

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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THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

We seem to be living through extraordinary times. As I write this, my chair is once again in the bay window at the front of my house. Every quarter of an hour or so, a bus goes by, empty except for the driver. Is this the end of an era? Or the beginning of a new and better one? It's been disappointing to have to delay so many arrangements and projects, even when it's obvious that this was necessary.

I'd like to thank all the speakers who have agreed to come and talk to us. If we cannot meet on the agreed date, we'll try to re-book them when circumstances allow.

As you'll know, our AGM couldn't take place in March. Fortunately, all of the committee members are willing to serve for another year, and there do not seem to be any urgent motions requiring a decision.

Earlier in the year, it was sad that we were no longer able to offer secure free parking under Davidson house, on the other side of Abbey Square, for our meetings in the Baptist church.

Later, committee members learned of the retirement of the caretaker at the church, Steve Hodge, at the end of March. We got together via e-mail, and decided that we'd like to present Steve with a gift, on behalf of the Society, at our AGM – but that was not to be. As I expect all members have realised, Steve was always helpful, especially when it came to making special arrangements for delivering and collecting things, and setting out extra tables, as happened at our second-hand book sales. I have had personal experience of other church halls where the caretaker wouldn't have been half as helpful or as friendly. So, Steve, if you chance to read this, we wish you a long and happy retirement, and will deliver on our intention of making a presentation when the situation permits.

In the interim, I'm trying to make the best of the situation, trying to put the time when I would have been at meetings, concerts, plays, restaurants, and generally socialising to good use. The book about Reading pubs and breweries, to be published by the Society, is now ready for the printer. Decisions will have to be made on whether we wish to get a commercial publisher to publish it, or we publish it ourselves. If the latter, we will need to come to agreements with a printer and booksellers, to ensure that we are

likely to get our money back, with a bit on top. But printers and booksellers don't seem to be active at present.

For myself, I've been working on getting a book about the town where I was born ready for the printer. My first experience of self-publishing has been good – only last month, over a year after the launch, I had to order a further hundred copies – which will now have to sit around for a bit. Much of this new book was written over thirty years ago, and I have been surprised by the number of changes that I've found to be necessary. During those thirty years, the face of the town has changed so much, and in my books, I like to tell readers where things were on the ground, and what's on the site now. Thank goodness for Google Street View! And then I've learned so much in the interim, and feel the need to correct mistakes and misunderstandings, and add new relevant facts. Also, I find that my style of writing has changed over the years – I'm a bit more cautious than I was. It is an interesting exercise that will take several months at this rate.

I hope that all our members are feeling well, and finding interesting things to do during the restrictions. The HoRS committee members are in regular e-mail contact, and we thought it was time for another newsletter to assure members that they haven't been forgotten. When it's safe to do so, our programme of talks and visits will resume. We'll send out another newsletter, or an e-mail message to let you know when things can get going again – and we'll make a point of contacting members who don't use e-mail. In the meantime, let's all try to stay sensible and safe, and look forward to things returning to normal, when we can talk face-to-face once again.

David Cliffe

What the Reading Mercury tells us about Reading in 1820.

I wanted to get an idea of what was happening in Reading 200 years ago and chose to look at two editions of the Reading Mercury: 10th January and 18th September. Each had 4 pages, the first consisting of reports from abroad and classified adverts, and the others a mix of crime, politics, property sales, events and more adverts. Reading's population in 1820 was increasing in size: between the 1801 and the 1831 census it nearly doubled in size, from 9,742 to 1,6048 inhabitants.

Firstly from the education angle Reading was awash with small schools, all privately owned at that time. In the January edition in particular the proprietors of schools were appealing to parents to send their children back to school. Schools were available for both boys or girls, with few details of the curriculum. Taking just two as examples, at the **Seminary for Young Ladies** in Watlington House "Mesdams Thorowood and Stevens" were simply inviting pupils to return, whereas the **Classical, Mathematical and Commercial Academy** in Castle St was promising to teach boys, "with the requisite attention to the health and manners", a range of subjects including "Latin, Greek and French Languages (supplementary fees) Mathematics, Merchants Accounts, Geography, Astronomy, History, Elocution and Composition". Natural Philosophy and Science in general, also on the curriculum, were delivered with the use of "extensive apparatus". All this was available for 22 guineas a term.

