

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

Chairman	Hon Secretary/ Programme Organiser	Hon Treasurer/ Membership	Editor/ Vice Chairman
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Winter 2019

No 49

Notice of Annual General Meeting

The Society's AGM will take place on Wednesday 20th March 2019.

AGENDA

1. Welcome and Apologies
2. Approval of Minutes of 2018 AGM
3. Matters Arising
4. Chairman's Report and Review.
5. Treasurer's Report
6. Election of Officers and Committee for 2019/20

Present Officers	
Chairman	David Cliffe
Vice Chairman [and News Editor]	John Dearing
Secretary	Vicki Chesterman*
Treasurer	Malcolm Summers**
Present Committee	
Sidney Gold	
Sean Duggan [Archives and Publicity]	
Joy Pibworth [Minutes Secretary]	
John Whitehead	

*Also Programme Organiser. **Co-opted during 2018/9

All current members are prepared to stand again with the exception of Sidney Gold and John Whitehead. Any other nominations with names of proposers and seconders should be submitted to the Secretary, prior to the meeting.

7. To elect an Independent Examiner of Accounts.
8. Any Other Business

THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

We'll be holding another book sale, before and after the talk on Berkshire Suffragettes on April 10th. Thanks to our members, we have a lot of new stuff, likely to be of interest to anyone who is keen on local history in general, and on Reading history in particular.

Also included will be some items from the collection of Doug Noyes, which have been kindly donated to the Society by Alan Copeland. Everything received from Alan has been checked against the holdings of the Central Library's Local Studies Collection. Where the Library has sufficient copies, the "spares" will go on sale. Where the library needed copies, they have been passed on.

Nothing very valuable has turned up, and many of the items in the sale will be going for £1 or less. I say "items" because one or two postcards and bits of ephemera are included. These sales are a good way of raising a little money for the Society, and I myself have picked up (and paid for!) a number of useful items in the past.

We still have some copies of the book on the history of the Reading cinemas for sale – *Picture Palace to Penny Plunge* – at £12. I'll bring copies along to our meetings, until they're all gone.

The next book to be published by the Society, *The A-Z of Reading Pubs and Breweries*, is now well on the way, with John Dearing as the main author, aided and abetted by Evelyn Williams and myself. My jobs included reading every copy of the house journal of Reading brewers, H. & G. Simonds – *The Hop Leaf Gazette* – and I also spent time looking at old property deeds in the Record Office. The book goes right back to the earliest records, and we seem to have picked up around 500 drinking establishments altogether.

Finally, I should mention that two long-standing members of our committee will be standing down at the Annual General Meeting on March 20th. If you feel you might like to join, please contact me, or any other member of the committee. Not only will you be helping the History of Reading Society going, but you'll be keeping it active in promoting Reading's history among the members and more widely, and helping preserve history for the future.

David Cliffe

[Editorial note. Both Sidney Gold and John Whitehead joined the committee while I was in the chair and so I would like to add my appreciation of the many services they have given to the Society]

IN CASE YOU MISSED THEM

Reports of the final four talks given to the Society in 2018 follow, as recorded by our committee member for Publicity and Archives, Sean Duggan.

The subject of the September talk was **Amelia Dyer and the Baby Farm Murders**. The speaker was Angela Buckley who after a career in teaching modern languages is now a writer on the subject of crime history. A keen family historian she was the Chair of the Society of Genealogists.



Clappers c.1900

At Reading on the 30th March 1896 a gruesome discovery was made in the River Thames when bargeman Charles Humphreys and a colleague noticed a suspicious object floating in the water near the Clappers Weir footbridge at Caversham Lock. Humphreys managed to fish the object out of the river and on closer inspection it was revealed to be a brown paper parcel tied with string and contained within it was a brick and the body of a baby. The body was wrapped in newspapers and had a cord tied tightly around the neck.

Humphreys left his mate at the Lock with the parcel and ran to the Borough Police Station at the foot of London Street to report what he had discovered. Later, Humphreys returned to the Lock with a police constable to collect the package and deliver it to the town mortuary.

The mortuary surgeon, Dr. William Maurice, examined the infant, a girl aged between 6 months and a year, and concluded she had died of strangulation. A murder investigation was launched by the police, led by Superintendent George Tewsley assisted by DC James Anderson and Sergeant Harry James. After a search, more bodies of babies were found in the river at Caversham.

An important clue was discovered on the parcel paper: it bore the faded stamp of the Midland Railway Company with the date 24-10-'95 Bristol Temple Meads and was addressed to a Mrs. Thomas at Piggott's Road, Caversham. Detective Constable Anderson took the parcel to Reading Railway Station where a clerk remembered it and knew the recipient's real name to be Mrs. Dyer who had moved to Kensington Road, Reading.

