

The History of Reading Society



P & M Russell

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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ELSPET NAISH

2 December 1932 - 1 December 1998

It is with deep regret that the Society announces the death of its past Chair, Elspet Naish, through an accident on the Cob at Lyme Regis on 1 December.

Some of our members will have already heard this sad news or indeed may have attended, along with many of your Committee, the thanksgiving service at a very full Greyfriars Church on 9 December. At the service, among the many tributes from family and friends was a glowing one for Elspet's work on local history and for the History of Reading Society. Your committee can only but echo these tributes - Elspet will be sorely missed by the Society. She was a person of many wide interests - not only as a historian - which with her wry Scots humour endeared Elspet to all who knew her as a friend - a real loss indeed to us all.

On 9 December, those in the congregation wishing to give flowers on that occasion were asked to make a donation in her memory to the Naish Trust, to go to the work of the Crusaders in Uganda and the African International Christian Ministry also in Uganda. Members may also wish

to do this as an ongoing memorial to Elspet as our past Chair. Such contributions should be sent to the *Naish Trust, 19 Denmark Road, Reading RG1 5PA.*

John Dearing, Chair
Bent C Weber, immediate past Chair.

January 1999

Caversham Bridge

The earliest known reference to Caversham Bridge was in 1231, in an order from Henry III relating to a chapel there which stood on the north end of the bridge and was dedicated to St. Anne (mother of the Virgin Mary). It is said to have contained among its relics a piece of the rope with which Judas hanged himself, and the knife that killed St. Edward. (He was murdered at the gate of Corfe Castle in the year 978 by his stepmother Queen Adeliza so that her son Ethelred should become king. A few years later in 985 she founded a nunnery at Reading as a form of atonement.) Another relic in the chapel was the spearhead which pierced our Lord's side. This was given by Agnes, widow of Walter Gifford, first Earl of Buckingham, who had been given Caversham by William I. The earl had accompanied Robert, Duke of Normandy, on the first crusade, and he brought this spearhead back with him. After the suppression of the monasteries by Henry VIII the chapel was given to Reading Corporation by Elizabeth I in 1562.

During the Civil War one arch of the bridge was replaced by a drawbridge. When Reading was under siege by parliamentary troops in 1643, Prince Rupert, nephew of Charles I, tried to relieve the town by attacking the besiegers across the bridge but was beaten back by the forces of the Earl of Essex. This was due partly to the narrowness of the bridge, partly to a sudden hail-storm which blew in the faces of Rupert's men, and partly because they got no support from the town garrison, who on that very same day, April 30th., had just surrendered.

This old bridge of brick and timber stood for well over 600 years before the town decided to replace it. Then an iron bridge was designed and built by William Henry Woodman in 1869. A cast-iron plate was fixed on the downstream parapet of the bridge. It had a raised line across it and one side was marked Oxon and the other Berks. Children used to stand astride the line and claim to be standing in two counties at the same time. In 1913 Harry Houdini the escapologist was performing at the Palace Theatre in Cheapside, and to advertise his

act he drove to the bridge, where he was to be chained and handcuffed and strapped into a straightjacket. It was his intention to make his escape after being lowered into the river, but the police stepped in and stopped his stunt.

A ferry used to run across the river just downstream of the bridge for the use of poorer people; obviously the ferry charges were less than bridge tolls. The ferry was first mentioned in 1231, the same year as the bridge, again by Henry III, who gave one good oak from Windsor forest to make a boat for ferrying poor people over the water at Caversham. The ferryman's cottage stood on Piper's Island, and when the iron bridge was built the cottage was moved bodily several feet downstream to make room for it.

The ferryman's cottage was finally removed when the present Caversham Bridge was built in 1924-26 by Holloway Bros. of London. It was designed to carry a rolling load of 850 tons and is of reinforced concrete with balustrades of Aberdeen granite. Whilst it was being built the foundations of the early chapel of St. Anne were discovered and the stones given to St. Anne's Church in Caversham, where they were used to build a small side chapel. The bridge was opened by the Prince of Wales in 1926 after two postponements due to the general strike of that year.

Norman Wicks

New books for your bookshelf.

An Historical Atlas of Berkshire. Edited by Joan Dils. Available from Joan (47, Ramsbury Drive, Earley, Reading, RG6 7RT), the Berkshire Record Society, or Reading University Centre for Continuing Education. Price £14.95.

At the demise of Berkshire as an administrative body, this is a very valuable book of essays looking at the history of the county as a whole. Many of the authors have given talks to the Society.

George Edmund Street. A Victorian architect in Berkshire. Edited by John Elliott and John Pritchard.. Available from Centre for Continuing Education, University of Reading. Price £14.95

A Reminder of Future Meetings

- 18 March Annual General Meeting, followed by "*A personal View of Reading*" - Ron Walker.
- 15 April Presidential Address, "*Reading's Mediaeval Account Rolls*" - Dr. Cecil Slade.
- 20 May "*The Oracle Site - the archaeological excavations*" - David Wilkinson of Oxford Archaeology Unit
- 17 June Guided walk - "*A Thousand Years of History*" - from the Butts west along Oxford Road. (Meet at Virgin Megastore at 7 p.m.).
- 15 July Guided walk around Whitchurch with Barbara Aldridge. (Meet at north end of Whitchurch bridge at 7 p.m.)

Further details of all these are available from Bent Weber or any officer of the Society.

You may be interested

The Town Hall Lectures - Recent archaeological investigations in the Thames valley. At 7.30 p.m.

Three lectures still to come:

23 Feb. Silchester Roman Town: New Evidence.

9 March. Windsor Castle: Fire, restoration and archaeology.

23 March. Excavations on the Oracle site.

With capacity audiences so far, it is advisable to book in advance either at the Town Hall or at the Hexagon.

Oxford University Local History Summer School. 10 - 17 July.

Details from Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, Rewley House, 1, Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2JA.