

# 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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Spring 2014

No 36

## SUMMER OUTINGS

On **Wednesday** 18<sup>th</sup> June the History of Reading Society members are invited to a guided tour around Brock Barracks in Reading (excluding The Keep). The tour party is to congregate outside the Dragon Club at the top end of Battalion Square (it will be signposted) at **7.15pm**, ready for the tour to commence at **7.30pm**. Parking is available onsite. The entrance to the camp from Oxford Road is indicated by a big red sign - for SatNav users postcode is RG30 1HW (no. 575 Oxford Road will get you close).

Places are limited to **30**. Places are filling fast.

On **Wednesday** 16<sup>th</sup> July the History of Reading Society members are invited to a guided tour around St Michael's Church, New Lane Hill,

Tilehurst.



The tour party is to congregate at the main door of the church at **7.15pm**, ready for the tour to commence at **7.30pm**. The church is located on a triangle of land between New Lane Hill and Routh Lane, which is designated as a Conservation Area. There is a lay-by outside the church on New Lane Hill, and there is additional parking space along the churchyard wall in Routh Lane.

Places are limited to **30**. There is a **£1 per person charge for this**

**outing, payable upon booking.**  
Places are filling fast.

Members are invited to book their places at these summer events by contacting Vicki Chesterman at or on 0118 947 3443, or, preferably in person, at a monthly meeting.

### **THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR**

The A.G.M. of the Society took place on March 19<sup>th</sup>, when Eddy Hooper stepped down as Secretary after many years of faithful service. His post has now been split into two – which must surely say something about the amount of work he got through. Vicki Chesterman takes over as Secretary, as well as being Programme Organiser, and Joy Pibworth will produce the necessary papers for our meetings, and take the minutes.

The formalities were followed by a talk by Ann Smith, who looks after the local studies collection in the Central Library. Her theme was shops in Reading, and it evoked a great deal of interest, and many memories. During her talk, Mark Bridges gave a short presentation on one of these well-remembered businesses, which I remember as being in King's Road, and known as the Lebensmittel Delikatessen. Later, it moved to St. Mary's Butts, and was re-named County Delicacies. Mark had brought several photographs of the shop with him, and since then, he has allowed the library to scan them and put them on to the website for all to see. In a few weeks' time, the work should have been done.

Some more interesting old photographs have come my way,

which were left at the library by an anonymous donor. They were left for "the historical society," so I have assumed that the History of Reading Society was meant. The Society doesn't keep an archive of old documents and images, but undertakes to find appropriate homes for anything that is given. In this case, the actual photographs have been given to the library, so that after a few weeks, these images too will appear on the website. They include several aerial views of the town centre taken just after the Second World War, two of a pawnbroker's shop in St. Mary's Butts, one of a steamer, "Queen of the Thames," during an outing run by the Reading Philanthropic Society, and one which appears to show a fire at the fire station in St. Mary's Butts. I'm very grateful to the donor.

Our book sale, held at our April meeting, raised £52 for the Society's funds. Thanks are due to all who brought in their unwanted books – and especially to Sidney Gold, who brought in so many of his own books. And, of course, thanks are due to all who bought the books and took them away!

The sale was followed by a highly erudite and diverting talk by Roger Hovell about crime and the perception of crime around the Oxford Road area of Reading. It may not have been quite what people were expecting, but it did enable us to see illegal drugs and drug-taking equipment, and involved a couple of conjuring tricks!

And now, a new departure for the Society. During the summer, some of the committee members will

be working on a new venture – to produce a calendar for 2015, with 13 pictures of old Reading. Members are invited to contribute a picture. It should be monochrome, out of copyright, and it should be worth re-publishing. By this, I mean it should not be an image that has been reproduced in the several books of old Reading photographs, and it should be interesting. Please send a scan, at 300 d.p.i. or above, to me at by the end of May. Alternatively, you could bring the picture to our May meeting, with your name and address on the back so that it can be returned, or you could post it to me at home – 1, Priest Hill, Caversham, Reading, RG4 7RZ.

A small sub-committee will meet, early in June, to decide on the pictures to be included, and the captions, and the calendar should be ready for the first meeting on September 17<sup>th</sup>. It will sell for £5 or less, and should bring in a small profit for the society. Who knows, if we manage to sell all the copies, it may encourage us to produce other worthwhile publications in the future.

