

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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EDITORIAL

This edition of the Newsletter normally appears before the festive season, providing me an opportunity to wish readers a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. At least I can still do the latter. May I remind you of our forthcoming AGM on Wednesday 21 March when we receive the accounts for 2006, elect a new set of officers and Committee and conduct any other necessary business. You will find the notice and agenda for the meeting on Page 3 of this issue.

To attend the AGM it is, of course, necessary to renew your subscription (an omission that at time of writing also applies to the Editor!) The current subscription rates are £11 for single persons and £17.50 for couples, unless you are a senior citizen or full-time student, in which case rates of £9 for singles and £14.50 for couples apply.

Peter Russell who has been the Secretary of the society for some 15 years has announced his retirement from this post and from the committee with effect from the AGM. Peter has been a faithful minute-taker and co-ordinator of the society's activities over this period and has helped in many other ways. I am pleased to say that there is a volunteer to succeed him but one that will lead to a vacancy on the Committee and the need for a new programme organiser.

Before that we welcome David Cliffe, who is a member of the society and also Local Studies Librarian at Reading Library. His talk on **Wednesday, 21 February** is entitled **Two Reading Churches 1912-1924** and we can now reveal that the two churches are St John's, Watlington Street, now the Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart, serving the Polish community, and St Stephen's, Rupert Street, reduced to rubble in the 1970s and replaced by the modern church of St John and St Stephen's. St John's was built in 1872-3 at a cost of £11,000 to a design by a London-based architect, William Allen Dixon, replacing an earlier building of 1837, which had begun life as a chapel-of-ease to St Giles. I have to confess to finding it rather an ugly building, although the late Godwin Arnold writes of it with affection. St Stephen's, dating from 1864-6, was the work of a better known architect, William White (1825-1900), although more modest in scale, having cost less than £2,000. It was enlarged in 1886.

Finally, the Committee has learnt with concern of a fall in membership over the last year. This may not be a cause of alarm, as the decline seems to be largely due to older folk deciding that they need to reduce their commitments or no longer feeling that they want to come out in the evenings, which is quite understandable, and we still have over 70 members. However, there is a moral – please tell your friends who have an interest in local history about the society and bring them along. The more members we have the better we are able to keep subscriptions down in the face of rising costs. And if you think we're doing anything wrong that will put people off, please let us know.

From the Reading Chronicle, 1804

"Thursday last being the anniversary of his Majesty's accession to the throne, the first battalion of Reading Volunteers, now on permanent duty at Henley, fired three excellent volleys in the Market-place of that town, in honour of the day. – The great progress this regiment has made in military manoeuvres, in one week only, is highly creditable both to the officers and privates, and is warmly spoken of by several military men who have witnessed their rapid improvement."

[The Reading Volunteers had been dissolved in 1802, following the Treaty of Amiens, which concluded the first wave of the French revolutionary Wars the previous years. Evidently the troop had reformed after hostilities broke out once again against the Emperor, "Boney", in 1804. But why couldn't Henley raise its own volunteer force? Perhaps somebody with more expertise in military history knows the answer?]

"Thursday Se'enight was married, at Egham, Mr R[ichard]d. Gates, jun. To Miss Elizabeth Brooks, both of that place, after a long and tedious courtship of nine years!"

NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

To be held at the Abbey Baptist church, Reading at 7.30 pm on Wednesday, 21 March 2007.

AGENDA

1. Welcome and apologies.
2. Approval of Minutes of 2006 AGM
3. Matters Arising.
4. Chairman's Report and Review
5. Treasurer's report
6. Election of Officers and Committee for 2007/7.

Present Officers

Chairman	John Dearing**	Willing to stand again
Secretary	Peter Russell	Retiring
Treasurer	John Starr	✓

Present Committee

Vicki Chesterman	✓
Sidney Gold	✓
Eddie Hooper [Programme Organiser]++	✓
Noreen Hooper	✓
Bent Weber [Technical Support]	✓
John Whitehead [Publicity]	✓

** Also Newsletter Editor. ++ Willing to stand as Secretary.

7. To elect an independent examiner of accounts
8. Any Other Business – Data Protection Acts

The AGM will be followed by a talk on the Berkshire artist, **Stanley Spencer**, by **Ann Danks**. This coincides with the current refurbishment of the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham, during which time the paintings and other exhibits will be on show at Reading's Art Gallery. The talk replaces that by Dr Barr on the Battle Hospital, which we expect to include in next year's programme.

SUTTONS SEEDS – ‘DOWN UNDER’

In 1888 Dr Schomburgk, a driving force behind the internationally renowned *Museum of Economic Botany* in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens, noted in the Annual Report that Messrs Sutton and Sons, the English Seed Merchants, had presented the Adelaide (South Australia) Botanic Gardens with a decorative case. The case showed an array of wheat and grain grasses, with their seeds, for display in the Museum of Economic Botany – where it can be seen to this day.

Many of you will know that John Sutton founded the Reading business in 1806 as a supplier of corn. Later his sons persuaded him to expand into the flower and vegetable trade. Son Martin became a partner in 1836 when the firm became Sutton and Sons. Suttons was granted Royal Patronage in 1855. Readers wishing to know more should consult: "*Suttons Seeds: A History 1806 - 2006*" by the Earley Local History Group (ISBN 0 9540041-2-4) available from Earley Town Council Offices (price £14.99).

We hope to include a talk on Sutton's Seeds in a future programme.

John Starr

New members may wish to know of our parking scheme, which works out considerably cheaper than using the Borough facilities and is very much nearer to the Abbey Baptist Church as well as being more secure. Please ask Eddy Hooper for details.

Did you know that there are at least two Abbey Baptist Churches in Berkshire? The other is in Abingdon and like that in Reading derives its name from its proximity to the ruins of the mediaeval abbey. Perhaps it is appropriate that we have a talk on our own abbey at our May meeting.

Help with serving tea and coffee after our meetings is always welcome - don't be afraid to volunteer – full training will be provided! Please see Noreen Hooper if you can help.

Advance notice:

Famous Reading People – a lunchtime talk: Wednesday 11 April 1-1.30pm.

Join the Curator of Social History at Reading Museum as he discusses famous Reading people and their impact on the town.

Venue: the Museum (People and Place Gallery). **Free – no need to book.**