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

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EDITORIAL

Readers will notice that this is a sort of Jubilee edition since the Newsletter has apparently reached its 50th issue. In fact, I think there have been rather more issues of it than that since at one time numbering was done on an annual basis – 2006-1, 2006-2, etc. It may perhaps be the 50th edited by the present incumbent which may or may not be a cause for celebration. I have decided to celebrate by republishing a short piece from the earliest Newsletter I can trace in electronic form. Since it concerns a Reading-born politician who changed parties it could perhaps be considered quite topical!

SUMMER OUTINGS

Wednesday 19th June 2019 - Guided Tour of St James' Church

On **Wednesday** 19th June the History of Reading Society members are invited to visit St James' Church, Forbury Road, Reading RG1 3HW. The tour party is to congregate at the main entrance to the Church at **1.45pm**, ready for the tour to commence at **2.00pm**. Parking is available in the Queens Road car park or Reading Railway Station car park.

Booking is essential as places are limited to **25**. **There is a £2 per person charge for this outing, preferably payable upon booking – ONLY TWO PLACES LEFT**

Wednesday 17th July 2019 - Guided Tour of The Mills Archive Trust, Watlington House

On **Wednesday** 17th July the History of Reading Society members are invited to visit The Mills Archive Trust, Watlington House, 44 Watlington Street, Reading RG1 4RJ. The tour party is to congregate at the front main entrance to Watlington House at **6.45pm**, ready for the tour to commence at **7.00pm**. Parking is available at the front of Watlington House (accessed via Watlington Street).

Booking is essential for this visit as places are limited to **20**. **There is a £2 per person charge for this outing, preferably payable upon booking.**

THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

At this year's A.G.M., two long-standing and valued members of the committee, Sidney Gold and John Whitehead, decided to stand down. We owe them a lot. And we had one volunteer interested in joining the committee – which means that there is room for one more!

I was at first taken aback and then delighted when Caroline Piller asked me about joining the committee. Since the A.G.M., we've had a committee meeting, and I can safely say that the whole committee is delighted to have Caroline on the team. We look forward to working with her over the coming months, and hopefully, years.

The A.G.M. is the time when members of the Society can bring up additional matters under "any other business." This year, someone raised the question of holding meetings in the afternoon, and we had a time for discussion. For myself, I remembered when I had to work for a living, sometimes until 7 p.m., and thought how disappointed I would have been to have to miss the talks. I'm rather pleased that we have some younger members and visitors, and wouldn't like the History of Reading Society to become a club for retired people. This is, of course, only the situation as it appears to me.

Membership of the Society stands at 103, plus 3 honorary members, which is about the highest it has ever been, and the funds are in good shape.

Thanks are due to those who helped with the second-hand book sale in April, by donating items, transporting the books, running the sale, and buying things. It raised around £90 for the Society, and I bought a couple of books for myself.

I hope that not too many people were disappointed that we couldn't have talk on suffragettes in Berkshire in April as advertised. This talk will be booked in for the 2020 programme. I filled in with a talk about Reading industries which I'd put together years ago for the Berkshire Industrial Archaeology Group. Someone must have liked it – I've been booked to repeat the talk for another society!

At the last committee meeting, Vicki revealed some of the topics to be covered in the 2020 season of talks. They seem to me to be as varied and interesting as ever, some of them subjects I'd never have thought of. The display boards advertising the Society's existence and activities are also thanks to Vicki. They can be taken round to exhibitions and fairs, and made their first appearance in April at the A.G.M. of the Berkshire Local History Association at Watlington House in Reading. They looked good.

The B.L.H.A., of which I'm currently chairman, is an "umbrella" organisation to which the 40 or so local history societies in Berkshire are affiliated, including the H.o.R.S. It, too, has a lively newsletter, which you can see on the website – www.blha.org.uk.

It holds occasional visits, workshops and seminars, to which all H.o.R.S. members are invited. In the autumn – 26 October to be precise, it will be holding a seminar for societies and private individuals holding archival collections. During the day, we shall be hearing about the various collections, and have advice on best practice on storage, cataloguing, and making the material available for study. The venue will be The Barn, at Purley-on-Thames. Please watch the B.L.H.A. website, where details will be published when they are finalised.

