

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 1994

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING- MARCH 1994

Chairman's Review and Report

The Place

There must be general agreement that the Abbey Room continues to provide comfortable, well-lit accommodation for the Society's meetings; and having the use of the kitchen is convenient. The parking is reasonable (although it would be nice to have more light on it! Those who remember the stairs, the draughts and the indifferent level of lighting in the Abbey Gateway must agree that we have made an improvement! We are grateful to Bent Weber for smoothing our communications with the library authorities.

The People

Any society is the people who are its members. We are grateful to the core of members who come so faithfully each

month and whose faces are always missed when they are absent.

We are pleased that the membership continues to hover around the 50 mark. However, in a town of Reading's size with a population of around 150,000 there *must* be potential members who just don't know that we exist. Any ideas for publicising the Society are always welcome, and we are grateful to Mr Norman Wicks for his work as our publicity officer, but the best publicity is always when an individual member recommends the Society to a friend.

The Programme

It is always interesting in reviewing a year's programme to think which talks stand out most in one's memory. They have been an

interesting and varied collection. It is always difficult in planning a programme to strike a balance - to find something for the newer member who knows little or nothing about Reading's history but also to add something to the knowledge of someone who knows a great deal.

Everyone enjoyed Douglas Noyes 'Then and Now' presentation and we hope he will come and present part two in the 1994-5 programme.

The excellent follow-up talk to our walk-about in Wokingham I hope inspired some people to go back and have another look at the town.

And then we went well beyond Reading's borders to enjoy visits to two German towns, Augsburg and Dusseldorf. Perhaps one day we might manage an exchange visit with Dusseldorf's History Society.

The party was, as always, a happy friendly occasion where the food, the company, the music and the wartime souvenirs which Mr Harris brought were all much appreciated. We even had a visiting evacuee!

Since our parties have now covered Romans in Reading, medieval Reading, Victorian Reading, Upstairs/Downstairs Edwardian Reading - I feel the only theme left is possibly "stone-Age Reading" when we can all sit in a circle on the floor dressed in old bits of fur, grunting at each other and eating raw meat and a variety of berries. (The evening might even be enlivened by a visit from animal rights activists) I defy Mr Harris to supply suitable music for *that!*

Our programme isn't finished however, and we look forward to Joan Dils' walk around Lower Caversham on 16 June, and Mrs Aldridge's guided walk in Whitchurch on 14 July.

I cannot step down as Chairman without expressing my *very* grateful thanks to all my fellow committee members. Mr Hutchinson's report represents many hours of hard work, for which we thank him. Mr Russell has received - and written - all our letters. Mr

Harris has produced our newsletter. Mr Weber has not only arranged this year's programme but has also provided a book box full of all-too-tempting local history books from the library. It's good to see that this has proved popular with members. Mr Goodridge provides us with coffee and washes up afterwards (incidentally, we need a volunteer to look after the coffee from September).

The Committee ladies have hosted committee meetings, provided invaluable help with the cooking and organisation of the party and have always been on hand to provide a friendly welcome at the meetings - to them all - thank you.

Elsbet Naish

READING BOARD SCHOOLS (1871 - 1900)

Those which remain, many still in use as educational establishments of one kind or another, even today, impress by their solid massive appearance, towering above the surrounding Victorian rows of terrace housing, like great citadels from a bygone age.

How and why was it that this transformation of the local scene came about, and what was it which spurred on reluctant and grudging local authorities to lend their support to the new schools?

Towards the end of the last century, parliamentarians, local worthies and commercial interests, were concerned about the considerable number of children in our country who were outside the reach of any form of education. Alarm about foreign competition especially from Germany, was allied to fears about deprived and destitute children who could neither read, write, nor pray.

The movement to get something done about this, was spearheaded in Parliament by W.E. Forster, a Quaker MP sometime described as the best kind of conservative Liberal. His education act of 1870 laid the

foundations for an entirely new concept, free, universal education for all.

Reading's part in all of this, began in 1871 with a meeting in the Reading Council Chamber, when the hope was expressed that a School Board could be provided in the town, without a contested election for places on the Board. In the event, the election was hotly contested, with candidates from the Anglican and Non-conformist interests.

Evidence of the feeling at the time comes from an unsigned letter to the Reading Mercury dated March 9th 1871, which deplored the setting up of a "Godless Board, which could do the Devils work".

Of the twelve nominees for the Board eight were elected, this prompted the Mayor of Reading to comment "I do not anticipate that their labours will be onerous, the town is better provided with schools than most places."

Pupils for the new schools were to be recruited by circulars, distributed to parents, supplemented by personal canvassing by the town's Sergeants At Mace.

Temporary schoolrooms were opened in hired rooms in Coley Street, Silver Street and Katesgrove Lane. This operation was supervised by two local businessmen, Martin Hope Sutton, and Mr Palmer, who offered financial assistance and expertise, following up their previous pioneer work in the Ragged School movement

By 1876, about half of the total child population in England was being educated, while in the Borough of Reading it was estimated at the time, that some 84% of local children were in school.

