

# The History of Reading Society



The object of the Society is to cultivate interest in and to encourage research into the history of the town of Reading.

Chairman	Hon Secretary	Hon Treasurer/ Membership	Editor/ Vice Chairman
David Cliffe 1 Priest Hill Caversham READING RG4 7RZ 0118 948 3354	Vicki Chesterman 7 Norman Road Caversham READING RG4 5JN Tel: 0777 634 0923	Malcolm Summers 1 Downs Way Tilehurst READING RG31 6SL Tel: 0788 302 5606 <a href="mailto:malsummers@aol.com">malsummers@aol.com</a>	John Dearing 27 Sherman Road READING RG1 2PJ Tel: 0118 958 0377 <a href="mailto:john.dearing@gpwild.co.uk">john.dearing@gpwild.co.uk</a>

**Spring 2021**

[historyofreadingsociety@yahoo.com](mailto:historyofreadingsociety@yahoo.com)

**No 56**

## THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

First, I'd like to thank those members who joined us for the 2021 Annual General Meeting in March, which allowed us to continue in our work, in line with the Constitution. As it turned out, it wasn't many months after the delayed 2020 AGM in October. It was with great pleasure that we could welcome Jo Alexander-Jones to the committee, someone I know will prove a great asset to the Society, and Jo set off on the right foot by giving the talk which followed immediately after the meeting. The gas industry in Reading, its development and importance, has long interested me, and now we were learning about it from an expert who had worked in the industry.

My job for yesterday was to complete the indexing of the 300 or so pages of the book on pubs and breweries in Reading, and send it off to the printer, which was duly done. It had taken me a week. This is the book to be published by the Society, and this time it will be a self-publishing venture. It seems to me that it's just the sort of thing that an active local history society should be doing. In a large town like Reading, we ought to be able to sell 500-1000 copies, and get a decent return on our investment, which should lead on to other projects.

However, to return to more immediate concerns, I must say that up to a point I have enjoyed the talks via "Zoom," and look forward to the rest of the series. Much is lost at "virtual" meetings, but there are some gains. For members who don't use the internet, I hope that the summaries of the talks which appear in the Newsletter give you at least a good idea of their content.

Among the advantages of "Zoom" is the fact that I don't have to turn out at 6.40 and make my way to the bus stop. I can turn on the computer at 7.15, as "The Archers" finishes on the radio. And there's no waiting around at the bus stop afterwards, either. Similarly for car users, there's no travelling time involved, or paying for car parking. (Such a pity that we lost the free parking over the road, but it was the same for the Baptist Church and the other users of their premises.)

People have told me that they find it easier to hear the speakers on "Zoom," and it's certainly better for looking at pictures. In the Baptist Church, for most people the screen is a bit small, and it's oblique. From the treasurer's point-of-view, he doesn't have

to pay travelling expenses, and if we wished, we could have speakers based almost anywhere in the world at no extra cost. And for the person sitting at home, unless you're the host, the chairman or the speaker, you can switch off if you're not enjoying the talk.

It has been noticeable that among the members joining the meetings are some who would find it difficult to travel to the Abbey Baptist Church, and it has been good to see them. And it has also been noted that because you must be a member to join the meetings, one or two people have joined who in normal times might have come to the hall as visitors.

On the other hand, you lose so much. When you go to a meeting in a hall, you usually have a good idea of who else will be there, but since the meetings are open to the public, you can never be quite sure. (On a number of occasions, because I've been knocking around Reading for a long time now, old acquaintances of mine have turned up.) And there is usually someone there who is likely to know more than you do on a particular subject, and who can be asked for information and advice.

If you're the person giving a talk, doing it online is a very strange experience because you get virtually no feedback from the audience. In the hall, you can have a pretty good idea of whether or not people can hear you, and you can tell if the audience is with you, through body language and small sounds, and hopefully occasional laughter and applause.

At our last committee meeting, as part of "any other business," I asked what we expected to happen when we were able to return to the hall for meetings. Would our members be happy to travel in, and to sit next to one another as they did before, even if they had been vaccinated? Would there be a demand for the "Zoom" meetings to continue after the return of face-to-face meetings? I understand that for technical reasons it would not be possible to relay the meetings from the Abbey Baptist Church as they happened, and that it was most unlikely that speakers would want their presentations to be recorded, because they'd lose all control over distribution and copying. We came round to thinking that members might appreciate the odd "Zoom" meeting in the coldest and darkest part of the year, instead of a meeting at the Church.

