

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 1993

WOKINGHAM WALKABOUT

On June 17 some twelve members of the society enjoyed a most interesting walk around Wokingham guided by four members of the local history group there.

We first looked at the oldest surviving house, an early fourteenth century hall-house, but we decided that from its very ordinary exterior, no one could have guessed its real age! There are several other mediaeval buildings, and many which appear to be later, in fact have a mediaeval core. One difficult to detect example of this was a fifteenth century Wealden hall, now 16-18 Rose Street.

There are many Tudor buildings in the town. One built around 1500, when new cost £7.50! The most spectacular timber-framed Tudor House, now a surgery, faces down Broad Street.

We all admired the mellow brick Georgian houses with their beautifully proportioned doors and windows. Colbourne

House, The Elms and Gatelee House are good examples.

From Victorian times we looked at the rather forbidding St. Paul's Rectory and the startling Town Hall. This was built around 1860 in an amazing mixture of Gothic Byzantine and French mannerist styles, in orange and dark red brick.

Unfortunately the rain and diminishing light meant that we missed seeing Denmark Street, the other main street of the old town.

The Wokingham Local History Group produce an excellent booklet "A Walk in Wokingham" (£1.25). This is an invaluable guide to what could be a most enjoyable Sunday afternoon stroll around old Wokingham which is full of architectural surprises and excitement.

Elspet Naish

THE STELLA MOTORCYCLE

When I was leading a walkabout in Henley for the society about two years ago, we looked at Stuart Turners Engineering Works, at the bottom of Gravel Hill. The founder, Stuart Turner, learned to build marine engines on the Clyde, then after a few years at sea he started an engineering business in Jersey which gave the island its first public electricity supply.

He came to Shiplake Court in 1897 to run the steam-powered electricity generating plant and in 1908 moved to Henley and started building engines. By 1912 he was producing motorcycles but all normal production ceased on the outbreak of war in 1914. He converted his factory into war production for the forces, employing up to 400 girls on night and day shifts. Today, they produce centrifugal pumps only, and their front office is in what was once the Broad Gates public house.

Stuart Turner still have one of their 1912 motorcycles and subsequent to our walkabout, I called at their works to ask permission to take a photograph or two of it; the only one still in existence.

It was powered by a 748 c.c. parallel twin cylinder 2-stroke water-cooled engine set transversely in the frame driving the rear wheel with a propeller shaft and worm gear. This was at a time when almost all motorcycles were belt driven. It had two gear ratios of 4 and 7.5 to 1 and the engine ran in the range of 300 to 3000 revolutions per minute, producing 8.32 brake horsepower.

The machine was well in advance of its time and if production hadn't ceased due to the war, it could have been a trend setter. This may be true anyway, the Scott motorcycles of the 1920s and 30s such as the Flying Squirrel were similarly powered by a water-cooled twin cylinder 2-stroke engine. It was however, chain-driven instead of having shaft-drive and its engine was parallel in the frame as opposed to the Stella's transverse engine.

What motorcycle enthusiasts will remember most is the lovely high-pitched purr of a twin 2-stroke engine.

Norman Wicks.

PEPYS IN READING

In June 1668, the diarist Samuel Pepys decided to take a break from what was a very heavy work-load and to "take the ayre" for a few days.

In fact he stayed away longer than he had meant to when he set out on the 5th. He went to Bristol, going via Barnet, Huntingdon, Bedford, Oxford, Abingdon, Hungerford, Salisbury and Bath.

On the 15th. he turned homewards, going via Marlborough and Newbury. Leaving Newbury he says "We lost our way which made me vexed but came into it again and in the evening betimes came to Reading and then to supper and then to walk about the town which is a very great one - I think bigger than Salisbury. A river runs through it in seven branches and unites in one in one part of the town and runs into the Thames half-a-mile off: one odd sign of 'the Broad Face'.

17th. (Wed) Rose and paying the reckoning 12/6; servants and poor 2/6; musick, the worst we have had, coming to our chamber door, but calling us by wrong names, we lay [i.e. no tip!]; so set out with one coach in company through Maydenhead and to Colnbrook by noon" He was safely back home in London in time for supper, having been away twelve days.

Elspet Naish

WALKABOUT; ELDON SQUARE

It was a brave lady who allowed twenty H of R members - all rather damp and dripping - to tramp around her house on July 15th. However, that is what Mrs Cairns did, and

the visit proved to be extremely interesting. The house, built around 1840, has two wings built around a central staircase area; but the floors in the two wings are at different levels and this means that many steps give the house great charm. It has been tastefully and appropriately restored. The rain stayed off long enough for us to enjoy the large garden, too.

The second house we visited was Watlington House, the only Grade-One-listed house in Reading. It was built in the late seventeenth century and altered in the eighteenth, and retains many of its original features. For some years it was the home of the Kendrick School. Now it is run by a Trust and let out to various organisations.

