

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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SPRING 1993

DIARY NOTES

The Annual General Meeting will be held at 7.30 on Thursday 25 March at the Abbey Room in the Central Library. The short meeting will be followed by a talk on 100 years of the Berkshire County Council by Joan Dills.

On the 15 April, John Rhodes will talk on the Museum of Reading while on 20 May, Ann Middleton will tell us about the importance of Excursions in the years gone by. Both of these events will be held at the Abbey Room from 7.30 to 9.30.

On Thursday 17 June, There will be a walking tour of central Wokingham conducted by guides of the Wokingham Historical Society. The guides will meet members at Wokingham Station at 7.00 PM.

Ken Major will lead a walkabout of the Eldon Road Conservation Area on Thursday 15 July. Members will meet at No. 2 Eldon Road at 7.00 PM.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Would members please note that subscriptions for 1993 became due on 1st January 1993. The rates agreed to at the last AGM are : Single member £7.50 (£5.00 if retired). Couple £10.00 (£7.50 if retired). Only those members who joined the society since 1st September have so far paid for 1993.

NEW PUBLICATION

The Trustees of St Mary's, Castle Street, Reading are proposing to publish a new history of the chapel in association with the local history specialist publishers, Baron Birch, formerly Barracuda Books. St Mary's is a rare, if not unique, phenomenon in the contemporary church, a chapel founded as a nonconformist institution which was subsequently licensed for Anglican worship.

It is now one of only a handful remaining of the many proprietary chapels which were founded during the Evangelical revival of the 18th century. The Chapel is also of considerable architectural interest, with box pews and galleries features of the interior, while the exterior is noted for its Greek Revival facade.

At the time of its foundation in 1798, the Chapel had seating for 1000 people, over one-tenth of the then population of Reading. Many of the famous businesses connected with Reading's history have had connections with the Chapel, including members of the Heelas and Sutton families, the brewers Hawkins, Hewett and Dymore Brown, Holmes the furnishes and the cycle manufacturers, Warrick. In the middle of the last century the chapel became synonymous with its long-serving minister, GEORGE IBBERSON TUBBS, and is still sometimes referred to as TUBBSES.

Service to the community has always been a part of the tradition. In earlier days this involved ministering to the poor in Coley. Today there is a Boys Brigade Company - the oldest in Reading, meeting since 1903 - attached to the chapel and a Pre-School Play Group of more recent foundation.

The Chapel's history has been written twice before, by James Consterdine in 1902 and by Robin Leaver in 1973, both Ministers at the time. The present work, however, contains much new material - it is five times the length of Leaver's account - and is also written by a layman, John Dearing, the Chapel Archivist, who is also a member of the History of Reading Society. While its main intention is to tell the story of the Chapel's contribution to the history of Reading and that of the Church at large, there are some lighter touches, including a full account of the controversy caused by the performance of a Sailor's Hornpipe in the Hall!

Unlike most local churches, St Mary's stores most of its own archives which include the Account Book of 1798 in which the subscribers to the original building are listed. Any members who would be interested in viewing these are welcome to contact Mr Dearing on 580377.

Subscriptions for a limited, numbered edition are welcomed and should be sent to St Mary's Chapel, Castle Street (£16-95 inc. post and packing). The post publication retail price is £18-50.

LEIGHTON PARK SCHOOL

Norman Wicks

Sir Frances Englefield built a house in Shinfield in 1630 of bricks made from clay taken from the clay pits in the glebe fields of Shinfield Church. He named it Shinfield Park and a few years later, during the civil war, Charles I stayed there for a short time and said he had enjoyed a "good rest" there. So the house was renamed "Goodrest", a name it kept for about 300 years until 1945 when it was bought by the Quaker school of Leighton Park and used as their junior school. Then it was renamed "Crosfields" in memory of Hugh Crosfield an old Leightonian and a governor for many years until he was killed in an air raid in 1944.

Leighton Park had been bought and presented to Captain Alexander William Cobham by his father-in-law Sir William Brown when the Captain married his daughter Louise. The family home of the Cobhams was Shinfield Manor and when his father moved out of there and into Shinfield Grange, Captain Cobham moved back into the Manor and the Society of Friends then took the Leighton Park estate of about 40 acres. The school opened in January 1890 with just four pupils but has since flourished and now has more than 300 including some girls. Now its future looks bright.

Inscriptions to A.W. Cobham and Louise his wife and several other members of this family can be seen on their tomb in St Mary's churchyard at Shinfield.

BERKSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Colchester

The History of

Each Spring the Berkshire Archaeological Society organises a trip to an area of archaeological interest. This year's trip from Friday 23rd to Sunday 25th April is to Colchester, Britain's oldest recorded town and other parts of Essex. A visit has been arranged to the Sutton Hoo ship excavation.

The Romans captured the pre-Roman settlement of Camulodunum in AD. 43 and established a legionary fortress. A thousand years later, in 1070, William the Conqueror built the largest Norman keep in Europe on the foundations of a Roman temple.

The populace supported parliament during the Civil War and much of the town was destroyed, however, you can still walk through the mediaeval lanes and alleyways and visit the Dutch quarter founded by Flemish weavers in the late sixteenth century.

Accommodation will be at the Red Lion in the High Street in Colchester which was built in 1465, licensed 1515 and restored in 1988. The cost covering two nights accommodation, evening meals and transport will be £110 (single room supplement £5 per night. For further details contact either their Treasurer, James Gafford on Reading 474308 or Edna Goodburn on Bracknell 425774.

