

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

Chairman	Hon Secretary	Treasurer & Membership	Programme Organiser	Editor
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

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EDITORIAL

It is pleasing not least for your Editor who has managed the project (or at least tried his best!) to report that the Reading Book of Days is almost complete at time of writing. A team of three, comprising the editor, Mr Philip Vaughan and Mrs Penny Starr, have been knocking and squeezing the many articles contributed by around 16 contributors into their final shape with a view to submitting these to the publisher on 31st January. The enthusiasm of the team has been such that a number of articles have had to be laid aside as there were competing contributions for particular dates and choices had to be made taking account of the balance of the book as a whole and the historical significance of the story, as well as its entertainment value. Some of these rejected items will appear in the pages of the Newsletter and the honour of being the first goes to a piece on the weather in January. An excellent story but it was felt that too much bad weather early on would dampen the readers' spirits!

JANUARY 18TH

1881: On this day blizzards struck southern England. Piercing easterly winds piled powdery snow into drifts † completely burying some trains and bringing everyday life in Reading to a complete standstill. Several people, venturing out were found frozen to death only yards from their front doors! *The Reading Mercury* described the blizzard as 'meteor-ologically memorable, for Reading has been left in a state of utter helplessness' and went on to describe how 'three fourths of Reading's shops were

caused to close and hundreds of stranded train passengers forced to cram into the town's pubs and hotels, while the poorer classes shivered in the poorly heated waiting rooms'. A Temperance Society Tea at Christ Church School was rudely curtailed when a Reading refreshment contractor could not get his van up the hill. The disappointment was cheerfully borne 'in view of the calamities that befell so many others'. The thaw finally set in nine days later! Of course, Reading had experienced many severe cold spells before: in January 1363 the Thames froze so thickly at Reading that '*the Abbot ordained that all poor and feeble of the town be invited to a Great Feast on the River!*'

John Starr Source: *The Berkshire Weather Book*, 1994, I Currie, M Davison, R Ogley; Christ Church Parish Magazine February 1881).

THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

A new year, and a new programme – and the 2013 programme is nothing if not varied! It ranges from morris dancing, through the Whitley Housing Estate, and Jackson's department store, to the turbulent times of Thomas Vachell.

As usual, there was a crop of pre-Christmas local history books, all worth having. True North Books, who brought us *Memories of Reading* and *More Memories of Reading* has now published *Nostalgic Reading*. As before, it's mainly photographs, and sponsored by Reading businesses. Many of the photographs have not been published for many years, and I was surprised to find among them a couple that had been given to me by friends, to add to the Reading Libraries collection. At first I was surprised, and then pleased to find that someone else had decided that they were worth looking at. The pictures are well printed, and reasonably large, and the captions are good and accurate. The price is £12.99.

The Friends of Caversham Court Gardens have produced a most attractive book, *Caversham Court Gardens: a Heritage Guide*. In fact the book is as much about the house and the people who lived in it as about the gardens. Many facts have come to light since Sarah Markham and Godwin Arnold produced their book in 1973. The new book is reviewed below by Sidney Gold.

Also just before Christmas, the new edition of *An Historical Atlas of Berkshire* arrived, edited by Joan Dils and Margaret Yates, and with maps by Clive Brown. The atlas is considerably expanded since the first edition, it covers more topics, the pages are bigger, and the maps are clearer and in full colour. Of course, you can quibble over what has been included and what has been left out, and you can quibble over the odd fact – this is all part of the fun with a book such as this. But I don't think anyone could deny that this is a splendid achievement, and a model of its kind. I found myself reading the bibliography at the end with great interest! Copies can be bought from the Berkshire Record Office for £20.

Elsewhere in this newsletter is a piece about the Central Library's bid for Lottery funding to carry out a digitisation project on primary sources concerning the First World War. Those who were at the December meeting will remember Ann Smith coming to talk

about it, and the History of Reading Society will be sending a letter to the Heritage Lottery Fund in support.

Coming up more immediately is the 70th anniversary of the bombing in Reading town centre in the Second World War. Four bombs fell in the afternoon of Wednesday February 10, and 41 people were killed, 49 were seriously injured, and 104 were slightly injured. The reason for the bombing around the east end of Friar Street, the Market Place and Minster Street was never obvious, though it has been claimed that the main target was a radio communications aerial hidden in the roof-space above one of the buildings. Mike Cooper will be coming to talk to our Society about this and other air raids on Reading in February. If you can't make that meeting, he will be giving a similar talk in Battle Library in Oxford Road on January 31. Tickets, costing £3, should be bought from the Central Library or Battle Library.

