

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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historyofreadingsociety@yahoo.com

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THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

When I sat down to write this, it seemed incredible that the last edition of the newsletter appeared in April. Then I realised that rather a lot has happened since then, time has gone by, and our programme of talks for 2022 is already published.

The range of subjects for next year is as varied as ever. They include the abbey, the gaol, the hospitals, and the printing and sail-making industries. I hope that the mix of "in person" meetings and those via Zoom will suit most members – December, January and February sitting at home, but meeting face-to-face from March onwards.

Our September meeting in the Abbey Baptist Church was the first for many months. The committee was rather pre-occupied with selling the new book about Reading's pubs and breweries, and many people attended, rather more visitors than members. The October meeting was rather more relaxed, when I took the opportunity of introducing the new caretaker, Ashley, to the audience. He has been most helpful in arranging things for us, and I was pleased when a spontaneous round of applause broke out to thank him. We're also most grateful to Denis Pibworth, who set up the sound equipment for that meeting. Several members made a point of remarking to me that the sound was well-nigh perfect, and that they had heard all of Margaret Simons' talk on female suffrage and Reading.

The pubs and breweries book, "Abbot Cook to Zero Degrees," has occupied the committee a great deal during the last few months. We sold a good number of copies at the September meeting in the Abbey Baptist Church, and also at the launch party at – appropriately in view of the book's title – the Zerodegrees microbrewery and restaurant in the town centre. I'm sorry that some people had difficulty in hearing the three short talks, but apart from that the venue was ideal, with the opportunity to move around, or just sit around, enjoying the drinks and nibbles, and having your copies of the book signed. The evening was warm, and it was possible to open the sliding doors to the balcony over Bridge Street. We also had the chance to hear from the brewer about how they brew the beer, and to see the brewing equipment. I was so pleased, at the end of the evening, when the manager came up to me, and said "What a lovely bunch of people!". He and the brewer were obviously pleased to have been our hosts.



The authors at the book signing – photo by Chris Widdows

Thanks are due to Chris Widdows, who took photographs of the event for us. One of them found its way into the *Reading Chronicle* and the *Henley Standard*, which noticeably helped with sales. Copies are available from the Reading Museum Shop in the town centre, and from the Fourbears Bookshop in Prospect Street, Caversham. We are advertising in the newsletters of various societies whose members are likely to be interested and are running a postal service for people living out of the area. When they arrived from the printer, there were 32 boxes stacked in my hallway at home, and now there are 15, which means that the Society must be well on the way to recovering its outlay. ①

Responses from readers have been very complimentary, and the committee members are already considering future projects – maybe another publication, or maybe a special event, study day or visit.

David Cliffe

① *Ed. The Treasurer tells me we have now passed breakeven.*

IN CASE YOU MISSED THEM

Reports follow by members of the committee of the on-line talks given to the Society in April to June 2021, together with the visit to St Luke's Church in July:

The Society's talk in **April** was *A Tour of Coley Streets*, given by Graham Turner and Joe Doak. This took the form of a video, exploring the area and illustrating the changes that have taken place over the years. It was fascinating to see the same locations as they changed through time, and to have two such knowledgeable guides – with the addition of a voice from the past, as Doug Noyes' commentary on his photographs from the 1960s and 1970s was also incorporated into the video.

The video made very good use of a range of old maps which demonstrated the development of the area from the 17th century to the present day. Many industries have come and gone: Coley Pottery works, Reading Iron Works, Simonds Brewery, and the

GWR goods yard, to name but a few. An interesting feature of the story was the decline of nine out of the ten pubs in the area, the Horse & Jockey – now called the Castle Tap – being the one still trading.

The tour started with Castle Street and Castle Hill, showing the large array of shops and businesses that have now been cleared away, considerably changing the nature of these streets. It then explored Field Road, with its subsidence caused by old chalk mines, Garnet Street (with Stony Hill), Wolseley Street, Willow Street and more. The slum housing was cleared following World War 1, being completed by 1932. The next major change was, of course, the wholesale clearance from the late 1960s onwards of much of Old Coley to make way for the Inner Distribution Road, removing Coley Street, the iconic Coley Steps, and the whole area around Bosier's Square.