As we would expect of Reading, construction projects were underway. Many houses were being built in the early years of the 19th century, in London St, Oxford Rd, Southampton Place, and others were in the planning/ building stage, in Queens Rd, Portland Place, Albion Place. The September edition offers bids for a 99 year lease in The Forbury, to build "11 elegant dwellings" each with its own garden, coach house and stable, and on application to Messrs Billing, architects, details of building land would be given at the spot known as Little Orts, in much the same area as Orts Rd today.

Shopping in Reading was a great attraction. Adverts invite us to visit **John Holgate** or **Mr Mace**, both gunsmiths, in Broad St, attend the Lower Ship Inn for a sale of house contents in Church St, or to order various medicines or books which were usually picked up at

Cowslade's the Publishers in the Market Place (19th century click and collect) The newspaper also records the range and price of commodities in London: interestingly most butter came from Ireland, Cork, Limerick, Dublin or Belfast were listed, but there was a market also for butter from Holland. Priced in hundredweight it varied from £80 to £96 (the Dutch butter). Other commodities included potatoes (£3-4 a ton) coal candles, metals, hops, hay and straw, cod, whale and seal oil, rape and linseed oil, £30 – 50 a tun⁹ sic).

T. Bunce, Grocer & Tea Dealer sold 15 different teas ranging from 5/6 to 12/- a pound, or prime bacon 10d per pound. This shop was to be found in Broad St,"7 doors from the Woolpack Inn". On the corner of King St and High St **Armstrong & Williams** offered the "largest assortment of linen, drapery, hosiery and haberdashery goods" and even better "at such prices as have never yet been offered before in Reading". Meanwhile at **Maggs**, the wholesale and retail warehouse at the top of Fisher Row, you could buy "cheap linen and woollen drapery".

The people of Reading also had entertainment to look forward to. In the September edition Mr Barnett was offering a performance by the Royal Berks Militia in his theatre on Monday 23rd September. Tickets could be bought from Mr Sweetman the fishmonger in St Mary's Butts. Three winter balls were announced for November, December and January, with the books for subscribers to sign held at Cowslade's. The mayor of Reading had the honour of announcing a Subscription Concert.

However probably the most stunning of all the entertainments on offer came from H. Morgan who "begged leave to announce" to the people of Reading the arrival of "his immense menagerie" during the Michaelmas Fair at the end of September.

His menagerie included:

"three living crocodiles, three beautiful living serpents, 5 noble lions, a pair of performing hunting tigers, a pair of polars from the frozen region, a most beautiful zebra, the nilghau horned horse, the jackall, a civet, the maucauco ... a great variety of apes and monkeys".

All of this for 1/- admittance. If only we had a review of the show.

Joy Pibworth

IN CASE YOU MISSED THEM

Reports of some of the talks given to the Society towards the end of 2020 follow, as recorded by our committee member for Publicity and Archives, Sean Duggan.

The subject of the October talk was **Quakers in Reading**. The speaker was Naomi Iloff. Naomi was educated at a Quaker school and is a member of the Reading Meeting.

Quakerism is the common name for the Religious Society of Friends that was established in England by George Fox in the 1640s. He was born in 1621, the son of a family of Leicestershire weavers. Fox had become dissatisfied with the doctrine of the established Church because he believed its structures of priests, buildings and formal services placed an obstacle between Christians and their faith.

The services at Quaker meetings are held in communal silence, but this does not mean that nothing is happening: it is an opportunity for mutual spiritual contemplation and an expectation at any time that someone may stand up and speak on any subject they choose.

In 1655, Quakerism became firmly established in Reading when George Fox preached to a large crowd in George Lamboll's orchard. Among their number was Captain George Curtis, a soldier in Oliver Cromwell's parliamentary army; around this time, he had been hosting meetings at his home in Sun Lane behind Broad Street.

In 1671, Curtis established the first proper meeting house at nearby Back Lane; the town's Quakers would hold their meetings there until 1680. In that year a schism occurred within the Reading Meeting: it is believed that the cause was a divergence of opinion on whether the men's meetings should be separate from the women's. Consequently, some

of the members left Sun Lane and continued to meet in a room at Sims Court off London Street.

It was at Sims Court that William Penn, who founded the English colony of Pennsylvania in North America, attended meetings while living at Ruscombe near Twyford after he was forced to return to England when declared bankrupt. Penn was a close friend of George Fox and a campaigner for religious tolerance.