Dyer's home was put under observation and enquiries with the neighbours revealed that one had given some string to Dyer on the same day as the child's body was found. On the 3rd April police arrived at the small terrace house in Kensington Road to arrest Amelia Dyer. When a search was made by officers, they found: string that was identical to that used to tie the package; the same cord that was used to strangle the child; a box that bore

traces of having contained a corpse; and letters from parents who had put up their children for adoption by Dyer.

Dyer's principal source of income was to care for the children of parents forced to give them up for adoption, usually those born out of wedlock; she received a fee of £10. Many of the children in her care were allowed to die of malnutrition and then, later, she turned to infanticide as a means of disposing of them.

Amelia Dyer was sent for trial at the Old Bailey in London where she was charged with the murders of Helena Fry, Doris Marmon and Harry Simmons; the investigating detectives, after reading the letters found at Kensington Road, concluded that the first body found at Caversham Lock was probably Fry's; she was the illegitimate daughter of a domestic servant. After the judge's summing up the jury took just five minutes to reach a verdict of guilty and she was sentenced to death. Amelia Dyer was hanged at Newgate Prison on 10th June 1896.

The subject of the October talk was the **Forbury at Reading**. The speaker was Joy Pibworth, a member of the Society's committee.

Today's public open-space opposite St.Laurence's churchyard in Reading, known as the Forbury Gardens, was in the 9th century the stage for the fierce battle between the Anglo-Saxons, led by King Ethelred I and his brother Alfred, and the invading Danish forces who chose it as the vanguard for their invasion of Wessex.

After the Norman conquest of England in 1066 the land became the property of the Crown and was for 418 years within the precincts of the Benedictine Abbey that was founded by King Henry I in 1121. It was the abbey's outer court and served as a market and meeting place between monks and the townspeople; 'The Forbury' means: 'the land before the town'.

In 1536, with the dissolution of the monasteries, the abbey site reverted to common land and was used by the town for agricultural fairs and for grazing livestock; the fabric of the building was subjected to much pillaging by the locals. In 1539, the final ignominy was the execution for treason of the last abbot, Hugh Cook Faringdon; it took place opposite the abbey, the spectacle witnessed by the monks and the townsfolk.

In 1642 the Forbury would again be the setting for bloodshed. In the siege of Reading, during the English Civil Wars, the occupying Royalist army, commanded by Sir Arthur Aston, turned the town into a fortress: Aston ordered the inhabitants to assist with the construction of the defences. An important bulwark was the mound, a hillock at the centre of the site: this was raised higher and cannon positioned on it. The siege would cause yet more damage to the remaining fabric of the abbey.

During the nineteenth century, with the rapid expansion of Reading, the Forbury was no longer the edge of the town. In 1831 the abbey, then a picturesque ruin, faced a new danger: a building scheme proposed the complete demolition of the ruins; fortunately, the public outrage that ensued caused the Reading Corporation to act: a sum of £500 was raised through subscription and most of the site was saved.

In the 1840s, however, some of the ruins were demolished to make room for St. James's Roman Catholic Church and a new prison. In 1854, to prevent further encroachment at the site, the Corporation purchased the remaining undeveloped land from the owner, James Joseph Wheble, for £1,200. The principal legacy of this largesse was the creation of a new public park, the Forbury Gardens; it opened on Easter Sunday 1856. The 'Forbury Lion' its best known landmark, was erected as the Maiwand War Memorial to commemorate those who died in the Afghan war of the 1880s.

Today, the gardens are a well-used public amenity and a vital green lung in the town centre and, recently, the abbey ruins have undergone further restoration work to ensure their survival. The future use of the former prison, which closed in 2013, is uncertain.

The subject of the November talk was the **Architectural History of Caversham: A Personal View**. The speaker was Dr Megan Aldrich who began her career at the Victoria & Albert Museum and later became an academic director at Sotheby's Institute of Art in London.



Opening of Caversham Free Library, 1908

For much of its existence the Reading suburb of Caversham was a village in the county of Oxfordshire and quite independent of its larger neighbour; this separateness was reinforced by the physical barriers of the river Thames and surrounding marshland. However, with Reading's relentless expansion in the late-nineteenth century Caversham was absorbed by Reading in 1911.

In common with many ancient settlements in England, Caversham developed around the parish church, dedicated to St. Peter, which can trace its history back to 1162 when it was gifted to Notley Abbey in Buckinghamshire by Walter Giffard, Earl of Buckingham. Today, the church's appearance is the result of the numerous restoration works of the late nineteenth century, principally that executed by a local firm of architects,

Morris & Stallwood. Some Norman work survives at the south door and in the north aisle.

Opposite the church is Caversham Court Gardens. This was the site of the original rectory erected in the 1450s: it was built around three sides of an inner courtyard; the principal room was the long gallery. After the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s it was tenanted by lay people. In the twentieth century the house was bought by Reading Corporation who, in 1933, decided to demolish it. Today, it is a public park.

