

# 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>
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## **EDITORIAL**

A New Year and a new programme. Our Programme Organiser, Vicki Chesterman, has done an excellent job as usual to produce a varied programme and she will no doubt be keeping her fingers crossed that speakers do not drop out at the last minute as happened twice in 2011!

At least as a result of the last occasion members have a better idea (we hope) of the Reading Book of Days project. There is still room for others to get involved if they wish – please see the Editor or Vice-Chairman if you wish to discuss it.

One matter members might have knowledge of. I was visiting Bristol last year, wandered into the Museum out of the rain and saw

that there was an exhibition of the work of the artist, Beryl Cook. As well as being highly entertained I was intrigued to discover that she lived in Reading in her youth. This is confirmed by that fount of all knowledge, Wikipedia: "She grew up in Reading in Berkshire, where she attended Kendrick School, a selective girls' school near the centre of the town. Beryl left school at fourteen, and worked in a variety of jobs."

We'd love to have Beryl in the Book of Days but does anybody have any idea of a suitable date? Maybe that of her enrolment at Kendrick?

## **CHARLES DICKENS IN READING**

Only 8 days into 2012 as I write but go near any bookshop and it will soon become clear that this is the year of Dickens – born on 7

February 1812. So it would seem appropriate to write a few words on the novelist's connections with Reading. The main centre of interest here is the handsome Greek revival building in London Street, now known as Great Expectations in reference to one of the Dickens novels you will find prominently displayed in the aforesaid bookshops, having been recently filmed yet again.



Charles Dickens in 1839

This was built as the New Public Rooms to a design by William Brown (1809-65) who also designed the entrance to Reading Cemetery, and opened its doors in October 1843. Later it is listed in directories as the Literary, Scientific and Mechanical Institute, usually shortened to the Mechanics Institute. Dickens apparently spoke at the opening ceremony, following on the heels of Miss Mitford who had laid the foundation stone the previous year.

Dickens began his famous reading tours in 1858, largely as a means of augmenting his income, and is believed to have used the Institute for these readings, at least until it was converted into a Primitive Methodist chapel in the 1860s.

During his visits to Reading, Dickens would, when moving on to the west of England the following day, put up at the George Hotel, which now has a Dickens Bar and Brasserie, promoted with a quotation from Martin Chuzzlewit: "There is no such passion in human nature, as the passion for gravy among commercial gentlemen."

However, his connections with Reading go back much further to the very start of his literary career for it was as a young reporter in the early 1830s that he formed a friendship with the Reading-born writer and lawyer, Thomas Noon Talfourd (1795-1854). Dickens saw Talfourd take his seat as MP for Reading in 1835 and later dedicated the Pickwick Papers to him. It is said also that he modelled a character in *David Copperfield*, Tommy Traddles, on Talfourd. One of Dickens' biographers, Una Pope-Hennessy, considers it likely that it was due to Talfourd's influence that in 1841 Dickens received an invitation from the bookseller, George Lovejoy, to stand for Reading in the Whig (or Liberal) interest.

His first biographer, John Forster wrote: "It was the strong desire he had to make himself heard upon [the subject of the Poor Law], even in Parliament, that led him not immediately to turn aside from a

proposal, now privately made by some of the magnates of Reading, to bring him in for that borough; but the notion was soon dismissed." Two letters on this subject from Dickens to Lovejoy, have survived.

1, Devonshire Terrace, York Gate,  
Regent's Park.

*Monday Evening, May 31st, 1841.*

Sir,

I am much obliged and flattered by the receipt of your letter, which I should have answered immediately on its arrival but for my absence from home at the moment.

My principles and inclinations would lead me to aspire to the distinction you invite me to seek, if there were any reasonable chance of success, and I hope I should do no discredit to such an honour if I won and wore it. But I am bound to add, and I have no hesitation in saying plainly, that I cannot afford the expense of a contested election. If I could, I would act on your suggestion instantly. I am not the less indebted to you and the friends to whom the thought occurred, for your good opinion and approval. I beg you to understand that I am restrained solely (and much against my will) by the consideration I have mentioned, and thank both you and them most warmly.

