

# 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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**Summer 2020**

**No 53**

## **THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR**

It seems vaguely incredible that it is now more than three months since I had to put this particular thinking-cap on. John Dearing, our editor, and the other committee members have decided that the time has come for another edition. The last time I wrote, it was obvious that the March, April and May talks could not happen, and nor could the visits in June and July.

Since then, your committee was saddened to hear of the unexpected death of Penny Starr, the wife of our former long-serving treasurer. On the few occasions I met her, she was delightful, and I am sure she must have been a tower of strength to John. I believe she used to help him on the welcome desk, as members came into our meetings. So, our thoughts and best wishes go out to John at this time of loss.

I'm sorry to have had to start off in this gloomy way. Of course, time does not stand still for any of us. In some directions, there's not a lot going on, and in others there is. We cannot go to the library or the record office. The 'mystery buyer' of Reading Gaol is still mysterious. We know that the Borough Council was unsuccessful in its bid to turn the building, in partnership with others, into an arts venue, but that is about all. We may well have followed the story in the *Chronicle*, and read what Matt Rodda, M.P. has written on the subject. And we may also have read about the changes at Chestnut Walk, new cycle lanes, one-way systems for pedestrians in narrow streets, and noticed still more planning applications for apartment blocks in the town centre. I have invested in some facemasks and hand sanitiser, with the intention of walking into the town centre just to have a look at it, some time this week.

But there are some things I have been able to do. Since the restrictions, I have completed a book I've been working on for some years and sent it off to the printer. I am expecting the proofs any day now. The next book is well on the way. These are about different aspects of the history of Macclesfield, the town where I grew up. Maybe by next week I shall get round to working on my next book about Reading. I have plenty of scanned and photographed material here at home to enable me to get halfway there with it, but the rest will have to wait until I can get to the library again.

Another way in which I have amused myself is by looking at eBay. Some items you must bid for, and others have a set price. Sometimes the seller has not realised the value of an item, and if you are lucky, other people haven't either, so you can find bargains. Usually there is nothing that takes my attention, but now and then I make a bid. Recently, there was a postcard showing the interior of a chapel in Macclesfield. I had never seen any representation of the interior of this chapel and didn't even know that it had been photographed. It cost me something like £2.50 including postage. A fortnight ago there was an inventory and valuation of the contents of an inn, dating from 1830, which cost considerably more. Last week there was a postcard showing an early garage, about 1910. I was intrigued because I did not know it had existed, or where it had been. So, I acquired the card, scanned it and sent it off to the local paper. The paper came out yesterday morning, and by yesterday evening I had had five replies – four of them agreeing on the location. And there are many more items from Reading on eBay than there are about Macclesfield, so if you are a local history collector, it's worth a look now and then.

So, to some extent I can still "do" local history from home. I haven't (yet) invested in Zoom or Skype but am in e-mail contact with local historians and local history societies – including the committee members of the HoRS. Good things still happen. I hope that all our members feel they are able, despite the restrictions, to get on with things – maybe things they have been intending to do for years. Our society will bounce back when it is safe to do so, and on behalf of myself and the rest of the committee, I should like to send our best wishes to all members.

David Cliffe

**[Ed: The Editor would like to add his own tribute to Penny, especially for all the hard work she put into the **Reading Book of Days**, both in her own contributions and also helping with the final editing process.]**

## **IN CASE YOU MISSED THEM**

*Reports of two talks given to the Society at the start of 2020 immediately before the lockdown.*

The subject of the January talk was **A Trip Along The IDR**. The speaker was Graham Turner. Graham was born and raised in Coley and runs the Coley Local History Facebook page.

Graham is now the custodian of a collection of colour photographic slides made by the late Doug Noyes: they chronicle the construction of the Reading IDR or Inner Distribution Road.

The archive has views of the streets and buildings along the entire future route of the ring road where so many of them were scheduled for demolition. The images were accompanied by an audio recording of Doug's personal commentary where he referred to the features of interest such as the names of shops and their trades.

The route of the first stage of the IDR would run between Caversham Road and Mill Lane. Construction began in 1969 but due to financial and planning problems it was not completed with the Southampton Street flyover until 1989.

Graham's family was itself displaced by the first phase of the road's construction: he lived with his parents in a terrace house at Bright Street in Coley where, he said, 'even in 1969 many of the houses had no electricity and street lighting was provided by gas lamps'. The Turner family were the last residents to leave.

Coley was the neighbourhood most altered by the arrival of the road. Many streets and their familiar names would disappear forever: Bright, Flint and Henrietta Streets among them. Many businesses would either move or close: especially missed were the local pubs like the Borough Arms at Brook Street and the Rose and Crown at Coley Street. Many of the displaced residents would relocate to elsewhere in Reading.

In 1973, the part of the route that most incensed public opinion was the proposed link between Southampton Street and Forbury Road: one section would encroach into the

Forbury Gardens, the town centre's principal open space. The plan was to sink the road in a trench and drive it straight through the western half of the gardens. In addition, the Forbury Lion War Memorial would have to be relocated to the new pedestrian bridge that would cross it. A small pressure group 'The Hands off the Forbury' successfully campaigned to prevent the road being built there.

