

The History of Reading Society



Wicks

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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Links with Reading U.S.A.

At a committee meeting last year the idea was put forward to find possible connections, as the millennium approaches, between our Reading and the many Readings in the U.S.A. (the Micro-soft CD-Rom Atlas gives eight).

Knowing the present mayor fairly well, I offered to write to him to enquire about possible connections. His reply was interesting, stating that Reading, Pennsylvania had links with us.

I later received a letter from Rose Williams, past mayor. She wrote that earlier last year in March '98 she travelled to Reading, Berks County, Pennsylvania to join in the celebrations of the 250th anniversary of their founding (1748).

"Their Reading," she writes, "was founded by the brothers Thomas and Richard Penn, and was indeed named after us because the area reminded them of our Reading and the Chilterns."

Thomas and Richard were the sons of William Penn who worshipped here in The Friends meeting house, then situated in London Street, between 1702 - 1705.

Reading Pa. have a very active Historical Society and Rose mentioned a person to whom we should address our enquiries. I hope he can give me more information, when I will write again in due course.

Francis Goodridge

READING'S WATER

The early inhabitants of the little Saxon town of Reading obtained their water from the river Kennet by carrying it in wooden or leather buckets. As time went on wells were dug so they were not obliged to walk so far carrying heavy buckets of water, although it is conceivable that they would have used the wooden yokes to help them. as milkmaids did to carry the milking pails from the pasture land. Unfortunately people weren't sufficiently fussy about where they dug their wells and most of them were dug next to cesspits. So disease, both of cholera and typhoid was fairly general here; in fact at one time Reading at 3% p.a. had double the death rate of the rest of the country.

To alleviate the situation Reading's first communal water supply was drawn from St. Giles millstream in 1697 under an agreement by the corporation with Ambrose Crawley and others. These were Reading's first water contractors and the water was pumped to the top of a tower which stood in Broad St., to provide a head of water and give pressure in the mains. At first the pump was powered by water power but was converted to steam power in 1836 to keep up with the increasing demand though the wells were still in use by many of the poorer people.

The pipes were trunks of elm trees cut down and used before they could dry out and shrink or crack; They had a hole bored down the length of them by a 2" diameter auger, perhaps 15 feet long; this was operated by two men straining on a 5'0" long ash cross-piece forming a T-junction with the auger. The trunks were squared by an adze and a chalk line on two adjacent faces enabled the drillers to keep to a straight line. In fact they could bore a long trunk from both ends and still meet nicely in the middle. After it was drilled the 2" hole could be enlarged as required by a taper cutter up to a maximum of 5" diameter. From these elm mains subscribers were fed with water through lead pipes into their houses.

In the case of fire in the town the underground pipes were exposed by digging and an opening was chopped in the tree trunk so that the water flooded the hole that had been dug and could be bailed or pumped out and thrown or hosed onto the fire; it was not very efficient as valuable time was lost in opening the street and the main but was better than nothing.

Water from the river was unfiltered and it was not unknown for fish to be sucked into the pipes and to cause blockages, and at times the water was described as being chocolate colour. It was only available on alternate days, and in 1846 George Palmer, washing down the filthy pavement in front of his London St. premises was threatened by the water company that he would have his supply withdrawn if he persisted in such wastage.

A new water tower was erected on the north side of St. Giles mill-stream in 1820 and in the following year the wooden pipes were replaced by cast iron. Another reservoir used by the pumping station was built at Spring Gardens at Whitley, now used as a playground as it has been for well over 100 years, known to generations of school children as the "Tank". After it was no longer used for mains water it continued for 25 years as a storage for the water used in water carts to damp down the town's dusty roads in summer; it was also used to replenish the boilers of the railway engines.

In 1850 the Reading waterworks company was formed and bought a wire mill beside the Kennet canal at Southcote and converted it into a water pumping station with a reservoir alongside the Bath road near to its junction with Berkely Avenue. It came into operation in 1852 when it became Reading's first filtered water supply. The company was acquired by Reading corporation in 1868 and the pumping station in St. Giles mill-stream ceased working in 1877. An additional pumping station was opened at Fobney in 1878 with reservoirs alongside it and all of these early pumping stations were dispensed with when the latest Fobney waterworks started working in 1882 a little further downstream; and when this one came into use the reservoirs at the first Fobney station were adapted for fish rearing. The original Southcote works closed in 1980, the building being sold and converted to dwelling units.

