

# The History of Reading Society



July 1999

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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Please note that the visit to Hemdean Road Cemetery has now been arranged for Thursday, 19th August at 7.00 pm. Mr Ron Walker will show us around.

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## 1999 - 2000 Programme of Talks

With this edition of the the Newsletter comes the new season's programme card.

We should like to commend to you the very interesting programme of talks and visits that Joan Hutchinson has arranged. Joan stepped in this year to set up the programme again but she hopes that among our much larger membership now there is someone who would be prepared to take on the role of Programme Organiser. We should be more than pleased to hear from you as neither Bent Weber nor Joan Hutchinson are in a position to continue this role in which they have alternated over the past 7 years or so. As for the visits, because of our much enlarged membership, from this

year these are to be limited to members only with the details of each visit being confirmed in future editions of this newsletter. With the ever larger and increasing attendance at such events, we have to be fair to our guides who have in the past year been confronted by huge crowds to address: a task which may prove daunting to many.

For our meeting on Saturday, 15 Jan 2000, we are also limited by the size of the seminar room at the Museum of English Rural Life which can barely hold 30 or so. The arrangements for that meeting are that we meet inside the entrance of the Museum which is off Chancellors Way on the Whiteknights Campus of Reading University at 2 p m. Those coming will have to pay the standard entry fee of £1 to gain entry to the Museum. Roy Brigden, the Keeper, will then talk to us about the Museum followed by a tour. If you have never been or have been many times, you will always find it full of interest. During the autumn, details of how to get there including a map will be made available at our meetings.

### **GODWIN ARNOLD: an appreciation.**

Godwin Arnold - the well known architect and architectural historian - died on 16 June at the Friends Meeting House in Reading at the age of 78.

Many will have attended his courses on English churches and other similar subjects at the University's Centre for Continuing Education. Some will recall his talk to the Society many years ago as well as his guided walks for us around Reading's churches.

While he practised away from Reading, some may know of his works such as the Winchester City Hall extension for Hampshire C C and the Shaw House School at Newbury among others. Though away professionally from Reading, from the 1960s he was in the forefront of trying to keep the developers at bay from rampaging out of control in the historic centre of Reading. He was a founder member and later president of Reading's Civic Society as well as being equally closely involved with the Berkshire Archaeological Society. He carried out extensive authoritative and definitive Surveys of Reading's Victorian Buildings and London Street. He will be greatly missed for - among his many attributes - his encouragement of societies such as ours, his encyclopaedic historical knowledge of buildings, his love of music (especially choral music: he was at a choral rehearsal at the Friends Meeting House when he died) and his quiet unassuming modesty. At his memorial service at the Meeting House, it was a very full house - a major tribute indeed.

BCW

At the beginning of the last century Bristol was England's major port where sailing ships from America and the far east docked. This saved them the long beat up the channel to London and back so getting a quicker turn-around. But the Bristol merchants had their troubles, the roads were impassable to heavy freight for much of the year, and in times of drought or hard frost the canals couldn't be used either. So in 1832 following good reports from the Stockton-Darlington and Liverpool-Manchester railways they formed a committee to look into the possibilities of building a railroad.

In March the following year Isambard Kingdom Brunel was engaged to make a survey into the feasibility of a line from London to Bristol. He reported his findings on 30th July 1833 at a public meeting in the Bristol Guildhall when it was decided that a company be formed to carry out the proposals. There was a great deal of opposition to the project particularly from landowners and from the canal and barge-owners and the stage-coach proprietors. Reading tradespeople were becoming interested and on 6th March 1834 at a public meeting held here in the Town Hall to debate the subject the vast majority of those present approved the project. A few days later the Great Western Railway bill was presented to Parliament by Reading's M.P., Mr Charles Russell. The bill however, though approved by the commons, was rejected by the Lords. At a second attempt in mid 1835 a revised prospectus was passed by both houses and the work began.

The line reached Twyford on 1st July 1839 and a stage-coach started running from Henley to Twyford and back, timed to connect with the trains. The hard work of excavating the Sonning cutting by hand, up to 60 feet deep and nearly two miles long, which had been going on for almost three years at that time was finally completed and the track reached Reading in the spring of 1840. The station was officially opened on 30th March. Only six days before this opening a tragic and most unusual event occurred when a whirlwind struck as work was being done at the station and hurled Henry West 200 feet away as well as throwing down the lantern light weighing 4 tons on which he was working. The body of Henry West was buried in St Laurence's churchyard where a board describing his end can still be seen.

On the opening day the first train, drawn by an engine called 'Fire-fly', left Reading at 6.0 am followed by many others throughout the day. Reading was now on the railway map and work continued to take the lines through to Bristol. After completing the main line attention was paid to building branch lines. Reading had been involved in moves to have a railway as early as 1833 when the Tring, Reading and Basingstoke railway

was proposed. From Tring the line, through parts of Buckinghamshire and onward through Oxon and Berks, would have linked Henley through Rotherfield Greys, Peppard and Shiplake on its way to and through Reading. This proposal never got started but seven years after the G.W.R (proudly known as God's Wonderful Railway in its heyday) reached Reading, the company sought powers to build a branch line from Twyford to Henley. Permission was first granted in 1847 but owing to financial difficulties the powers lapsed and had to be re-approved by Parliament in 1853. The line was eventually opened for traffic on 1st June 1857 and on that day the stage coach ran for the last time. The branch opened as a single track built to the broad gauge of 7 feet, the Thames being crossed at Wargrave by a timber trestle bridge. The gauge was reduced to the standard gauge of 4 feet 8-1/2 inches on 25th March 1876. Shiplake was the only intermediate station at first, Wargrave being built in 1900. Around that same time proposals were made to build a racecourse at Henley and the directors of G.W.R. supported this by converting the single line into double track. The Racecourse scheme fell through and it was established in Newbury instead in 1905.