To enable road widening some notable river crossings would go: the ornate Victorian lattice iron-work bridges along the river Kennet at Forbury Road and Watlington Street would be rebuilt.

In 1988, during the construction of the final stage of the IDR at Forbury Road opposite the prison, a length of wall erected in the 19th century had to be removed to enable the road to be widened. During excavations it was discovered that some of the material used in its construction may date from the medieval period, also, its course followed that of the northern perimeter wall of the former Reading Abbey, originally known as the Plummary Wall. It was therefore decided that the new wall of the central reservation of the dual carriageway would follow its old course with the earlier wall preserved beneath it.

Recently, proposed 'improvements' to the road have included making the entire IDR one-way to improve traffic flow, and, decking-over the section between Castle Street and Oxford Road to create a public space.

The subject of the February talk was **Old Redlands Estate or Shackel's Fields**. The speaker was Keith Jerrome. Keith is an enthusiastic local historian and he is currently doing research into the people buried in paupers' plots at Old Reading Cemetery.

The Reading suburb known as 'Redlands' acquired its name from the 'Red Lane' the rough dirt track that ran from the London Road towards Shinfield.

The Redlands Estate is located south-east of Reading town centre: it occupies a roughly square site that spreads south from London Road. The landscape gently cascades downhill from the ridge at Shinfield Road northwards towards the River Kennet; it is predominantly urban in character and the principal green space is the playing field at Reading School.

One of the earliest indications of human settlement was the discovery in the nineteenth century of a Roman burial ground at Cemetery Junction; close-by were found fragments of Romano-British pottery.

In the twelfth century, at the time of the foundation of Reading Abbey, leprosy was a widespread pestilence in England. Within the precincts of the abbey a hospital to treat the sick was established, although later Abbot William would remove it to a 200-acre field in Redlands that became known as the Spittal Fields.

For 400 years Reading Abbey was the largest local landowner but after the dissolution of the abbey in 1536 its lands passed to the ownership of the Crown. Subsequently, it sold most of the land in Reading, including the leper hospital site at Redlands, to William Gray; he was the local MP and an adviser to Thomas Cromwell, the chief minister to King Henry VIII. Through marriage, on Gray's death the lands were inherited by the Blagrove family of Reading, who later sold it to Sir Francis Knollys of Rotherfield Greys.

For the next 300 years Redlands would remain rural in character, however, the relentless spread of the estate system of tenanted farms and enclosed fields would diminish significantly the amount of 'common land' available to local people on which they could grow their food and graze animals.

The area's principal tenanted farm was Red Lane Farm, now the site of the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Its last tenant farmer was George Shackel whose forbears had farmed it since the eighteenth-century: in his day the substantial farmhouse had ornamental lawns and a large pond; known as 'Shackel's Fields' the farm extended to 100-acres. In 1865, his landlord, Lord Sidmouth, ordered him to quit the farm.

During the nineteenth-century the Redlands we know today began to evolve. The largest local landowner was Henry Addington, Lord Sidmouth. In 1840, it was he who donated the land opposite London Road on which the Royal Berkshire Hospital would be built. By the 1860s he was selling plots of land in the vicinity for house building; over the next 40 years a socially mixed community of small terrace houses and detached villas would define the area's character.

In 1870, Reading School moved from its ancient home opposite St. Laurence's Church to the site at Erleigh Road where it is today: the new school buildings were designed by the eminent Victorian architect Alfred Waterhouse and the foundation stone was laid by HRH the Prince of Wales.

In the 1880s, with the rapid increase in population, Redlands became a separate parish from St. Giles Reading with a new church dedicated to St. Luke; it was designed by Piers St. Aubyn of London.

Today, Redlands is a popular place to live with higher than average property prices for Reading. The post-war expansion of Reading University has led to the establishment of a large student population. In 1990, the Redlands Local History Group published the first comprehensive history of the area.

Sean Duggan

[**Ed:** *The 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Sidmouth died in 1844 and the one who gave George Shackel notice to quit seems to have been his grandson, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount.*]

## **CAVERSHAM GROVE**

Today it is a Grade II Listed building, part of a secondary school in Emmer Green, north of Reading, but it started life as a farmhouse, generally known as Caversham Grove. Specific dating of the original building is not possible: one account describes it as a brick building dating from around 1720 although it first appeared on maps as early as 1761. It was built as a small farmhouse and stood in 33 acres of arable farmland. A tythe barn already existed on the site, erected possibly as early as 1600. The barn stands near to both the house and the kitchen garden. Some of its bricks make up a rough design of a sheaf of corn. In its earliest form, with its walls 3 feet thick and sturdy floors of oak, the house had two storeys but no attic; a farmer would not have had any servants. There was also a dairy and a good-sized stable block which is Grade II listed as are the kitchen garden walls and the building currently used as a music block.



