

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 is the first issue of the Newsletter since our AGM which saw all officers and members re-elected to their duties and no new faces on the Committee. Sadly, however, one absent face was that of our examiner of accounts for many years, Graeme Naish, who died in December after a short illness. We are grateful to Mr Walford Lewis for taking over this duty. Graeme was well remembered at a Memorial Service at Greyfriars Church in January, at which the society was represented by a number of members.

Following a vote at the AGM we shall no longer be serving coffee after the meetings, as there is insufficient demand to justify the time and expense of providing this service. This is an opportunity to thank Mrs Noreen Hooper for organising the coffee rota and provision of materials and balancing the books over a good few years.

It has also come to light that the Committee has been acting unconstitutionally in a number of areas. This would suggest that the Society Constitution, enacted in the early 1990s, no longer reflects current realities and requires revision. The Committee will undertake this task with a view to putting a new *modus operandi* before you at the 2009 AGM.

At time of writing the position remains that a number of members from last year have not so far renewed their membership for the current year. We would ask you to do so with all haste if you intend to do so but if not to let us know, so that we can with regret remove you from our records.

The Summer is before us and following the last formal lecture-type meeting on May 21st we shall have our "field days" in June and July. Please note that these are limited to 20 members each and so attendance will be on a first come first served basis. Perhaps mindful of last year's unstable weather, our Programme Organiser has thoughtfully arranged two visits which will be predominantly indoors! Notes on the two venues follow.

SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)

June 18th. We meet outside the Meeting House, in Church Street at 7.30. The visit is expected to take about one to 1.5 hours. Church Street is more of an alley than a road leading off the west side of London Street. If coming up from the town turn right at the estate agents on the corner and the Meeting House is a few yards on the right.

"Out of Sussex / passed through the countries till I came to Reading, where I found a few that were convinced of the way of the Lord. There I stayed till the First-day, and had a meeting in George Lamboll's orchard; and a great part of the town came to it. A glorious meeting it was; a great convincement there was, and the people were mightily satisfied."- George Fox's Journal, 1655.

The Quaker movement spread from the north of England to London and the southern counties from 1654 and early in 1655 Miles Halhead and Thomas Salthouse from Westmoreland and north Lancashire visited Reading, holding meetings, one in the home of Thomas Curtis (1630?-1712), a wealthy townsman who had been 'convinced' at Bristol. As my mother was a Salthouse from Lancashire, Thomas may well have been a distant relation!

Another convert was Joseph Coale who, after six years imprisonment died in gaol in 1670. A Quaker meeting has been held in the town ever since 1655, the initial meeting place being Sun Lane, the southern part of what is now King Street.

In the early 1680s a separation occurred, partly due to conflicting attitudes to meetings for church affairs but perhaps even more to personality clashes. The separatists among whom were Thomas Curtis and a brother of Joseph Coaler included the Friend responsible for the local monthly meeting 'orthodox' for church affairs and the trustees of the meeting house. The larger or group therefore had to buy a new minute book (which they resented) and find somewhere else to meet. They secured the use of a

building in Sims Court, London Street (which we shall see) and it was here that William Penn worshipped in his later years, when he lived at Ruscombe near Twyford in a house demolished by Brunel to build the Great Western railway.

There was a further short-lived separation in the mid-1690s. This was on theological grounds, the group which met in Gutter Lane (now Cross Street) being known as Keithian or Christian Quakers. After Thomas Curtis's death the separatist meeting, which was rapidly declining, sought and achieved reconciliation with the orthodox. Neutral ground was purchased in Church Street where a new meeting house was built in 1715, replaced in 1835 by the present building. Like most Quaker architecture it is plain and simple but perhaps the highlight of our visit will be the Quaker graveyard, one of Reading's hidden jewels! If you are unable to come on the outing, you can look down on the graveyard from the car park next to the doctors' surgery in London Street.

Ed. The above had been based on my notes for the Chapels Society visit to Reading in 2000.

MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE

16 July. This is now located in Redlands Road, opposite the side-entrance to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. A pleasant means of access on foot is via Crown Lane from London Road, turning left when you come to the footpath. Timing expected to be similar to the June visit will be confirmed nearer the time. The visit will be an opportunity to view the much larger premises, compared with the original site on the Whiteknights Campus.

CAR PARKING ON MEETING DAYS.

As many will be aware, we have been able to arrange for Members to park their cars in the Davidson House Car Park, opposite the Abbey Baptist Church, at a charge of £1.00 per evening.

To make use of this parking facility it will be necessary to display a Parking Permit showing your car registration number. Permits are available, together with a map showing the location and layout of the Car Park, from Eddy Hooper who can be contacted at

When you use the Car Park you should enter by the barrier. At the barrier press the call button and say 'History of Reading Society' when the Attendant answers, he will then raise the barrier and you can park in any available parking space.

To exit from the Car Park and also to return to your car after the meeting you use the rear door (see map). Entry from the outside the building requires you to use the four figure code that will be given to you with your parking ticket.

When you use the Car Park please let the Treasurer know when you 'book in' to the meeting and then pay the £1.00 fee to him.

If the Parking Permit is not displayed the car may be wheel-clamped so be sure to bring your Permit with you and put it on your dashboard when you leave the car.

1100 YEARS OLD!

The great Benedictine Abbey of Cluny will be celebrating its 11th centenary next year, having been founded in 909. The connection with Reading is, of course, that Reading Abbey began as a Cluniac foundation, probably what would be called an “abbey plant” in contemporary parlance. The Cluniacs sought to interpret the Benedictine Code more strictly. The society has had contact with a Mr Anthony Freeman who is involved with the celebrations.

At the time of the founding of Reading in 1121 Cluny itself was going through a period of turmoil. The reigning abbot, the seventh in line was Pons (or Pontius), who has been described as “a secular-minded, contentious nobleman, unsuited to be an abbot”. He had been in office since 1109 but by 1122 his style of leadership had created so many factions that the Pope asked him to resign.

The eighth Abbot was Peter the Venerable (1092-1156) who had been prior of Vezelay from 1112 and was elected to Cluny in 1122. Three years later, while Peter was away, the pugnacious former abbot, Pons, “returned with a band of armed men and seized control of the monastery.” However, the Pope stepped in once again and imprisoned Pons, whose turbulent life came to an end “inside” in 1126. Peter was a much more conciliatory character, giving shelter to the controversial theologian, Peter Abelard, and persuading the Pope to deal mildly with him. He was also a pioneer in missions to the Islamic world, sponsoring the first translation of the Koran into Latin, with the aim that Christian missionaries might be properly informed of what the Muslims believed. He also served as papal envoy to England, as well as to Aquitaine and various states in Italy.

Ed: I am indebted for much of the above information on the history of Cluny to an online history by James Kiefer.