So, I invite those members who use "Zoom" and those who don't, to let us know their feelings, via e-mail, post or in person to any committee member – the addresses are on the front of the Newsletter. Would you welcome having, say two or three of the meetings on "Zoom" and the rest at the Abbey Baptist Church?

Naturally, I look forward to having "real" meetings again, and maybe even a visit during the summer. Of course, it may have to be an outdoor meeting – it's too soon to tell – but we'll let you know. Until then, stay safe, and enjoy the spring and summer weather.

David Cliffe

## **IN CASE YOU MISSED THEM**

*Reports follow by members of the committee of the on-line talks given to the Society in December 2020 and January, February, and March 2021:*

### **Reading c.1660 to c.1720: Politics, Progress & Persecution**

The December talk to the History of Reading Society was the Annual Presidential Address by Joan Dils.

Throughout this period the fear of Catholicism was a major driving force in events, both nationally and locally, leading on to the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 and the microcosm of the Reading Skirmish when James's troops were routed by William's men. Dissenters faced persecution and, among other things, exclusion from local government. In 1662 the mayor, 12 aldermen and 5 others were removed from the corporation in

Reading and were replaced by 'loyal' men, including Sir William Armourer who was a ruthless persecutor of dissenters. However, life became much easier for the dissenters after 1688.

At the start of this period, Reading's population of about 6,000 was still trying to recover from the effects of the Civil War. The development of the Kennet Navigation to Newbury and the improvement of the Great West Road by various Turnpike Acts meant that trade with and through Reading blossomed in the first half of the 18th century. Although this led to greater wealth in the town, this of course did not mean for everyone. The period also saw the growth of the coffee house, with the first in Reading opening in 1682 in the Bear Inn, opposite St Mary's Church. Reading had its first newspaper, *Reading Mercury*, in 1723, mostly bringing London news to the town.

Malcolm Summers

### **Reading Abbey and the Abbey Quarter**

John Painter, secretary of Friends of Reading Abbey was a perfect choice to start our talks this year: 2021 is the ninth centenary of Reading Abbey. John took us from 1121 to the present day, describing in great detail what the abbey might have looked like and dispelled the myth that The Blade was the same height (the abbey was probably much lower). He did give a realistic picture though of how this building would have towered over the single storey wooden buildings in Reading at the time.

The abbey was used by various monarchs for different purposes. Elizabeth I came regularly to stay in the 'Queen's House', developed out of the monastic part of the abbey. There were many wonderful images from the last 900 years, showing the growth and decline, the various renovations, and the current regeneration of the abbey.

A lively discussion followed his talk and John has sent the following book details:

- *Reading Abbey: an Introduction to the History of the Abbey*, by Brian Kemp, published by Reading Museum and Art Gallery in 1968. This can also be downloaded from <http://readingabbey.org.uk/pdf-files/readingabbey-bkemp.pdf>
- *A Coates, English Medieval Books: the Reading Abbey Collections from Foundation to Dispersal*, by A Coates, published as an Oxford Historical Monograph in 1999.
- "Reading Abbey and the Abbey Quarter", by Peter Durrant and John Painter, from Reading Museum bookshop

Caroline Piller

See also Malcolm Summers' article on Reading's celebration of the abbey's last big anniversary in 1921 on page 6.

### **Caversham Road: an Industrial History in Pictures**

Our speaker, David Neale, was from the Bell Tower Community Association, which takes its name from the bellcote on top of E. P. Collier School, and during the evening we learned something of the Association's work in conserving and protecting the local environment.

The area round Caversham Road was slow to get built up, on account of its being on the Thames flood plain, with much of the building happening in the 1880s and 90s. We looked at the typical houses, who built them, and what the residents did for a living. We looked at the two pubs, and their rebuilding – The Moderation, rebuilt in 1893, and the White Hart by the bridge which became the Caversham Bridge Hotel and is currently the Crowne Plaza Hotel.