**Barn at Caversham Grove**



**Caversham Grove c. 1867 from lithograph by C Moody. Sheep are grazing under the trees and a pair of horses can also be seen.**

Historic England gives the following description:

*The main (older) part: 2 storeys and attic over segmental-headed windows. Red brick with stucco string at 1st floor level, flanking brick piers with rusticated bands. Stone moulded eaves cornice. 5 bays, glazing bar sashes with bracket cills centre 1st floor blind. Door and porch in centre probably by Norman Shaw, with moulded cornice and eared rubbed brick entrance. Tiled hipped roof with gabled dormers (part of Norman Shaw's work). Interior: richly panelled and with lavish plaster enrichments to ceilings (again probably by Norman Shaw). Stone staircase in central well with richly carved eared doorways, panelling and bold modillion cornice. The 1878-80 extensions by Norman Shaw almost, double the house in size. 2 storeys. Red brick. Queen Anne style. with fine garden front to south with loggia, interior decorated in 'Adam' style. Irregular plan with 2 storey gatehouse to stable yard projecting to east. Casement windows with glazing bars. The Norman Shaw work is important as an early example of his Queen Anne revival and some of the interior details in the original (early C18) house are very faithful replicas of that period.*

The earliest known owner was Mr David Fell in 1788. The house changed hands many times until it came under the ownership of Mr F. G. Saunders, who was the Chairman of the Great Western Railway. He commissioned the famous Victorian architect, (Richard) Norman Shaw to enlarge the house and add many features in a style that he pioneered, known as the Queen Anne revival style; this work was carried out between 1878 and 1880. Mr Saunders died in 1901 and his widow remained in the house until about 1914.

Norman Shaw (1831-1912) was best known for his designs for public and domestic buildings. According to the Berkshire volume in The Buildings of England series and local architectural historian, Sidney Gold, the work that he carried out in the 1880s is the only example of his work in Reading. While he worked on Caversham Grove he designed Greenham Lodge near Newbury which was also converted into a school. His work is of particular importance as it was an unusual style, at a time when Gothic revival was the dominant style for both ecclesiastical and secular architecture. His most famous building was perhaps New Scotland Yard in London, headquarters of the Metropolitan Police from 1890 until 1967, which are now called The Norman Shaw Buildings.

During the 1920s Caversham Grove was occupied by the Foster-Browns, who raised funds for a new church. At this time, the estate included several farms: Shipnell's Farm in Gravel Hill and Grove Farm. Inside the house there was a very extensive labyrinth of cellars. In 1932 the house was purchased by Reading Corporation and it was used as a general archive repository for artefacts from Reading Museum, such as stuffed birds and animals!

In March 1939, Reading Council held a Budget Meeting; one item on the agenda was the proposed sale of Caversham Grove. It had long been considered a 'white elephant' by many people but Cllr Smart outlined its many potential uses in case of air raids, if war broke out: the vaults could be used for storing documents, pictures and other works from Reading Art Gallery; alternatively, it could be used for educational purposes. Alderman Lovelly claimed that the building had been purchased for use as a secondary school for boys. Cllr Field said neither were the vaults suitable for storage, nor the building for use as school premises because secondary education was becoming more practical and less academic.

Evacuees started arriving from London on 1<sup>st</sup> September and temporary provision was made for expectant mothers. At the end of the month, plans were in place for more permanent facilities, with the Bailey Home in Milman Road being turned down as unsuitable. By the 7th October, Caversham Grove had been swiftly converted into an emergency maternity home and had hosted 5 births already, with the capacity to accommodate 50 patients.

The aim of establishing Grove Home was solely as a maternity home for pregnant women who had been evacuated to Reading. Genuine concern was expressed by the Mayor: these women 'are away from their homes. In the general upset of evacuation, these mothers were unable to prepare properly for the coming of the babies. He also decreed, that these women must be provided with homes again with their babies.' He continued: 'we appeal to those who love babies to come forward and find a home for mother and baby. It is appreciated, of course that a baby in the house, makes a lot of trouble but I think the plight in which these women find themselves is something which will make a real appeal to the public'.

Reading Council was very proud of their new maternity home. The Mayor announced that the house was very large, set in grounds of 45 acres and he felt 'quite certain that those who are patients there could not be in better surroundings. It seems as if it is in the heart of the country'. The Medical Officer under Child Welfare and the Maternity Committee, of Reading Town Council,

had done a wonderful job of equipping the hospital, at very short notice. Reading Town Council 'would be responsible for the administration of the Grove Emergency Maternity Home and that any expenditure necessarily incurred by the connection to it, would be ultimately refunded'. A temporary matron, Mrs G L Humphries, previously at Dellwood Maternity Home, was appointed on an annual salary of £197, with emoluments at £90 p a. The Reading Medical Officer of Health drew up a rota of doctors who were willing and able to attend patients, as well as requesting Mr Cane and Mr Hooper to act as consultants.

While patients were intended to come only from Reading, neighbouring Berkshire Councils asked if they could send some mothers, living very close to the Reading border. Reading Council agreed to this provided they had the capacity and the mothers were booked in as early as possible.

