

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 issue of the Newsletter greets the new year for the Society. I hope you will all have received your programmes and will have noticed that this takes us up to the end of 2009. This will enable us in future to bring the calendar year, the programme year and the membership subscription year into line. The correct telephone number for Vicki Chesterman is that shown on the front of the programme and in the box above this Editorial and not that on the reverse side of the programme! Thanks, of course, to Vicki for not only devising an excellent series of talks but also producing the programme leaflets this year.

As usual all aspects of the history of Reading and its hinterland are represented. We start with industry, more "ancient" perhaps in the case of Watermills on the Thames with which we begin our series, then moving into slightly more recent times with Matthew Williams of the Museum on the Huntley and Palmer Collection, a theme which reappears in September 2009 with reference to the Huntley and Palmer Railway.

Writers connected with Reading is an interesting strand in our history and one which we have perhaps neglected, although I recall a very fine talk on Jane Austen's local connections some years back now. Wilfred Owen spent some time in the area before making his name as a First World War poet –writing what many regard as the greatest poems on the subject of the

“pity of war”. There is an interesting connection between this talk and our March address following the AGM on 60 Years of the Dusseldorf Association. Perhaps one of the most memorable concerts to take place at the Hexagon was that held in 1995 to mark the 50th anniversary of the ending of WW2 when choirs from Dusseldorf and Reading joined together in a moving performance of Britten’s War Requiem, which interweaves poems by Owen with the Latin Requiem Mass. This year marks the 90th anniversary of Owen’s death just seven days before the Armistice. In commemoration of this, **All Saint’s Church, Dunsden**, where Owen not altogether happily worked as a lay assistant, is putting on an exhibition of artefacts and memorabilia of the Great War loaned by members of the local community and also Reading Museum during the week beginning 4th November. This will be open from 10 00 until 16 00 hours each day. The week will culminate in a concert starting at 19 00 on 8th November based upon the songs, music, poetry and prose of the time, followed on Sunday the 9th by a 1914/18 lunch party in a marquee in the grounds of the Church.

In December, her usual month, we will welcome back our President, Joan Dils, whose topic will be “Reading in the Age of Improvement”. As far as I can tell, this is an expression used by the social historian, Asa Briggs, to characterise the period from 1784 to 1867, one of immense political, economic and social change in the country, all of which had their repercussions here in Reading, not least through the influence of the railway - and, of course, biscuit-making!

I had better forbear from any further comments or I will exhaust the rich mine of editorial filler to be gained from the programme before it is out of its infancy. I hope you will enjoy the talks.

MORE ON THE QUAKERS

Sidney Gold writes:

All those with an interest in genealogy will be delighted to know of a new publication entitled "Biographical Dictionary of British Quakers in Commerce and Industry 1775-1920". It has nearly 3,000 separate biographies and each of these adds the names of relating families. It is written by Edward (Ted) Milligan who has lived more than 40 years in Reading and for many years was the Librarian of the Religious Society of Friends in the Euston Road. As those who attended our visit to the Meeting House in June will be aware, Reading has a long tradition of Quakerism and there are naturally numerous entries relating to local families, the Palmers, the Huntleys, Awmacs, Boornes, Hornimans, Messers, Tuttys and Whitings to name just a few plus the Waterhouse family. Apart from the main text there are several appendices listing those mentioned in the various trades, their schools, their location and a glossary. There are of course names that are missing, but then we must recall the title of the work Commerce and Industry, so that such groups as professionals and farmers are omitted. Mr Milligan who is now 85 hopes others will continue the work he has so gallantly started. This is a monumental piece of research with

over 600 pages including 50 pages of photographs. I had expected to pay a monumental price for such an excellent reference book, but it is a respectable £30 (soft back) and worth every penny. It is also anticipated that a copy will be available at the Local studies Library for reference.

H & G SIMONDS LTD

Reading's Civic Society has been engaged with surviving members of the family in a major project to create within the Oracle site a permanent record of the brewery which filled much of the site now occupied by the Oracle shopping mall. This would seem, therefore, to be a good reason to remind ourselves of the history of one of Reading's major industrial sites and perhaps encourage some members to dip into their pockets as the Civic Society is still seeking funds!

