

# *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 Newsletter for some six months and for once I have an embarrassment of riches to put before you. I will, therefore, just point out briefly that we continue with our meetings on Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> September when Mr Rex Hora will speak on the Huntley and Palmers Railway. I should also remind you that the current programme card lasts through to the end of the year so that we will not be sending you a new one in August, as has been the past custom, but nearer the end of the year. As I write, the Committee is about to meet to decide on the 2010 programme. The other meeting between now and Christmas are:

21 October: The Irish in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Reading – Ann McCormack;

18 November: Three Men in a Post – Reading Medical Officers of Health 1872-1939 – Dr Margaret Simons

16 December: **Reading in the reign of Henry VIII** – Presidential address by Joan Dils.

## **Chancel Repair Obligation**

Our son Tim was about to buy a small house in Coventry Road, Newtown. But what should our solicitor come up with from Searches? Why, the house was located in a 'risk parish' that could impose charges for the repair of the Chancel of the Parish Church!

The obligation stems from medieval times where land, previously owned by the church to fund the local rector, had been sold and the new owner took on the repairing obligations attached to the land.

The liability could be considerable. In a recent case of ***Aston Cantlow PCC v Wallbank*** (2003) the church sought payment from the owners of the rectorial land, known as Glebe Farm, to repair the Chancel of the local medieval church. The owners declined to pay the original 'modest' bill of £6,000. By the time the case finally reached the House of Lords costs of the repairs of the deteriorating church had spiralled to £96,000. The Obligation was upheld by the House! However, the Diocese of Oxford informed me that the property was sold very cheaply to the family in the 1930s in the knowledge of the Liability. The family thus had 70 years to set aside a sum for possible fees or insurance. It certainly was NOT a surprise as was implied. The case therefore as quoted would seem to be misleading in not presenting the full truth.

National Archive records will reveal whether your property is liable to such costs – at a £100+VAT search fee! But knowing would not stop the liability! You could take out an Indemnity: some £80 for a 25 year cover. OR you could choose to take no action and judge the risk to be too low to worry about.

The Title Deed for Tim's Coventry Road property is signed over by George Palmer – in 1895. At that time the Parish would have been that of St Bartholomew's. However, Joan Dils, The Society's President, explained to me: 'The parish of St Bartholomew was carved out of Earley St Peters which itself was formed in 1854 out of the huge parish of Sonning so there are no connections with the parishes of Reading; the Reading parish of St Laurence ended at Cemetery Junction. Sonning was - still is, I believe, a rectory.

So the whole issue seems complex - imagine, anyway, trying to extract the Liability from the hundreds of properties in the Newtown area now peopled by a multi-cultural, multi-religious society!

Are YOU insured for Chancel Repair Liability? Why not check to see if your property is in a 'Risk Area'? (ChancelCheck offers a Liability check and Insurance service: [www.csl.co.uk](http://www.csl.co.uk)).

John Starr

**Ed.** *It could be time to get in quick while VAT is still "only" 15%.*

## **Noises of Reading**

Stuart Hylton's *A History of Reading* (2007) describes the Reading Iron Works in Katesgrove Lane as one of the largest suppliers of agricultural machinery in the country during the years of its success.

In 1872 the company needed to request official permission from Reading Borough Council (acting as the Sanitary Authority) to be allowed to continue the use of its Signal Steam Whistle 'for summoning and discharging' its

workmen. It was not used until 8.20 in the morning and 'the sound is not greater than that of the ordinary locomotive whistle in daily use upon the Railways'.

An ordinary factory bell could not be heard in the workshops 'because of the noise produced by the working of the machinery'.

The relevant Act of Parliament which regulated the Use of Steam Whistles in Certain Manufactories was Statute 35 and 36 Victoria, Chapter 61, which seems to indicate that it was recent legislation to the date of the successful application for sanction.

Pat Smart

## Postcards

Whilst collecting postcards that have views of Reading and the surrounding district one cannot help but notice the messages written on them. Most messages are of a personal nature and do not add much to our local knowledge.

