

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	Chair	Hon Treasurer
Mr P Russell	Mr J Dearing	Mr R Hutchinson
5 Wilmington Close	27 Sherman Rd	19 Rosehill Park
Woodley	Reading RG1 2PJ	Caversham
Reading RG5 4LR		Reading TG4 8XE
Tel 9618559	Tel 9580377	Tel 9479379

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Subscriptions for year 2001.

Your subscription is due before the first of January. Bob Hutchinson is waiting for your cheques.

Single member £9 or £6 concession.

Couple £12 or £9 concession.

Museum Visit.

There will be a guided tour through several of the galleries of the Museum of Reading on **Saturday 20th January at 2 pm**. Could members wishing to participate please assemble inside the entrance to the Museum/Concert Hall before 2 pm. Unfortunately this visit is restricted to members only.

The Society would like to thank the Museum and its staff for arranging this visit.

A Potpourri of Reading's Past.

Mary Southerton has recently presented to the Society a large collection of her husband's photographs of Reading. In the September meeting Bent Weber gave us an interesting evening of slides selected from this collection. His introduction to the evening makes a fine tribute to Peter and Mary Southerton:-

Peter Southerton and his wife Mary were amongst the founder members of the Society in the 1970s. He was the first Chairman from

1977 when members of the committee were constrained to a three-year term of office. Then he served in various capacities on your Committee until he and Mary left in 1991 for Cheltenham, to be closer to their children and grandchildren.

To me, equally one of the early members of the Society, he was a modest unassuming person but steeped in the history of this town. I recall him on several conducted walkabouts round the town in the then much quieter streets, often at weekends or on summer evenings, avidly making verbal notes into a small Dictaphone to write up later. He was the author of several books on Reading, particularly two small volumes of *Reading in Old Photographs*. Both I hope are still available though I noticed one last Saturday being remaindered in the new bookshop in the newly opened Broad Street entrance to the Oracle.

He also had considerable professional interest in one aspect of the town's history. He worked in the Probation Service and thus had first hand knowledge of its current penal establishments. He delved deeply and authoritatively into the history of the succession of jails that Reading has had and their whereabouts so some of the photos I'll be showing will reflect this interest.

Peter died some years ago and Mary recently gave his substantial collection of slides on Reading to the Society to do with as it saw fit. In consequence I have become the honorary archivist. The collection came to me in two parts: the first provides the basis of tonight's offering while the second but larger part recently arrived and has yet to be sorted. There were many duplicates in the first part, but I hope that having honed down the collection, I shall have distilled some of Peter's interests which I hope in turn will interest you. There are copies of historical scenes - including photos of those huge pictures which hang in the Abbey Gateway (all rather romantic) but most reflect a Reading of only yesterday: a time capsule of the 1970s and 1980s. There is rarely any social comment in these photos but revisiting his books belies the camera just recording. A few I shall show nearer the end - I feel - have implied social comment.

As to the actual photos, sometimes the colour dyes have faded or altered. I hope that this will not detract from their value as historical documents. B.C.W.

Thomas Porter of Earley.

Norman Wicks

In late Victorian times Thomas Porter was a major benefactor to the parish and church of Earley St Peter. The church was built in 1844 to hold 360 people; before then the people of Earley had had to travel to St Andrew's church at Sonning to worship. When the population of Earley increased the church was too small and the number of Sunday school

children had to be limited. This was, of course, very unsatisfactory and the vicar, the reverend Havilland Durand, called a meeting on June 4th 1881 to discuss the question. It was agreed that enlargement of the church was essential.

The architect, Francis Bacon of Burghclere, produced plans for the enlargement which was estimated to cost £3200. An appeal was issued and money began to be subscribed. Mr. Hargreaves of Maiden Erlegh gave £1000, Thomas Porter of Whiteknights gave £700 and the work began, but costs began to rise and altogether over £4000 was raised from a parish population of 1175 souls. By the completion of the work in 1883 only £200 or £300 remained outstanding, and this was soon cleared.

In May 1895 the erection of a workingmen's club was suggested and a meeting was called to consider this. Thomas Porter, who had contributed largely to the cost of the church enlargement and also given a considerable sum for the enlargement of the nearby school, offered to pay the entire cost of the clubroom if a site could be found for it. So the vicar, at that time the reverend Charles Henry Firmstone, gave a small part of the glebe lands. This was about 26 by 18 yards, opposite the end of St Peters road, that had previously been used as part of the school playground. Mr. Porter gave an immediate cheque to the amount of the estimate, £650, but owing to the usual rising costs had to add a further £230 as building continued. Work was soon finished and the institute was opened by Mr. Porter on 21st July 1896 when he used a silver trowel to spread the mortar for the stone laid to commemorate the completion of the building. A short service was held to bless the building, which was furnished with snooker tables, card tables, and dartboards. It was also to be made available for other purposes such as concerts and talks and it was here in the December of that year the first meeting to form a local branch of the Mothers union was held and it is still going strongly today. Thomas Porter who had borne the costs of the building work died less than a year after opening it and was buried in the churchyard.

As the institute had been built on glebeland it was considered to be the property of St Peter's church and in 1978 after more than 80 years as a workingmen's club it was sold to the school for use as two extra classrooms, which were badly needed. The money paid to the church, rather more than £8000, covered about half the cost of rebuilding its Dalladay organ which had been installed in the church and dedicated in 1910.

My own remembrance of the institute dates from April 1941 when it was hired for my wedding reception by my parents-in-law to be. I was away serving at R.A.F. Cranwell at the time and was only allowed a long weekend of 72 hours, from after-duty on the Friday until 2359 hours on Monday, for my wedding. I left Cranwell on the Friday evening and arrived

at Kings Cross to find an air-raid taking place. Paddington station had been hit and I had to make my way to Ealing Broadway, which was as far as trains could travel that night. Eventually I reached Reading station and had to walk to my home at Woodley as the taxis had used their day's allowance of petrol and refused to carry me. I reached home in the early hours of the morning on the day of my wedding and only managed 3 or 4 hours sleep before having to get up again. There was no icing allowed for wedding cakes in those years of strife, but the very nice plain cake had a lift-off cardboard cover made to look like an iced wedding cake. There was a war on I was told and I still have the cardboard cover today, 60 years later.

I managed to obtain two rooms in a house in the nearby town of Sleaford and was granted a sleeping-out pass for the remainder of my time at Cranwell, which only amounted to about ten weeks. It was a warm sunny spring and a very pleasant if short interlude.

Most of the facts have been taken from Ernest Dormer's book "The parish and church of Earley St Peter" and from Lesley Hannah's more recent book "The story of Earley St Peter".
N.W.

Notice of A.G.M.

The Annual General Meeting of the History of Reading Society will be held at 7.30 pm on the 15 March, 2001 at the Abbey Baptist church, Abbey Square, Reading.

Agenda

- 1 Welcome and apologies
- 2 Approval of 1999 minutes
- 3 Matters arising
- 4 Chairman's report
- 5 Treasurer's report
- 6 Election of the committee
- 7 Election of an auditor
- 8 Any other business

The present committee members are willing to stand for re-election but other nominations will be welcome. Nominations, with the support of a proposer and seconder, can be made in writing to the secretary or from the floor of the meeting.

The AGM will be followed by a talk on Reading Chapels and Churches by John Dearing.