

# *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 Newsletter accompanies your programme for next year. The latter is in a new format which includes a form to facilitate the process by which members re-subscribe to the Society. May I remind you that subs are due in January and that while there are sometime very good reasons why individual members are unable to pay up on time it does give the Committee and especially the hard-pressed Treasurer a lot of extra work if we have to chase too many of you up!

The first three meetings of the New Year are listed below with a few random thoughts from the Editor.

20 Jan      **THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON'S COUNTRY HOUSE AT  
STRATFIELD SAYE** - Brigadier Michael Aris

One of the Duke's connections with Reading that may or may not emerge from Brigadier Aris' talk is his friendship with the renowned Reading brewer, William Blackall Simonds. Reportedly they hunted together and after the Duke became Prime Minister in 1818 Simonds is believed to have got early wind of the government's intention of greatly increasing the number of public houses through the Beer Act. He was

thus able to steal a march on his rivals by buying up suitable properties. Another measure by that government was destined to have a perhaps more profound effect on British politics was the Catholic Emancipation Act which enfranchised Roman Catholics for the first time. This would have been appreciated perhaps by Reading's growing Catholic population about which Ann McCormack recently addressed, though it is perhaps debatable how many of them met the very restricted property qualifications that continued despite growing parliamentary reform throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century until universal suffrage finally became a fact in 1928.

It is one of the signs of a great man that he has a large number of witty anecdotes told of him – think of Churchill! The Duke was no exception and I have always rather liked the tale, perhaps apocryphal, of the Duke reviewing the troops at Windsor in the company of Queen Victoria. It was a very hot day and the troops were all-clad in heavy uniforms, perspiring profusely. “What is that strange odour, my Lord Duke?” asked Vicky. “Odour, ma'am? Why that is esprit de corps!”

17 Feb      **BERKSHIRE AVIATION** - Jean and Ken Fostekew

Having been Chairman for nearly eleven years I have developed a habit of closing the meetings by thanking the speaker(s) for expanding my knowledge of a subject about which I knew next to nothing. This will no doubt fall into that category although of course I have heard of Miles Aircraft, the Woodley Aerodrome and even worked for one day at White Waltham. I used to know a couple of chaps in the 70s who were the resident firemen at White Waltham. There hadn't been a fire in living memory and apart from carrying out very occasional checks they spent all their time playing cards. What you might call a cushy number!

17 Mar **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING** followed by **READING THEATRES** - David Cliffe

Agendas for the AGM will be sent out in due course. I did learn something about theatres while writing *Reading Pubs* which I will share with you. In 1786 a lady innkeeper opened a “warm and commodious” theatre at the Marquis of Granby (now plain Granby) and put on performances of Shakespeare and Sheridan. It became quite an attraction with the well-to-do but came to an end when local felons burgled the inn and made off with the theatrical costumes and props.

What is now Great Expectations began life as a lecture hall in which Charles Dickens made appearances and was later, after its long stint as a Primitive Methodist chapel, a theatre for a while.

In the early 1950s the Ancient Foresters was used by theatre goers, and some of the artistes from the Palace theatre in Cheapside. Inside was a mixed bar, a smokers only bar, a men only bar and a women only bar. This catered for the needs of the area.” Performers using it may have included Max Miller, Tommy Trinder, Tony Hancock, Gert and Daisy (Elsie and Doris Waters) and Billie Cotton and his band. This, unusually for Reading, was a pub that belonged to Blatch’s of Theale.

Gracie Fields and Max Miller are also mentioned as patrons of the Mitre in West Street, also presumably because of the proximity of the Palace Theatre. Performers also stayed at the **Prince of Wales**, Chatham St.

## 1810

There were so many anniversaries in 2009 (Darwin, Tennyson, Mendelssohn, Handel to name but a few) that one wonders whether 2010 may not prove an anti-climax. At least we will have one notable local anniversary, the bicentenary of the publication of John Man’s “The Stranger in Reading”. Not that it was connected to John Man by those who bought the first edition for it appeared anonymously in order to give the impression that it was indeed from the pen of a newcomer to the town. It is now available in a superb edition by Adam Sowan, published by the Two Rivers Press in 2005.

In his introduction Adam informs us that John Man was born in Whitechapel in 1749 and arrived in Reading in 1770 where he taught at a school in Hosier’s Lane until he retired in 1795, thereafter becoming Secretary of the Reading Provident Society and later of the Reading Navigation Company, an entity active in waterborne transport between Reading and London. He also found time to write “The History and Antiquities, Ancient and Modern, of the Borough of Reading”, published in 1816, ten years before his death.

“The Stranger” contains Man’s sometimes controversial views on a great variety of subjects, including paving, drama, beer, and the usual suspects, religion and politics. Religion has a whole chapter to itself (Letter 5) and not surprisingly since Man took a strong line against extravagance and “religious enthusiasm”. This inspired an equally anonymous response by Henry Gauntlett, a former Minister of the Castle Street Chapel (now St Mary’s Episcopal Chapel), entitled “Letters to the Stranger in Reading by Detector”. To John Man’s disparaging reference to the Bible that the Bible was the most read book in Reading

Gauntlett replied: "This assertion, Sir, is the highest compliment you can possibly pay to the inhabitants of Reading."

## **KEN MAJOR**

A former member of this Society, who was a distinguished restoration architect and industrial archaeologist, John Kenneth ("Ken") Major died in July, aged 80. Although he had family connections with Reading, where his grandfather had been Headmaster of Leighton Park School, Ken's early life was spent in the North of England including his architectural studies at King's College, Newcastle, then part of Durham University. His professional life thereafter included architectural practice in London, Doncaster and finally in Reading. He also acquired a consuming interest in the recording and preservation of windmills and watermills and became one of the world's leading "molinologists". He was a founding trustee of the Mills Archive, which is located in Watlington House in Watlington Street.

He led a number of walks for the Society, including a very memorable one around the Watlington Street and Eldon Road area, including his own house, and also saved the Editor's day when the latter managed to smash to smithereens the old-fashioned push—and-pull slide projector on which he was about to show slides of St Mary's Castle Street to the society one January afternoon.

## **MICHAEL MELROSE**

It was also a great shock to learn of the sudden death, aged 61 of Father Michael Melrose, Vicar of St Giles, just a few days after he had given as such a warm welcome at the church as well as his own very individuals "take" on the ecclesiastical history of the town. We do wish the people of St Giles well as they seek a successor who will carry on the good work.

## **RACING IN READING**

Some members will remember that Nigel Sutcliffe addressed us some years ago concerning his researches into this subject. It is good to know that these have advanced towards their conclusion and it is hoped that the book will appear in the Spring of 2010 – one to look out for!