

# The History of Reading Society

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

## Hon. Secretary

Mr P Russell  
5 Wilmington Close  
Woodley  
Reading RG5 4LR

Phone: (0118) 969 6081

## Chair

Mr BC Weber

## Hon. Treasurer

Mr R Hutchinson  
19 Rosehill Parle  
Caversham  
Reading RG4 8XE

Phone: (0 118) 947 9379

## SUMMER1996

### EDITORIAL

For reasons given below, since the Society's Annual General Meeting way back in March, the editorship of this Newsletter has passed to the Chair of the Society to undertake, albeit on a temporary basis. Nevertheless it has meant that the Newsletter having to join my priority list of many other commitments with the result that its production has been much delayed: this I as Chair and temporary Editor much regret as it does not provide you - our members - the service and information that we should like. Please accept my personal apologies in this - as you will note also below, my period as editor has been limited to this one edition so I hope that my failings will be limited! In turn I must thank in advance Elspet Naish - my predecessor as Chair of the Society - for offering to edit this Newsletter in future. This is much appreciated

Because this is the first newsletter since the AGM in March, you will find as part of its contents both my *Annual Review* as Chair of the past year and the *Report* by our Hon. Treasurer, Bob Hutchinson. This is to highlight to the whole membership, the increasingly parlous state **the** Society-your Society- finds itself in with what appears to be ever-decreasing membership. I should like to think that in the next 9 months, this trend may be reversed. From this edition onwards, the Newsletter will also include summaries of our current speakers' talks - we hope that most of our members will still be able to come to the talks which will obviously be much fuller than in bland print, but we do appreciate that for one reason or another, they may have to be missed. But first there are a number of brief but items of concern to all.

Bent C Weber, Chair - late summer 1996

### DEATHS

It is with deep regret that the Society has to record the passing during the first few months of this year of three of its most ardent supporters over the years:

**Bert Rivers:** died in February aged 93. Born and educated in Reading, he lived in or near the town throughout his life during which worked for Huntley and Palmers for 50 years. He was organist &

choirmaster at several local churches including finally St Lawrence's which coincided with a vice presidency of the Berkshire Organists Association. He always retained an interest in archaeology and local history - he was one of the founding members of this Society, and remained a keen member till his death. His considerable contribution to the Society was recognised by his election an honorary member.

Ron Harris died in April after being ill for some months. Many will recall that he was the editor of this Society's newsletter for a few years though he and his wife Molly stood down from the committee at this year's AGM: it was not then realised how ill he was. All who heard him give his 2 talks on his boyhood life as a London evacuee in "rural" Berkshire will remember his humour and the fun he experienced which led to his evacuation being made permanent. He was a keen contributor behind the scenes to the Society's well-being - for example arranging excellent accommodation for Committee meetings out at Pegasus Court, Tilehurst or providing appropriate music at the Society's buffet/socials. He has been much missed. The Society was represented at his funeral in early May.

Peter Southerton - again another of the founding members of the Society with his wife Mary - died in May. He had been ill for some months. Graeme & Elspet Naish represented the Society at his funeral in Cheltenham. Peter in his quiet way was a tower of strength to the Society, with his very extensive knowledge of local history and in particular the penal arrangements over time. He was the author of several books on Reading which are a mine of historical information to all who would follow in his footsteps: these will remain a fitting memorial to his memory as far as this Society is concerned. Nevertheless the Society again recognised his - and that of Mary - contribution by their election as honorary members.

To the families and relatives of these outstanding friends of the Society, we would wish to express the Society's deepest condolences coupled with our grateful thanks for their contributions over the years. We are indeed fortunate to have known them.

