

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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Spring 2006

EDITORIAL

Our 2005-6 programme of talks will shortly come to an end with the 17 May meeting and during the following two months we shall be undertaking "field visits". However, there will probably be rather less "fresh air" on these occasions than has sometimes been the case.

As previously recorded, the visit to **Greys Court** will take place a day earlier than shown on the programme cards, on **Wednesday 14 June**. This is a stately home in the care of the National Trust and, as those who attended the April meeting will have heard, was the seat of the Knollys family during the turbulent times of the Tudors and Stuarts, in which that family played an active part. There is no restriction on numbers here, although you are reminded that these visits are for Society members only. Greys Court is situated near the villages of Rotherfield Greys and Greys Green and can be accessed via the B481 from Caversham. **Meet at the entrance office inside the grounds at 2.00 p.m.** Please note also that there is a

considerable amount of restoration work being carried out to the exterior of the building.

On Wednesday 19 July we have a visit to **the Berkshire Records Office**. This visit is limited to 30 persons and those wishing to attend are asked to contact Eddy Hooper as soon as possible, either by telephone as above, or in person at the next meeting. The visit is timed for 6.30 p.m. Meet at the Record Office which is located at the top of Castle Hill at its corner with Coley Avenue. [Car parking available in the grounds.]

You are also reminded of the **car parking arrangements** we have in place. The parking is secure, near to our meeting place and costs £1.00 per visit. Contact Eddy Hooper for the necessary permit.

As predicted in the last issue, Reading now has a plaque commemorating **Jane Austen's connection** with the town and John Dearing and Sidney Gold represented the society at its unveiling in late March.

READING TO GORING-ON-THAMES

Moving about by train in high midsummer
I strangely yearn for wintertime again,
For now through keyholes in lush vegetation
I catch just glimpses of the river god,
But then through windows in bare leafless trees
I shall see more of him.

Anon - 2005

ON CERTAIN ITEMS OF HARDWARE DEPOSITED IN THE RIVER KENNET BY COUNTY LOCK

The river fowl don't seem to mind
These monuments of Mankind's folly -
The Mallard perches on a tyre,
The Coot prefers a shopper's trolley.

Anon - 1991

JAMES GRAVENOR GAFFORD (1913-2006)

Joan Hutchinson has contributed this tribute to Mr Gafford, following his recent death.

The History of Reading Society was founded in 1978 and it is believed that James was one of the first members. The first recorded reference to him in our archives was in 1983 when he was elected to the committee. At that AGM he gave a short talk about two local insurance companies founded in the 1820s. Insurance was a subject on which he was well versed for he became the office manager of London Assurance, based at 8 Cross Street.

James' name frequently occurred in the Society records as press officer, where he wrote resumes of talks given at the meetings. In 1987 he was elected as chairman and served in that capacity for three years. During this time a "Chairman's Quiz" appeared in the newsletter, as well as many articles that helped members become more aware of Reading's history. His professional life and his interest in history came together again in a talk that he gave on insurance companies and their Fire Office badges. The widely held view that firefighters in the 18th and early 19th centuries would only attend fires that occurred where their office badge was displayed was strongly disputed by James. Was there a "fire engine" for every company in every town? Were half a dozen pumps dragged to every fire, for most, if not all, to go away again? No, said James, the fire badge merely told the firefighters who manned the engines where to send the bill!

James was a man of many parts. He came to live in Reading in 1936. During the war years he served as a Captain in the Royal Artillery from 1940 to 1946. In 1942 he married Pamela Letch and in 1960 they moved to Caversham where they lived until Pamela died. These years were particularly active ones. James served as a Reading JP from 1957 till 1983, he was Vice-Chairman of the Friends of Watlington House, Treasurer of Berkshire Archaeological Society and also of Silchester Excavation Committee and the Friends of Reading Abbey. He listed his interests as archaeology, travel and photography. He was also quite a gifted artist, as was his wife.

Many will remember his wide knowledge which he would willingly share with any who sought information from him. A quiet man, with a wry sense of humour, James was always ready to share a joke. His last years in Caversham were spent caring for Pamela with the result that he was not able to attend meetings so often. When she died he moved to a residential home in Surrey to be near his son. He is greatly missed for all the contributions and support he gave to the History of Reading Society.

We are grateful to Joan for this article and members will be pleased to know that the Committee has invited her to be an honorary member in recognition of her own long service to our Society. This invitation she has graciously accepted. Joan has also lent the Editor copies of some of James Gafford's sketches of old Reading buildings and we may perhaps reproduce one of these in a later issue.

SUTTONS BOWLING CLUB

Our member, Mr Walford Lewis has produced an attractive booklet, detailing the history of Suttons Bowling Club over the past hundred years since its inception in 1906. He has kindly presented a copy to the Society. Any members with an interest in the subject are welcome to borrow this. The Club grew from the Recreation Club set up by Suttons Seeds in Cintra Park in 1904. Among the early purchases was a lawnmower for the princely sum of £4.00. You couldn't even get a gallon of petrol to put in your lawnmower for that sum these days!

There are still a number of members who have not paid subscriptions for 2006. If you think this might be you please contact John Starr urgently. We would not like to lose you!

The next issue will quite probably go out with next year's programme by early September and the Editor will be pleased to receive any contributions by 11 August. Our indoor meetings will resume on Wednesday 20 September, 2006.