

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

I am writing this just after our last meeting at Abbey Baptist Church before the summer break. At that meeting we had a foretaste of the first of our summer "field trips" when Mr Tony Pretlove spoke about the early history of All Saints Church, Downshire Square and the mid-Victorian extension of Reading along the Bath Road that gave rise to the need for a new church. On 16 June we will have an opportunity to visit the church, designed by James Piers St Aubyn, who also designed St Luke's and undertook the restoration of St Giles, both churches we have also visited during our summer forays. We are asked to meet outside the church at 7.30. For those coming by car we are advised that parking should not be a problem. If you wish to come but have not yet given your name to Eddy Hooper please let him know of your intention before the day.

Our second visit is on 21 July and takes us across the river to Caversham Court Gardens for a guided tour. Again please meet outside the main entrance on Church Road, Caversham, at 7.30.

We resume our talks on 15 September with Dr Kate Tiller on "Church and Chapel; Local Religion in 1851." This was the year of the religious census that was uniquely undertaken and Dr Tiller is shortly to publish an edition of the Berkshire entries for the Berkshire Record Society. The Editor heard Dr Tiller talk on the subject at the BRS AGM last year and can highly recommend it as a result!

THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON IN READING

As a follow-up to our talk on Stratfield Saye in January Pat Smart has submitted the following interesting "snippet":

In August 1844 a Reading resident wrote to her sister that she had had a message from her uncle to go to the station:

"The Duke was to go to Oxford today to escort the Prince of Prussia. Willie and I went and saw the Duke as well as his hat, which he wears low on his forehead, would allow - [sic] He looks very old. There were crowds of people, and they gave him 3 cheers. The party arrived from Stratfieldsaye at 11 and the train did not come up till more than ½ past; a special carriage was added to it.'

Ed Note. *The very old Duke was 75 at this time and still had eight years of his life ahead. An intriguing question is who was the Prince of Prussia who briefly visited Reading? The most likely candidate would seem to be Prince Wilhelm Friedrich Ludwig who was then heir to the throne occupied by his brother, Friedrich Wilhelm IV and who succeeded him in 1861 as King, later becoming the first Emperor of Germany and grandfather of Kaiser Bill. Perhaps a bit of homework for somebody to do some research and see if I am right!*

HELP NEEDED – I

John Nixon has written to the Society appealing for information regarding the Danish prisoners of

war, who following their defeat in the Napoleonic Wars were on parole in Reading. John was responsible, last year, along with Reading Civic Society, for raising funds for the restoration of the memorial on the south wall of St Mary's Church to one of the Danes, Laurentes Braag, who died in Reading while on parole.

Though he wrote an article in Berkshire Old and New in 1994 (No 11), he has now gathered enough material on the subject to publish a book. However, a large portion of that work has come from Danish archives and John believes that there should be more information from Reading sources.

With nearly 600 Danish prisoners of war in the town during the period 1807-14, their presence must have been noticeable, especially as they were free to mingle with the townsfolk and some are known to have married local girls. Their good behaviour led them to be known as the "Gentlemen Danes".

The Reading Mercury has been scanned and William Silver Darter makes a brief mention, but there seems to be little from other writers, family archives and other observers associated with Reading in their memoirs. The Editor *thought* he recalled a reference in Mary Russell Mitford's "Belford Regis" but has not been able to find it!

Perhaps some of our members may have come across references to the Danes in Reading in the course of their own researches. If so please contact John Nixon

HELP NEEDED - II

We have also received a rather more unusual approach from Sabina Netherclift, who is interested in the history of the former Labour Exchange, which is now the South Street Arts Centre. Sabina and others are planning "a project which would lead to a promenade performance around South Street Arts Centre in which different rooms would represent different eras in the life of the building. We would like to create a room inspired by the opening of the Labour Exchange (perhaps taking research into the archives of Huntley and Palmer as a starting point), one that would bring us into the 1950s, and then a room to bring to life a period during the 1970s.

We are working with Kendrick School and members of Reading's Beijan community to research the 1950s. Girls studying both history and drama will be interviewing community members and from this material the history department will create a written document, whilst the drama students will use the interviews as source material for a devised project.

We are also working with members of the local labour group who used the building during the 1970s - particularly during the winter of discontent. This research will be conducted with

members of Reading Youth Theatre who will also produce a performance.

Now although we are used to interviewing people, we are novices at research and we wondered if we might be able to involve the local history group? There are several ways in which we hope you might like to become involved: Firstly we wondered if you might be able to come in give a talk to both the Kendrick girls who are taking part and the local youth theatre on researching local history.

We also wondered if we might be able to work with members of the group to uncover some stories about the working lives of employees at Huntley and Palmers in the 1930s?"

This is probably not something the Society can get involved with on a group basis but if any individual members would like to help, please contact Sabina Netherclift directly on tel. 07958 679350 or email:

Some earlier researches by Sidney Gold revealed that the new Labour Exchange in South Street was opened in July 1933, replacing an earlier one in London Street at Nos 29-31.

The latter was originally a retail premises dating from 1870s and designed by the prolific local architects, Brown and Albury. Initially, it was occupied by Long, Son and Everard, general drapers and silk mercers, later becoming one of the town's first department stores. After its stint as a Labour Exchange, it survived as commercial premises until 1972, latterly as "Longlamps Limited". The Wessex Finance Corporation building, Wessex House, now occupies the site. Sources: "London Street described" ed James Smart; "Victorian Architecture in Reading" H. Godwin Arnold; "Biographical Dictionary of Architects at Reading" Sidney M. Gold.

CALLING ALL QUIZ ADDICTS

James Ford, who has twice addressed us on chalk mines, brick kilns and the like, has drawn our attention to a Quiz organised by the Rotaract charity, which he supports. Entitled "How well do you know the World?" it takes place on Friday 4th June at Earley St Peters Church Hall, Church Rd, Earley, at 7.30 for a prompt 8 pm start. The entry fee is £3 and as a "tempter" James promises that "there will also be a few questions pertaining to Reading local history as part of the quiz-although they'll be very simple ones."

Soft refreshments will be available "at ROTARACT prices".