Like many non-conformist Christians at this time, the Quakers suffered much persecution by the State: in 1664, a zealous local magistrate, Sir William Armorer, incarcerated all the adult members of the Reading Meeting in the town's bridewell then at the former Grey Friars' monastery in Friar Street; their children were left to fend for themselves.

In 1712, George Curtis died. The rival meetings had by now reconciled their differences and in 1715 they had acquired land off Church Street in Reading upon which to erect a meeting house with additional space for burials.



Reading's Quaker Graveyard. It was formerly the custom among Quakers for months to be referred to by their number rather than the largely pagan names by which we know them. Thus, Walter Horton Bentley was born on the 1st of May 1876 and died on 12th February 1968.

The present meeting house at Church Street was erected in 1835 to an austere, neo-Classical design, behind it is the burial ground where many eminent Reading citizens are interred; their graves are marked by headstones of an identical, simple design. Among their number is Joseph Huntley: his shop in London Street, which sold biscuits to passing travellers, would burgeon into the famous Huntley & Palmers biscuit empire.

The Reading Quakers were enthusiastic advocates of universal education and in 1890 established, opposite Whiteknights Park, Leighton Park School; in addition, they supported the provision of adult education schools in Reading and Caversham.

In recent times the local peace-campaigner and Quaker Phoebe Cusden established in 1947 the first town-twinning in the UK with a city in Germany: its purpose, initially, to help people in Düsseldorf who were homeless and hungry after the war.



Members of Reading Quakers dressed in traditional costume during the 2019 Heritage Days.

The subject of the December talk was **What Did Newcomers Do for Reading?** The speaker was Joan Dils, the Society's president.

In December 2019 the *Reading Chronicle* reported that 'nearly one third of people living in Reading were born outside the UK'. The town's location and its ability to attract migrants over the last millennium has helped to cement its position as a major commercial and transport hub for southern England.

The first mention of Reading is in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the date 871; it was then in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex. Its first inhabitants were the descendants of settlers from

northern Europe who arrived in the wake of the Roman withdrawal from Britain in the fifth century.

In 1121, Reading's status and demographics were profoundly altered with the foundation of the Benedictine Abbey by King Henry I. The first monks came from Cluny in France and Lewes in Sussex. From the beginning the abbey was the town's largest employer: during the forty years it took to build many of the craftsmen and labourers employed came from outside the town and made it their home.

Soon after its foundation, the abbey established an alternative 'new market' opposite St. Laurence's Church in direct competition with the existing one at St. Mary's Butts. Merchants from across Berkshire came to settle in the town so that they could ply their wares there with the pilgrims who came to venerate the abbey's holy relics.

In the medieval period, the origins of many of the migrants who settled in Reading could be discerned from the 'locative' surnames then in use: Andrew of Burghfield and Henry of Greenham are some examples.

By the fifteenth-century, Reading had become an important centre for the manufacture of cloth; this had attracted immigrants from the Low Countries. From the 1440s, these immigrant workers were taxed by the Crown; the tax known as the 'Aliens Subsidy' would last until the early-1500s.

The next significant wave of migration to Reading would occur in the nineteenth century. In the 1840s, immigrants would arrive from Ireland fleeing the ravages of the potato famine; many would find employment constructing the Great Western Railway. Before the arrival of the railway Reading was the principal market place for its agricultural hinterland; by the end of the century it had become an important manufacturing centre: beer, biscuits and seeds its principal products.

These new industries would need a large workforce: many would come from across southern England; they were mostly displaced agricultural labourers made redundant because of the mechanization of farming.

Some of the founders of these new businesses were themselves migrants: Joseph Huntley (Huntley & Palmers Biscuits) came from Burford, Oxfordshire and John Sutton (Suttons Seeds) came from London.

In the second half of the twentieth century following the Second World War immigration would come principally from Britain's colonies. The newly created National Health Service finding it had a severe labour shortage led the government to launch a recruitment drive in Britain's Caribbean colonies; many of them would come to work for the Battle and the Royal Berkshire Hospitals and settle permanently in Reading.

In this century, their numbers would be augmented by immigrants from the European Union who have come to work in the town's booming services sector.

THE LOST EMPIRE OF EARLEY

On 14 April we were due to have committee member, Caroline Piller, speaking on the subject matter of her new book. Although we have had to postpone this pleasure we are pleased to let readers know that the book is now published and will be available to purchase in a few weeks' time.