In the meantime, please enjoy the H.o.R.S. visits to St. James's Catholic Church, and to the Mills Archive over the summer. I hope we shall all be back together in September for the talk on George Lovejoy, one of Reading's most fascinating Victorian characters.

David Cliffe

NEW ON THE COMMITTEE

As noted from the Chair, Caroline Piller has recently joined the committee. As a teacher in many Reading schools, she drew on local history across the town, to teach her pupils about their heritage. Day trips to Reading's historic sites and buildings were always a great hit with the children.

Arriving in Reading as a student in the 70s, Caroline was told she was "going back to her roots" but it was twelve years later when she discovered that her grandfather had been born in Coley in the 1850s. This led to several years of research, building her family tree.

For many years, she taught at Katesgrove Primary School and is proud to have been part of the initial working group who set up the Victorian School Room with Wynne Frankum. It was an exciting time, poring over catalogues of light fittings and discussing the painting of the room. With the Victorian classroom next to hers, Caroline's pupils were always on hand to help out with 'trial runs' or go on heritage walks around Katesgrove.

After retiring, Caroline joined the Museum of English Rural Life as a volunteer in the MERL Players. This amateur group performed the powerful and moving play about the Swing Riots, when threshing machines were introduced in Berkshire, ending with the hanging of William Winterbourne at Reading gaol. Every January the Players visit his grave in Kintbury to lead a memorial service.

Realising that there were so many wonderful pieces of art in Reading, Caroline devised a guided walk around the town centre, pointing out hidden or overlooked examples to captivated groups. While some pieces are modern, others are of a more historical importance. To complement the tours, Caroline also gives talks on "Statues and Sculptures of Reading Town Centre".

In September Caroline will be publishing her first book called "The Life and Times of Oliver Dixon: A Reading horseman remembered". A young Irish boy, demonstrating an exceptional talent with horses, was brought to Reading in the 1880s. He built a far reaching and prodigious reputation as a horseman, establishing a huge business empire on Mockbeggar Farm, which has long vanished. A generous, religious man, he also supported many Reading communities. Photographs and maps illustrate how the neighbourhood once looked while anecdotes reveal lost lifestyles of the period. Reading this man's story we learn about how social, economic and political events impacted on his life.

IN CASE YOU MISSED THEM

Reports of the first four talks given to the Society in 2019 follow, as recorded by our committee member for Publicity and Archives, Sean Duggan.

The subject of the January talk was the **Influence of Victorian Mourning in Reading Cemetery**. The speaker was Anna Ellis who as a mature student has completed a BA Honours degree in archaeology at the University of Reading.

On the 6th May 1843 the *Berkshire Chronicle* reported the first interment at the new Reading Cemetery. The burial was of Elizabeth Jacobs the daughter of Mr T. Jacobs of Eldon Terrace, Reading and the mourners were led by the Reverend William Legg of Broad Street Chapel; a considerable number of spectators had gathered to witness the event.

The Reading Cemetery Company was established by an Act of Parliament in 1842 to build and maintain a cemetery on the outskirts of the town; it would be funded by the sale of company shares and burial plots. It was based on the seven 'garden cemeteries' that were established on the outskirts of London and whose layouts were influenced by the writings of the landscape gardener and botanist John Claudius Loudon.

The purpose of these 'out-of-town' cemeteries was to move the dead from the immediate proximity of the living, this in response to the growing national campaign against the universal custom of burying the dead in churchyards. Reading's growing population and the increasing mortality rate, particularly from the most feared of Victorian killers, cholera, meant that the overcrowded burial grounds in the town's parish churches were now a hazard to public health.

The site of the new cemetery at Hatton's Platt in Earley was purchased from a Mr. Cholmeley. It is flanked by the London and Wokingham Roads and is surrounded by a high perimeter wall, built to prevent grave robbing; the site is bisected by a central avenue approached through the neo-classical gatehouse. The interred are segregated: the non-Conformists are buried opposite the gatehouse and the Conformists (Church of England) nearer to Palmer Park. Originally there were two chapels. The trees and shrubs were supplied by Suttons Seeds of Reading.