But much of the talk was about manufacturing in the area – the Great Western Railway Signal Works, Cox and Wyman the printers, Warrick's Monarch Cycle Works, Buckler Cars, the Coronium Metal Company (making bearings for railway vehicles),

Robert Cort (making equipment for the gas and oil industries), and the foundries of H. C. Goodman, Henry Lewis and Samuel Griffith. The building that started out as Dowson's maltings was considered, and the various firms that were based there afterwards, the last of them being Drew's the ironmongers.

It was a fascinating talk, and the questions that followed were also interesting – especially the question of why Caversham Road bends, where Vastern Road meets it.

David Cliffe

### **Gas: its history and technologies**

Following the AGM, Jo Alexander-Jones celebrated her election to the committee by speaking to us on this subject with particular reference to Reading. This is a subject she is well-qualified to speak on, having worked for British Gas for 28 years and Shell for five. Jo dated the history of gas-fuelled energy to 1792 with William Murdoch, although initially its use was limited to industrial applications, mainly in the north of England. Things changed with the formation in London of the Gas Light and Coke Co. in 1812. Over the next fifteen years nearly all large towns in the country, including Reading, established gasworks. Gas derived from coking coal continued to be the principal source, through the nationalisation of the industry in 1949 until the changeover to natural gas introduced during the years 1967-76. Privatisation followed in 1986 and then in 2016 came the merger of BG Group with Shell.



**Lighting up Reading**

Reading's use of gas commenced with the formation of the Reading Gas Light Co. in 1819; Newbury, Abingdon and Windsor followed over the next decade. £10,000 was raised by public subscription to fund the construction of the gasworks, with the first stone being laid in May 1819 by Alderman Annesley. Initially lighting was only provided for eight months in the year but was extended to year-round in 1821. The company's works were sited in part of the area now covered by the Oracle.

Competition was provided from 1835 by a rival company, Reading Union Gas Co., with works situated further downstream close to the Huntley and Palmer site. This resulted in keener pricing but in 1863 the two companies merged to form the Reading Gas Co., with J. Okey Taylor as its first Chairman. Gas production was centred on the sites of both

the original companies, later moving nearer to Kennet Mouth where the surviving gasholder can still be seen. This dates from 1916.

Also surviving, although in a state of dilapidation, is the former Governor House near Gasworks Road from which gas supplies were distributed round the town. Initially distribution was limited to the old borough but gradually extended outward to Tilehurst in 1903 and Three mile Cross and other outlying villages in 1907.



**Map showing location of the first Gasworks**

In 1896 the company set up showrooms at the corner of Friar Street and Cross Street, premises currently occupied by Haslams, the estate agents. Efforts were also made to improve public lighting which led to Reading being hailed as 'one of the best-lighted towns in the country'.

John Dearing

## **THE OCTOCENTENARY OF READING ABBEY**

**18 June 1921**

As we come to the nonocentenary of Reading Abbey later this year, it is interesting to look back 100 years and see how Reading celebrated the 800th anniversary of the founding of Reading Abbey on 18 June 1121.

Before a large crowd, at 3 pm on Saturday 18 June 1921, the celebratory events got under way. The Mayor of Reading, Denys Egginton, called upon Mr. Charles Edward Keyser F.S.A., of Aldermaston Court and an expert on church architecture, to open the 'Historic Exhibition' in Reading Museum & Art Gallery. Calling Reading Abbey 'the finest church in Norman England', Keyser declared the exhibition open.

The exhibition was the most amazing collection of manuscripts, charters, coins, seals, paintings, architectural remains and other objects connected with the Abbey ever brought together in one place. Loans were made by Reading Corporation, the Cambridge University Library, various colleges of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, the Bishop of Portsmouth and from private collectors. The exhibition was open for 8 days



and was viewed by over 6,000 people, including very many local school parties who were shown around in parties of about 30 by 'special teachers'.

The next event of the busy day was at 3.15, with the unveiling of two new oil paintings given by Dr. Jamieson Boyd Hurry to the Museum & Art Gallery. Hurry had previously presented five other scenes from Reading Abbey's history, and these were all on display at the exhibition. The additions were: 'The Consecration of the Abbey Church by Archbishop Thomas Becket, AD1164' by Stephen Reid, and 'Sumer is Icumen In' by Ernest Board.