In December 1939 the Minister of Health, Walter Elliot, joined the Mayor Cllr W McIlroy, the Reading Medical Officer of Health Dr H Milligan and three other officials to make an inspection of the home and described it as 'almost ideal for its purpose'. He even suggested that The Grove might ultimately become the principal maternity home for Reading Corporation, either closing down Dellwood or using it as an overflow. At this time Dellwood was full, so some Reading women were being sent over to The Grove! The Minister described the evacuation scheme 'as another proof of national solidarity' which 'has led to a better appreciation of the problems of both town and country by hosts and guests alike'. He also congratulated 'the capable and highly experienced matron, medical and nursing staff'. Caversham Grove continued as a maternity home throughout the war and possibly into the 1950s. Relevant records to confirm this are inaccessible at the moment.

On the day of the inspection, the Minister was shown all sections of the hospital and claimed the conditions were excellent. He met 11 women and 9 babies and spoke to some mothers who were all busy knitting. One of them, Mrs Nicholls, described her situation: she had been having problems during the pregnancy and her husband L/Cpl Nicholls had been sent for by telegraph. He travelled back from France and was allowed to stay, until his wife was able to get out of bed and take a few steps each day. This would have taken up to 14 days; of course, he would not have attended the birth at this time.

In Early October the Mayor, sent out a request to the Reading community: 'If generous people would give clothing or material, which sewing parties could make into suitable clothing or give a donation, it would be a very humanitarian action and would be greatly appreciated'. This was printed on The Ladies Page of the *Reading Mercury* where the journalist also wrote, 'I understand that a suggestion has been made that residential nurseries should be opened in Reading, to care for the children and allow mothers to rejoin their husbands'. There is no further information telling us whether this actually happened or even why it was suggested. Later that month the same journalist paid a visit to the Reading Central Hospital Supply Depot, at St Mary's Church House. The centre, only up and running since the middle of September, operated 3 days a week. It was under the charge of Lady Sibly, the Women's Voluntary Services representative of the borough. All the women were dressed in white overalls, some were knitting squares to join together to make colourful blankets. Some were sewing or making bandages, splint covers or other supplies. These supplies were sent to the Royal Berkshire and Battle Hospitals, the Red Cross and Caversham Grove maternity home. However, there were some medical supplies which the depot was unable to make: sterilised equipment such as gowns, masks and dressings for wounds. These items had to be made in a few special centres across Berkshire, where the walls, ceiling, floor of each room had to be sprayed daily.

On Christmas Day 1939, eleven patients were given presents of shawls, blankets and baby clothes etc, sent by the Mayor and other Reading residents. Christmas dinner of turkey, plum pudding and seasonal luxuries was served to the patients who then listened to the Empire Broadcast by the King, on the wireless. Some lucky mothers had visitors.

Caversham Grove Maternity Home was always intended as a temporary measure in war time and Dellwood continued to be the principal maternity home in Reading after the war. At some point, (not known at the moment), Grove House was closed down. In 1948 Reading & District Hospital Management Committee was set up to administer 19 hospitals, which included The Grove maternity home.

By 1958, the lease on The Grove Maternity Home had expired and plans had been drawn up for a school in Grove House. It was to be a secondary school, to suit the needs and abilities of

all the pupils, which would be truly co-educational. It was hoped that by offering courses with a rural bias, with an emphasis on outdoor education, that many boys would find something they could do well and that would interest them. In March 1958 Mr Brooker, headteacher of The Grove School was a forward-thinking man. In a meeting with other head teachers, he went so far as to say that he would like to see a complete interchange of subjects in schools, with boys doing commerce, girls doing some engineering and both doing rural science. In 1971, the school changed its name again, becoming Highdown School for both girls and boys under the comprehensive system then being introduced – one Margaret Thatcher was Minister for Education at the time!

Caroline Piller

*[This research was undertaken following a request from information from Terry Garratt who was born at the maternity home in 1944. We thought, however, that readers would also find this a fascinating story. We are sorry for the poor quality of the illustrations, but they were then best we could find!]*

## **AND TALKING OF SCHOOLS - BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR BERKSHIRE**

Have you done research into the history of your local school? If so, the Building Schools for Berkshire team would like to hear from you.

'Building Schools for Berkshire' is the latest research project organised by Berkshire Local History Association, Berkshire Record Office and the Berkshire Record Society. We are looking at school buildings erected or altered between 1870 and 1914. This was a period of great change in British education, and the design of school buildings developed dramatically to respond to changing needs and the national demand for higher standards of accommodation for teachers and children.

Over 100 new schools were built in Berkshire during these 44 years. In addition, many were altered and enlarged. We have a team of twelve researchers working in the Record Office (temporarily interrupted by closure, but soon to resume), and we are making good progress. However, it would be a shame to duplicate work already done, so if you have information you could share, published or unpublished, do let us know. Everything used in the final publication will be acknowledged.

Or perhaps you would like to join us. If so, do get in touch with David Cliffe or Peter Durrant to find out more. It is estimated that the work will take several years, and we have started in the country, but will get round to Reading in due course.