David Cliffe

### **THE CRESCENT ROAD TRAGEDY**

Just after Christmas 2013, the History of Reading Society was approached with the following request for information. A Mr Edmunds wrote "I've got a rather gruesome request but hope you can help. My mother who is now 98 lived in Crescent Road, Earley during her childhood & has related to me the murder of a child by its father, presumably in a Crescent Road property but of course it could be in any road in that area. Apparently his

wife had an affair with another man, the husband took the child out of school, murdered the child & then committed suicide by putting his head in the gas oven. I remember Mum relating this to me many years ago so I've no reason to disbelieve it. Do you have any details regarding this as Mum mentioned it again only a few days back? I assume it would have been in the 1920/30's". With these few clues I started to investigate. This is what I found:

On Monday June 24<sup>th</sup> 1929 Percival Frederick James Baigent, a counter hand at Messrs. Kingham and Co., committed suicide by gas poisoning after having killed his six-year old son, Kenneth Charles Baigent, by cutting his throat through to the spine with a table knife.

The inquest was held on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> June. Horace Baigent (Percival's brother) testified that the Baigents had been married for 7 years, although not altogether happily, and that Percival was passionately fond of Kenneth. Percival had not previously shown any suicidal tendencies.

On the Monday in question, Percival had been to work as usual but returned home early and Kenneth returned home from school just after 12 midday. At 12.40pm Charles Lovegrove was summoned to 10 Crescent Road by his sister-in-law. He found the front door locked and windows secured. Charles forced the door open, smelt gas, and found Kenneth in the dining room in a pool of blood. Percival was found in the scullery with his head in the gas oven and a tube in his mouth. Two blood stained table knives were found, one in the

copper and one on the kitchen table.

Mrs Baigent told the inquest that her husband had left for work as usual, but had not spoken to her. She came home from an errand at 12.05 but got no answer, so went for Mr Lovegrove. She said that her husband had moody fits, and had one on Saturday night (22<sup>nd</sup> June) after hearing of the other murder (Alfred Oliver's).

In a note left by Percival, he mentioned "That lot up the yard have driven me to this." Mrs Baigent said that referred to people who lived in Marker's Cottages, Southampton Street. The jury's unanimous verdict was "that the man killed his son, and then committed suicide whilst of unsound mind". They, and the coroner, expressed their sympathy to the widow. The coroner continued, "There were a lot of rumours going around in this case about the domestic relations of the man and his wife, and we have heard there was some friction going on somewhere. But I do think that if the female element learn to keep their tongues and jaws in better order and control, there may be fewer of these tragedies."

The funeral of Percival and Kenneth was held on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> June, when large crowds lined the route when the cortege passed by. There was a service at St Mary's Episcopal Church, Castle Street, followed by interment at Henley Road Municipal Cemetery, both in the same grave.

Each of the three local papers being published at the time of the incident (Berkshire Chronicle,

Reading Mercury and Reading Standard) ran articles on the inquest and funerals. The reason for this double tragedy slipping into the realms of obscurity, is that it occurred in the same week as the more widely reported murder of Alfred Oliver, which involved the American actor Philip Yale Drew and which was mentioned at the inquest.

Vicki Chesterman

### **THE PULSOMETER ENGINEERING COMPANY LIMITED ITS ORIGIN AND WORK**

In 1875, the late John Eliot Hodgkin, F.S.A., began to manufacture, in a Battersea factory, the "Pulsometer" Steam Pump. Two years later this business was registered as "THE PULSOMETER ENGINEERING CO. LTD."

The "Pulsometer" Steam Pump, which could pump almost anything, soon became world famous. The firm's activities increased so quickly that within three years a move to larger premises became necessary. This was made to Nine Elms in London. By 1901 another move became inevitable and new premises were built on the outskirts of Reading, perpetuating past associations by being named "Nine Elms Ironworks".

Meanwhile, electric current at an economic price and the change from reciprocating to rotating machinery had given an impetus to the centrifugal pump, which this firm has developed to a high degree.

The firm has initiated and patented important ideas that have greatly improved or revolutionised existing pumping practice, especially in the case of sewage

and vacuum pumps, in the manufacture of stoneware and rubber-lined pumps and in the purification of water.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Pulsometer Engineering Company produced the first practical vacuum pump which gave hitherto unobtainable results and made X-ray tubes, wireless valves and incandescent lamps workable propositions. These vacuum pumps are now used for innumerable industrial and scientific purposes, including delicate surgical operations.