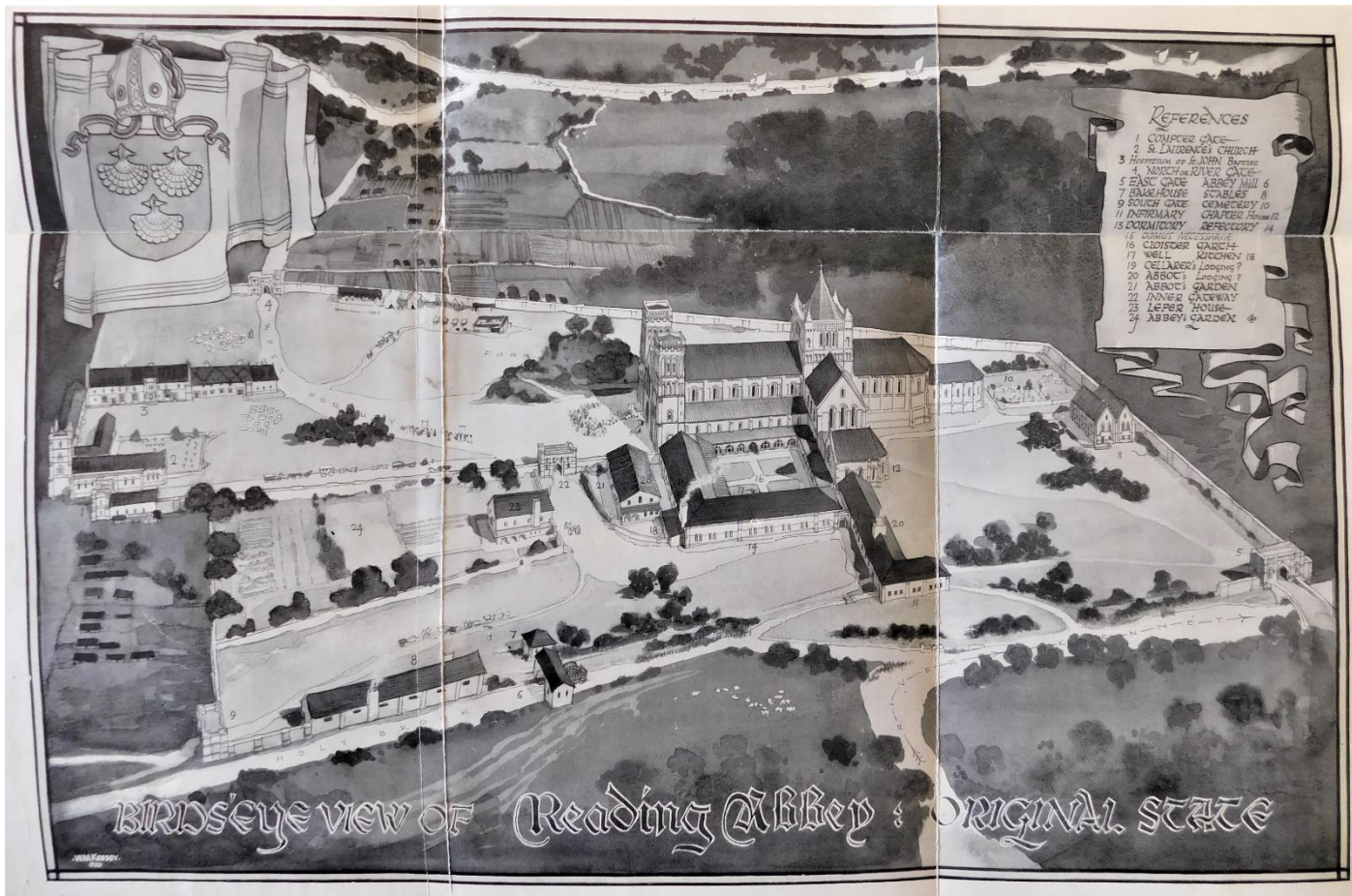
By 3.30 the Mayor, invited guests and ticket holders were in the Abbey ruins for the unveiling of the memorial to Henry I near the spot where he was buried. The small square tablet was unveiled by the Very Rev. the Dean of Winchester.

