

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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Dear Members

Those of us who enjoy being members of the Society are so grateful to the faithful few who keep it running.

Every year we appeal for new folk to join the committee (the duties involved can't be described as arduous!) and I would again ask you if you would consider becoming involved in this way.

Between now and May we have three meetings planned; March 19 is the A.G.M., on April 16 Margaret Smith will take us round the Local Studies library and talk about it, and in May there will be a talk on oral history.

Following Joan Dils excellent talk in December on the de la Pole family in Ewelme we are having a "walkabout" there in June.

A big "thank you" to Norman Wicks for giving us such an excellent article on The Oracle. I am always very grateful for articles for publication.

Elspet Naish

THE GUILDHALL AND THE ORACLE

The redevelopment of the area of Reading lying between Minster Street and the Kennet has provided an excellent opportunity for archaeologists to uncover and examine some of the ancient buildings of the town. The first part of note to be excavated was the old Guildhall beside Yieldhall Lane, and though not open for general inspection I was allowed to go in and take a picture or two of its ancient foundations.

It was built there in 1420, but was not satisfactory as the nearby Kennet was used by washerwomen who used to beat their clothes with battledores, and the resulting clamour tended to smother the profound discussions of the mayor and burgesses.

The opportunity to move from there came after Henry VIII's suppression of the monasteries and we can read in "Records of Reading" that the Guild Merchant moved into "le body et lez syde iles Ecclesie Domus dudum Fratrum Minorum vulgariter nuncupatorum lez Grey Freres de Redyng", which it goes on to say the Guild Merchant had lately received by the gift and concession of the King. It seems that they had commenced their occupation on 20th. November 1545 and paid a peppercorn rent of a "centesimum partum unius feodi militaris", which a later writer has called one obolus; this was a term applied in the Middle Ages to a small coin, usually a halfpenny.

More recently, at the other end of the new development area near to Gun Street, the excavation of the Oracle site was opened to the public one Saturday in August; it proved a tremendously popular move for more than 3000 people visited on that day and there was quite a queue waiting to go in. Immediately inside there was a Portacabin laid out

with artefacts which had been unearthed, and descriptions of what had been discovered; after which one was conducted along the outside of the excavations and heard the experts telling us what we were looking at.

It was thanks to a legacy of £7500 left for that purpose by John Kendrick in 1624 that the place was built, it being his intention to support the small clothiers by providing accommodation and financial support for them to carry on their work. The place decided on for this purpose was quadrangular, 150 feet by 100 feet approximately, enclosing a rectangular courtyard with workshops on its four sides. The Holybrook ran through it, as can be seen from the excavation, and south of this stream the workshops were occupied by dyers, and south of that again was a large garden. On the side nearest to Gun Street Henry Deane obtained use of one of the sheds for making pins, and several were found there. In addition hemp and flax were used in the manufacture of sacking. Candlewicks, ribbons, and sailcloth were other productions.

No-one knows how "Oracle" came to be the name given to the place, but a drug known as Orchal, known as Oricello in Italy, and used in dyeing, came from the Canary Islands via Italy. Large quantities were stored here and this is one possible derivation of the name.

In 1642 during the Civil War it was converted to a barracks for the various troops of soldiers who were stationed in Reading at differing times, and provided with wood and coals at the expense of the town. After the war it reverted to its previous role until 1762 when, being partly unoccupied it was fixed on for a workhouse for the poor of Reading's three parishes.

" Owing to misuse of the legacy, in 1849 Christ's Hospital in London was able to claim the money, as allowed for in a clause in John Kendrick's will, and the life of the Oracle came to an end. It was demolished in 1850. The oak gates, however, carved

- with the initials J. K. and the date of 1628, hung for a long time as the entrance to a large private house in Tilehurst Road, on the north side about 100 yards west of Prospect Street. They were taken down in the 1960's when James Butcher built Taylor Court, one of his retirement homes there, and were given to Kendrick Girls School. Now they are held in Reading museum.

In late September an ancient tannery was unexpectedly discovered beneath what had been Kendrick's Oracle, consisting of 20 pits in which animal hides were treated for up to two years to convert them into leather, and the Oxford Archaeological Unit pronounced it as being a very good example of an early tannery. Wooden barrels sealed with day puddle would have been sunk in the pits which are each 4ft. wide and 3ft. deep. The clay of course remains but the timber has rotted away. This tannery had been completely forgotten, but many older people will remember another one still operating at the corner of Katesgrove Lane and Southampton Street as late as the 1920's.

Later excavation at the same place uncovered the foundations of a medieval building of the 12th. Century. These foundations were 4ft. below the tannery and were of flint and chalk one metre thick and were of great importance because they were built of stone, a rarely used material at that time. It appears to have been a merchant's house with living quarters and business premises. The Archaeological Unit found an oven, and a tiled open hearth in the centre of one of the rooms, indicating in the manner of the day that there would have been a hole in the roof to allow the smoke to escape.

Norman Wicks