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Peter Durrant ([peter.durrant@reading.gov.uk](mailto:peter.durrant@reading.gov.uk))

## **THE ATTWELLS MEMORIAL FOUNTAIN 1908**

The old drinking fountain, now situated by the Thames Promenade not far from Caversham Bridge, was unveiled in October 1908 in memory of Frank and Sarah Attwells. Originally it stood beside the Caversham Road, next to the Bridge at the old tramway terminus, near the way down to the Promenade. It was moved in the early 1930s to its current position, which had previously been occupied by an old Army tank (given to the town in May 1920 in recognition of Reading's War Savings in the First World War).<sup>1</sup>

Frank Attwells was born in Reading in 1846.<sup>2</sup> His parents, Richard and Rhoda, both ran businesses from their house/shop at 15 High Street (now Duke Street). Richard was a hairdresser and perfumer, while Rhoda ran a private registry office for



servants. They moved to larger premises at 163 Friar Street in November 1866.<sup>3</sup>

As a young man, Frank was articled to Messrs. Kirkman of London, well-known pianoforte manufacturers, and as a result he was able to set up his own music business in his parents' shop when he returned to Reading in 1870.<sup>4</sup> This business grew and grew, becoming variously called Attwells' Pianoforte Warehouse or Attwells' Music Warehouse. Frank became a vital part of the music scene in Reading, running "Mr Attwells Promenade Concerts" at the New Town Hall and giving performances on the piano and the piccolo and as an orchestral conductor.

Frank was an excellent swimmer and formed the Reading Amphibious Club, of which he was Chairman and Captain throughout its short life from about 1878 to 1882. The Club held polo matches and Carnivals (with their famous Duck Races) on the Thames by Caversham Bridge. The polo match in August 1878 between the Reading Amphibious Club and Henley Dabchicks (in which Frank scored the winning goal in a 2-1 victory) drew "a vast concourse of spectators" numbering about 4000.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the voluntary collections taken up at their events never matched their expenditure and gifts to charity and the Club had to close, but not before they had provided "five life buoys at various spots on the Thames, at Caversham, and one at High Bridge, on the Kennet" in 1881.<sup>6</sup>

Frank saved several lives: it is recorded that on "five or six occasions" he saved persons from drowning and no doubt he saved others by virtue of being the Deputy-Captain of the voluntary Reading Fire Brigade (of which he was also one of the founders).<sup>7</sup>

On 6 February 1877 Frank married Sarah Georgina Smallbone of Calcot, a carpenter's daughter.<sup>8</sup> Their only child, daughter Alice Rhoda, sadly died aged 4 months in September the following year.<sup>9</sup> Frank and Sarah lived above the shop at 163 Friar Street.<sup>10</sup>

In 1887 Frank bought, re-built (apart from the frontage) and re-opened the Royal County Theatre in Friar Street.<sup>11</sup> This re-opening on 20 June 1887 was well timed, being in the week of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebrations.<sup>12</sup> Two years later, due to the health problems described below, Frank sold his interest in the Theatre to Henry Dundas.<sup>13</sup>

In November 1884 Frank had been elected to the Town Council for Abbey Ward in the Conservative interest, coming top in the poll with 345 votes and defeating the sitting member, Mr J Dymore Brown.<sup>14</sup> Frank was subsequently re-elected twice unopposed for the same ward. Frank was an active member of the Council, although his plain speaking could make, if not enemies, then at least annoyed opponents. He was elected to be Mayor of Reading in November 1891.<sup>15</sup>

There had been some concern beforehand as to the state of his health, which had started with throat problems that then spread to his lungs. Following medical advice, Frank and Sarah wintered in Egypt in 1889-90 to avoid the damp Thames Valley weather.<sup>16</sup> While giving him temporary relief, this did not improve his condition. Undaunted, Frank continued in his active life.

However, during his year as mayor, Frank died on 25 August 1892, aged 46. As the Reading Mercury expressed it: 'Having "put his hand to the plough" Mr Attwells, with the determined courage which signalled his whole career, was indefatigable in the discharge of the multifarious duties of the office which he filled with dignity and credit, but these onerous labours, combined with the conduct of his own important business, proved too much for his enfeebled constitution'. The members of the Corporation attended his funeral 'in state' at St Lawrence's Church at 2.30pm on Monday 29 August, with business in the town suspended from 2 to 4pm.<sup>17</sup>

Sarah continued successfully to run the music business after Frank's death.<sup>18</sup> On 2 April 1905 she died aged 59. She was laid beside her husband in Reading cemetery, where their monument and gravestone can still be seen.<sup>19</sup> As part of the terms of Sarah's will, she instructed her executors "to apply the said moneys at their discretion in erecting and building a drinking fountain on a site in the Bath Road, Reading, or on such other site in the Borough of Reading, as may be approved of by the Reading Corporation, at such cost as my trustees may think fit, and to place a suitable brass tablet on the said fountain in memory of my late husband Frank Attwells and myself, with an appropriate description thereon."<sup>20</sup>

