

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

This edition, hovering between Summer and Autumn, serves to welcome members back from their breaks, when we hope they have enjoyed the better than usual holiday weather! We had warm to hot weather for both our summer outdoor events.



Society members enjoying Joy Pibworth's guided Millennium Walk in June
Photo: Sean Duggan

We have an interesting and varied programme ahead with talks on the Whitley housing estates, Jacksons of Reading, ephemera and 18th century Reading. Vicki Chesterman is also far advanced with the preparation of next year's programme, which will be revealed in due course. It is safe to say that the anniversary of the Great War will feature somewhere!

Vicki also promises that the Society's website should be up and running by October, while November will see the launch of the Society's first ever major publishing project, the Reading Book of Days.

Thoughts from the Chair by David Cliffe

At our May meeting I was momentarily taken aback. It was the talk by Tony Hadland about Thomas Vachell – a name I pronounced to rhyme with “satchel,” but Tony pronounced it to rhyme with the girl's name “Rachel.”

Another Reading name I'm never sure about is Knollys, commemorated in Great Knollys Street. Most people in Reading pronounce Knollys to rhyme with “follies,” but some say it should be pronounced like the name it turned into, spelled “Knowles.”

Then there is the name of the Irish family who owned the department store in Oxford Road, the McIlroys. Is the stress on the first syllable, or the second? And then there is the one which cropped up in St. Laurence's Church on Saturday last. We were looking at the monument to John Blagrove, the mathematician. I pronounced the first syllable with a short “a” and my companion said, “Oh – is that how you pronounce it?”



500 years of Morris Dancing in Reading
Photo: David Cliffe

By “Saturday last” I'm thinking of August 10th, which was the day when a number of morris dancing sides descended on Reading to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the mention of morris dancing in the churchwardens' accounts of St. Laurence's Church. We had a memorable talk on the subject at our January meeting.

It's surprising what churchwardens paid out for in the past, and I look forward to reading the St. Laurence's accounts (and having them explained) in the volume to be published shortly by the Berkshire Record Society. The editor is our President, Joan Dils. As well as paying for morris dancing, they paid for plays, both sacred and secular, before the Reformation put paid to such frivolities.

The highlight of Saturday's festivities was the appearance of The Redding Moreys Dawncers – a troupe dressed as they would have been in 1513, and performing dances which were around at the time. The costume comprised a kind of cap, a patchwork tunic with the three scallop shells of Reading Abbey on the back, and knee breeches. A pipe

and tabor provided the music.

September will bring the Heritage Open Days. I usually manage to see something different every year, and this time I'm looking forward to the chance to see the Reading Synagogue in Goldsmid Road. It looks fantastic from the outside, and I believe it is even more so inside. The architect was W. G. Lewton, who also designed Caversham Library. A comparison of the two buildings shows his fondness for decorative balls, whether in stone or copper.

Only a week or so after that and our talks begin again at the Abbey Baptist Church, when I look forward to catching up with old friends.

Matters of Finance

Your committee recently discussed the possible introduction of payment by standing order. Members are, therefore, asked for their opinion on Subs being collected through such a scheme. How many of you would be interested, starting 2015? The matter will be put to the AGM in March 2014. Meanwhile, do express your 'pros' and 'cons' to Treasurer, Dr John Starr, or other committee members.

Regrettably, the Society is a little out of pocket because a payment was made "up front" for the July visit to the University's London Road site but only just over half of those who signed up to attend appeared on the day. Please, if you sign up for a summer outing in future do let us know if circumstances change and you are no longer able to attend.

All Aboard

As advertised in the last Newsletter, **The British Trolleybus Society** is organising an afternoon guided tour around Reading and environs on Saturday, 5th October 2013. Lasting from 1 pm to 4 pm the itinerary will take in the various major trolley bus routes in Reading from Valpy Street via King's Road and London Road to Cemetery Junction, Wokingham Road to Three Tuns terminus, then back via Kings Road and Duke Street, out to Basingstoke Road, Northumberland Avenue and Whitley Wood Lane. After returning to town via Southampton Street the bus will then proceed via Oxford Road to Water Tower Terminus. Finally it will return to town via Kentwood Hill and Oxford Road to West Street, Friar Street and Caversham Bridge before finally terminating at Friar Street. The itinerary will include photo stops as well as comfort stops. Further details from Maria Teresa Molner on: artist.mtmolner@gmail.com or phone: 0118 967 4105.

Victorian Banburyshire ed Barrie Trinder.

