

# *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 2007**

### **EDITORIAL**

Whether on account of the uncertain weather or the fast approaching holiday season, the Historical Walk round Wargrave on 18 July was enjoyed by a very select band of seven! Peter Delaney of the Wargrave Historical Society gave us a very exhaustive tour which took in a mausoleum designed by Lutyens, the church which was virtually rebuilt after it was burnt down by arsonists who were almost certainly from the militant wing of the Suffragette movement, various monuments to a Mrs Smith's attempts to turn Wargrave into a teetotallers' paradise, those pubs that nevertheless survived and those that did not, the quaint Independent Chapel, now turned into a dwelling and the site of a private theatre set up by Richard Barrymore, a member of the Hell Fire Club. We neglected to enquire whether he was also an ancestor of Lionel! Our other walking tour in June was better attended as committee member, Sidney Gold,

led us on a tour of some of Reading's sculptures and public monuments, dispelling a few myths en route such as the theory that Queen Victoria had herself positioned with her back to a town she could not stand, in spite of never having set foot in it!

We have received a request from John Chapman, the well-known local historian, who, with others, is in the process of preparing to write a book about the 2nd Afghan War (1880's). He is looking for relatives or descendents of those who fought, in the Reading area. Could any members who may be able to help with this please contact him on, write to him at, or email him on. John has, of course, addressed our society on a number of occasions and we welcome him back in February 2008 to talk on the not unconnected theme of the Royal Berkshire Regiment.

### **SOME NEW PUBLICATIONS**

It is good to be able to report that a number of members and friends have recently brought out published contributions to local history. Adam Sowan was first in the field with "A Mark of Affection" which was how Edward Simeon described the purpose of his Obelisk designed by Sir John Soane that graces the Buttermarket and is currently in process of restoration. Others attributed less altruistic motives, suggesting that the gift of the Obelisk was a means of ingratiating the Simeon family with the voters of Reading so that Edward's brother, John, who had recently lost his seat, could get himself re-elected as one of the town's MPs. As it happens, John was re-elected at the next General Election! The booklet costs £5 which may seem a bit steep for only 24 pages but it is as ever beautifully produced by the Two Rivers Press with ample illustrations and so worth every penny, in the Editor's judgement.

Diana Mackarill has chosen a perhaps more obscure part of Reading's history but one that is certainly a fascinating by-way. This is the story of the Snares of Minster Street, referring to a printing business founded by Robert Snare in at No 16 Minster Street in 1790. The book is mainly about his nephew and heir, John, who had an unfortunate habit of getting himself involved

with the law, with ultimately disastrous consequences for the business. Much of this involved his purchase of a "Van Dyck" for eight pounds, which he obsessively claimed to be Velasquez' lost portrait of Charles the First. This is also priced at £5.

There are rumours of a new book on the history of London Street in which member, Jim Smart, has a part. More news of this perhaps in our next issue.

## **SOME CHAPEL CONNEXIONS**

I recently spent a weekend in Worcester, managing to get in between floods. The main object was to attend the AGM of the Chapels Society, which was followed by a tour of the city's chapels. These included Huntingdon Hall, formerly a chapel of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion and now a concert hall but retaining as many of the pews, monuments and other features as possible. Its history revealed an interesting connection with Reading. One of the preachers who graced this chapel in its early days was a Mr Green, who was one of the first ministers trained at the Countess's seminary in Wales. He is almost certainly to be identified with William Green, who was the first minister of the new independent chapel founded in Castle Street in 1798, that is now known as St Mary's Castle Street. The last minister of that church in its independent phase was James Sherman, to whom I referred in the last issue on the subject of street names and who was also a Huntingdon minister.

Sherman founded a string of satellite chapels around Reading and one of the last of these was that at Wargrave. It was interesting to learn from Peter Delaney that the wheel turned full circle in that towards the end of its life the Wargrave Chapel was served by ministers from the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion.

## **THE 2007-8 PROGRAMME**

The 2007-8 programme commences on Wednesday, 19 Sept 2007 at the Abbey Baptist Church at 7.30. We begin with a talk on the Thames Valley and Chiltern Air Ambulance Service. The website indicates that it was founded in 1999, which I think will make this the most recent history we have covered. October see the return of James Ford who will be exploring Chalk Mines In and Around Reading, following his fascinating talk on the town's brick-making industry in our last session. The November meeting will be addressed by John Price, of the Berkshire Family History Society on the subject of Family History, and as a quid pro quo I shall be addressing that society on the Morris family of architects during the previous month.

I am reminded that the BFHS put on a fascinating exhibition of their activities and researches over 20 years ago at the Quaker Meeting House in Church Street. There were a number of the family trees on display and I noticed that one of these included a couple who were married at the Bowen Methodist Church in Bombay. As it happened I had attended a service at that church during a business trip to India and asked whether the author of the tree was present. She was and our meeting led to my commissioning some colleagues who were travelling to Bombay to take some photographs of the church which I was subsequently able to presented to the lady.

Finally our December meeting will as usual encompass the Presidential Address, with Mrs Joan Dils speaking on Reading: A Town of Two Rivers. I hope you will agree that our new Programme Organiser, Vicki Chesterman, has put together a varied and interesting series of talks and that you will continue to give the Society your support.

Finally, those of a musical persuasion are reminded that the Reading Phoenix Choir is giving a concert at the Abbey Baptist Church on Saturday 22 September at 7.30.