Although the offer of this fountain was first made to the Council by the executors of Sarah's will in August 1905, it took until 1908 for the decision to be made to agree its location and for it to be put in place. The Council acquired land in 1907 to create the Thames Promenade and in December of that year it was decided to place the memorial drinking fountain near the entrance to the Promenade at Caversham Bridge.<sup>21</sup> In January 1908 the sub-committee of the Council's Finance Committee finalised the decision as: "the fountain should be erected at the junction of the new approach road and Caversham Road, near the tram terminus".<sup>22</sup>



At 4.30pm on Thursday 15 October 1908 over two hundred people gathered to see the Mayoress, Mrs Colebrook, remove the flags draped over the drinking fountain and declare it open.<sup>23</sup>



*The inscription on the tablet says:*

**THIS DRINKING FOUNTAIN  
WAS ERECTED AS PROVIDED  
BY THE WILL OF  
MRS SARAH GEORGINA ATTWELLS  
IN MEMORY OF  
FRANK ATTWELLS  
WHO WAS MAYOR OF READING 1891-2  
AND WHO DIED DURING  
HIS YEAR OF OFFICE,  
ON AUGUST 25<sup>TH</sup> 1892,  
AND ALSO  
IN MEMORY OF HIS WIDOW  
SARAH GEORGINA ATTWELLS  
WHO DIED ON APRIL 2<sup>ND</sup> 1905.**

The drinking fountain was designed by Mr Charles S Smith, architect; Messrs. Collier and Catley were the general contractors for the erection, with Mr A F Jones executing the mason's work and Messrs. Hayden and Batting carrying out the carving. The Berkshire Chronicle reported:

"It has been constructed of Portland stone in the Renaissance style, with steps and base of Aberdeen granite; it is four sided and contains two drinking troughs for horses and cattle, and two places for people. The upper part, which forms a canopy to the fountain, has a dome shaped central feature supported by four carved trusses, one at each angle, below which is a bold projecting cornice carried on four columns with entablatures. From the central feature, which these columns surround, spring four grotesque water jets, which serve the drinking troughs and cups respectively. On the sides are gunmetal panels bearing the following inscription..."



The Council decided that, following the closure of the tramway terminus by Caversham Bridge in 1931, the Attwells Memorial Fountain should be removed and put into storage. A Mr C W Maxwell, of 85 Crescent Road, wrote to the Council enclosing a petition signed by local residents, proposing that instead the fountain should be immediately re-erected and that the Thameside Promenade would be a suitable position. Although it meant an expenditure of £150 or so to lay the new base and provide a water service for the new position, the Council changed their mind and agreed.<sup>24</sup>

Malcolm Summers

[You can find similar tales of Reading's Memorials in **Signs of the Times** by Malcolm Summers, published by Two Rivers Press]

### SWINGING READING Part 3

Somerville Hastings, elected in 1923 was not MP for Reading for long for less than a year later the first Labour government fell, and Stanley Baldwin became PM for the second time. Reading moved with the tide and Herbert Williams became MP with a Tory majority of 3,001. The next election in 1929 was the first with full adult suffrage and it brought back the worthy Doctor, though with a lower majority than in 1923 of 852. The defeated candidate returned to the Commons for Croydon South in 1935.

Hastings' second term was twice as long as his first and he fell with the majority of his party's MPs in the election of 1931 which endorsed the National government formed at the urging of King George V in the wake of the deepening economic crisis engulfing both the British and the global economy. The new Tory member, Alfred Howitt, who was also a medical practitioner, had a comfortable majority of 15,000 over Dr Hastings. The same two fought again in 1935 but despite a determined effort by Hastings, reducing the deficit to less than 5,000, Howitt remained Reading's MP till 1945.

This was one of the landmark years in British politics, often compared with 1979 as not only changing the governing party but also bringing about a revolution in the future shape of the 'body politic.' I have been informed by our friend, Keith Jerrome, that it was a speech by the new labour candidate, Ian Mikardo that led to the nationalisation of the railways being included in the Labour manifesto and that Herbert Morrison then said to him. 'Young man, you have just lost us the election.' If so history vindicated Mikardo and proved Morrison wrong. Reading once more followed the swing of the pendulum and returned Mikardo with a majority of 6,390 over a new Tory candidate, a member of the McIlroy clan. The same Labour landslide brought back Somerville Hastings as MP for Barking.

By the time the next election was due in 1950 the Boundaries Commission had deliberated, and Reading found itself with two seats, Reading North and Reading South. Unlike the dual seat arrangement today, those seats were confined to the borough of Reading and did not include extra bits of the adjacent countryside. In 1950 both stayed Labour, with Mikardo taking the South and one Kim Mackay, an Australian, elected for the North. However, Mackay had a majority of only 527 and in 1951, when the Tories narrowly regained power, Reading North went the same way, returning Frederic Bennett with a majority of 302. Mikardo, however, hung on with a majority just into four figures.