CAROLINE PILLER

The Life and Times of Oliver Dixon

A Reading Horseman Remembered

In the 1880s a young Irish boy, showing an exceptional talent with horses, was brought over to Reading. He left behind his family at a time of great agricultural hardship to learn a trade and make something of himself. His determination to succeed secured himself a far reaching reputation, with clients coming from across the social spectrum including aristocracy and royalty. Oliver Dixon was a generous, religious man who supported many communities in Reading. But he also ensured that his family back in Co Mayo were well provided for. His business empire at Mockbeggar Farm, has now vanished: all that remains are a field, a gate post and a bus stop. In this book, Oliver's life (1869 – 1939) and his business premises are vividly brought to life. Photographs and maps illustrate how a neighbourhood once looked, while anecdotes reveal forgotten lifestyles across Reading and Ireland. This fascinating biography is enriched with historical facts on the social, economic and political events of the time.

ALFRED CALLAS AND THE FIRM CALLAS SONS AND MAY

Do you remember the Reading plumbing and heating business called Callas Sons and May? The origins of the business were in the late 1860s with Reading-born Alfred Callas, son of a bell hanger.

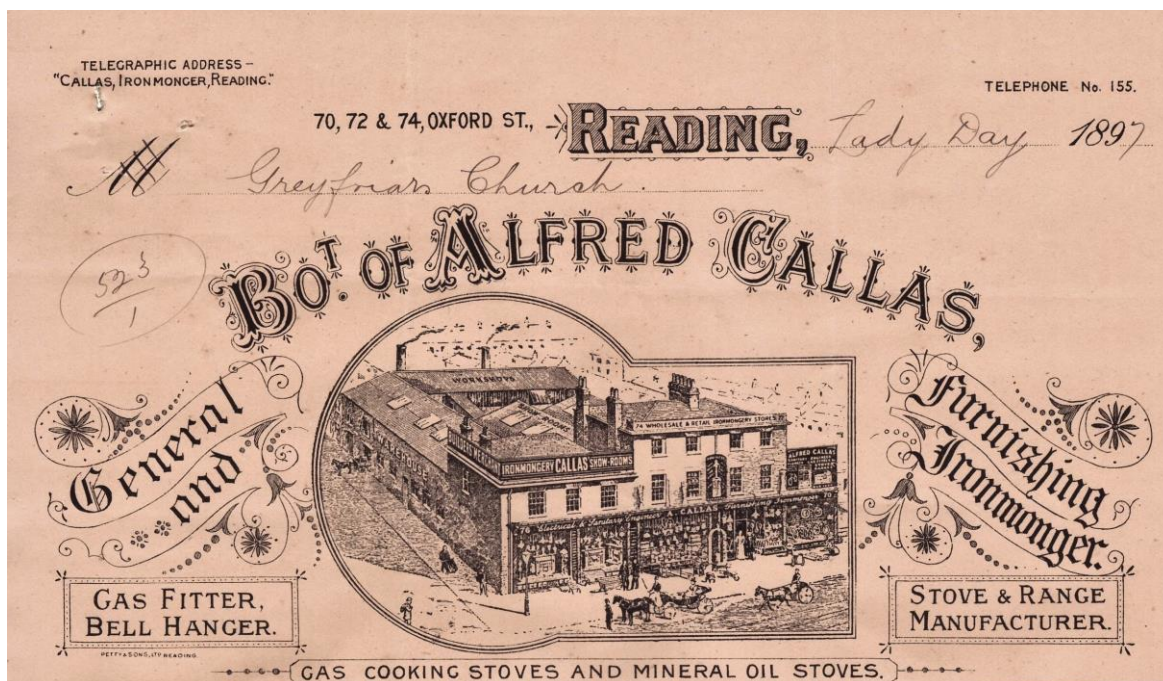
Alfred Callas was born in 1846 and lived at 68 Bedford Street until his marriage to Eunice Carter on 20 February 1868. He initially followed in his father's footsteps as a bell hanger. One of his early jobs entailed fitting a pull in each of the cells at the Bridewell, the prison in the old friary building, later converted back to a church and named Greyfriars, so that inmates could call the Keeper, John Readings, if they were taken ill in the night.