The party then settled down to be entertained by the performance in the Abbey ruins of two monastic episodes, written for the occasion by the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield. These were of the 'Laying of the Foundation Stone of the Church on 18 June 1121', and the writing down of 'Sumer is Icumen in' in about 1240.

After tea and light refreshments from 4.30 in the Forbury Gardens, the final part of the day's celebrations took place at the bandstand, with a Concert of Old English Music, with mixed choir, directed by P. R. Scrivener.

Tickets to attend these celebrations were on sale for 10/-, 5/- and 2/6. Each 10/- and 5/- ticket holder received a 'handsome souvenir handbook of the celebration', which included a description of the items in the exhibition, the script of the dramatic performances in the abbey and the details of the programme of music. Those with the 5/- and 2/6 tickets attended from 3.30 in the Abbey only.

This very successful day had been organised by a committee, chaired by the Mayor, and inspired by Dr. Hurry. It was the latter's letter to the Mayor and Corporation, read out at the Town Council meeting on 6 January 1921 that had started the process off. On the last day of March, the Mayor chaired a public meeting in the Town Hall at which Dr. Hurry put forward his proposals for the day, resulting in the programme carried through on 18 June. Not only did Hurry inspire the event, but he also carried out most of the work to collect together the various manuscripts and artefacts for the exhibition, and his 1901 book *Reading Abbey* was the basis for the detail in the exhibition and its souvenir handbook.



Hurry also wrote a 'Memorial Volume' to celebrate the day: 'The Octocentenary of Reading Abbey'. It was advertised as giving 'a retrospect of the principal incidents in the history of the Abbey during the past 800 years'. It was lavishly illustrated with full page black and white reproductions of all seven paintings Hurry had donated to the Museum and Art Gallery by this point (he was to give three more over the next five years). However, the large fold out 'Bird's Eye View of Reading Abbey', drawn by W. M. Kessey, was the most striking feature.

Let us hope that circumstances allow us to celebrate the nonocentenary at the Abbey in person this year.

Malcolm Summers

## WILLIAM TALBOT – PARSON AND SLEUTH

William Talbot was Vicar of St Giles for only six years (1768-74) but made his mark in more ways than one during that time. Of aristocratic descent, Talbot probably entered the church because that was what younger sons of the nobility did. He owed his spiritual rebirth to the witness of Selena, Countess of Huntingdon and thereafter he was described as a man 'baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire'. At Reading, apart from preaching, he was given to good works, visiting the sick and the poor and those in prison.

Thus, he came to meet a Yorkshireman named Jonathan Britain, described as 'one of the greatest impostors that this kingdom has ever seen.' After trying his hand at the law, schoolteaching and soldiering, Britain turned to crime. The *Newgate Calendar* states that 'he committed a variety of frauds, most of them of such artful contrivance as to elude all possibility of detection. He had a custom of introducing himself into the company of persons who had no suspicion of deceit, and then he would so far insinuate himself into their good opinion as to take undue advantage of their unsuspecting honesty.'



His criminal career commenced in Bristol where he passed a number of forged bank drafts, but it was in Reading in 1771 that similar offences brought about his incarceration in the Compter, one of Reading's several gaols, where he attempted suicide. One of his victims, a grocer named Blisset, was concerned for the state of his soul and asked William Talbot to visit him. Talbot was at first reluctant, as the Compter was in St Laurence's parish. However, the urgency of the case persuaded him to ignore Anglican protocol. In the course of several visits during August and September he found Britain 'not in the least degree sensible of the evil of what he had done' in attempting to take his life, nor did he admit his crimes.

An extended stay at Bath from late October, while his wife, Sarah, took the waters, enabled Talbot to visit Bristol to seek out those Britain had defrauded, mostly, like their counterparts in Reading, honest tradespeople who had been taken in by his plausible ways, which included the practice of 'diabolical deceptions, under the mask of religion.' One of these, a barber named Arthur Sandall, was a man of strong, religious convictions who had written to Britain, warning him of the terrors of hell that awaited him!