## **PROGRAMME FOR THE FORTHCOMING YEAR: 1996 - 1997**

With this issue of the Newsletter comes your programme card giving full details of the forthcoming year's programme. Once again we are indebted to Joan Hutchinson for arranging such an interesting series of talks and visits. The programme card itself is an innovation which we hope will meet with approval - it should enable us to inexpensively publicise our Society more widely and we hope bring in more support and interest. The other innovation is to try our first Saturday afternoon meeting (on 18 January 1997) - we hope that the Abbey Room and the talk by Paddy Derry on Twyford will provide a welcome contrast to the hassle and bustle of January sales shopping or gloomy wintry days.

Mind you, before then we hope to see as many as possible at our meetings starting with the talk on **19 Sept** to be given by Dr. Tony Corley on *Jane Austen in Reading*. To those who watched the recent TV adaptations of 'Pride & Prejudice' or 'Sense & Sensibility' generating revived interest in Jane Austen or who await to see 'Emma', this talk is a MUST! This goes too for those who heard Tony Corley - an old friend of the Society - give his University public lecture in early spring: that was certainly an event!

Given all this, the essential is that all who come will be most welcome - we look forward to meeting both old friends and new. Do come along and bring some newcomers too.

## **A G M 1996: REPORT & REVIEW FROM THE CHAIR FOR 1995/1996**

Another 12 months have gone by since I last stood before you at our Annual General Meeting, yet again how quickly that time seems to have gone by or has it? In one sense, no time has elapsed - we are still faced by the same underlying problem I highlighted 12 months ago though it has become even more urgent. Yet in

another sense, with us now entering the last few months of the current programme, we have enjoyed a full year of interest and enlightenment - and that is what the Society is all about. *Can we resolve these two opposites!*

At the risk of repeating myself, the underlying problem **and my message is this:** unless some means emerges to reverse the trend of our declining membership, the Society will not be able to survive for many more years. The past year has again seen another very substantial fall. Admittedly we have welcomed a few new members, but against this must be set a further and dramatic fall in our overall membership. I shall leave it to our Treasurer, Bob Hutchinson, to spell out the details and how it is reflected in our financial position. However at this rate of decline - from 46 to 35 in total membership in 2 years - the Society, your **Society**, is in danger of entering a no - win situation. And this I must stress is your/ our Society. We are of course more than pleased to welcome our new members - but so few in a town (or City) of this size! Why? Can I ask all of us to take our situation seriously and try to encourage friends (and relatives) to join and come to our meetings, even more - take an active part in making the Society more active, more part of the community called Reading and that includes more than just the borough. Bring them along as guests to begin with, then ask them to sign on the dotted line as members.

Your Committee - with its limited resources - is trying to encourage a bigger audience. We have had a sustained poster and leaflet through the libraries and museums. Unfortunately advertising elsewhere can become very expensive. Again your help and thoughts on this will be welcome. Equally we are reviewing the contents of our programme, even the meeting time and day but more of this (or the future).

Speaking of your Committee, we are about to lose 3 of our valued members of the Committee: I hope by the end of these proceedings this evening, we shall be able to welcome 3 replacements. As I recently wrote in the latest edition of the Society's Newsletter, the Committee is really only able to function well with its full complement.

Now for the actual past 12 months. After last year's AGM, the 1994/95 session still had 2 meetings and 1 or 2 summer outings on the stocks. I hope that many recall the interesting talk we had 12 months ago tonight after the AGM given by John Starr on *Weather, Climate & History*. April's talk was by Judith Hunter waxing lyrically on journeying *To Reading By Coach*. As May's original speaker, David Skilton, was taken seriously ill, we were most grateful to Ron Harris stepping in and giving the second part of his autobiographical *An Evacuee's Life in the Reading Area*. We followed up Sue Read's very popular wintertime talk on *Silchester* by a guided walk led by Dr. Stephen Rippon of the University Archaeology Dept. This despite the unseasonably cold wet weather last June (it was just before last summer's heatwave!) was of considerable interest with over 20 joining us for the afternoon. However our attempt to arrange a July evening boat trip on the Kennet & Avon Canal sadly foundered on very little interest - the first occasion in the past 12 months.