In 1861, after the death of her husband Prince Albert, Queen Victoria influenced a vogue, following a bereavement, for more flamboyant, ritualized forms of public behaviour at funerals and a more outward mourning etiquette.

The bereaved were often led into spending more than was either necessary or desirable for a funeral; to avoid the ignominy of a 'pauper's funeral' many families on low incomes would save money each week to pay for it. A typical funeral comprised the 'wake' a social gathering in the home of the deceased followed by a remembrance service at a church. The deceased would then be conveyed to the cemetery by a horse-drawn cortège the coffin bedecked in wreaths and the horses' heads adorned with plumes. A clergyman would preside at a short ceremony at the graveside before burial.

The burial plot could be marked by a simple metal or wooden cross; more expensive headstones with an inscription made of stone, marble or granite were popular. The wealthy would erect ornate monuments: statues on plinths, obelisks and broken columns were some of the designs available.

Immediately, a period of mourning would commence: this could last between a year and two years. The most restrictive etiquette applied to widows: the convention required them, at all times, to be attired entirely in black garments which were made of crepe, a dull silk; a veil should be worn to cover the face and any jewellery was made of jet. Widowers would usually wear a black arm band.

Today, there are 70,000 burials and 12,000 monuments at the cemetery. In 2002 it was Grade II listed by English Heritage, additionally, two monuments are Grade II listed: one is to Bernard Laurence Hieatt a world record holding motorcycle rider and pilot, and the other, a pair of cast-iron urns dedicated to the Barratt and Andrews families, once owners of a local iron foundry.

The subject of the February talk was a **History of Reading's Allotments**. The speaker was Evelyn Williams who has published an e-book on the subject and has cultivated a plot at the Waterloo Meadows Allotments in Reading for the past 10 years.

The origins of modern allotments can be traced back to medieval times when most of the poor rural population would grow much of their food on the 'common lands', however, from the 17th Century onwards, vast tracts of rural England would be transformed by the 'Enclosure Acts'. These Acts of Parliament created legal property rights that favoured rural land owners, mostly the Lords of the Manor: they established the field system of tenanted farms whose boundaries were defined by the dry-stone walls and hedge rows familiar today; consequently, the rural poor would be dispossessed of their land rights; many would migrate to work in the new industrial towns.

Many of those who were involved in providing allotments in the early-nineteenth century did so out of paternalistic motives. In the 1830s, the famous local author Mary

Russell Mitford in her story *Bere Regis*, about life in a fictionalized Reading, gave an account about "the power of allotments to rescue and redeem the drinking classes".

In the enclosure of Tilehurst in 1817, three plots of land were set aside at Kentwood and Workhouse Commons for agriculture to generate income for the purchase of fuel for the poor of the parish. Today, this land is used for allotments and has 100 plot holders; it is administered by Tilehurst Poor's Land Charity. Other early allotments were established at Whitley Wood Lane in 1858 and at Grove Road, Emmer Green in 1865.

The rapid expansion of Reading's population in the wake of the industrial revolution fomented local opinion and led to demands to secure green open spaces for public recreation: among them was a Mr. Wing who during a lecture he gave on the subject of Old Caversham in 1894 declaimed "All should unite to guard what all may share; the general good should be the general care". Eventually, the government of the day was forced to legislate; in 1908 the Small Holdings and Allotments Act became law: it stipulated that the provision of local authority allotments, where there was a demand, would be compulsory.

The criteria for an entitlement to a plot appeared in Reading's 1910 Allotment Rules where the definition for eligibility was: any person who was resident in the borough and belonged to the labouring classes.

In Reading, the 1908 Act began a process of land purchasing by the council; in that year, a land agent, Mr. L. H. Bailey, was appointed and the newly formed 'County Land Agents Association' convened its first meeting at the Great Western Hotel on 8th August.