Between those two houses, Mr Ken Major, who led our walk, pointed out many interesting features of the houses we passed, and he commented on the street alignments too. A most pleasant evening and we are very grateful to Mr Major for making it so.

Elspet Naish

UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS AROUND ELDON SQUARE

This was the theme of Joan Dils' University of Reading Extended Education Classes held during the Autumn term of 1992. The class explored the Eldon Square/St. John's area using census returns, particularly for 1851 and 1891, maps and other records (including a guided tour on foot led by Ken Major). Several class members used personal computers with data-sorting programs to generate 'pie-charts' and 'histograms' to graphically illustrate the population trends!

The two areas emerged as very different in both their housing and the social groups who lived there, as the following summary shows.

In 1851 the twelve families in Eldon Square employed an average of 2.7 servants per

household. Where there were children (in four of the households) the number rose to 3.2 and averaged one servant per child. No. 9, a household of four adults and five children, employed four servants, for example, while at No. 11, four servants served a household of two adults and two children. Eight of the households recorded at least one member of the 'extended family' in residence. Not surprisingly there were no servants attached to households in St. John's.

Eldon Square inhabitants were older than those of St. John's; there were about equal numbers under and over 40 in the Square whereas in St. John's those under 40 outnumbered the rest by four to one. This young population was very new to the town, only half having been born in Reading. Most of the others were either Berkshire people or came from villages and towns less than 10 miles away, although others came from the West of England.

By 1891 St. John's was a little more settled; just over half its population were Reading-born, but one in five came from outside Berkshire. By contrast in Eldon Square four in every five people were newcomers, the vast majority not even being Berkshire-born. Both populations were younger than had been the case fifty years before; in Eldon Square only a quarter were over 40, while in St. John's there were large numbers of boys under 15 and young men aged between 30 and 35. 1891 was twelve years into an agricultural depression and young men were moving into the towns seeking employment. Only eight of over 160 described themselves as 'employer' rather than 'employed'. In the Square, most heads of households were 'employers', especially in retailing, a contrast to 1851 when many had been 'retired' or 'of independent means'.

Further noteworthy contrasts in life in the Square were the reduction in the number of servants per household (down to 1.3 from 2.7 in 1851), in the average number of people living in the twelve households (down to 3.2 from 3.7), and in the number of children recorded (in 1851: a total of 13 children were recorded from four

households; in 1891 the number was down to nine children from three households).

One interesting result was that the censuses seem to dispel the popular belief that the district was developed for, or became, the residential area for staff of the Royal Berkshire Hospital.

John Starr and Class Members

SUBSCRIPTIONS

If you find a red star alongside, then your subscription for 1993, which became due on 1st. January, is still unpaid. If you would like to renew your subscription the Hon. Treasurer would be pleased to hear from you. The rates are £7.50 for a single member (£5.00 if retired or a student), £10.00 for a couple (£7.50 if retired).

A NEW MUSEUM

Earlier this year the Museum of Berkshire Aviation was opened in Mohawk Way, Woodley. The "Founding Sponsor" of the museum is the Royal Berkshire Aviation Society which was formed in 1982 as the Berkshire Aviation Group. The society aims to broaden the field of knowledge of all aspects of aviation, past and present, with particular emphasis on aviation in Berkshire.

The society's plans for a museum were given a good start by the offer from Adwest Engineering, of a hangar which had housed part of the Miles Aircraft Aeronautical Technical School in days gone by. The problem was that the hangar was on a site scheduled for housing development. Wokingham District Council came to the rescue and offered a site overlooking the former southern boundary of Woodley airfield. Sponsorship for the project has also been provided by the Bryant Group and British Steel, as well as local companies and individuals.

The museum display currently concentrates on aircraft construction and aviation

activities at Woodley, but greater coverage of the history of the RAF, Air Transport Auxiliary and the American Air Force in Berkshire is planned.

The museum is open to the general public from April to October at weekends and Bank Holidays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Ron Harris

AUTUMN AND SPRING PROGRAMME 1993 - 1994

Changing Face of Reading
(An audio-visual presentation)
Douglas Noyes 16 September 1993

Huntley, Bourne & Stevens
David Skilton 21 October 1993

Wokingham: A Brief History
John and Rosemary Lea 18 November 1993

Dusseldorf: Reading's Twin Town
Martin Allies 16 December 1993

Party
Theme: 50-odd Years Ago.
6.45 for 7.00 p.m. 20 January 1994

Reading Places & Reading People
Stuart Hylton 17 February 1994

Annual General Meeting
Followed by Members' Contributions
17 March 1994

Whitchurch in the 20th. Century
Barbara Aldridge 21 April 1994

The Mansion House - A Brief History
Muriel Parsons 19 May 1994

Guided Walks

Lower Caversham
Joan Dils 16 June 1994

Whitchurch
Barbara Aldridge 14 July 1994

Further details of guided walks to be advised.