These figures are highly suspect, however, as Board School Committee Minutes, and early school log books reveal that many children attend infrequently, and in fact, the number of local absentees and truants increased between 1874 and 1877.

School Attendance Officers were appointed to deal with this problem, but as one S.A.O.

wrote in his report to the Board, " I regret that my efficiency is not furthered by prompt and ready means of sending to school the number of destitute children who daily come under my observation." (December 4th 1871)

Some children were absent for health reasons or for work demands, others simply lacked shoes and clothing. One boy, Thomas Gough, was observed intoxicated in the street Two other boy entrants were traced to the Newbury Lock-Up, where they were detained for stealing fruit

Board School Teachers struggled to educate children who were often listless, apathetic or so downright starving, that the Board decreed meals of soup and bread for them at the Rising Sun Coffee Tavern, in Silver Street.

Some idea of the difficulty experienced in the first Reading Board School classes, can be seen from the records of "dirty and uncleanly scholars", who with the agreement of their parents were to be washed in school time, by a woman who was specially employed to clean up children who arrived for lessons in a dirty and often verminous condition.

Actual classroom conditions varied, but as the Principal Teacher of the Coley Street School reported "In the winter months much time is wasted, and the discipline suffers in consequence of the darkness of the rooms", he added "as the Committee are unable to recommend the provision of gas lighting (although the town streets had some gas lights from 1819 onwards) I wish the Committee to take into consideration the advisability of putting two more windows.."

The official reply was that further time was needed for consideration of this request, but in the meantime, the walls of the schoolrooms could be washed and coloured.

As one school was only fitted out with infant desks, older children had to stand, until it was realised that larger desks would have to be provided.

Apart from suffering excessive cold in winter due to inadequate heating, and overheating in summer due to lack of ventilation, it is not surprising that *many* children preferred to be out hop picking, black berrying, gathering acorns, or working, quite illegally, in the wider world outside school.

Then there was the added impediment for poor parents, of school fees. In some areas, board schools were charging 6d a week while in another area labourer's children were assessed at 2d a week, farmer's children at 3d per week.

Reading's rule was to charge 2d a week for the first child, and an additional penny for other children in the same family. In practice, with so much local poverty, many children arrived for lessons at the beginning of the week, and were withdrawn by mid-week, or excluded for non-payment of fees.

The problem of "irrecoverable arrears" became so acute, that reluctantly the Reading School Board was obliged to write these amounts out of their accounts.

By 1886 the National Liberal Federation, amongst others, was committed to a policy of free schools, and the complete abolition of fees.

Cramping restrictions on what was taught, rigid supervision and inspection of schools, together with the "poor relation" approach to State or Council schools, stifled for many years what is now accepted as normal practice in English education.

School premises of a convenient and more commodious kind followed slowly, after frequent ultimatums over grants from Government in London, so that it was not until the late 1880's that the now familiar Board School buildings like E.P. Collier (Swansea Road Board School) , Oxford Road School, Katesgrove and others were erected.

Altogether, it took nearly thirty years of local and national effort, for Reading's Board Schools to attract pupils and teachers of sufficient quality and quantity, to rival the

alternatives of independent and private schooling in the town.

R S Bray

THOMAS COLE OF READING

Thomas Cole was a famous clothier (i.e. cloth maker) in Reading and is reported to have had 100 manservants and 40 maidservants and to have employed about 300 others; carders, spinners, dyers, fullers, weavers etc. in his business. Numerous anecdotes attest to his standing in the community; one well-known one refers to the occasion when King Henry I, riding to Wales to subdue an uprising, was delayed on the road for about an hour when he met about 200 of Thomas Cole's wagons travelling to London laden with cloth to sell. His Majesty was ill-pleased at being held up, and later, during the same journey, was delayed again by the cloth wagons of Gray of Gloucester and of William of Worcester.

These three together with Sutton of Salisbury, Dove of Exeter, and Simon of Southampton, who all took a different route to London, as also did Cuthbert of Kendal, Hodgekins of Halifax, and Martin Byram of Manchester from the north country, all were in the habit of meeting at Bosomes Inn at London.

This story, told by Thomas Deloney in his book "Thomas of Reading, or the Six Worthie Yeoman of the West" was written in 1612 nearly 500 years after Henry I's death which was almost 200 years before Thomas Cole's time, so although widely quoted, is somewhat suspect.

Another interesting story from Deloney's book tells how the clothiers, having spent a few days bargaining with the buyers, then started on their return journeys. Thomas Cole was wont to spend the night at an inn near Colnbrook and used to hand over to the landlady for safe custody at night, the large sums of money he had received for his cloth. Jarman, the innkeeper, had previously been a carpenter, and with envious eyes on

the money, had devised a cunning mechanism by which the floor of the bedroom could be tilted, pitching the sleeper into a large vat of boiling water. Jarman had operated this contraption successfully a few times but Thomas Cole was the last victim of this diabolical trick. Suspicion being aroused, Jarman and his wife were both convicted and hanged, and the inn was afterwards burnt to the ground by command of the King.

Thomas Cole's widow bequeathed "a mightie summe of money" towards the maintenance of the "new-builded monasterie at Reading".