Callas branched out into general ironmongery, and by 1871 he was installed at his own premises at 34a Oxford Road, employing 2 men and 3 boys. The 1870s were definitely about growth for the Callas family. Between 1870 and 1881 Eunice gave birth to 9 children, of whom two died in infancy. Meanwhile the Ironmonger's business outgrew their first premises and moved to 72 and 74 Oxford Street, shown in the first picture below.



As well as being an ironmonger and bell hanger, Alfred now provided a wide range of other services, including being a gas fitter, stove and range manufacturer, well borer and pump installer.

His business flourished in this period of great growth in Reading, and he added the houses on either side to his store: number 70 in the early 1890s and 76 a few years later. He also created a wood yard behind. The expanded premises are shown below, from an invoice in 1897.

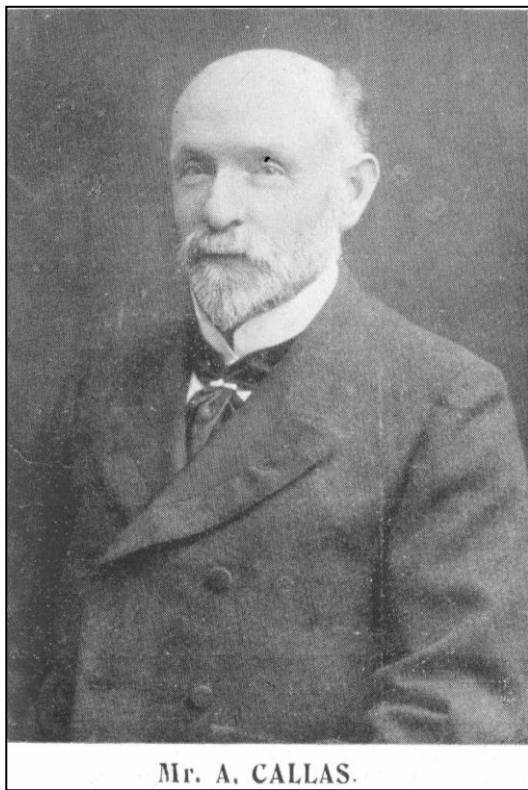


On 17 May 1899 Alfred joined with two of his sons, Henry William aged 30 years and George Frederick 26, and long-time manager of the business Thomas May, to form Callas Sons and May Ltd.

In a description written in 1915 the business premises and its uses were described:

The accommodation includes a large dry basement, ground floor, on which are the offices, builders ironmongers' department, and also furnishing ironmongery. The first floor is occupied by furnishing ironmongery stock and gas showrooms, electric light fittings, etc. On the second floor is the architects and builders department, which contains a large selection of stoves, chimney-pieces, ranges, baths, and lavatories, etc. The windows display carpenters' tools and garden requisites, electro-plate and household goods; also brass curbs and fancy goods. In the builders' window are shown the gold medal Eagle range and Callas' Wantage fire, over 200 of which fires have been fixed in the hostels of University College... Immediately at the rear of the shop are the packing rooms, warehouses, garage, workshops, iron store, etc... There are now 85 employees, many of them of 20 and 30 years' service. The business is a private limited company, the directors being Mr. Alfred Callas, Mr. Thomas May, Mr. H. W. Callas and Mr. A. J. May.

George Frederick Callas had died in 1906 and so had been replaced as director by Thomas May's son Arthur.



This photograph of Alfred Callas dates from 1903, by which time he was 57 years old. In addition to his business life, he found time to be churchwarden of the newly restored Greyfriars Church from 1881 to 1915. He remains the longest serving Greyfriars' churchwarden, his 34 years easily surpassing all others.

As part of his involvement with the church, he used his expertise to install brass gas lighting pendants throughout the church in 1866 which, although converted to electricity in 1930, were still in place until 2017. In 1902 he replaced the entire heating system of the church which had been installed at the restoration in 1863.

Alfred and Eunice lived in several houses in west Reading, in Brunswick Hill and Western Elms Avenue, finally finding the right place in about 1905 in "Lexden", 60 Bath Road, at one time the home of Arthur Warwick Sutton of Sutton & Sons Ltd (as it then was). Eunice Callas died, aged 78, in November 1926 and Alfred survived her until 5 April 1934. He left a considerable fortune of almost £39,000 which equates to something like £2 million in today's money.

The company Callas Sons and May moved from Reading to Bicester in 1990. It was dissolved in May 2014.

