

# 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**

<b>Chairman</b>	<b>Hon Secretary</b>	<b>Treasurer &amp; Membership</b>	<b>Programme Organiser</b>	<b>Editor</b>
David Cliffe 1 Priest Hill Caversham READING RG4 7RZ 0118 948 3354	Eddy Hooper	John Starr	Vicki Chesterman 7 Norman Road Caversham READING RG4 5JN Tel: 0118 947 3443	John Dearing 27 Sherman Road READING RG1 2PJ Tel: 0118 958 0377

**Spring 2011**

**No 27**

## **EDITORIAL**

The AGM of the Society duly took place in March and it can now be revealed that we have a new Chairman in the person of Mr David Cliffe, well known as Reading's Local Studies Librarian and also Chairman of the Berkshire Local History Association and a noted local historian "in his own write" (to quote the late John Lennon). In addition, Sean Duggan was confirmed as a member of the committee. Thank you, David and Sean!

The outgoing Chairman committed an appalling blunder in the previous Newsletter but as nobody seems to have spotted it (unless too polite to point it out) he has retained his position as Editor. It was not in 1311 but in 1233 that the Franciscans arrived in Reading; **1311** was the date that they built their splendid church which we now know as Greyfriars. A recent account of the

early history of Greyfriars is included in this issue.

## **JOAN HUTCHINSON**

Having noted the loss of Norman Wicks in the last issue it is particularly sad to have to record that of another of our former stalwarts, Mrs Joan Hutchinson, who died in a nursing home in Hertfordshire on 14 March. Along with her husband, Bob, as Treasurer, Joan was on the Committee for many years and served as Programme Organiser for several of these. After Bob's death in 2005, she continued to support the Society until she moved to be nearer her family. Joan was also extremely generous to us in donating a slide projector and other equipment to HRS and the Committee felt it appropriate to make a donation of £20 to the Royal Marsden Hospital in her memory.

## THE SOCIETY'S SUMMER VISITS

On **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> June** the Society is holding an outing for members to **Wokingham**. There will be a guided tour of the town by the Wokingham History Group for which there will be a charge of £1 per member attending. The tour party is to congregate in Rose Street (near the entrance to Rose Street car park) at 7.15pm, ready for the tour to commence at 7.30pm. Places are limited to 30, of which only 10 are left!

On **Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> July** (please note change of date) the Society is holding an outing for members to **Reading Bus depot** at Great Knollys Street, Reading. There will be a guided tour of the depot and a bus tour on a new "hybrid" bus followed by one on a 1935 vintage bus, for which there may be a small charge. The tour party is to meet at the depot at 7.15pm, ready for the tour to commence at 7.30pm. Places are limited to 30. Further details will be made available when they are confirmed (parking arrangements, charges, etc).

## LOCAL HISTORY DAY, 13<sup>TH</sup> JULY

The day is being promoted jointly by the BLHA and Reading Borough Libraries, and the theme is "Catholic Reading." The morning, a Wednesday, will be spent in the cenacle of the Church of Our Lady and St. Anne in South View Avenue, Caversham, where participants will hear three talks, dealing with the Middle Ages, persecution and recusancy and the return of "legal" Catholicism.

The speakers will be Dr. Julia Boorman, Senior Lecturer at Reading

University and Chairman of the Friends of Reading Abbey, Sheila Ephraim, Teaching and Learning Co-ordinator at the University and John Mullaney, author of "St. James's Catholic Church and School in the Abbey Ruins."

After lunch, there will be visits to the church itself, which contains stones from one of the medieval chapels on Caversham Bridge, to St. James's Church in Reading, notable for Pugin's architecture and the ornate carving of the "Abbey Stone" and, if time and weather permit, the remains of Reading Abbey which are accessible at the time.

Numbers are limited and tickets must be bought in advance from Reading Central Library. They will be available from Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> June, price £15 – which includes refreshments.

## READING BOOK OF DAYS

The Society has received an approach from the History Press, publishers of "Reading Pubs" by the Editor, in connection with a new series recently launched by them called The Book of Days. They are looking for someone at The History of Reading Society who would be interested in writing a *Reading Book of Days*.

The basic premise of the series is to find an interesting, important or quirky story relating to Reading for every day of the year. Each day would require an entry of no more than 200 words, making the overall word count 70-75,000. The Committee feel that this is quite a big job for one person to take on but if a sufficient number of people were willing to participate, taking up perhaps a particular theme and a

number of entries, the Editor would be willing to use his experience as an HP author to coordinate the project. Please contact John Dearing on [gpwild@btconnect.com](mailto:gpwild@btconnect.com) if you would like to be involved in what could be a worthwhile collaborative project for the Society to take on.