The Last Slum House in Coley - demolished in 1932

The speakers' local knowledge was considerable and enabled them to weave stories of life in Old Coley into the narrative, both from personal experience and from stories passed on through families. The listeners were often transported back to former days as an old photograph led to a reminiscence that evoked another era.

The video lasted an hour, being an abridged version of three longer videos – *A Tour of Coley Streets (parts 1 to 3)*. These three talks, each of which lasts about half an hour, and the one-hour abridgement shown at our meeting, can all be found on YouTube. I highly recommend them to anyone interested in Reading history.

Malcolm Summers

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE KIDDING, DAD'S ARMY? THE HOME GUARD 1940-1944

At our **May** meeting local historian Mike Cooper spoke to us on the subject of the Home Guard and informed us of their vital role both in Reading and Berkshire. Britain in the interwar years had a civil defence force, as did other countries. In fact, for more than 300 years there had been a volunteer force of some sort in this country ready to deal with emergencies.

Throughout 1939 men were volunteering to join local defence forces, 700 men did so in Reading alone on 17th May 1939, with the name Home Guard being adopted in

1940. The catastrophic losses of men and materials at Dunkirk in 1940 following the German invasions into France, Belgium, Holland, and Norway led to the very real fear of an invasion and in that event the Home Guard's role was to defend their own homes and towns, to the death. By 1942 their tactics were to act as a delaying force, although this became less necessary after the German incursion into Russia in 1941.

Countywide there were 12 battalions, with Reading hosting the 7th, 10th and 12th battalions who were tasked with preparing Reading to be an 'anti-tank island', ready to resist the enemy for up to seven days and to be held to 'the last man and the last round'. For such drastic measures to be put in place physical fitness was taken very seriously and weapon training was a top priority. The Battle of Tilehurst 'fought' in the streets in 1942 was an exercise of great importance.

Unlike their TV image the Home Guard had an average age of 30, and had good supplies of the most modern weapons, including guns, rifles, machine guns, grenades and ammunition, as the records for Pangbourne tell us. Equally important, as the Sonning Company records show, some officers had had medal-winning battle experience in World War 1. Naturally, this work did lead to some casualties with more than 300 killed out of a force of 1.5 million during the period. Different roles emerged as needs changed and the Home Guard was used in anti-aircraft defences, bomb disposal and intelligence.

Unfortunately, the records of the Home Guard are rather piecemeal, researchers relying on personal memories or newspaper reports to fill out some details. The role of women exemplifies this: despite their jobs - drivers, operators in signals and intelligence, runners, first aid, telephones, and catering - underpinning many activities, they were mostly unrecognised. Dr Edith Summerskill MP was the first to press for women to play an active role in civil defence. The Home Guard was stood down in December 1944, when there was no longer a viable threat of invasion.

Joy Pibworth

THE MUSICAL WORLD OF THE BINFIELD FAMILY IN 19TH CENTURY READING



The **June** talk was given by Dr Gordon Cox, who explored the rich musical heritage of the Binfield family in Reading. Richard Binfield arrived in the town in 1799 and before long was established as a music teacher, organist of St Lawrence's Church (from 1804) and provider of 'music for assemblies, concerts and entertainments on the shortest notice'. He established a shop to sell musical instruments and sheet music at 159 Friar Street, at the corner of Cross Street, where Haslams is now (and the gas showrooms used to be).

Richard created a tradition of Berkshire Triennial Musical Festivals. The first festival in 1806 consisted of a performance of Handel's *Messiah* in St Lawrence's Church in the morning followed by a 'Miscellaneous Concert' and a Ball at the Town Hall in the evening. Over the next forty years there were thirteen festivals, mostly lasting just one day, but occasionally two or even three days. These were huge undertakings, bringing in choirs and orchestras from London and elsewhere. The cost of tickets meant that the festivals were patronised by the 'superior classes'.



Hannah Binfield 1809-1887

Richard's son, John Bilson Binfield, produced several collections of church music, including compositions by members of the Binfield family, and was the organist of St Giles' Church. His passion, though, was to enable people of all classes to learn to sing by sight reading. To accomplish this, he ran many different classes, teaching according to 'Hullah's method', also known as the 'fixed sol-fa' method where 'do' (of do, re, mi, fa, etc) was fixed to C. John directed the last two Musical Festivals, after his father's death in 1839.