Reviewing a book with this title might be thought to be stretching the Society's boundaries somewhat but one of the three memoirs contained in this publication of the Banbury Historical Society is full of references to Reading. Sarah Beeseley (1812-92)'s uncle, Philip Davies, was a Reading grocer and Sarah often stayed with him. Her account mentions visits to Heelas (misnamed "Elas"). After one shopping trip with her aunt she 'repaired to the

Abbey Coffee Restaurant in King's Road, where we partook of "light" refreshments at a very moderate charge.' Perhaps surprisingly she is given to understand that 'Reading is one of the healthiest towns in England'. Copies can be ordered at a cost of £20.00 + £3.00 inland postage & packing by email or post, from Jeremy Gibson, email – . (cheques payable to 'Banbury Historical Society').

Blatch's of Theale

Parts of Theale's brewery can still be seen in the Bull pub on the High Street and the buildings behind it. Nobody is quite sure when brewing began in Theale but it was in operation by 1830 when Jasper Draper was the brewer. He came from a local family which had owned land in and around the village in the previous century. By 1841, the business was being run by his widow, Sophia, then aged 70, and by 1851, their son, James Hugh Draper, who had latterly assisted his mother, was in sole charge. Aged 49, he is described in the census as "head brewer employing 4 men, also a farmer of 40 acres employing 2 men and 1 boy".

In 1854, the business was taken over by William Henry Blatch, then aged 33, and was thereafter for the next 111 years known as Blatch's Brewery. In the 1861 census he is described as "head brewer, maltster and spirit merchant, employing 6 men". He was assisted by his younger brother, Frank (aged 27 in 1861) and this arrangement continued until 1887 when William died and Frank continued on his own until his own death in 1902. The business was registered as a private company in 1938 as Blatch's Theale Brewery Limited. Adverts show that the brothers' Pale Ale was sold at 21 shillings (£1.05) per kilderkin (18 gallons). It is "strongly recommended for Family Use" and "carefully brewed from the best Malt and Hops, and is a tonic and strengthening beverage of the highest class". Blatch's also offered "consignments of Burton Ale" with India Pale Ale at 30s per kilderkin (£1.50) and Light Family Ale at 18s (£0.90). The water supply is drawn from one of the best artesian wells in the country" with a depth of 140 ft. (43 metres).

The company diversified into the manufacture of mineral waters including Soda water Seltzer "made on the American system" (2s – 10p - per dozen) and lemonade using "Fratelli's Sicilian Oil of Lemons and the best Citric Acid" (2/6 – 12.5p per dozen).

Despite the hype Blatch's beer did not enjoy a great reputation and I have never come across anyone who claims to have liked it! However, Vic Wilson tells me that when he worked for the Southern Electricity Board, it was considered a great privilege to read the meters at Blatch's. This privilege was normally jealously guarded by the foreman but when Vic stood in for him one day, he found out why. Blatch's brewed a special beer for their own consumption (rather in the manner of Courage's Directors) and the electricity man was allowed a generous sample of it after completing his duties. It was considerably better than the standard product!

In 1965 the business was sold to Ind Coope. Brewing had by then ceased and the 22 tied pubs were absorbed into the estate of Allied Breweries. Pubs in Reading included the Plough in Tilehurst and the now long demolished Ancient Foresters in Oxford Road, Crown of England, East Street and Ye Olde Friars, Friar Street.

A Score to Settle

22 November 1913: On this day, a noisy affray erupted in Reading's Basingstoke Road, near the World Turned Upside Down public house. Unusually, drink was not involved, but old scores were about to be settled.

The father of a boy charged and later convicted of stealing tools from Manor Farm in Basingstoke Road was so incensed by the trial outcome, that at 11.15am on November 22nd, he was to be found hammering on the door of the main witness against his son demanding an explanation.

Fennel, the convicted boy's father, was spoiling for a fight, and when the witness' father was not around, he assaulted, first, a nearby deliveryman who had been sent to get the police, but didn't, then 2 labourers who went to the delivery man's aid, and finally a decorator who tried to corral the group in his motor car. Once Fennel had been quietened down and arrested for malicious wounding, the four injured men received treatment for their various wounds.

John Bridgewater, one of the labourers, was taken to the Royal Berkshire Hospital to get stitches to the base of his skull. Whilst at the hospital, Bridgewater caught an infection and died. Fennel was re-arrested and charged with murder. After a prolonged inquest and trial, under a new charge of manslaughter, a surprise verdict of not guilty was returned by the jury.

(This is one of the stories submitted for the Reading Book of Days, which was "squeezed out". It was contributed by Vicki Chesterman and based on an account in, *I'll Be Hanged – a saga of sudden death in and around old Berkshire*, by Roger Long, 1991)

Book Sale

We hope to have another book sale in April 2014. Please pass any items to David Cliffe for storage until then.