It was all change again in 1955 with Reading going back to being a single constituency – or nearly. In fact, the new Reading seat comprised most of the of the town except the western and eastern fringes, which came under Newbury and Wokingham. Despite the swing to the Conservatives which gave them a more comfortable majority, Ian Mikardo won the new Reading seat but with a majority of only 238. It was not surprising then that in 1959, when Harold MacMillan bounced back from the Suez disaster with his promises of 'You've never had it so good,' Reading said goodbye to Mikardo after 14 years and welcomed Peter Emery as their new MP with a majority of 3,942. But Parliament had not seen the last of the pipe-smoking left-winger who returned in 1964 as MP for Poplar, remaining as representative for various East End constituencies up until 1987, when he retired at 79. Mikardo was a staunch supporter of Israel so that one shudders to think what he would made of recent events within his old party.

1964 was a repeat of 1951, a new government with a very narrow majority and with Peter Emery hanging on with a majority of only ten over his Labour challenger, John Lee. Lee not surprisingly was swept in at the landslide victory for Harold Wilson 18 months later with a majority of over 4,000. Emery like Mikardo, but more quickly, returned to the house at a by-election the following year and remained a Devon MP for 34 years. When he died in 2004, Reading East MP, Jane Griffiths, testified to his kindness to her as a 'new girl' finding her way in 1997.

In 1970 Ted Heath won the second of the four elections he fought, and Gerard Vaughan became MP for Reading with a majority of around 1,100 over John Lee. Dr Vaughan, continuing the traditional of medical men representing the town, was also the last MP for Reading before further boundary changes came into effect for the 1974 elections. In the second of those same elections, Lee continued another tradition of reappearing for another seat, Birmingham Handsworth. And that seems a good place to pause - I hope that Part 4 will complete the saga!

## UNCOVERING SOFA HISTORY - THE HARRIS LEBUS LEGACY – ADVERTISING FEATURE

'LEBUS: Silver Anniversary' was the celebratory headline of a four-page pull-out special of the Reading Evening Post, Wednesday July 23 1975. At that time the future looked great. However, within a few short years Lebus went out of business.

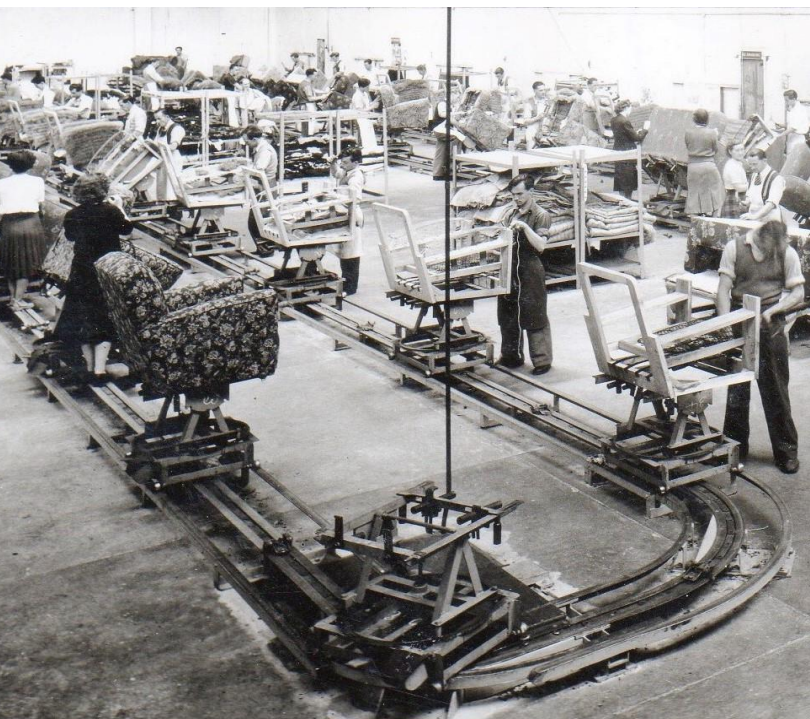
The upholstery manufacturing side of Harris Lebus had moved into Hawkhurst House at Woodley in 1950. It would be a 28-year association with the town and a source of much appreciated employment.

Harris Lebus furniture making began life in London's East End. The story can be traced back to Harris' father Louis who arrived as a refugee in Hull in 1840. Harris, his son, was destined to be the entrepreneur. The business expanded to such a level that by the beginning of the 20th century, a new manufacturing hub was needed. A site in Tottenham Hale North London was chosen. It marked a split between the sites used by the firm for cabinet making and upholstery. Whilst upholstery production (as well as sales) continued in Tabernacle Street under Harris' watchful eye, his younger brother and business partner Sol ran the cabinet making end at Tottenham Hale.

From Arts and Crafts cabinet pieces to stylish, modern dining, bedroom and three-piece suites for the lounge, Lebus had been a furniture industry leader with a renowned, iconic brand known not only the length and breadth of the land, but globally. After Harris' son, Sir Herman Lebus died in 1957 - he had steered the family business through two world wars and raised the firm to the level of a public company - his two sons Anthony and Oliver and Lebus continued the business. Anthony, it seemed spent more time with the upholstery side of the business in Woodley, with Oliver working at Tottenham Hale.