The water company had taken over the Tilehurst Pangbourne and district water company in 1931 getting their supply from deep bored wells.

The well known water tower alongside Park Lane at Tilehurst was opened in 1932; it holds 20,000 gallons and has buried beneath ground level 8 tanks which hold a further 22,000,000 gallons; and next to it stands the cupola and weather vane which once adorned the top of the Mill Lane water tower. All of the various works are now being run by Thames Water.

Norman Wicks

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Having taken over from Bent Weber at last year's AGM, this is my first report as your Chairman. As a result of some of the policies introduced under my predecessor, the History of Reading Society finds itself in a stronger position than it has been for some years both in terms of membership and as a consequence of that in terms of financial stability. As a result the Committee has not needed to implement any increase in the membership subscription for 1999.

I am very grateful to the Committee for its hard work during the year, in particular for our Secretary, Peter Russell, for his painstaking recording of the affairs of the society through the Minutes and for our Treasurer, Mr Bob Hutchinson, for his masterly direction of our finances, as well as keeping a tally of the members. In addition, Bent Weber kindly assumed the role of Programme secretary over the past year and I think most will agree did a splendid job. However, he is anxious to relinquish this to someone else and we trust there will be a volunteer. Bent has also provided valuable technical support at our meetings here in the Abbey Room. We are also grateful to the ordinary committee members, Francis Goodridge, Peter Kimber, Joan Hutchinson and Wendy Preston, all of whom have made a valuable contribution. It is thanks to Wendy that our doings have received more advance press publicity recently and this has encouraged guests to appear and again contributed to the cash flow. We are also grateful that Peter has expressed an interest/ willingness to take over the editing of the Newsletter. A number of members have made regular contributions including Norman Wicks and I am sure the Editor will be pleased to see articles continuing to roll in.

A further encouragement has been the regular appearance of our Newsletter which was in the able hands of Elspet Naish until her sad death last December. As a past Chair, as an occasional and very able lecturer to the society, as Editor and as a good friend to many of us, she will be much missed. Elspet was in the chair when I joined the society and I certainly appreciated the very warm welcome I received at the time. It was good to see so many Society members in attendance at the Thanksgiving service at Greyfriars Church, on the mediaeval origins of which she had addressed us with such erudition following our last AGM.

Perhaps the most unusual feature of the programme over the last year has been the number of field trips that we have enjoyed. April 1998 saw us at the Local History Library (up above us) where Margaret Smith revealed some of the hidden secrets of the collection to us. Our summer programme for 1998 included very memorable visits to Ewelme where we were ably guided by Mr George Cannon and a remarkable evening in July when no fewer than 80 members and guests turned out for a guided tour of Reading cemetery conducted by Mr Ron Walker. Sometimes numbers can be an embarrassment and it proved difficult for most of those present to catch very much of the commentary above the distant hum of traffic and the general hubbub. We were, therefore, very grateful to Mr Walker for undertaking a second itinerary for members only during the normally close month of August. In addition, we have had visits to Katesgrove School, the St Giles' Mill excavations on the Reading Transport site, and most recently in January to St James RC Church in the Forbury and to the Berkshire Records Office. Unfortunately it did not prove possible to arrange the visit to view Reading's Civic Silver and Mayoral Robes which had been programmed.

At the same time the formal lecture meetings have not been neglected. The last such meeting of the 1997/8 programme was on the subject of recording oral history, with Margaret Houlbrooke playing to us and commenting on some fascinating examples from her wide experience in this field. Our Autumn programme began with Jean Heward on Oscar Wilde and Reading Prison, appropriately in the centenary year of the publication of Oscar's greatest poem, The Ballad of Reading Gaol. This was full of insights into the character of this extraordinary man. Jean will be back with us in June to take us on a guided walk down the Oxford Road. In October, Stephen Capel-Davies presented The Thames at Reading, or perhaps more generally the Thames in Berkshire, with much emphasis on the engineering aspects of river conservancy. In November, Barbara Aldridge spoke on Alan Gardiner, like Wilde a rather controversial character, even a monster in the eyes of some, yet a man of single-minded dedication to the task of bringing the Christian Gospel to the natives of South America. We look forward to another opportunity of visiting Whitchurch in July, when Barbara will lead a guided walk

around the village. Public health - sanitas sanitarum, as Disraeli called it, was Joan Dils' theme when she addressed us in December. Our most recent speaker has been Sarah Griffin who spoke on Reading and the Civil War, with special reference to Henry Marten, one of the Regicides, who was MP for Berkshire. We look forward to hearing Mr Ron Walker tonight with what I know will be a very individual Personal View of Reading.