On higher ground to the east stands Caversham Park. The present house, mostly re-built in the 1850s, is a pleasantly unmemorable neo-Classical design by the London architect Sir Horace Jones for the industrialist William Crawshay. It was the first country house in England built around an iron frame with the elevations clad with Bath stone; the colonnaded flanking wings survive from the previous house. In the 1970s a large housing estate, Caversham Park Village, would encroach on the estate's parkland.

Caversham's more modest domestic architecture is no less interesting: along Church Road and Surley Row are to be found examples of pre-Georgian timber frame houses. Victorian speculative builders erected many terrace houses today admired for their ornate brickwork; many of the bricks were supplied by Colliers of Reading. A middle-class suburb emerged at Caversham Heights; today, its spacious villas are highly sought after.

Caversham is well represented with non-conformist places of worship; many were designed by Reading's most eminent architects: Alfred Waterhouse's Free Baptist Church at Prospect Street to name but one. Among the secular public buildings the library in Church Street is notable: it was designed in 1906 by William Lewton in a florid Art Nouveau style

In the 21st century the latest addition to Caversham's architectural heritage is the new footbridge across the Thames at Christchurch Meadows.

The subject of the December talk was **Reading in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I**. The speaker was Joan Dils, the Society's president.

Elizabeth was crowned Queen of England on 15th January 1559; she was the last monarch of the House of Tudor, the only issue of the marriage of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. At the beginning of her reign Reading was comprised of three ancient parishes: St.Mary, St.Laurence and St.Giles; the extent of the built-up area lay within the triangle of New Street (today's Friar Street) in the north and flanked by London and Southampton Streets to the south, the population was around three thousand.



John Blagrave Monument at St Laurence's

With the closure of the abbey in the 1530s the economy of Reading had suffered: the large monastic household and the many visitors it had attracted led to a decline in trade. Many of the responsibilities once held by the abbey had passed to the Crown and its negligence had become apparent: the condition of the two hundred houses, an important source of income, and the nineteen bridges it had owned, was parlous. At the commencement of Elizabeth's reign the town was bankrupt.

In 1560, the Queen gave a new charter to Reading for self-government. This confirmed the charters and liberties formerly granted and it defined the town's boundaries and also helped to solve the town's financial problems.

The Queen gifted the former house of the Grey Friars to the Corporation (the town's government) for use as their guildhall. Also, all deeds and documents issued by the Corporation would have its own seal upon them. The town would be governed by nine head burgesses who would serve for life, and, annually they would elect, from among their number, a mayor, in addition, they were supported by twelve secondary burgesses. This system of government and the extent of the borough's boundaries would last until the nineteenth century.

The charter granted the Corporation the assize of ale, bread, wine and other provisions; it would receive the income from the profits of the town's various fairs and markets and the rents collected from former crown property as well as the responsibility for its maintenance; lamentably, the Corporation was granted the right to pillage building material from the former abbey.

During Elizabeth's reign there were many trading companies (the guilds) in the town, the four main guilds were: the clothiers and cloth makers, the mercers and drapers, the tanners and leather sellers and the cutlers and bell founders. Each guild set the rules for the regulation of its trade such as where in the town a business could trade.

Two eminent citizens of Elizabethan Reading who are remembered today are: the clothier Thomas Aldworth, who served four terms as mayor of Reading and was elected its MP in 1558 and the mathematician John Blagrave, born circa 1561 at Bulmershe Court. He was educated at Reading School and St. John's College, Oxford; he built the first Southcote Manor and published four mathematical books.

Queen Elizabeth I paid many visits to Reading, the last of which was in 1602: she would stay at the abbey, which was still a royal palace, and attend services at St. Laurence's Church. She died at Richmond, Surrey on 24th March 1603.

KATE TILLER, O.B.E.

Dr. Kate Tiller was awarded an O.B.E. for services to local history in the New Year Honours. In the History Faculty at Oxford University she is Reader Emerita in English Local History, and the list of her qualifications, the posts she holds and her publications is long.

Much of her research has been concerned with Oxfordshire. She is currently involved with the V.C.H. Oxfordshire Trust, which in due course will publish the volume of the *Victoria History of Oxfordshire*, and which contains Caversham and neighbouring parishes. I am hoping that in time it will be possible to publish the Caversham section separately, maybe with added illustrations.

On the other side of the river, she has edited *The Religious Census Returns, 1851, for Berkshire*, for the Berkshire Record Society. It was published in 2010.

Then in 2015, she crossed into Berkshire again to read a paper, *Priests and People: Changing Relationships in South Oxfordshire*, at the symposium held in St. Laurence's Church, Reading, in honour of our President, Joan Dils. Joan is now also President of the Berkshire Local History Association, who organised the symposium.

For our Society, in May 2012, she gave a talk entitled: **Church and Chapel: Local Religion in 1851**. From what I remember, the vivacious Kate was able to make what could have been a dry and academic subject quite the opposite – a rare ability.

On behalf of the History of Reading Society, I should like to offer her our hearty congratulations.

David Cliffe