Devonshire Terrace,

*June 10th, 1841.*

Dear Sir,

I am favoured with your note of yesterday's date, and lose no time in replying to it.

The sum you mention, though small I am aware in the abstract, is greater than I could afford for such a purpose; as the mere sitting in the House and attending to my duties, if I were a member, would oblige me to make many pecuniary sacrifices, consequent upon the very nature of my pursuits.

The course you suggest did occur to me when I received your first letter, and I have very little doubt indeed that the Government would support me—perhaps to the whole extent. But I cannot satisfy myself that to enter Parliament under such circumstances would enable me to pursue that honourable independence without which I could neither preserve my own respect nor that of my constituents. I confess therefore (it may be from not having considered the points sufficiently, or in the right light) that I cannot bring myself to propound the subject to any member of the administration whom I know. I am truly obliged to you nevertheless, and am,

Dear Sir, Faithfully yours,  
Charles Dickens.

In the event the Conservatives under Peel won the 1841 election, and Reading, as so often, followed the flow. Talfourd himself was defeated and Charles Russell and Henry Cadogan, Lord Chelsea, were duly elected for the borough. One cannot help wondering, though, whether the popular young writer would have made any difference to the result, had he consented to have his name put forward!

## NOTICE OF 34th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Abbey Baptist Church, Reading,  
7.30 p.m. Wednesday 21st March  
2012

### AGENDA

1. Welcome and Apologies.
2. Approval of Minutes of 2011  
AGM.
3. Matters Arising.
4. Chairman's Report and Review.
5. Treasurer's Report
6. Election of Officers and  
Committee for 2012/13.

#### Present Officers

Chairman	David Cliffe	Willing to stand again	✓
Vice	Sidney Gold		✓
Chairman:			
Secretary	Eddy Hooper		✓
Treasurer	John Starr		✓

#### Present Committee

Vicki Chesterman	✓
[Programme Organiser]	
John Dearing [Newsletter Editor]	✓
Sean Duggan	✓
John Whitehead [Publicity]	✓

Any other nominations with names of proposers and seconders should be submitted to the Secretary, prior to the meeting.

7. To elect an Independent  
Examiner of Accounts.
8. Any Other Business

The formal proceedings will be followed by a talk entitled "The Reading School of Art 1860-92" given by Sidney Gold, our Vice-Chairman and an authority on the history of the fine arts and architecture in Reading.

### BOOK SALES

The society held a very successful book sale in October, bringing in income of just over £50, mostly from books donated to the society by the family of the late Martyn Allies. "Marginal revenue" such of this helps us avoid having to raise the cost of subscriptions. So, if you have any books that are likely to be of interest to fellow-members and that are surplus to your requirements, why not bring them along to the next meeting?

### WHERE THAMES AND KENNET MEET

Two rivers meet here, one renowned  
Wherever Englishmen have gone,  
Whose winding length, two hundred miles,  
Has witnessed battle, skirmish, siege,  
Etched in the unfolding tale and song  
Of England's history, proud and long,  
With many a scenic reach or bridge  
Portrayed by artists, skilled with brush.

The other, of a beauty less,  
More modest length and local fame -  
Yet waterfowl seem drawn to it,  
Mallard and moorhen, as to home.  
Perhaps it is more homely too  
For those who dwell in Reading town,  
Small-minded, urban, like these birds  
That scarcely care to take to wing  
And never do migrate abroad;  
Who to the Jolly Anglers flock  
To talk of pigeon-lofts and crib.

Anon.

### SUBSCRIPTIONS

Members are respectfully reminded that subs for 2012 became due on the 1<sup>st</sup> January. These are held at £9 for the coming year and represent excellent value for money! Please send your cheques to **Dr John Starr, Treasurer**, or see John at the seat of custom at the next meeting.