Some land owners were not always willing to sell their land to the council; in 1909, when the council attempted to compulsorily purchase land from Sir Walter Palmer at Norcot Farm, he refused to sell and during the subsequent enquiry Sir Walter argued successfully that the land was the best on his farm and would not be suitable as allotments. In 1912, across the river at Caversham Park, the owner, Mr Crawshay, protested that the council's proposal to turn land on his estate into allotments, which was "in full view from his house, and its use for that purpose would be unsightly".

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the number of allotments in Britain had decreased from a peak of 1,300,000 in 1920 to fewer than 1 million; at this time the *Berkshire Chronicle* reported that the number of plot holders in Reading had increased to 4,262. In 1940, the Federated Horticultural & Allotment Association of Reading was formed: it was a grouping of allotment societies under the banner of the Ministry of Agriculture's 'Dig for Victory' campaign; its task was to reduce Britain's reliance on food imports. Huntley & Palmers Horticultural Association were among the founder members; today, the allotments at Culver Lane, Earley are a reminder of their contribution to the war effort.

Today, in Reading, there are 20 allotment sites with 1,160 plots which are managed by the borough council as well as private sites in Caversham and Tilehurst; a recent resurgence in their popularity means applicants may have to wait for up to 10 years for a plot to become vacant.

The subject of the March talk was **Defending Reading**. The speaker was Mike Cooper who is an author and public speaker on the subjects of local and military history.

In Anglo-Saxon England Reading was a strategically important border town between the kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex because of its situation at the heart of the Thames Valley at the confluence of the Kennet and Thames rivers and was on an important trade route between the south coast and the midlands.

In 870, this led the rampaging Danish army, commanded by Kings Bagsecg and Halfdan Ragnarsson, to occupy the town and use it as the vanguard for their invasion of Wessex: it was the last Anglo-Saxon kingdom not under Danish rule and its defenders, the West Saxons, were ruled by King Aethelred I.

In January 871, according to Bishop Asser in his *Life of King Alfred*, the Danes successfully repulsed the attack on Reading by Aethelred's army. The defending Danes had erected ramparts along the town's exposed western flank and the rivers served as a natural barrier against attacks from the south and east; there is conjectural evidence that a castle was erected.

During the English Civil Wars of the 1640s, fought between the Crown and Parliament, Reading was occupied by a royalist garrison commanded by Sir Arthur Aston. The town would be an important outpost for the defence of the Royal Court of King Charles I, now relocated to Oxford, against any attack by Parliamentary forces from London.

Sir Arthur had at his disposal a force comprised of 3,500 infantry, 400 cavalry and dragoons, and 50 artillerymen with 12 cannon. He employed the latest defensive tactics introduced from the Netherlands: a line of ramparts encircled the town and cannon were positioned on high ground to fire over them. In 1643, in the Siege of Reading, Aston's defenders were defeated by a Parliamentary army of 16,000 foot soldiers commanded by the Earl of Essex. The mound in the Forbury Gardens is a visible reminder of the siege.

In the Second World War, after the surrender of France to German forces in May 1940, Britain was now vulnerable to invasion and preparations were made for the defence of the country.

In June work began on a number of defensive lines designed to counter a German invasion; the most important of them was the GHQ Line (General Headquarters Line): this section traversed southern England between the Bristol Channel and the Thames Estuary.

To the south of Reading a network of small defensive fortifications known as 'pill-boxes' was built: these concrete structures were equipped with light armour such as anti-tank guns; the largest concentration was at Sulham.

From the late-1940s as relations between the West and the Soviet Union plunged toward the 'Cold War' a new Civil Defence Corps was formed. Its local headquarters at Whiteknights Park, Earley was known as the Region 6 War Room: it was built on two levels the lower one designed to survive a nuclear attack; in the aftermath of an attack on the UK the region around Reading would be administered from there.

Today, the possibility of a terrorist attack from within the UK is the main peril facing the authorities: in August 2018 a suspect device was discovered in the Oracle Shopping Centre Reading; although it was later revealed to be a hoax, it caused the partial shut-down of the town centre for several hours.

The subject of the April talk was **Industrial Reading: Pictures of Sixty Old Reading Firms in Sixty Minutes**. The speaker was David Cliffe, the Society's chairman. This took the place of the advertised talk on the suffragette movement in Berkshire.