Hannah, Richard's daughter, had taken over Binfield & Co. with her older sister, Louisa, in 1839. Hannah had made her musical debut at the age of six as a pianist at the Town Hall. She played the harp and the concertina, composed songs and instrumental arrangements, and presented annual concerts in Reading through to the 1870s.

Following in her father's footsteps, she was the organist of St Lawrence's Church until 1880, retiring not because of her age but because she was too busy!

In 1881 Hannah formed a business partnership with Milton Wellings. Although the partnership only lasted three years, in that time Binfield & Wellings established the Royal Berkshire Academy of Music, which aimed to provide 'the highest form of instruction in the Art and Science of Music'. After Hannah's death, Binfield & Co continued for several years, but was taken over in 1902 by their main competitor, to become Attwells, Binfield & Co.

We were delighted to have been joined at this well researched and fascinating talk by two descendants of the Binfield family, both of whom now reside in the USA – see below.

Dr Cox's book, *Music in Nineteenth Century Reading*, is available direct from him (gordoncox50@gmail.com) cost £10 (direct) or £11.50 (incl. p&p).

Malcolm Summers

We have also received the following update from Dr Cox:

On 16th June, this year I presented a talk to the History of Reading Society about 'The Musical World of the Binfield Family'. This was my first zoom presentation and I tried to cover in advance every eventuality that might arise. What I didn't expect was that amongst the audience were two guests, John Schlosser and Seth Binfield, who were tuning in from their homes in the USA. John is a direct descendant of Richard Binfield, whilst Seth is an authority on the family's history and a cousin. I was delighted as I had previously failed to meet any individuals connected with the family. During the questions at the end of my talk, they both made very valuable points based upon their extensive knowledge of the Binfields. Since then, I have corresponded with them, and as a result they have generously shared with me their knowledge about Richard Binfield.

I knew that Richard had lived and worked in the Essex town of Chelmsford in the early 1790s before moving in 1795 to the Hampshire naval town of Gosport. From there he

reached Reading in 1799 where he resided until his death. My problem was that I couldn't work out what connected those three towns with Richard's working life.

Through my later correspondence with Seth, I discovered that Richard was a theatre musician. He advised me to consult Paul Ranger's book, *Under Two Managers: The Everyday Life of the Thornton-Barnett Theatre Company 1785-1853* (2001). Everything then became clear. Chelmsford, Gosport and Reading each had a theatre managed by the actor-manager Henry Thornton who had created a circuit of twenty theatres, most of them in the south of England. [See article below]

The book had a couple of index entries for Richard Binfield. Apparently, he was musically versatile and played the violin, the flute and the piano. He also occasionally acted. I came to understand through Ranger's account, that the musicians of these theatres formed a small, tightly knit section of the company, although very little is known about them. Unlike the actors who moved between the theatres, some musicians like Richard were based in the town in which the theatre was situated. This enabled them to earn a living by teaching and performing, as well as playing in the orchestra during the theatre season.

I already knew that Richard's arrival in Reading was heralded by a benefit performance at the town's theatre on 16 September 1799. It marked his retirement from the theatre company and was presented by 'His Majesty's Servants from the Theatre Royal, Windsor'. Again, this started to make sense, because the Windsor Theatre was also run by Thornton, who referred to his company as 'His Majesty's Servants ...'

Through our meeting and subsequent correspondence, I discovered unexpected links which have enabled me to gain a fuller understanding of Richard's life, and best of all to actually meet, if only on-line, two of his American descendants.

VISIT TO ST LUKE'S CHURCH ERLEIGH ROAD

Wednesday 21 July 2021 was a very special event in our calendar as we were able to meet in person for the first time in more than a year!

We were welcomed by Revd Christine Blackman and Janet Davies, a parishioner, also a member of our Society. There was an excellent turnout of 18, who gathered in the church first, and we spent nearly an hour looking round. We had planned to visit the church hall too, as this has a very interesting history and architectural heritage. Unfortunately, this was not possible, as the church had very recently let it out to the RBH to use for a holiday play scheme. So, it had been commercially cleaned and sanitized before being sealed off.





