

# 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



## Hon. Secretary

5 Mr P Russell  
Wilmington Close  
Woodley  
Reading RG5 4LR  
Phone: (0118) 969 6081

## Chair

Mr. J. Dearing  
27, Sherman Road  
Reading RG1 2PJ  
Phone: (0118) 958 0377

## Hon. Treasurer

Mr R Hutchinson  
19 Rosehill Park  
Caversham  
Reading RG4 8XE  
Phone: (0118) 947 9379

## **Dear Members,**

We are almost at the end of this year's programme, and I would like to say thank you to Joan Hutchinson who has organised such an excellent series of speakers for us.

There are two summer meetings. The first is at Ewelme, about whose most famous inhabitant, Alice Chaucer, Duchess of Suffolk, Joan Dils gave such an interesting talk in December. We meet at Ewelme church at 7 p.m. on June 18th. A map is enclosed. If you have transport difficulty ring Bent Weber on 926 5200.

The second meeting is on July 16th. when we meet at 7.30 p.m. in the gateway at Cemetery junction. Mr. Ron Walker will take us round the cemetery.

I'm very grateful to Mr. Norman Wicks for his article about it.

Some members have yet to renew their 1998 subscriptions. Can I remind them that those are for the calendar year, and at present are; £9 for a single subscription; £6 for a senior citizen; the subscription for a couple is £12; and for a senior citizen couple is £9?

Finally it is good to welcome two new people on to the committee, Wendy Preston and Peter Kimber, and we thank them for being willing to help us in this way.

**Elsbet Raish**

May 1998

## **The Reading Cemetery.**

In the early years of the last century graveyards were so overcrowded that it was not unusual for earlier burials to be disturbed, even to the slicing through of partly decomposed bodies, to make room for new interments! This practice was much to be deplored, and the crowded cemeteries were a threat to public health owing to the danger of contamination of water supplies, which still came mostly from wells.

William Silver Darter, painter, plumber and glazier, lived in 26, London Street (now 54), a house which was built in 1752 in the architectural style of the day, with Georgian sash windows and gauged brick arches above them. (Incidentally, should not this house of his have a commemorative plaque added to it?) He became an alderman and was twice mayor, in 1850 and 1852. He was the author of "Reminiscences of Reading" by an "Octogenarian" published in 1888 at the Blagrove Street steam printing works, and in it he writes that in 1840 he had seen this disturbance of graves taking place in St. Mary's churchyard, and had raised strong objections to it in the local paper.

It was as a result of his bringing the matter into the open that the Reading Cemetery Company was formed two years later by Act of Parliament, and fourteen acres of land belonging to Francis Cholmondely was purchased for £1000. With Nathaniel Bryant as architect, an entrance gateway with living accommodation for the curator and two chapels, one for Episcopalians and the other for Dissenters, were built. The foundation stone for the Episcopalian chapel was laid by John Ramsbottom M.P., and on June 1st 1843 the Bishop of Oxford consecrated the Established Church area. The first burial had taken place on May 1st of that year when Elizabeth Jacobs, aged 21, a Dissenter, had been interred.

Today both chapels have gone, the Episcopal chapel many years ago. The listed Nonconformist chapel, a megaron type building with a portico formed by four Greek Doric columns, and

standing under a weeping beech tree, had been disused for many years. In 1981 repair costs were estimated at £93,000, and, after a public enquiry, permission for its demolition was given by the Secretary of State for the Environment

Many beautiful items of statuary are to be seen in the cemetery; one of them is a marble life-sized statue of Bernard Laurence Heatt, shown wearing his racing leathers and holding his crash helmet. He was the son of a Reading butcher, and was an air pilot and racing motorcyclist. He lost his life when racing at Brooklands on May 3rd 1930 at the early age of twenty one. He was competing in a 200 mile sidecar race on a very wet day at the time of his crash. In those days I frequently visited the track as a spectator, and only missed this particular meeting because of the inclement weather. Bernard had just broken the two hour record when his sidecar wheel crossed the edge of the track and caused his fatal crash. His brothers Ronald and Stanley were also motorcycle club members and were often to be seen racing on grass tracks in this area but were not in the same class as Bernard. His statue stands on a marble plinth with an aeroplane sculpted on one side and a motorcycle on the other. Now his grave also contains the bodies of his parents and his brother Stanley.

There must be many more interesting tales to be told of others who have found their last resting-places in this cemetery over the 155 years of its existence.

Norman Wicks

We are very sorry to have to tell you that two long standing members of the Society have died - Miss Rayner and Miss Chapman.  
We shall miss them.

It may be of interest to give an extract from "The Homeland Handbook of Reading" of 1907.

*"Coming to Blagrove Street we have the range of Municipal Buildings on our right, These consist of Borough Council Offices, Town Halls, Free Library, Museum and Art Gallery. The buildings were erected at various periods from 1875 to 1897 at a total cost exceeding £60,000 to which members of the Palmer family, with their usual munificence have largely contributed. Built of brick (Stafford blues predominate, accounting for a somewhat heavy appearance) in the Elizabethan style, with a clock tower facing Friar Street, this group is a notable modern distinction."*

The Council Offices have moved out and many of the uses are different but it is still a notable group.

*"We will next make our way along Friar Street, one of the oldest streets of Reading. In the space before the Municipal Buildings is a statue of Queen Victoria, which formed part of the town's commemoration of the Jubilee of 1887. The statue is the work of Mr. George Simmonds, a native of Reading, and was carved from a block of Carrara marble. Friar Street is still a picturesque thoroughfare. It is wide, has a gentle curve, a retired and easy-going air and an atmosphere of repose, for though possessing some modern shops and buildings, there yet remain sleepy old inns and many of those substantial red-brick houses that add to the warmth and colouring of the town. These old houses are now occupied largely as the offices of professional men. The most noticeable modern buildings are the new Royal County Theatre, spacious and daintily decorated, and the Athenaeum (non-political) Club. The chief clubs are all in this neighbourhood. Round the corner, in Station Road, is the Wellington, while the Liberal Club in Broad Street is hardly a stone's cast away. The Athenaeum is distinguished by its fine collection of Hogarth engravings and its many prints and pictures of old Reading."*

Who would recognise the modern Friar Street in that description, with its endless queues of buses, forest of street furniture and multitude of modern-style pubs and eating houses?