

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 Annual General Meeting duly took place in March and contained few surprises with all the present officers and committee members re-elected unopposed. We are now reaching the mid-point of the annual programme with the last indoor event until the Autumn coming up in May followed by two of what I like to call "field trips" although neither of this year's evenings out take us beyond the borders of Reading. These are for members only and members are invited to book their place at:.

The first occasion is on Wednesday 20th June when we shall visit Leighton Park School. There will be a guided tour of the school, finishing with refreshments. The tour party is to congregate at the school reception (in the Old School opposite the Main Hall) at 7.15pm, ready for the tour to commence at 7.30pm. The reception is clearly signposted from the Shinfield Road entrance. At time of writing all 25 places have been taken up but there would be no harm in registering an interest with Vicki in case someone "drops out". For this visit there is no fee.

On Wednesday 18th July the Society is holding an outing to the Mills Archive at Watlington House, Watlington Street, Reading. There will be a tour of the archive offices and library and additional historical information about the house will also be given. The tour party is to congregate at the front of the building at 7.15pm, ready

for the tour to commence at 7.30pm. There are 10 parking spaces available at Watlington House (car sharing may be advised). . Places are limited to 25, of which 7 remain at time of writing. There is a £1 fee per person attending.

MICHAEL FOOT

One of the most distinguished “old boys” of Leighton Park School was the Labour politician and writer, Michael Foot (1913-2010). Foot was an MP for over 40 years, first for Devonport and later Ebbw Vale and after declining office in Harold Wilson's first government later served as Secretary of State for Employment and leader of the House of Commons in the 70s Labour governments. In 1980 he succeeded James Callaghan as party leader but resigned after the losing the General Election of 1983, fought with a manifesto that one of his own party described as “the longest suicide note in history”. He was also, of course, neither the first nor the last politician to be damaged by the Murdoch press!

At Leighton Park Foot, then aged 16, “cut his political teeth” by winning a mock election on 30 May 1929 as a *Liberal*, polling 56 votes to 38 for the Conservative and 11 for the Labour candidate. In the real election on the same day, Reading followed the national trend with Dr Somerville Hastings victorious for Labour.

Michael attended Leighton Park School, then sometimes known as the “Quaker Eton”, from 1927 until 1931 when he went up to Wadham College, Oxford. He found its liberal Quaker ethos with no fagging, corporal punishment and no cadet force highly congenial. He showed little aptitude for physics and chemistry (he has my sympathy!) but excelled at mathematics, the humanities and scripture in which he obtained a score of 92% in 1928 – not bad for a future free-thinker who had a non-religious funeral.

Aside from his academic success, Foot was a School Prefect and was also highly-acclaimed for the part he took as Sergeant of Police in a performance of “The Pirates of Penzance”; according to one old boy “Foot's performance will go down in the school's history” and the audience evidently agreed for they encored one of his songs three times.

Despite health problems, caused by asthma and eczema, Foot also distinguished himself at sport. At cricket he took 6 for 20 against Bedales School, topping the bowling averages in 1931 with 15 wickets for 10.73.

JD – Source: Kenneth Morgan, *Michael Foot*, 2007.

KINGS ROAD BAPTIST CHAPEL

On 16 May we welcome Dr Kate Tiller to talk about her work on the 1851 Religious Census for Berkshire. Kings Road was the predecessor to Abbey Baptist Church, where we meet and this was its entry:

Kings Road Baptist Chapel. Parish of St Lawrence. *Erected* 1834 in lieu of another Chapel but not on the same site. A separate building used exclusively for worship. *Free sittings* 140; *other sittings* 560. *On 30 March*: morning general congregation 320; Sunday scholars 140; afternoon general congregation 120; Sunday scholars 170; evening general congregation 600; Sunday scholars 40. *Signed* John Jenkyn Brown, Minister, 5 The Abbot's Walk, Reading.