

# 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



*The High Altar of All Saints, Downshire Square, including the mosaic reredos by Antonio Salivati. Photograph: Sean Duggan.*

The main purpose of this issue of the Newsletter is to remind you that, while we are “on holiday” for the month of August, our activities begin again in September. First, however, a reflective look at our two

field trips. The first of these was to one of Reading’s perhaps less well-known churches, that of **All Saints, Downshire Square**, which was built to serve the growing population in that part of the town.

Designed by James Piers St Aubyn, it was never quite finished and it is certainly one of those churches where a slightly dowdy exterior hides a wealth of artistry to the glory of God within. Mind you, I used to think that St John's Watlington Street (now the Polish RC church of the Sacred Heart) was also rather a dismal building but it has recently been cleaned up and transformed!) Tony Pretlove kindly showed us round and as at St Giles last year we were able to view some of the vestments and church silverware, as well as such glories as the reredos, captured in the photograph above by Sean Duggan. This was the work of the Italian glass manufacturer, Antonio Salviati (1816-90) who also produced a similar but larger reredos for Westminster Abbey.

Our second visit was to **Caversham Court Gardens** for a guided tour by some of its devoted Friends. As one of those who was passed over when the green fingers were being handed out I wasn't sure whether I would like this but Chairman's duty etc! However, the gardens have been magnificently restored and it came as a revelation to learn that there was a Californian Redwood just a few feet from the River Thames! and the sheer enthusiasm of the volunteers enthused even this most reluctant of gardeners! Although Caversham Court itself was sadly demolished in the 1930s for a road scheme that never happened, the restoration of the gardens includes an outline of the house. There are also a number of interesting ancillary buildings, ranging in date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century Gazebo to the Tea Kiosk built in Arts-and-Crafts style in 1934 and originally used as a toilet block!

We resume our series of talks on **Wednesday 15 September** with Dr Kate Tiller on "Church and Chapel; Local Religion in 1851." Dr Tiller's edition of the Berkshire returns in the great religious census held as part of the national population census in that year has now been published by the Berkshire Record Society. If you think that the subject sounds a bit "dry" not a bit of it. It is a story of skulduggery and intrigue as the Bishop of Oxford tried to persuade his clergy to boycott the census on the

grounds that the nonconformists would be likely to "bump up their figures" and try to show the National Church in a poor light. A number of clergy evidently complied with the Bishop's request, leaving registrars to make estimates for them. However, it backfired in quite a few instances as those unsympathetic to the Bishop's point of view made very fulsome returns including the Vicar of White Waltham who begged "to protest against the Bishop of Oxford's recommendation to forbear answering the Registrar General's enquiries" and then launched into a rant about his pay and conditions of service!

On the book front, it is good to see that Nigel Sutcliffe's **Reading: A Horse-racing Town** has now appeared, published by our excellent Two Rivers Press. **Reading Pubs** has also gone into a reprint which corrects some of the errors that crept in during the frenetic effort to meet the publisher's umpteenth deadline including referring to a mythical publishing house called Three Rivers Press. Another reprint that has come to my attention is that of Tony Hadland's excellent **Thames Valley Papists**, now in paperback format. Appropriately it is on sale at Mapledurham House.

Recently I have been completing a little monograph on the biography of my father. Mainly for family and friends, of course, but there is a Reading connection as Frederick Horace Dearing was confirmed by the Bishop of Reading in 1944 while serving as Staff Quartermaster Sergeant at Arborfield Camp under the famous RSM McNally, aka the Beast of Arborfelden. So, if any readers would like a copy, I will be pleased to oblige.

The Heritage Weekend will also be upon us soon, it's the one before we resume our talks and I am sure many members will take the opportunity of visiting some of the buildings in Reading which are normally difficult to access. I have been negotiating with the Berkshire Record Office over a selection of chapel archives which will be on display at St Mary's Castle Street on Thursday and Saturday 9 and 11 September.