The Bridge Street brewery was historically the most important of Berkshire's breweries and arguably its successor still is in terms of total beer production, as opposed to traditional ales, although it looks as if its end is nigh as a result of continuing structural changes in the brewing industry. The founder of the family, William Blackall Simonds, began his brewing enterprise at the age of 22 in Broad St in 1785. At this time there were already five rival concerns but Simonds, nevertheless, prospered sufficiently to move to a larger site in Bridge St after a few years.

An astute businessman, Simonds involved himself in banking as well as brewing - Barclays Bank in King St was originally J & C Simonds, Bank of Reading - and also a substantial landowner. This gave him strong connections with the gentry and it was evidently while hunting that he picked up the scent of far-reaching new legislation which would considerably extend the numbers of public houses. The Duke of Wellington's Beer Act, as it was generally known, encouraged the establishment of beer houses with a licence for the retail of beer only. Simonds, accompanied by his groom, whose knowledge of local habits was invaluable, identified suitable sites for fifty new pubs, while the legislation was still going through Parliament, and thus the Reading brewers were able to steal a march on their rivals.

Quite a number of these new houses were in the Aldershot area and this led to further trading opportunities when that town began to develop in the 1850s as the premier centre of the British Army. Before the institutionalised NAAFI, Simonds were supplying beer for army manoeuvres via canvas canteens, themselves employing vast armies of horses.

As the business grew, it continued to be a family-run concern. Chairman from 1910 to 1929 was George Blackall Simonds, one of William's grandsons, and best known as sculptor of the Maiwand Lion in the Forbury Gardens. Simonds had taken over Hewitt's Victoria Brewery in 1900 but its major expansionist phase began just after the 1st World War when it had around 300 to 350 houses. Over the next 30 to 40 years it grew to a total of 1,400 houses and four breweries in 1952.

The principal acquisitions with the year and number of pubs included: Tamar Brewery, Devonport, 1919, 150/ 200 houses; South Berkshire Brewery, Newbury, 1920 150/ 200 houses; Ashby's Staines Brewery Ltd, 1930, 200/ 300 houses; Cirencester Brewery Ltd, 1937, 92 houses; May, Basingstoke, 1947, 90/ 100 houses; and Philips & Sons Ltd, Newport, 1949, 125 houses.

In 1960 Simonds was acquired by the recently united London brewery company, Courage, Barclay and Co. Ltd and its beers were renamed Courage. Happily, however, the Simonds trademark of the Hop Leaf can still be seen in many pubs in and around Reading. Brewing continued on the Reading site until 1979 when a new plant, producing only brewery-conditioned beers and described by its detractors as a "mega-keggery", opened at Worton Grange near the M4 at Reading. The redevelopment of the main brewery site as The Oracle Centre was completed 20 years later and incorporates the one building now remaining from the old Simonds site, formerly known as Seven Bridges House and used as Courage's hospitality suite. Contrary to some authorities, the handsomely restored dwelling was not that built for William Blackall Simonds by the great architect, Sir John Soane, which was demolished ca. 1900. Following the closure of Simonds, Courage beer continued to be supplied to Reading from the former George's brewery in Bristol but this eventually succumbed to brewery closure mania so that Courage Best and Directors, after a number of years being brewed in Tadcaster, Yorkshire, is currently sourced from Wells and Youngs' Eagle Brewery, Bedford.

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

The second word of the title of this piece can be taken as a noun or a verb. For 2009 the Subs will remain at £9 for individual members - £18 for couples. Those non-members who seriously intend to become full members from January 2009 will be charged just £1 per meeting from September to December, instead of the £2 Visitor rate.

As in previous years we are faced with the fact that a number of members have not as yet paid subscriptions for 2008. Because of other priorities you have not yet been "chased" for your contribution this year. Such chasing in itself, of course, adds to the expense of managing your membership. It would be appreciated if those members who do intend to renew would do so as soon as possible. If you are not sure whether this applies to you please contact the Treasurer on 0118 966 1466.

Membership perks are growing. Car-drivers will be pleased to know that the car-parking facility near the church will be free from now on.