Malcolm Summers

Stop press. Mr John Mullaney has informed us that because of the current situation he has decided to postpone publication of my book, *A Tale of Two Towns*. We look forward to seeing the book, dealing with the demise of Calleva (Silchester), and the emergence of Reading in due course.

SWINGING READING Part 2

Six months ago we left off this account with a by-election in 1898, since when of course another election has been added to Reading's political history. Having received no protests from readers, I can now continue this account into the 20th century.

1900 saw what became known as the Khaki election, held during the South African (or Boer) War, which divided the nation between hawks and doves, represented politically by the Conservatives and Liberals. The election saw the incumbent Tories nationally losing a few seats to the Liberals but holding onto power with another large (130-seat) majority. In Reading, therefore, G. W. Palmer held the seat he had won at the by-election but with a reduced majority (239) on a slightly lower turnout – down from nearly 92% to 88%.

In 1904, however, Palmer resigned because he was becoming severely afflicted with deafness and his successor was one of Reading's most distinguished and controversial representatives, Rufus Isaacs QC. Although the national mood was beginning to change by this time, the result was almost identical to that of four years ago, as Isaacs achieved a majority of 230 over Charles Edward Keyser, who seems at this point to have retired from the political fray after three consecutive defeats. Unlike his predecessor, Isaacs had no family connections with Reading but he went on to be re-elected with a majority of nearly 700 in the Liberal landslide of 1906, retaining his seat in both the 1910 elections, although with his majority going down to just over 200 in January and to 99 in December. In between there was another by-election, following Isaacs' appointment as Solicitor-General, in which he was returned unopposed. Later in the year he became Attorney-General and then in 1913 Lord Chief Justice, resulting in his elevation to the peerage – and yet another by-election! Lord Reading as he became continued on his distinguished career, serving as Ambassador to the USA, Viceroy of India and briefly as Foreign Secretary in the 1931 National Government, before his death in 1935, aged 75.

The 1910 elections showed the tide turning against the Liberals who were now dependent on the Irish Nationalists to continue in power. It perhaps came as no surprise, therefore, that in the 1913 by-election Leslie Orme Wilson, defeated in December 1910, romped home for the Tories with just over half the vote and a majority of 1,131, helped by the intervention of a 'British Socialist' candidate. In the normal course of things a General Election should have taken place at the end of 1915 but the war got in the way of that and so it was December 1918 before we had the 'Hang the Kaiser' election. It was also remarkable in that the wartime coalition sought re-election, candidates of whatever party endorsed by the government receiving a letter to that effect from Lloyd George popularly known as the 'coupon'. It was also the first election in which all adult males and women over the age of 30 had a limited suffrage. As a result the turnout in Reading increased from 10,000 to 28,000. Nationally while the Liberal, Lloyd George, remained Prime Minister, the Conservatives won a large majority of the seats and so held on to their seat in 'Swinging Reading'. Wilson was returned with 15,204 votes (53.9% of the total), helped by a three-way split in the opposition between Labour, in second place, Liberal and the well-known trade unionist, Lorenzo Quelch, standing as a National Socialist. This was a Marxist splinter-group and nothing to do with Adolf Hitler's subsequent abomination. The Liberal decline continued in the 1922 election, when, following the national trend, a new Conservative candidate, Edward Cadogan, with 16,000 votes gained a majority of 1,760 votes over the Labour candidate. Then came the 1923 election which saw the election of Reading's first Labour MP, Dr Somerville Hastings with 16,657 votes and a 1,542 majority over Cadogan. Here again Reading was swinging with the tide, if that is not a mixed metaphor, for Hastings' election contributed to the formation of the first minority Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald and (as the saying is) the world was never quite the same again.

(To be continued)

John Dearing

MEMBERS ARE REMINDED THAT ARTICLES INCLUDING REPORTS 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!

Advertisement Feature

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Written and published by Paul Lacey



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Finally, here is a WordSearch to keep you amused, we hope, in these strange times:

People of Reading

n w t d e b f d o k q j j n l g r e m e r s g y
y w h h e g x w s j o d o d l k u u a c l t b i
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William Blackall Simonds

Oscar Wilde

John Kendrick

Charles Dickens

Jane Austen

William Cadogan

Henry of Essex

John Newbery

Rufus Isaacs

Martin Hope Sutton

Hugh Cook Faringdon

Henry Addington

Mary Russell Mitford

Daniel Blagrove

William Laud

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George Palmer

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