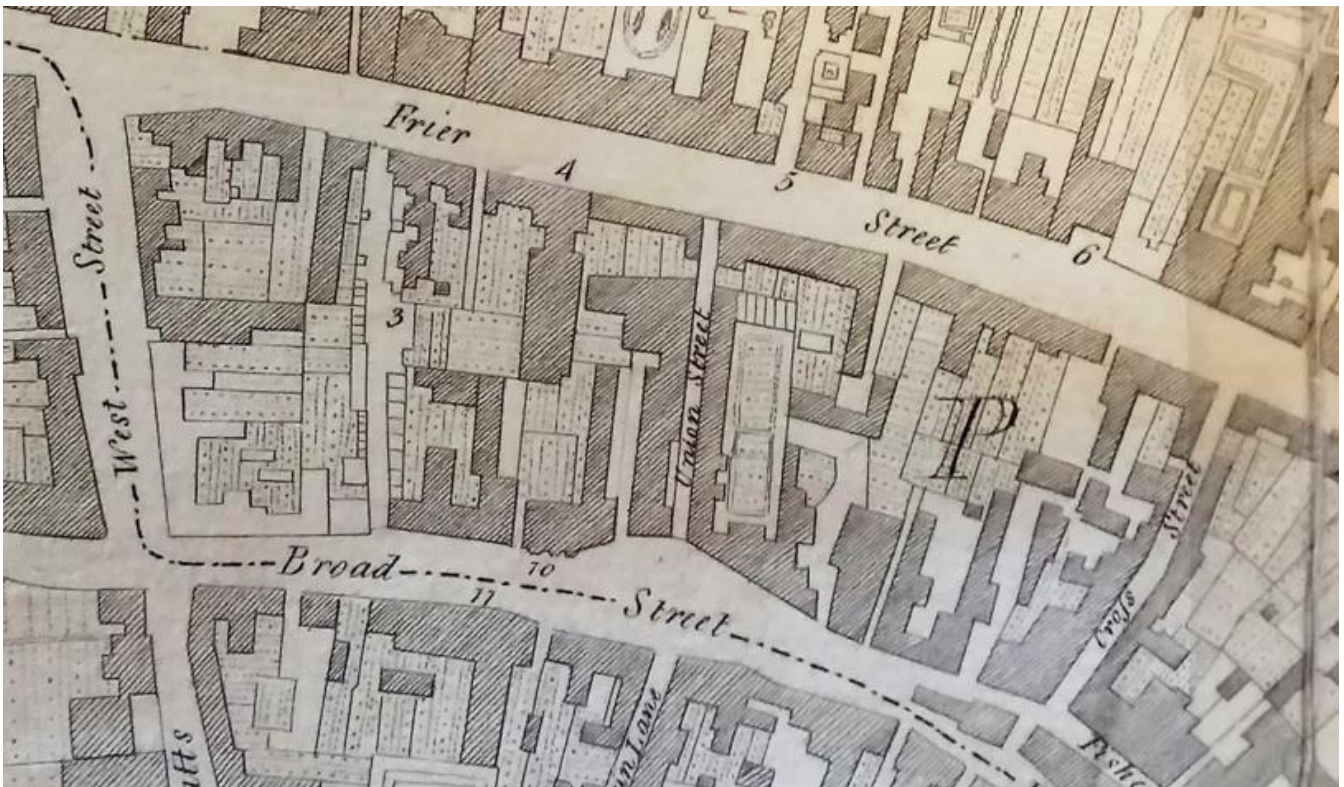
We had also asked if we could visit the community garden behind the church and a hasty phone call, enabled Janet to unlock the garden for us. We enjoyed a wander round and a sit down, where lots of chatting and catching up was a much-appreciated activity! It was so good to be active again, meeting our friends face to face.

Caroline Piller

READING THEATRE'S FIRST SEASON

The first permanent theatre in Reading opened in 1788. It was established by Henry Thornton, who was already managing theatres in Newbury, Andover, Farnham, and Henley. Soon after opening the Theatre in Reading, he added Guildford and Horsham to his portfolio. Thornton retained control of the Theatre in Reading until his retirement in 1817, by which time he was running some twenty theatres in all.

The Reading Theatre was on Friar Street. Its location was marked on Tomkins' 1802 map in Coates' *History of Reading*. The site is marked with a 4, on the south side of the road, just along from Union Street – about where McDonald's is now.

