

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

Hon. Secretary

Mr P Russell
5 Wilmington Close
Woodley
Reading RG5 4LR
Phone: (0118) 969 6081

Chair

Mr B C Weber

Hon. Treasurer

Mr R Hutchinson
19 Rosehill Park
Caversham
Reading RG4 8XE

Phone: (0118) 947 9379

Editorial

Dear Members

In the Spring Newsletter, I wrote in the middle of a hailstorm - now, in this summer edition, I write in a heatwave, but with thoughts towards autumn.

The 1997-8 programme is enclosed (starting appropriately, I note, with "Restoration" and ending up in the cemetery!) Do make a note of the meetings in your diary - they all look interesting.

HELP! Some pairs of hands are needed to help make and serve the coffee at meetings; and is there anyone could come a little early to meetings and help put out the chairs? Please contact Peter Russell if you could help the committee in either of these small but much appreciated ways.

Thank You - to Norman Wicks, who for many years has written an account of our meetings for the local press. Norman now feels he wants to retire, and while I myself am willing to write an account of each meeting, a contact with the press would be so useful. Does anyone know of a person who might be able to forward articles, and to encourage the editors to print them? If so, ring me

I look forward to seeing you again on September 18th. at 7.30 p.m.

Elsbeth Naish

Professor Goldwin Smith

Each time I visit my dentist I see a sign beside the door, which I realised called for a little investigation. The sign reads:-

"This house was the birthplace of Professor Goldwin Smith, DCL, born August 13, 1823, died at Toronto June 7, 1910."

His father, Richard Pritchard Smith, son of a Yorkshire rector, and leading Reading physician, helped to establish the G.W.R. and became a director of that company. In 1822 he and his wife Elizabeth moved to that 18th. Century (Georgian) house in Friar Street, which is now the entrance to the Harris Arcade, and their son, Goldwin, was born in the following year. Elizabeth died when Goldwin was only 10 years old, leaving five children-three boys and two girls - but Goldwin was the only one to reach maturity. The others, their names now barely legible, are buried in the family tomb in St. Laurence's churchyard, on the right hand side as one enters from Friar Street. In addition a brass plate was fixed on the North wall of the church as a memorial to them all - Richard Pritchard Smith himself, his wife Elizabeth and second wife Katherine, his son Arthur who died aged 17, and Frederick, Emily and Eliza, who all died in infancy.

Goldwin was educated at a preparatory school near Bath, then Eton and Christ Church, Oxford. Having matriculated, he transferred to Magdalen and, after taking his degree, moved on to University College, Later he became Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, a position he resigned in 1866, because he felt he should tend his father who had met with a railway accident in 1848, which left him with such a disturbed mental balance that eventually he committed suicide in 1867.

Goldwin, the sole survivor of this unfortunate family, then moved to America, where he occupied the Chair of English and Constitutional History in the newly opened Cornell University. After a few years he and his American wife, Harriet, moved to Canada where other branches of his family were settled. They lived in a fine old house in Toronto. Here he devoted himself to literary work, as he had independent means. He returned at least twice to Reading to speak, once on the subject of the Irish Church and once on the Temperance Question.

Goldwin Smith, almost forgotten today, was once a renowned controversialist, and a speaker and writer on numerous subjects about which he felt strongly. For example he opposed the Boer War, and disliked the British Empire, urging the cause of freeing the colonies from British rule, some 50-60 years before such thinking became acceptable.

He died in Toronto in 1910, and two years later Dr. J.B. Hurry gave an oil painting of him by John Russell to Reading Corporation. So with that painting, the plaque beside his father's one-time front door in Friar Street, the family tomb in St. Laurence's churchyard, the brass plate in the church, and an appreciation of him written by John James Cooper and published in 1923, memories of his works and deeds are still available in the town of his birth to those who care to look for them.

Norman Wicks

STOP PRESS!

Please note that the car park under the old Prudential building will be closed permanently from 31st. August, as the building is being demolished.

The nearest alternative car park for the Library is the multi-story in Queen's Road, which is free in the evenings.

Summer Walkabouts

June The 19th. June saw some thirty members and friends meet for a guided walk along the Kennet to Newtown. Our guide was architect Ken Major. In spite of the rain we all found looking at Reading's buildings through the eyes of an expert most interesting, and I think that all of us agreed with him how sad it was that so many ugly modern buildings had been put up, and that so many of the houses in the Newtown terraces had been spoilt by pebble-dash and by inappropriate replacement windows and doors.

July This walk, held on a glorious summer evening was led by Paddy Derry. She showed us many buildings that one does not notice when driving through the village, but which are interesting, and a walk-about gives the opportunity to stand and stare. We were privileged to go into the council chamber and the courtyard of the almshouses, before major improvements are made to the residents' accomodation later this year.

The church of St. James the Great at Ruscombe proved to be the highlight of the tour. The 13th. Century wall paintings by the East window are thought to be by monks from Reading Abbey.; and from more recent times there is an impressive vestry door carved by a local man in 1912. Other treasures - too many to be listed in a newsletter - are detailed in an excellent guide. If you have not visited St. James, do go. The church is normally open during the day.

Lectures

During the winter months the WEA and Reading University are running their usual interesting courses and day schools. Details can be had from (0118) 950 9276 or (0118) 931 8347. For those interested in Reading I see that Joan Dils is running a course on "Getting to know the Reading Area" on Thursday evenings from 15th. January, and on Monday evenings from 28th. April there is a series on "Living in Berkshire from 1800 - 1900". The Town Hall lectures this year start on Tuesday 27th. January. The theme is "Literature in the Thames Valley".