So then the doubling of the branch line was made use of for experimenting in railway operation. It was here in 1906 that the audible early warning system in engine cabs was developed by Amos Brooker to indicate to drivers the aspects of distant signals. This became universal on G.W.R. until nationalisation, after which it was carried on, in a modified form, over the whole of British Rail.

Again in 1960 Henley signal box was converted to electronic control and when this had proved satisfactory big installations were built at Bristol, Reading and Cardiff to control all the traffic on the main line. In 1961 the line was cut back to a single track again to reduce costs, but such is progress, 20th century style.

JOSEPH MORRIS      by John Dearing

Sir Christopher Wren's epitaph in St Paul's Cathedral, *si monumentum requiris, circumspice* - if you seek a monument to him look around you, is equally true of the many architects of largely local reputation who flourished in the Reading area and not least of Joseph Morris (1836-1913). In particular in his rôle as County Surveyor of Bridges and Buildings for Berkshire from 1872 to 1905, Joseph Morris designed many of the new schools that were built largely as a result of the Education Act of 1870, as well as other public buildings such as police stations, including the fine example in Wokingham, and the extensions to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Along with his two very gifted children, Frank and Violet, he also contributed to the growth of commercial property in Reading in particular Mollroy's stores in Oxford Road and the alas largely demolished Broadway Buildings in Station Road. Prior to his children joining the family firm he was in partnership with Spencer Slingsby Stallwood, whose own contribution to Reading's architecture might form the subject of a future study (hint to our programmes secretary??).

Last but not least Morris's influence in Reading and its environs is seen in his contribution to domestic architecture. This included both "social housing" seen in some distinctive contributions to the terraces of Newtown as well as his work for the People's Investment Company which was largely concerned with building for the professional and middle classes. Perhaps his loveliest domestic piece in Reading is No 103 Connaught Rd, built originally as a cottage for the gardener to the treasurer of Berkshire County Council. It is equally well worth seeking out Batty's Barn Farm Estate for the many distinctive properties designed by Joseph and Violet Morris in that late Victorian development of Wokingham.

Morris was also distinguished if that is the correct word for the peculiarity of his religious views. From a Quaker background he converted with his parents to evangelical Anglicanism but in 1884 became a member of the sect of Agapemonites who practised a broadly communistic philosophy in advance of the imminent Second Coming of Christ. It was Joseph Morris himself who proclaimed this as "a fact" on the steps of his home in Craven Road in 1902. It was for the sect that he undertook his only major assignment outside Reading, the Church of the Ark of the Covenant, situated in Clapton Common, North London, and now known as the Church of the Good Shepherd. It is a fine building, well worth seeking out. I was grateful for the opportunity of researching Morris and looking out his work (taking some sixty slides in the process) but I remain conscious of

my indebtedness to the pioneering work of Sidney Gold and the late Godwin Arnold whose monograph, Morris of Reading, is well worth reading. Copies can be found in Waterstones in Broad St. A comprehensive list of buildings designed by Morris and his family can also be found in Sidney's more recent compendium of Reading architects.

## ADVANCE NOTICE

THE UNIVERSITY OF READING DEPARTMENT OF CONTINUING  
EDUCATION

In association with, Reading Museum Service, The Berkshire County  
Record Office and The Berkshire Record Society.

THE TOWN HALL LECTURES 2000  
**RECORDS OF CHANGE: LIFE IN BERKSHIRE OVER TEN CENTURIES**  
A SERIES OF FIVE FORTNIGHTLY ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

25th January - 21st March 2000; alternate Tuesdays at 7:30 pm in the  
Town Hall, Reading

The Town Hall Lectures in the year 2000 will be looking at the changing map of Berkshire and records of the lives of its people from the time of the Anglo-saxon settlement to the Twentieth Century. This follows the successful publication of *An Historical Atlas of Berkshire* \* edited by Joan Dils and published by the Berkshire Records Society at the end of 1998. Our speakers will include a national leading expert in Place-Name Studies and two very well-known historians of Medieval and Modern Berkshire, the Chairman of the Berkshire Records Society and Joan Dils herself. Each of the five lectures will deal with a different chronological period in this long view of Berkshire's history.

Dates 25 Jan, 8 Feb, 22 Feb, 7 March, 21 March 2000

Price Five meetings: £18 series rate or £5 at the door. Series tickets may be obtained from the Extra Mural Office or the Hexagon Box Office. Further details available from the Extra Mural Office: 0118 931 8347

NB Advance booking is advised: the past two years of the series have seen very full houses and many people turned away.

\* **AN HISTORICAL ATLAS OF BERKSHIRE:** copies available from the editor, Mrs Joan Dils, 47 Ramsbury Drive, Earley, Reading, RG6 7RT. Price £16.95. Cheques should be made payable to the **BERKSHIRE RECORD SOCIETY**