Norman Wicks

THE GREYFRIARS

In 1233 a group of Franciscan monks (Greyfriars) arrived in Reading armed with a letter from Pope Gregory IX ordering the Abbot of Reading to provide them with land so that they could build a friary. Reading Abbey owned virtually all the land in Reading but the Abbot was none too pleased, to say the least, at having another monastic order on his doorstep. However, a requirement from the Pope was not to be treated lightly and had to be complied with. For reasons we can only guess, the Greyfriars were given a plot just south of the Thames by Caversham Bridge. It just happened that the donated land, little better than a swamp, was regularly flooded, cutting off the Friary from the town.

In 1282, the Franciscan Archbishop of Canterbury intervened in the plight of the Greyfriars and three years later they were given a plot of land at the west end of Friar Street which was then known as New Street. Here they completed in 1311, a large church, the main fabric of which remains today.

For another 227 years the Friars continued in their work of providing relief for the sick and poor of Reading but in 1538, Doctor John London, acting on the orders of Thomas Cromwell, arrived to oversee the dissolution of the Friary. He closed down the Grey Friars, disposed of the Friary valuables and defaced the stained glass and church interior. When the Friars left, the townsfolk looted the building and carried off anything of value.

Reading Council took over the derelict church of the Friary in 1543 as a Guildhall. Although not really suitable, being so cold and uncomfortable, the building continued in use as the Guildhall until about 1570.

In 1578 and for the next twelve years, the building was in use as a workhouse and hospital for the poor. Then in 1590, it became a "House of Correction" for the punishment of idle and vagrant persons. The building became the town "bridewell" (a 16th Century term for a prison) in 1631 where prisoners were housed in small cells in the aisles of the former church. Even in winter there was no heating and a straw bed provided the only furniture. The prison had no kitchen so the prisoners diet consisted of bread and water.

At the turn of the century, the roof covering the centre section of the church was unsafe and had to be removed. The uncovered part became the exercise yard with an earth privy in the centre. This state of affairs remained until 1844 when the prisoners were transferred to the new county gaol in Forbury Road.

In 1863 the Greyfriars derelict building was restored as a church by the borough surveyor. Evidence of its history remains in the form of the magnificent west window, medieval floor tiles and the names of former prisoners scratched into the columns.

Ron Harris

SUBSCRIPTIONS

If you find a red star alongside, then your subscription for 1994, which became due on 1st. January, is still unpaid. If you would like to renew your subscription the Hon. Treasurer would be pleased to hear from you. The rates are £7.50 for a single member (£5.00 if retired or a student), £10.00 for a couple (£7.50 if retired).

WHAT A SURPRISE

One Saturday just recently, My husband and I had our three Grandsons for the day and thought that we would spend part of the morning with them in the new Museum of Reading. We spent a long time looking around. I must say that I can thoroughly recommend it, especially to Reading people. It is so interesting; so much to look at - write-ups, photos and videos. And it's free!

I have digressed. We were on our way out when one of the staff came up to me and asked if I was local, to which I proudly said 'Yes for 60 something years'. She then said that I was the 100,000 visitor to the museum since it reopened last year and would I accept a bouquet?

To say I was totally surprised is the understatement of the year. I can't remember what I said to the young lady who gave me the news, but I do know that when someone came along with the beautiful huge bouquet I said 'I think I am going to cry'.

The staff were all so lovely and soon had me laughing. They invited me to join them at the museum two weeks later for an official reception, when I would receive a gilt and have pictures taken for the press. I returned home in a dream.

On the appointed day, I arrived with Ron, my husband, at the museum with knocking knees. As you know, Marks and Spencer is almost opposite the Town Hall and I suggested to Ron that I spent the time in there looking around, but of course that plea fell on deaf ears.

My fears were unfounded; everyone was so nice and made us, or rather, me feel at ease. I was presented with a huge basket of 'goodies', all items from the museum gift shop which I shall treasure. The press took photos of me with the Mayor of Reading and the Mayor of Clonmel, Ireland who *only* the previous day had signed and sealed the twinning of our two towns. The final picture was taken of me sitting on a throne with a velvet cloak draped around my shoulders, but instead of holding an orb and sceptre, I was asked to hold *my* basket of "goodies".

The event was completed with a small buffet. I think I had something to eat, can't remember much. I was in such a daze. The whole occasion was very nice and I am so grateful to all concerned in choosing me. I must add they were lucky in picking someone who has lived in Reading all her life and who just loves the town.

Mollie Harris

GUIDED WALKS

16th June '94 - Lower Caversham

Led by Joan Dils, the walk will take approximately one hour. Meet at 7.30 PM inside the Adult Education Centre, School Lane Caversham. Please do not park within the centre complex but in the adjacent Waitrose car park which is free of restrictions at that time.

14th July '94 -Whitchurch

Led by Barbara Aldridge, the Whitchurch village walk-about is preceded by a riverside picnic. Park and meet at Walliscote Farm, Whitchurch (north of the toll bridge) at 7.15 PM.

Mr Bent Weber, has kindly volunteered to try and arrange transportation for those who cannot get there under their own arrangements.

Don't forget your stout shoes and umbrellas.