Joan Hutchinson very kindly took on the work of organising the 1995/96 programme. So to her we owe a considerable debt of gratitude this year in providing so many good speakers on so many interesting topics concerning Reading. September saw *Aviation in Berkshire* given by Geoffrey Becket; October gave us Chris Bergmann who spoke on *Policing in Reading* (personally I regret that I missed that talk but recuperation after an operation precluded my presence. Still I look forward - as indeed I hope we all do - to the visit in July to the *Police Museum at Sulhumpstead*). In November, Dr Gillian Clarke's talk on *Foundlings in 18th Century Reading* was a real highlight and tour de force for the Society, with a greatly enhanced audience fascinated by her talk. Our President, Dr Cecil Slade, spoke on *Medieval Reading* in December: a salutary reminder that Reading's past then was not a bed of roses. In January we had our second and even greater disappointment of the year- *the Party. Social* had to be cancelled due to very limited support. This we feel may be symptomatic of a sea change for small societies like ours when such social events may have exceeded their best before dates. Finally last month - in contrast to last year's 2 explorations of the

experiences of a wartime evacuee in Reading, we had a return visit from Barbara Aldridge who spoke on *Whitchurch in Wartime*: another greatly appreciated evening's talk. But then we must thank all our speakers and guides over the year.

In saying this, in no way do I wish to belittle the efforts of your officers (Peter Russell, our Secretary; Bob Hutchinson, our Treasurer - you will be hearing more from him in a little while & Joan Hutchinson whom I have already mentioned as our Programme Organiser.) Sadly we are having to say farewell to Ron Harris, our Newsletter editor and his wife Molly as well as Elizabeth Hodgson - we are most grateful to all 3 and wish them well. Finally I must not forget Francis Goodridge & Margaret Russell of your Committee. My grateful thanks to them all for supporting me as the Chair so well over the past 12 months and for providing so pleasant a time for all of us.

*TREASURER'S REPORT FOR 1995: 'Expenditure Up, Income Down, Membership Down.'*  
(Please see the Annual Accounts enclosed)

Sadly, after two years with a surplus of income over expenditure, in 1995 we had a deficit of £55.72. We spent £68 more on speakers than in 1994. On average the amount spent on speakers in the past has been £40 to £60 p a, so the 1994 figure of £32.50 was low, whereas the 1995 figure of £100 was high compared with the average. This almost equates with the 1992 figure of £112. So our grateful thanks are again due to those speakers who gave us valuable support by declining a fee.

Subscriptions for 1995 were down on 1994 by £42.50, though surprisingly bank interest was up a little. The surplus on sales of coffee was £15, disappointedly down by £17 on last year - a disappointment too to the kind folk who supply the goods and their helpers. A very big 'thank you' to them all.

Visitors' contributions - increased to £1.00 per person last September - have gone up by £28. Hopefully this will be even higher for the full year.

The New Year Party surplus was down by £41. This year it had to be cancelled due to lack of support: only 16 asked for tickets in advance. So no party surplus this year.

Membership continued to decrease: now 35 compared with 41 in 1994. Fourteen 1994 memberships were not renewed in 1995: this continued the trend of 17 non-renewals in the previous year. In contrast there were 6 new members in 1995 and so far this year 4.

If there is no further decrease in members, the 10% increase in the subscription from 1 January this year should produce an extra £23 surplus, but it does look as if it will have to go up by a further 10% next year.

Finally the Treasurer thanked Mr Naish for auditing the accounts.

## **READING CENTRAL LIBRARY: COUNTY LOCAL STUDIES LIBRARY**

The County Studies Library reopened on 1 May on the third floor of the Central Library. For those who have been not yet been up to the 3rd floor: there are many new features

1. a large new area
2. more seating
3. more books on open access
4. separate area for microfilm and fiche
5. drinks and snacks machines available

David Cliffe, the County Reference Librarian and Margaret Smith, Librarian are in charge and are keen to welcome users - new and old - & guests.