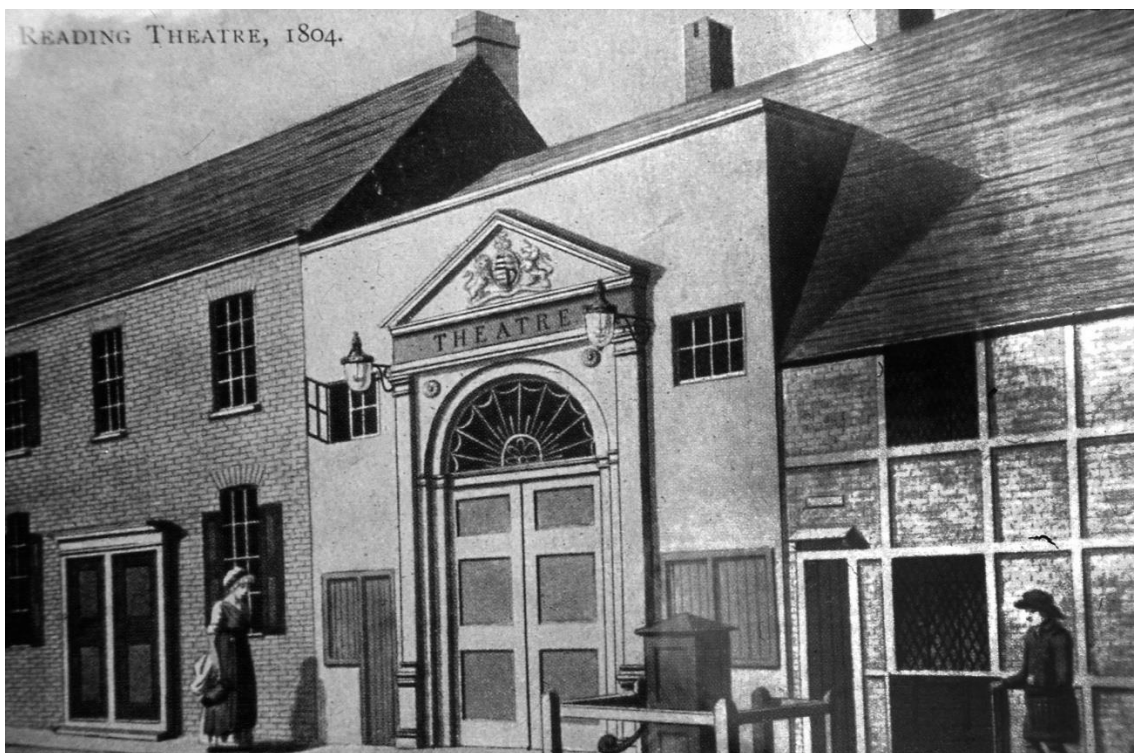


There is a sketch by J. C. Stadler of the outside of the Theatre, dating from 1804, shown below, but unfortunately it is not of the original building, as this is of the Theatre

after it was rebuilt in 1801. Man (in his *History of Reading* in 1816) describes this new theatre as 'neat and convenient, and capable of containing a numerous audience'. By 1839, William Fletcher (in *Reading Past and Present*) lamented that it is 'often found too small and inconvenient', and 'its external and internal appearance is also very far from attractive'.

The earliest mention of the Theatre in the *Reading Mercury* is on 12 May 1788. The programme for that evening is described in an advertisement, and a paragraph elsewhere informs readers that 'in addition to our very respectable company of Comedians, the celebrated Charles Bannister, and the beautiful Mrs Fox, are engaged to perform for a few nights previous to the opening of the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, and they will make their first appearance on Tuesday or Wednesday next'.

The programme for Monday 12 May began with 'the favourite comedy of *The School for Scandal*', Sheridan's comedy of manners that had first been performed in 1777. Then there was an Interlude taken from the *Tempest*, called *Love and Innocence*. To complete the programme, there was a 'favourite Musical Entertainment called *The Poor Soldier*'. This was a comedy from 1783 by John O'Keefe (text) and William Shield (music) following the love tangles of some Irish soldiers, newly returned from the American War of Independence. Theatregoers certainly got value for their money in the 18th century, at 3 shillings for a seat in a Box, or 2 shillings for the Pit or Gallery, and performances lasting from 7pm to 11.