The new Committee elected tonight will shortly be getting to work on the new programme for 1999/2000. We shall, of course, be grateful for any suggestions from you the members - will the Millennium feature? - What was happening in Reading at the close of the first Christian Millennium in 1000 AD? One theme that may appear, thanks to an initiative by Francis Goodridge, is that of our namesake town in the USA. Another thought that has just struck me is that a long-time hero of mine and one of Berkshire's' greatest sons, King Alfred the Great, died 1100 years ago - on 26 October 899.....

John Dearing

SUMMARY OF ACCOUNTS, 1998

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT (up to 31st. December, 1998)

<u>INCOME</u>		<u>EXPENDITURE</u>	
1997		1998	
217	Subscriptions for 1998	342.00	90 Hire of Hall
12	Bank Interest	21.29	6 Hire of Projector and Screen
38	Coffee Sales	40.02	70 Speakers' Fees
84	Visitors Contributions	180.50	93 Newsletter, post, phones
	Booklet Sales	31.80	31. Programme Printing
			20 Affiliation Fees
			Booklet Purchases
			41 Excess Income over Expenditure
			211.56
			<u>615.61</u>
<u>351</u>		<u>615.61</u>	<u>351</u>

BALANCE SHEET AT 31ST. DECEMBER, 1998

<u>CURRENT LIABILITIES AND CREDITORS</u>		<u>CURRENT ASSETS</u>	
412	Accumulated Surplus	634.02	62 Current Account
10	Hire of Hall (18.12.97)		379 Deposit Account
21	1998 Subs paid in Advance	54.00	2 Coffee Cash not deposited
			2.54
			712.02
			LESS Cheques not yet presented
			(24.00)
<u>443</u>		<u>688.02</u>	<u>688.02</u>

ACCUMULATED SURPLUS

Opening Balance at 1.1.98	443.46
PLUS Excess income over expenditure	<u>211.56</u>
	655.02
LESS 1998 Subs paid in advance	<u>(21.00)</u>
	<u>634.02</u>

Treasurer's Report

The income has exceeded the expenditure by £211.56.

The membership for the year was as follows (1997 figures in brackets):-

Individual	10 (7)
Couples	13 (9)
Retired single and students	20 (12)
<u>Total</u>	<u>43 (28)</u>

One 1996 membership was not renewed for 1998.

R. Hutchinson

Auditor's Report

The Income and Expenditure Account and the Balance Sheet accord with the books and records of the Society.

The membership numbers showed a very encouraging increase this year, and together with the good numbers of visitors gave a very good surplus of £211. The finances are in good shape, but we must provide an attractive programme so that members will continue to rejoin.

1998/99 PROGRAMME - Summer guided walks: a reminder

Our two summer walks are on:

Thursday 17 June @ 7.00 p m when Jean Heward will guide us through
THOUSAND YEARS OF HISTORY from the Butts west along Oxford Road
(meet at the 'shopping bags' statue outside Virgin Megastore, Broad Street Mall).

Thursday 15 July @ 7.00 p m when Barbara Aldridge will conduct us around **WHITCHURCH**
(meet at Walliscote Farm car park - please note the change in meeting place) - a sketch map is given below.

N B: to be fair to each guide these walks are for members and spouse or partner only (i.e. total no = 2) at most - we regret that we are unable to take any other guests or visitors on either occasion but neither is suitable for a large audience. We shall ask for the usual fee of £2 for non-members.

DIRECTIONS TO AND AT WHITCHURCH

Leave Reading on the A329 (Oxford Road) towards Oxford, travelling out via Tilehurst and Purley-on-Thames to Pangbourne. Turn right in Pangbourne on to the B471 to Whitchurch, and cross the Thames via the toll bridge. The toll was 8p in 1994 - it may now be a few pence more - and is paid at the toll-house at the north end of the bridge (the toll booth is open 07.00 - 22.00). We meet at the car park for Walliscote Farm, which is on the left up the High Street after the drive to the church.