The name History Press may not be immediately recognised by some readers as it was only formed relatively recently by the merger of the better known Alan Sutton and Tempus publishing companies, both specialising in local history studies.

## **THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE GREYFRIARS IN READING**

One of the most attractive characters in the annals of the mediaeval church was undoubtedly Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). After a somewhat frivolous youth Francis espoused a life of poverty and founded an order of brothers (friars), who became known by the colour of their habit, as the Grey Friars, distinguishing them from the Dominicans or Black Friars, who came into being about the same time. Their real name, however, was the *ordo fratrum minorum*, "the order of lesser brothers".

The Friars were distinguished from the older monastic orders by being less tied to the life of the cloister so that they soon became an active force in the life of the church, preaching in the cities, teaching in the universities and taking the gospel to the heathen. Francis himself famously visited the Sultan Kamil in 1218 with this end in view. Also perhaps less attractively they were employed in combating what passed for heresy, the Dominicans in particular being

closely involved in the work of the Inquisition.

The new order soon spread far and wide across Christendom and in 1224 the first Franciscans arrived in England and established their first friary at Canterbury. Within ten years of Francis' death, in 1233, they arrived in Reading. The Abbot of Reading, Adam de Lathbury, granted the friars a piece of waste ground close to the river near Caversham Bridge. The site was 33 perches in length and 23 in breadth, which in metric measurements is roughly equivalent to 211 by 147 metres. The friars somewhat unwisely undertook not to seek any other land or extension of the existing site from the abbey authorities. Henry III apparently took an interest in the welfare of the friars and allowed them draw on the resources of Windsor Forest in the construction of their church and "before the winter of 1239, the Sheriff was instructed to purchase 52 ells of russet to make tunics for the thirteen men and, in following years, wood for burning."

St Francis was never one much given to comfort and might well have approved of the somewhat damp conditions that the friars enjoyed in an area subject to flooding in winter. However by 1282 we find John Peckham, Archbishop of Canterbury (1279-92), himself a Franciscan and formerly provincial of the order in England, addressing the Abbot of Reading on their behalf, seeking permission to enlarge their house. This request was somewhat grudgingly granted by the monks, who tended to resent the growing influence of the upstart friars, and the result was a new covenant

whereby in the words of the Victoria County History:

"The abbot and convent of Reading stated that they had unanimously received as guests the Franciscan friars in the town of Reading, upon a piece of ground..... extending from the common way called New Street, the use whereof the friars should continue to have, of the grace of the abbey and convent, saving the following conditions: It should be lawful for the friars to build and dwell upon this additional plot of land (16½ perches by 16 perches) so long as they remained without property and, in accordance with their profession, observers of the deepest poverty.

"The friars promised, for themselves and their successors, that they would never seek any other dwelling on the land of the abbey, or extend their boundaries, and that they would never ask alms from the abbey as a due, but only out of mercy and by special grace." Further restrictions included limitations on rights of burial of "deceased parishioners of the monastery or of the churches appropriated to the abbey in Reading" without the agreement of the abbot "and that they would never receive tithes or offerings or legacies due of certain knowledge or by custom to the abbey."

New Street was the road that we now know as Friar Street so that their new site was on higher ground and somewhat drier than the former. It was, however, somewhat smaller (105 x 102 metres). Nevertheless, the friars set to work to build their church within these confines, their chief object being "to rear a church suitable for the crowds who flocked

to hear their zealous preaching". King Edward I, following in his father's footsteps, took an interest in the project and granted 56 oaks from the forest of Windsor for the new building. The great church was finally completed in 1311 and so celebrates its 7<sup>th</sup> centenary this year. Originally it may have been dedicated to St James. It is said to be the oldest Franciscan church still in use as a place of worship, although for over three hundred years it was put to secular uses, some of them rather ignoble.

Although it remained to some extent under the shadow the great abbey, at least two of the Reading friars distinguished themselves. William Boteler (died c. 1416) was provincial of the order in England and also ministered in Oxford. He was much busied in combating the Wycliffite "heresy" and also wrote a treatise against the translation of the Bible into English! John Latterbury became a doctor of divinity at Oxford and "wrote much which was highly esteemed in his day."

There is evidence to suggest that the friars later built a daughter house in Castle Street and that following the dissolution this formed the site of the County Gaol, which in turn formed that of the New Chapel built, in 1798, now known as St Mary's, Castle Street.

Coincidentally the mother church also served as the town gaol but happily, of course, it was restored to Christian worship in the 1860s thanks to the remarkable vision of the former Incumbent of Trinity Chapel, William Phelps. But that as they say is another story.

John Dearing