Thornton's company consisted of almost 20 actors (including himself). Taking part on the evening of 12 May were 9 men, 5 women, 2 young men/boys and a young lady. There were four married couples amongst that number, and the young lady was the manager's daughter, Miss Thornton.

A feature of the programmes in this first season – and no doubt one that continued – was the visiting star. On 12 May, for example, the bill included 'Mrs Day, from the Theatre Royal, Dublin'. The visits of Charles Bannister (of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane) and Mrs Fox ('of the Royalty Theatre') were mentioned above. In June, there were performances by 'Mr and Mrs Kemble', famous names indeed. The Kemble family were legion: Roger and Sally Kemble had thirteen children (the eldest becoming Mrs Sarah Siddons), all of whom

were to some degree famous on stage. The Kembles who appeared at Reading's Theatre in 1788 were Stephen and his wife Elizabeth.

They were not the only famous visitors in this first season. Mrs Jordan, who three years earlier had become the starring actress at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, graced the Reading Theatre stage too, acting in her current hit, *The Country Girl*, a comedy by David Garrick in which she had performed 'upwards of twenty nights successively' in London. A week later she was billed to play Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Priscilla Tomboy in Bickerstaffe's farce *The Romp*, billed as her final appearance 'on this stage'. The *Reading Mercury* led a chorus of entreaties for her to stay on to 'charm them a night or two longer with her incomparable performance'. Graciously, she stayed a further week and thrilled locals with her 'breeches part' as Sir Harry Wildair in George Farquhar's 1699 comedy *The Constant Couple*. The portrait of Mrs Jordan shown here is as this character and is from the same year as she performed in Reading.

Mrs Jordan had something of a complicated life. Born Dorothea Bland, she adopted the name Mrs Jordan – ladies on the stage were usually called Mrs, regardless of marital status. She was embroiled in various affairs, before, in 1790, becoming the mistress of Prince William, the Duke of Clarence, and bearing some ten 'FitzClarences' over the next seventeen years. By the time the Duke became William IV, however, he had had to sever relations with her, leaving her with custody of their girls (he kept the boys) and a £4,400 annual pension.

This first season of Reading Theatre lasted from mid-May to the beginning of September 1788, some seventeen weeks. Unfortunately, it is not possible completely to recreate the whole season. The *Reading Mercury* carried an advertisement each Monday for that night's programme, but the Theatre was also open on two or three other nights in the week. The programme varied from opening to opening, with rarely if ever the same play on consecutively.

For example, *The School for Scandal* and *The Poor Soldier*, performed on Monday 12 May, were followed on Thursday 15 May by John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, when Charles Bannister, the visiting star, played Captain Macheath, and by John Fletcher's comedy *The Maid of the Mill*. Then, on the following Monday, the troop presented Thomas Arne's opera *Love in a Village*, together with the farce *The Mayor of Garratt* by Samuel Foote. Thus, six different plays in eight days – or more if there were other performances that week.

The number of plays that the company needed to be fluent in, or to be able to learn at very short notice, was quite staggeringly large. The first season contained at least 26 different comedies, operas and farces, and most of the Theatre's troop performed in most of the productions.



THEATRE, READING.
 For the **BENEFIT** of Mrs. **THORNTON.**
 And positively the last Night of Performing this Season.
 On Tuesday next, the 2d of September; inst. will
 be presented the Comedy of the
SUSPICIOUS HUSBAND.
 With an Interlude from **MISS** in her **TEENS**, by
CHILDREN.
 And a new Farce, as now performing at the Theatre Royal
 Haymarket, with the greatest applause, called
The VILLAGE LAWYER;
 (From the original Manuscript.)
 Tickets to be had at the usual Places, and of Mrs.
 Thornton in Gun-street.
 As the Theatre will positively close with the above per-
 formance, Mr. Thornton requests, that any tradesman or
 others, who has demands on himself or any of his Com-
 pany, will please to send in an account of the same, and
 they will be instantly discharged.

The season ended with a 'Benefit' night for the owner's wife, Mrs Thornton. These nights presented the evening's receipts (less Theatre expenses, of course) to the one named, and was seen as a way that the public could show their appreciation for that individual.

There had been quite a few Benefit nights through the season. Each of the visiting stars had had their own Benefit – Mrs Jordan had had two.