Within living memory Reading was once home to a diverse range of manufacturing industries; by sourcing images from Reading Central Library's local illustrations catalogue David showed a choice selection.

One of the town's oldest industries was the production of food; many businesses in this sector once thrived in Reading. The biscuit manufacturer Huntley & Palmers is well remembered, however, it had a local rival in H.O. Serpell at South Street which produced ships' biscuits. Originally from Plymouth the company, following a fire at its factory there, was in search of larger premises and it relocated to Reading in the early-1900s. Fate would revisit the company when a devastating fire struck in 1904; the company soldiered on until 1959 when it went into liquidation.

Reading's waterways were, until recently, an important resource to the town's economy as an important inland port; they were once lined with wharves, mills and factories: among their number was the Talbot family of barge builders and timber merchants who were near to Caversham Bridge. The founder of the business, Richard Talbot, was born at Pangbourne in 1777 and by the 1850s the firm employed 30 men and 9 boys; later, they diversified into trading coal.

The industrial revolution created in its wake a considerable demand for building materials; with no local stone available to builders it had to be brick and a thriving brick-making industry emerged at Reading. The young, local clays available in the Thames Valley produced the attractive red bricks familiar today; among the brick-makers the most notable was S & E Collier. Established at Coley in the mid-nineteenth century, later, they relocated to a site at Grovelands Road until it closed in 1966. Today, the only reminder of the business is the firm's brick-built war memorial to employees at nearby Water Road.

Finally, a company that was a pillar of the town's economy for 170 years was Suttons Seeds; the company's story began at King Street, Reading in 1806. The founder, John Sutton, started as a corn merchant, then, in 1832, he was joined by his sons, Alfred and Martin Hope; it was they who diversified the business into selling flower and vegetable seeds by mail-order, utilising the new rail and postal services. At the turn of the twentieth-century the company occupied a sprawling site behind Market Place, as well as its seed trial grounds at a site off London Road, Earley. Today its entire operation is at Torquay, Devon.

BORN IN READING –from the Newsletter, Autumn 2002

It is quite unusual (perhaps fortunately, readers might feel) for politicians to reach the age of 100, but one who did was born in Reading on the 12th day of February 1898. He died two days after meriting his telegram in 1998. He was Edgar Louis Granville who was Liberal MP for Eye in Suffolk from 1929 to 1951.

Granville spent part of his childhood in Australia and enlisted in the Australian Light Horse at the outbreak of the Great War, serving at Gallipoli and in Egypt and France. Thereafter he settled back in his native country, becoming a director of businesses involved in pharmaceuticals and rearmaments. His victory in the 1929 election came against the trend of public opinion towards the Conservatives on the one side and the Labour party on the other. Nevertheless, he continued to hold onto his seat against the odds. Part of his success was due to his employing two secretaries to write letters to all those getting married in the constituency, offering them the Member's best wishes.

After 1931, Granville supported the National Government but unlike the National Liberals who became increasingly absorbed into the Conservatives, he sat as a Liberal National and after the war became more sympathetic to the new Labour government. Finally defeated in the 1951 election, which returned Churchill to power, Granville joined Labour in 1952 and twice unsuccessfully contested his old seat for his new party, losing by 889 votes in 1955 and by 2,484 in the Macmillan landslide year of 1959. His personal vote must have been significant, for in 1964 when the electorate at large swung towards Labour, his successor as candidate for Eye failed by 5,426 votes!

Granville was made a life peer by the new Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, in 1967 but after some years deserted the Labour benches to become a cross-bencher, that is an independent peer of no fixed political persuasion.

Another mini-biography of Granville appeared in the ***Reading Book of Days****, penned by Vicki Chesterman.*

MEMBERS ARE REMINDED THAT ARTTICLES INCLUDING REP0RTS OF ANY HISTORICAL RESEARCH THEY ARE UNDERTAKING RELEVANT TO READING AND ITS ENVIRONS WILL BE WELCOMED BY THE EDITOR. IT IS YOUR SOCIETY AND YOUR NEWSLETTER!