The swinging sixties led to swinging fortunes for the firm. In 1966 the Lebus brothers a radical embarked on a radical re-invention of manufacturing methods and re-investment in robot machinery produce a new, stylish, Scandinavian influenced product. Europa furniture consisted of honey-coloured, veneered chipboard cabinet pieces - sideboards, shelving, dining furniture, bedroom suites - flat-packed, and bright, yellow ochre sofa suites and chairs. For a couple of years this style proved a commercial success, but the investment and financial obligations caught up with the firm and causing it to crash in 1970.

Fifty years ago, a shock announcement foretold of the closure of the 'largest furniture factory in the world' in Tottenham Hale, north London. The company would cease cabinet furniture-making completely. Upholstery production however was saved. At least for the time being. But this too folded in 1978. The history had been confined to the archives, that is, until now.



**Upholstery Production Line in Woodley, 1960s**

Published on March 31, *Harris Lebus: A Romance with the Furniture Trade* charts the complete history from humble beginnings through to its final tumultuous years. Researched and written over a thirteen-year period, Paul Collier's first book is the story of a life, a business, a family and a workforce community.

If you wish to indulge yourself in a nostalgic journey through furniture design - from the finest Arts and Crafts pieces lovingly hand-made to furniture style with a nod to the futuristic produced by 'robot-like' machines, then this is the book for you. This work is lavishly illustrated with over 200 images.

But this book is much, much more than a conveyor belt of furniture designs through the decades. Not least because Lebus ceased furniture

production completely during both World Wars, switching its resources - a workforce of primarily women as many men went to fight - to 'the war effort' and the manufacture of complete war planes. 'Handley Page and Vickers Vimy monoplanes of World War One, the Albermarle, Hotspur and Horsa gliders and Mosquito fighter bomber of World War Two - these planes were produced by Lebus, in the hundreds .... all from wood, of course' states Paul.

Over a century or more, many people, from young men and women through to retirement were engaged in employment at Lebus - both in cabinet making at Tottenham Hale and upholstery in Woodley. And just as the Lebus family had followed in their parent's footsteps, so too did the next generation of a 'Lebus' family. Each of these individuals lived their own story, as unique to them as the life they lived. At the same time, as an employee of the firm, they were intrinsically linked by community - the Lebus workforce community. A number of these individuals consciously or unconsciously left their indelible mark on history. Their stories - including those employed in upholstery manufacture at Woodley, have been weaved through each chapter and, as far as possible, have been told using their own words.

To purchase a copy contact the author: Paul Collier, 99 Armadale Close, Ferry Lane est., Tottenham Hale, London, N17 9PL, email: [https://publishwithlibri.co.uk/libri\\_book/harris-lebus/](https://publishwithlibri.co.uk/libri_book/harris-lebus/)

**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!**

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## NOTES TO ARTICLE ON ATTWELLS FOUNTAIN

<sup>1</sup> Reading Observer 29 May 1920 p9 c1-2

<sup>2</sup> Free BMD England & Wales Civil Registration Birth Index 1837-1915, Reading v6 p254 Q3 1846

<sup>3</sup> See their adverts in Reading Mercury 3 November 1866 p3 c1 and p6 c7

<sup>4</sup> Reading Mercury 27 August 1892 p5 c3

<sup>5</sup> Berkshire Chronicle 10 August 1878 p5 c2

<sup>6</sup> Berkshire Chronicle 21 May 1881 p5 c3

<sup>7</sup> Reading Mercury 27 August 1892 p5 c3; Reading Observer 27 August 1892 p8 c1-2

<sup>8</sup> Parish Record of St Saviour's Church, Ruskin Park, Lambeth, England, 1868-1900 entry 196 of 6 February 1877

<sup>9</sup> Reading Mercury 14 September 1878 p5 c7

<sup>10</sup> 1881 Census RG11, Piece 1305, Folio 88, Page 22

<sup>11</sup> Reading Mercury 4 June 1887 p5 c2

<sup>12</sup> Reading Mercury 11 June 1887 p5 c2

<sup>13</sup> Reading Observer 27 August 1892 p8 c1

<sup>14</sup> Reading Mercury 8 November 1884 p2 c4. [Ed: The defeated candidate was a well-known Reading brewer.]

<sup>15</sup> Reading Observer 14 November 1891 p3 c3

<sup>16</sup> Reading Mercury 27 August 1892 p5 c3

<sup>17</sup> Reading Mercury 27 August 1892 p5 c3, Reading Observer 27 August 1892 p8 c1-2

<sup>18</sup> Reading Mercury 7 January 1893 p1 c7

<sup>19</sup> Reading Observer 8 April 1905 p5 c7

<sup>20</sup> Berkshire Chronicle 5 August 1905 p3 c6

<sup>21</sup> Berkshire Chronicle 28 December 1907 p5 c1

<sup>22</sup> Berkshire Chronicle 11 January 1908 p5 c4

<sup>23</sup> Berkshire Chronicle 17 October 1908 p11 c5

<sup>24</sup> Reading Mercury 11 April 1931 p9 c3