However there are exceptions; for instance, one coloured Raphael Tuck postcard view of Reading St Lawrence's Church and Town Hall, postmarked in January 1904, says that 'we have had a taste of winter again but milder today The roads are like a flowing river of mud. It's all a craze this money finding isn't it. [Three of us ] went on the hunt for it last week beyond Tilehurst Stn. We had no luck but it was found by the 2nd milestone. There were 4 hundred people looking for it on the Sunday between the Pond House and Tilehurst Stn.'

Further investigation showed that this most likely referred to a newspaper treasure-hunt competition. A token would be hidden and a broad description of the particular stretch of road would be published in the newspaper, and the finder of the token was entitled to a cash prize. Such were the numbers of enthusiastic searchers hunting on these occasions, with kerbstones upturned and wayside trees damaged, that the damage caused by these events (described in the *Reading Mercury*) seems to have brought to a halt the newspaper promotion by the *Weekly Dispatch*.

However, the research for one light-hearted topic can lead to quite another and more serious subject. A further search in the newspapers, held on microfilm in the Local Studies department of Reading Library, revealed an unemployment problem causing poverty and desperation. The old remedy of work schemes could not match the numbers of applicants and the descriptions of hunger and want in the *Reading Standard* were intended to jolt the better off into supporting the charitable work of supplying soup kitchens in the town.

The Reading Corporation Relief Works in January 1904 provided work for some of the town's unemployed. On one day about 40 men were stone breaking. This was hard work and paid as piece work, so that a man inexperienced at hard manual labour might earn as little as a shilling a day, although for others, more used to hammering, the maximum might be four shillings per day for a cubic yard of stone. The Inspector of Highways was

sympathetic, but it was difficult to find suitable work for all who applied. The men working on the scheme were Reading men with wives and families to keep. He was hoping to transfer the less capable stone breakers to work at Prospect Park for a month, where 30 or 40 others were digging gravel and assisting in laying out new paths. These were not on piecework and were paid three shillings a day, and so had had a month of regular wages and easier work.

Other work being carried out during the winter months to provide employment was the levelling of the Coley Recreation Ground. The stone breaking at The Fairground (where the reporter recorded thick mud similarly to that mentioned by the postcard writer) cost the Corporation considerably more than obtaining it direct from firms who supplied broken stone, so it was not a cheap alternative. By February 1904 a permanent committee was to be formed by the Corporation because of the unemployment situation and the economic conditions.

It was implied by one of the newspapers that the treasure hunting had provided an occupation for the unemployed - no wonder the searching became so desperate for some.

Pat Smart

### **The Marconi Scandal**

The recent furore about MPs' expenses, duck islands, moat-cleaning and other trivialities, brought to mind a previous scandal that beset the Liberal government in 1912. Reading was involved because of the central part played by the Attorney-General, Sir Rufus Isaacs, who was the town's MP from 1904-13. Wireless communications were just becoming a reality and Rufus' brother, Godfrey, was appointed Joint Chairman of Marconi's UK company, which obtained a contract from the GPO. Sir Rufus first had to defend himself against charges of having influenced the award of this contract but the real furore began when it came out that he himself had purchased shares in the American Marconi company, as did a number of other leading members of the government including Lloyd George, put up to it by the Isaacs brothers. Accusations of corruption partly stemmed from anti-semitic feelings against the brothers, regrettably typical of those times, and because the American company had no direct interest in the Post Office contract no wrong-doing on their part could be proved. Although it was acknowledged that Sir Rufus had made a serious error of judgement in the timing of his share dealings, the loser was their principal accuser, Cecil Chesterton, brother of the writer, G. K., who was found guilty of criminal libel and fined £100. The criticisms, justified or not, certainly did not prevent Isaacs from being made Lord Chief Justice in 1913 and later Viceroy of India and First Marquess of Reading. He was also briefly Foreign Secretary in 1931 and closed his public career as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. His statue graces Eldon Square in Reading.

John Dearing