Because material evidence had been inadvertently destroyed by his Reading victims, making conviction unlikely, Talbot encouraged the Bristolians to combine to bring him to justice: 'Having therefore regard enough for the public, and spirit enough for the undertaking, I resolved without delay, to stop him in his career.' Eventually, Britain was removed to Bristol to stand trial for his several acts of forgery; he pleaded not guilty and conducted his own defence: 'He cross-examined the witnesses in a manner that gave sufficient testimony of his abilities; but the evidence against him was such as not to admit of a doubt of his guilt, and in consequence he was capitally convicted, and sentenced to die.'

Britain then put out a story that Talbot had deceived him into confessing his crimes, even claiming that he had masqueraded as 'a Romish priest'. Despite the preposterous nature of these allegations, they were believed by a section of the public in both Bristol and Reading.

Talbot's primary aim in bringing Britain to justice was to rid the public of one whom he believed to be a dangerous criminal. However, initially, his concern had been for the security of Britain's soul. Despite Britain's shameless lack of concern for his victims, Talbot hoped that when faced with the gallows he might still repent and be saved. However, he showed no signs of a change of heart before he was executed on 15th May 1772.

William Talbot continued to serve St Giles until attendance at the sickbed of a parishioner led to his contracting the same contagious fever, from which he died on 2nd March 1774.

For further information, the reader is referred to my longer article on the subject in *Berkshire Old and New*, No. 16, 1999. This version first appeared in St Giles Church's on-line magazine, *Thursday*.

John Dearing

## NEW PUBLICATIONS

***Music in Nineteenth-Century Reading: A Family History*** is a 50-page book which has just been published by Scallop Shell Press. Written by **Gordon Cox**, it focuses upon the contribution of three generations of the Binfield family who dominated the musical life of nineteenth-century Reading as performers, business leaders, impresarios, teachers, and composers. Gordon will be talking about the Binfield family to the Society on Wednesday 16 June. The book is available direct from him price at £10, or £11.50 including post and packing. Contact [gordoncox50@gmail.com](mailto:gordoncox50@gmail.com). We also look forward to the talk Mr Cox is to give to us on this subject at our **June** meeting.



As mentioned at our April meeting, **Margaret Ounsley's** book, **Coley Talking: Realities of life in old Reading**, is due to be published on 21st June 2021. Copies can be pre-ordered now via Two Rivers Press at <https://tworiverspress.com/shop/coley-talking-realities-of-life-in-old-reading/>, price £12.99. The book:

- Looks at how Coley developed in the 19th century and the harshness of everyday life in this very poor community
- Includes a substantial central section which records memories of a way of life long gone from people who lived in Coley from 1900-1950
- Reveals the struggles of the town, and the community, to gradually improve their lives
- Covers the early 20th-century clearances and redevelopment that was eventually to disperse a whole community
- Makes available once more the oral history material from the Coley Local History Group's *Talking of Coley* and *More Talking of Coley* which are both long out of print

Also recently published by Two Rivers Press at £15.99 is **Adam Sowan's** book, **Bricks and Brickwork in Reading**, subtitled **Patterns & Polychromy**. The price may look a bit steep, but it is amply justified by the lavish illustrations. Adam covers the technical aspects of brickmaking – English and Flemish bond and all that – and gives due weight to the contribution of E & S Collier. There is finally a suggested walking tour of the town centre and Katesgrove, that wonderful urban village where I have lived for 40 years! I encountered Adam there one day, while he was researching the book, and asked him what he was doing. Sadly, the brickwork of my own house was rendered over before I moved in but there are many other fine examples to make up for it. It's a great pity, though, that many of the houses have been spoilt by unsightly loft extensions, as well as the earlier craze for stone-cladding.

## READING ON FILM

Through our member, Sean Duggan, the Civic Society has drawn attention to an archive BBC film dating from 1979 presented by Alan Wykes (1914-93), author of *Reading, A Biography*. You may be able to access this at: [📄 reading all change for email exarchive 1257 19 ...](#)

It is especially interesting for us, as there is a mention of a local history society opposed to the redevelopment of the Town Hall site, which sounds very like the fledgeling History of Reading Society, founded in the previous year.

**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. Nearly all the material above has come from the committee, but it would be great to see some contributions from the rest of the membership!**