Archaeology in Berkshire 1992

Each March in conjunction with Reading University, Berkshire Archaeological Society organise a Day School to review the past year's activities and developments. The wide range of speakers are drawn from the ranks of both the amateurs and the professionals. This year's day school will be held on Saturday 13th March at Reading University, London Road. Among the speakers booked are Kenneth Major (Churchgate House), John Rhodes (Reading Museum), Professor Mike Fulford (Lowbury Hill), Bryan Kerr (Windsor Castle) and Janet Firth (Field Research Group).

Berkshire Field Research Group

Berkshire Field Research Group, the active arm of Berkshire Archaeological Society has recently been reformed. Among activities

are visits to places of archaeological interest and current excavations in the region. The major local project is an archaeological survey of the parish of Barkham. In addition to this there are occasional social functions and members receive regular newsletters. The annual subscription is £3 for a single member or £5 for two members living at the same address. Further details can be obtained from Nigel Denton or their Membership Secretary, Mrs Anne Harrison, 2 Murdoch Road, Wokingham. RG11 2DA.

FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

An annual event in the calendar of the Friends of Reading Abbey (to which this society is affiliated) is the picnic held on June 18th to commemorate the coming of the monks in 1121. The speaker at this year's picnic will be Dr. Cecil Slade who will take as his topic the abbey's founder, Henry I. Tickets will cost £3.50 and can be obtained from Len Head, 21 Old Kennels Court, Burghfield Road, Reading.

CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations are due to one of our members, Ann Middleton, on her appointment as a Trustee of the Great Western Trust. The arrangement is too complicated to explain here but suffice to say that the trust is associated with the Great Western Society at Didcot. We are looking forward to her talk on Excursions at our May meeting.

FEEDING THE PEOPLE

"Feeding the People" is the title of a day conference to be held on Saturday 20th March at Berkshire College of Agriculture, Burchetts Green near Maidenhead, under the auspices of the South East Regional Industrial Archaeology Conference which is a group of industrial archaeological societies. This year our friends in Berkshire Industrial Archaeology Group are responsible for the organisation and would

not only welcome any members for the day but also any offers of help with stewarding etc. on the day. Topics range from the production of food to the means of distribution. Among the speakers are Roy Brigden and Brian Boulter. The cost for the day is £8 (excluding lunch). Further details may be had from Bent Weber or Graeme Naish.

FORGOTTEN AIRFIELDS

Ron Harris

As we drive along Rose Kiln Lane from Berkely Avenue to Basingstoke Road, it is difficult to visualise the scene or imagine the noise between 1915 and 1917 when the now waterlogged fields was an airfield for the training of pilots and observers in the Royal Flying Corps and then later the Royal Air Force.

In 1915 some of the buildings of Reading University were taken over by the War Office as part of the programme to rapidly train more pilots and observers for the expanding RFC. Wantage Hall in Redlands Road, provided the classrooms for an initial training course in what later became known as No.1 School of Military Aeronautics. Student accommodation was requisitioned in various parts of Reading and Yeomanry House at the top of Castle Hill was the headquarters building.

Although the author does not know the location, another aviation school known as the School of Technical Training (Men) existed at that time in Reading

Both of these schools used an airfield on low marshy ground for advanced training and for communication flights.

It is thought that the main aircraft used was the Avro 504 although Farman Longhorns and Shorthorns were reported as being at Reading.

The airfield had been made by joining up two fields alongside the CWS jam factory but it suffered from flooding and fog. However, the airfield remained open even after the School of Technical Training moved from Reading to Halton in September 1917. The last recorded use was a forced landing in November 1918.

Coley airfield fell into disuse after the war and the land was released by the War Office.

Nothing remains to give any indication that the fields of Coley were once used as an airfield. There is a little more left of another little-known airfield at Theale. Known as Sheffield Farm this land was requisitioned in 1940 for use by No. 8 Elementary Flying Training School with its headquarters at Woodley Aerodrome.

The airfield took longer to prepare than anticipated and instead of being in service in November 1940, the newly-sown grass was not ready until the following spring. By this time it had been decided to form a new unit No. 26 EFTS.

No. 26 EFTS came into being in late July 1941 with 60 pupils and 24 Tiger Moth trainers. The 60 pupils formed two courses of six weeks duration which overlapped by three weeks. Pupils were accommodated in Sulhamstead House which also provided ground training classrooms.

In August, the name of the airfield changed from Sheffield Farm to Theale. Flying started from about the middle of the month following delays caused by flooding. The site was still primitive in the early days of the airfield being opened. There was no water supply to the site and the airmen's mess was still under construction.

The Air Training Corps shared the use of the airfield when No. 128 Gliding School was formed during 1944 and continued to use the airfield until 1948 when the site was de-requisitioned.

The EFTS at Theale was the first to close at the end of the war with its last flight on June 30 1945. Sulhamstead House was vacated a few days later while the airfield was left in the hands of a "care and maintenance party".

In 1948, a gravel company moved in to extract sand and gravel from the site which had always had problems with water. Soon the gravel pits were flooded and became a centre for water sports.

Flooded gravel pits now cover most of what was the airfield. Only about three huts and one hangar remain to remind us of the activities going on at Theale during the war years.