These talks will coincide with a small display in Reading Museum, "The Bombing of a Southern Town," and the dedication of a memorial to the 41 people killed in 1943 by sculptor, Andrew Hood. I don't have precise details at the time of writing, but I believe it's due to take place on February 14, and that the memorial will be fixed to the offices of Blandy and Blandy, the solicitors, who had the front of their building demolished by the blast.

On the local illustrations front, the images of bridges in Reading have now been scanned and can be viewed on the Reading Libraries website, and by the time you read this, the photographs of plays performed by the Reading Repertory Company will also be viewable. The sets and costumes are of a very high standard, and the pictures leave me wishing I could have seen some of their productions!

David Cliffe

CAVERSHAM COURT

Caversham Court Gardens A Heritage Guide written by the Friends of Caversham Court Gardens tells the history of the houses that have stood on the site along with the families connected with them, most notably the Lovedays and Simonds, until the site was acquired by the Reading Borough Council in 1931. Following the demolition of the old house, the gardens and grounds were open to the public in 1934 but gradually fell into decline until finally in recent years they have been enthusiastically been restored and brought back to life. The 80 pages plus are gloriously illustrated with over 100 historic and modern photos of paintings, prints plans and plantings. many in colour. It is published by the Two Rivers Press in soft back at £5, a genuine bargain.

LIBRARY PROJECT

Reading Borough Libraries is involved in a Heritage Lottery Fund application for money to digitise and put our First World War materials on the Internet. Public libraries have had years of cuts to budgets, leaving us with little money and few staff to do anything but cope as best we can in hard times. However, it's not all doom and gloom. The

HLF bid is good news because it offers a chance to develop our collection and make parts of it accessible on the library website.

We have chosen the First World War because the centenary of the start of the war is coming up in August 2014. Many people have family members who were involved in the war, and we anticipate there will be a huge increase of interest in the period.

We are hoping to get money to digitise our local newspapers for the period 1910-1925: the *Reading Standard*, *Reading Observer*, *Berkshire Chronicle* and *Reading Mercury*. This would allow key word searching by researchers. If you have ever tried to find a particular article in the local newspapers on microfilm, you will realise why digitisation would make life much easier! We also hope to digitise street directories and other documents from this period. Then we can produce case studies, following people from before, during, and after the war, as well as looking at wider themes, such as women at war, the home front, etc. We are asking for volunteers to help with producing case studies. These will go on the library website, and we also hope to produce a book on Berkshire in the First World War.

The closing date for HLF applications is January 21st. If we receive the grant, our project would run from July 2013 to June 2014, and would tie in with Reading Museum's *Reading at War* exhibition. Read the next newsletter to find out if we are successful!

Ann Smith,
Librarian, Reading Central Library.

(Ed. Note. Those who can't wait may like to know that a number of Berkshire Directories from the 19th and early 20th centuries are accessible online via the following website: <http://www.historicaldirectories.org>)

MARRIAGE LINES

Notice of marriage from the "Reading Mercury," 26 September 1785

On Sunday the 11th instant was married at Olney, Bucks, Mr. John Carroll, an eminent maltster, of that place, aged 90, to Miss Betsey Alderman, of Warrington, in the same county, aged 19. It may not be improper to remark, that while we are led to wonder at this striking proof of the old gentleman's strong attachment to the most lovely part of the creation, at so advanced a period in life, we cannot less admire the young lady's intrepid spirit and resolution, in nobly daring to take to her arms a man, who had before consigned six loving spouses to the dreary mansions of the grave; she being the seventh virgin whom Hymen hath lighted with him to his altar, and united in the silken bands of wedlock.

We are sorry to have to record the deaths of a number of members over recent months: Lisa Klein, Kate Holland and Francis Goodridge. Francis was a member of the Society Committee for a number of years around the turn of the millennium.

NOTICE OF 35th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Abbey Baptist Church, Reading, 7.30 p.m. Wednesday 20th March 2013

AGENDA

1. Welcome and Apologies.
2. Approval of Minutes of 2012 AGM.
3. Matters Arising.
4. Chairman's Report and Review.
5. Treasurer's Report
6. Election of Officers and Committee for 2013/14.

Present Officers

Chairman	David Cliffe
Vice Chairman.	Sidney Gold
Secretary	Eddy Hooper
Treasurer	John Starr

Present Committee

Vicki Chesterman [Programme Organiser]

John Dearing [News Editor]

Sean Duggan [Archives]

John Whitehead [Publicity]

All are prepared to stand again. *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

Any old books?

The next Book Sale will be during our April 17 meeting. If you have any that are surplus to requirement and likely to interest other members please bring them in!

HRS in Cyperspace

The Society now has an internet presence - find us at "History of Reading Society" on: <http://www.facebook.com/> for updates on meetings, books and more.

And finally - a reminder that sub-scriptions for 2013 were due to be paid on 1 January. At £9 per person still a bargain!