Following the introduction of unlimited water supply, the Company made the first filter capable of dealing with really dirty water in 1875. In 1883 it designed a mechanical filter that was the precursor of mechanical filters now used all over the world. The largest drinking water plant in Scotland and some of the best known municipal swimming baths in England have installed "Pulsometer" Water Purification Plants.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Pulsometer" ice-making and refrigeration machinery has been supplied for practically all commercial and industrial uses at home and abroad. These plants are used in the manufacture of foods, for magazine cooling in H.M. vessels and for food storage on all the well-known shipping lines. The "Pulsometer" patent cylindrical stainless steel Milk Cooler may be found at work in many dairies and farms all over the country.

Today the firm still serves the world, and is constantly improving its products to meet all demands.

## **WELLSTEEDS LTD.**

Nearly 100 years ago the firm of WELLSTEEDS came into being when Mr. W.H. Wellsted opened a drapery shop in Broad Street, Reading. WELLSTEEDS soon attracted custom and gained a large proportion of trade.

The business was built up on a secure foundation and was later transferred to the founder's son, Mr. William Wellsted, who carried on and developed it until about 1879, when, still maintaining the name and traditions, the business was taken over by Mr. Reginald J. Tyrell.

WELLSTEEDS went forward under the guidance of Mr. Tyrell for over 30 years until taken over as a subsidiary to Messrs. Bobby & Co., Ltd., an associate company of Messrs. Debenham Limited.

Immediate success was achieved under the new management. With an increase in the volume of trade extensive enlargements and alterations were made to the premises, turning it into a modern store in a most convenient place for a shopping expedition.

The premises extended to three floors with a basement: the floor space being approximately 3½ acres. To the benefit of the public there is a departmental organisation with a well-equipped Restaurant.

The 1939 War left its scars, when in the afternoon of Wednesday, 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1943, with an air-raid on Reading, WELLSTEEDS were temporarily put out of action, necessitating the removal of most departments to the premises of Messrs. Holmes Ltd. in St. Mary's Butts. There the business continued until

28<sup>th</sup> April, 1947, which date marked the re-occupation and return of most of the departments to their rightful homes in Broad Street.

*From the Souvenir Programme issued (price 3d.) for the Reading Silver Lining Savings Week Events and Exhibition, held January 31 to February 7, 1948.*

These two items from the above source have been contributed by John Whitehead. John, who contributed most of the bus stories to the "Reading Book of Days", also announces that a book that he has co-written with **Ray Smith** is now at the printers and should be on sale by mid-May at £30 a copy plus £4.95 p&p.

Entitled **Reading's Municipal Transport 1939-1950: War and Austerity** it is case-bound and comprises 240 pages with prolific illustrations not usually in the public domain. It provides a detailed account of the years of strife and austerity in Reading seen through the operation of Reading Corporation Transport. **Copies can be obtained from John Whitehead at 3, Littlecote Drive, Reading RG1 6JD.**

#### **DAYS UPDATED**

The Book of Days team has been reviewing the text as published and come across a few errors to be corrected in any reprint, together with updates of contemporary stories. Those who have purchased copies may like to note the following proposed changes:

June 8 Line 5. *Millar Galt* should read *William Galt Millar*.

July 19 Line 4. *ivory-tuner* should

read *ivory turner*.

July 23 Lines 21-22. *Charles Richards Havell* should read *Charles Richard Havell*.

July 27 Second story, lines 2-3. Replace *It was designed by Leslie Gunston and sculpted by John Harvard Thomas* by *It was designed by Leslie Gunston, a cousin of the poet, Wilfred Owen*.

Aug. 19 Line 19. *in 1930* - this should read *in 1929*.

Sept. 17 Line 16. For two *High Street branches* read *two King's Road buildings*.

Sept. 17 Replace final sentence by: *On Christmas Eve 2013 Jacksons finally closed its doors after 138 years serving the Reading community*.

October 18 In the references 1988 should read 1888.

October 26 Second story, line 4. *Jack Bogart* should read *Jack Bryant*. Omit from last sentence: *and Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer (1981)*.

#### **STOP PRESS!**

Reading Borough Council, along with the Friends of Reading Abbey, will be running 15 minute drop-in tours of the Abbey Ruins. The first tours are this week, on Friday May 9<sup>th</sup> from 12-2pm, details at: <http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/events/details/483/>. There will also be tours running during Waterfest on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> June 11-3pm, details on the same website with number 484. There is no need to book, just drop-in at the Abbey Ruins on the day!