Southern Railway signal box on the bridge. As quickly as it came, the aircraft disappeared, leaving me scratching my head and not a little surprised by events, especially as there had been no air raid warning siren.

I was next aware of explosions, which seemed to come from the direction of the town centre. After some consideration, I decided that the fishing trip should be abandoned and that I ought to see if the family were OK. I learned later that the explosions I had heard, came from four bombs dropped in the area of the market place. From the timing of the explosions and the heading of the aircraft (a Dornier Do 217), I can only assume that by the time I saw it, the bombs had already been dropped but were of the delayed action type.

Those four bombs achieved a high mortality rate, largely due to the destruction of the Ministry of Food sponsored restaurant "The Peoples Pantry" which had the usual large number of customers. However, the death toll would have been much higher if it had not been early-closing day in Reading. As it was, 41 people lost their lives that day and 153 were injured, about a third of them seriously.

Apart from the cemeteries, very little remains to remind the inhabitants of Reading of that black Wednesday in 1943. An exception is the window tracery from the damaged St. Lawrence's Church. This is on permanent display and can be seen in St. Lawrence's churchyard.

A final ironic note: Mrs Weinstein, the mother of my schoolfriend Jean, had evacuated the family to Reading from London for safety, only to die in the ruins of the People's Pantry.

READING'S MACE

Norman Wicks

The corporation diary of 1485, records Reading's acquisition of its first mace.

"Memorandum that Frydaie November 3rd next before the fest of the Apostles Simones et Jude, the yere of the regne of our Kynge Harre VI xxxvil, William Rede browgte in the mace at a morow speche — the same Frydaie was payed — to Richard Goldsmythe for makeing of a mace iiis. ii. ijd."

But the Abbot forbade its use and partial permission was not obtained until 1487, then, after the dissolution of the monasteries, other insignia were added until in 1651 under Cromwell, the royal arms had to be removed and so a new mace had to be made.

The diary of the corporation dated 14 January 1651 reads:

This daie debate was had touchinge the alteration of the mace belonginge to the corporacion, and itt is agreed Ist, that the handle of the mace shall be onely new guilt and the 5 mayden-heades beinge the Towne armes at the upper end of the handle, to stand as they doe; 2ly, the head of the mace to be made three inches larger aboute, with depth porporcionable; 3ly, the Crosse at the top of the mace and the Kynge's armes to be left out and the State's armes to be set in the place accordinge to the pattern prescribed by the Act of Parliament. The care of doeing this whereof is committed to Mr. John Webb to employ his kinsman Mr. Rason, a goldsmythe in London to doe the same, the charge whereof is to be bourne out of the Hall stock.

And ten days later, 24th. Jan. 1651:

This daie a letter beinge received from Mr. William Rason signifienge that the charge of makeinge a new mace accordinge to the Act of Parliament will amounte to 26li. or 27li. besides the price of the old mace itt is ordered and agreed that itt shall be referred to Mr. Hollowai and Mr. Cope (whoe goe to London the nexte weeke to take order for the sale of the old mace att the best rate and the makeinge of a new mace upon the best terms).

"Memorandum, the old mace accordinge to Mr. Rason's letter weighes 52 1/2 oz or thereaboutes and the new mace will weigh 80 oz or thereaboutes."

And 27th. Feb. 1651 :

"Mr. Cope informinge the Company that the new mace cannott be brought to Readinge before Mundaie next — itt is agreed that John Bartlett, the Serjeant shall tomorrowe goe to London and

take charge of the mace there and bring it home with him on Mundaie next."

The bill was presented on the 19th. March:
The new mace weighed 91 1/2 oz at 9/9 per oz — £44.12.0.

The price received for the old mace was £14.7.0.
This mace, becoming damaged, was replaced in 1770 by a new silver gilt mace still being used today, which is approx. 4ft. high and carries the royal arms of George III on the top and at the foot, the words "Corporation of Reading" and the town arms.

THE MANSION LIVES ON

Mollie Harris

I wonder how many of you Reading folk know the history of the Mansion in Prospect Park? For those who don't know, here are a few basic details.

Frances Kendrick, the daughter of a very wealthy land owner in Reading, met and fell in love with a young lawyer, Benjamin Childs. As he came from a very different social position, he could not ask her to marry him.

Frances anonymously challenged Benjamin to duel. When he discovered his opponent was a woman he could not fight. Frances then gave him the alternative of marrying her.

They married in 1707. Very much in love and blissfully happy, they had three children. Frances died in 1721.

Benjamin lived on in Calcot Park (now the Golf Club) until 1759 when he sold his property, but still retained Prospect Park. He had the "Mansion" built in 1760 in remembrance of Frances. He had the pond excavated in the shape of a heart on the spot where they first met.

It has been said that the house is haunted by Frances looking for Benjamin in the upstairs rooms.

I have lived in Reading all my life and most of that time, within walking distance of Prospect Park. For this reason I have a soft spot for this area and especially the Mansion.

I am sure many people will remember summer evening walks in the park or a Saturday or Sunday stroll and calling into the Mansion for a cup of tea or an ice-cream.

Thinking back further to the late '40s into the mid '50s, how many folk remember Mac, who used to serve us teenagers with soft drinks from one of the rooms in the Mansion?

I saw the Mansion just prior to its marvellous face-lift and it was a truly depressing sight. I was convinced it could only finish up as a heap of bricks, or maybe even worse, to be converted into offices.

So, having enjoyed several meals in the restored Mansion, I am very grateful to all concerned for saving this wonderful bit of Reading's heritage and enabling it to be enjoyed by so many.

A BIG THANKYOU

For a long, long time now, as the talks were ending and questions were being asked, the discreet sounds of a kettle and the marshalling of cups, were very welcome to most of us. Unfortunately, as the operations were carried on without fuss or bother, it became too easy to take it all for granted that coffee and biscuits would be available at the end of the evening.

I am sure you will want to join the committee in conveying heartfelt thanks to Mrs and Mr Naish for providing us with a cheering "cuppa" under trying conditions, and in addition to many other duties, for so long.

The time has come to take a rest, and Elspeth has asked for someone else to take over the task of providing refreshments at our meetings. A volunteer would be very welcome.