As well as Mrs Thornton, some of the company also had a Benefit night: Miss Thornton and Master Hatton shared the proceeds on 11 August, and Mr & Mrs Jackson were the beneficiaries on 18 August.

With the successful season over, the Theatre was closed up. The next performance, opening up the 1789 season, was on Monday 31 August – almost exactly a year later. This second season ran until the end of December, with performances every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Malcolm Summers

NEW PUBLICATIONS

A History of Woodley appeared a couple of months ago, the result of a joint project of the Reading, Wokingham, and Woodley branches of U3A – the University of the Third Age. So, its 22 chapters are the work of different authors, edited by Ann Smith. Some of the authors and their families have lived in Woodley for many years and give much information that won't be recorded elsewhere. The book is well illustrated and contains 357 pages. Copies are available at £10 from the Woodley Town Council Offices at The Oakwood Centre, Headley Road, and from Woodley News in Crockhamwell Road in Woodley, from Fourbears Books in Prospect Street, Caversham, and from the Berkshire Record Office at the top of Castle Hill, Reading. There is also a postal service, for which you need to add on £3.50 for postage and packing. Contact Ann Smith at wokinghamsmith@gmail.com for payment details.

Memorial Tablet: Marlborough House and the First World War is a new book by Paul Mason. Marlborough House was a boys' school on Castle Street, and then on Bath Road. Its war memorial is now at Crosfields School, Shinfield Road, and the book's author is the Head of History there. He has been able to research the names of the fallen, and some of the survivors. He says: 'Perhaps most fascinating is that I have been able to tell the story of the whole war through this book, such was the involvement of the Marlborough House old boys. It is of appeal to anyone interested in the First World War, education history, school history, and the history of Reading.' The book costs £12.50, plus £2.50 for postage and packing, and can be ordered from the Crosfields School website – www.crosfields.com/memorial-tablet-book-sign-up

Two Rivers Press have recently published a book with the title *Coley Talking: Realities of Life in Old Reading*, by Margaret Ounsley. Many of us will have read *Talking of Coley* (1990) and *More Talking of Coley* (1991), the result of an oral history project of the Coley

Local History Group. The new book gives us these two small books again but adds an excellent introductory chapter on the area before living memory, and a closing chapter, *Coley Moves On – Clearance, the War, and Redevelopment*. It costs £12.99, and is available from all good bookshops, as they say.

David Cliffe

Not to mention:

In addition to his part in *Abbot Cook to Zerodegrees*, the Editor has published a small book 'in his own write' (to quote the late John Lennon). This is entitled *Sent from Reading* and subtitled *Reading's Part in Overseas Missions 1790-1950*. It relates the story of a large number of pastors, teachers, medical missionaries, and mission-founders (not to mention a shoemaker) who had connections with Reading and is priced at £8 for society members. If you would like a copy, contact the Editor by phone or email (note new email address) or send a cheque made out to Mr J B Dearing for £12 to include post and packing to the address shown on Page 1.

A NOTE FROM THE TREASURER

2022 Subscriptions are due from 1 January. Membership remains at £9 for the year. Since our January meeting will be on Zoom (19 Jan, A Brief History of Reading Gaol), and only available to members, please note that if you wish to join that meeting you will need to have paid your subscription by then. Members who have set up annual bank transfers may need to move the payment date to early January.

You can pay by:

- bank transfer - our bank details are unaltered from last year, but please email historyofreadingsociety@yahoo.com if you need to know them. Please always put your name as reference for the payment.
- cheque - by post to me (my address is at the top of this Newsletter).
- cash - if at an 'in-person' meeting of the Society.

Because of bank fees on cheques and cash, bank transfer is the best method, where possible.

I am aware that it used to be the case that payments before the new year were not desired, but that is not the case now. Please pay as soon as you wish!

One last thing, please make sure that you complete an Application Form to Join or Renew, as this keeps the permission to hold your details and contact you in your preferred way(s) up to date, according to 'GDPR' (General Data Protection Regulation) rules. The completed form can be scanned or photographed and emailed to me, or posted, or handed to me at an 'in-person' meeting. If you need a copy of the form (which is with the Programme), please email historyofreadingsociety@yahoo.com

Thank you.

Malcolm Summers

Members are further 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 further contributions from the rest of the membership!