

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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Thoughts from the Chair

I hope that you have been able to enjoy the summer weather, and our two summer visits. Not being much interested in military matters, I was pleased to find the visit to Brock Barracks more interesting than I had expected, though I must admit that for me, the most memorable part was the wonderful scent of the lime trees bordering the site, on a radiant summer's evening.



Major Andrew Bowes addressing members during their visit to the Brock Barracks in June. [Photo - Sean Duggan]

Then, despite my lack of interest in wars and armies, I found myself invited to the "launch" of Tommy Atkins Ale, produced by the West Berkshire Brewery. This took place in the beer garden of the Allied Arms pub in St. Mary's Butts. There were some interesting people there, including a lady who had a small pocket diary, written in the trenches of the Western Front by a relative of hers. She was hoping to have it published.



Society members gather for their tour of St Michael's Tilehurst. [Photo - JD]

The Society's trip to St. Michael's Church, Tilehurst, was also blessed by glorious weather – and the sound of the bells. The most memorable things for me were the “half-figure of a blackamoor holding a tobacco leaf,” as Pevsner puts it, on the monument of Sir Peter Vanlore, which I hadn't noticed before; a painting of the church before G. E. Street's 19th-century “restoration,” when it had a coved ceiling and the chancel arch was ogee-shaped; and another was watching the rays of setting sun change the colours in the stained glass windows.

I found the Heritage Open Days a bit disappointing this year. There didn't seem to be much that was new – perhaps I was expecting too much? – and there weren't any publicity leaflets in the usual places. I also discovered that the Heritage Open Days website didn't include everything that was going on, so maybe I missed something good.

Having said that, I did find an event to enjoy. This was an organ recital in St. James's Catholic Church, which happened just after the Sunday morning Mass. Incense hung in the air, pierced through by beams of coloured light from the stained glass windows. The effect was almost magical. Anyone interested in the windows and the history of this church should seek out a recent publication from the Scallop Shell Press, “The Stained Glass of St. James's Church, Reading,” by John Mullaney, well illustrated in full colour, and available from the church at £4.99. Those present enjoyed a recital of music, written to be performed in St. Mark's in Venice around 1560, played on an organ similar to the one which would have been in St. Mark's at the time. The distinguished organist, Richard Lester, gave us a short introduction before moving to the organ gallery at the back of the church.

After a pub lunch, it was ice-creams and listening to the band in the Forbury Gardens. The weather was kind, and the Goring and Streatley Concert Band were

on good form, and gave us a varied programme.

So I'm feeling grateful to a lot of people who have shown us round, played music for our enjoyment, and those who have organised things behind the scenes. And, as always, I'm grateful to the speakers at the Society's meetings. I'm looking forward to the new season of talks, in all their variety, and to meeting up with old and new friends in familiar surroundings.

Please be assured that over the summer I haven't been exactly idle. I've been involved in organising a symposium in St. Laurence's Church for the Berkshire Local History Association, and have almost finished work on a couple of illustrated talks. I was asked to talk about Reading cinemas for the Family History Society, and to give a second talk about engineering and manufacturing firms in Reading for the Berkshire Industrial Archaeology Group. The research has been time-consuming but rewarding. Then I've been finding images of wind- and watermills for The Mills Archive, and was amazed to find a picture from 1902 showing a water-wheel powered by the Thames to pump water for the growing and distillation of beetroot to produce a kind of brandy! Apparently, the venture was a commercial failure! Also, over the last few months, the number of old images on the Reading Libraries website has increased considerably. I've been cataloguing pictures of Crowthorne and Sandhurst, and my colleague has been adding the scanned images of the Alan Boshier collection of match-box labels. There are over 100 of them, advertising pubs and various other businesses, some still going and others defunct, and all with a story to tell.

David Cliffe.

Footnote on Heritage Days from the Editor: “The Editor spent a considerable part of the time on duty at St Mary's Castle Street, where the items on view included a montage in celebration of

marriage. It was all made worthwhile for me by a visit from an elderly lady who intimated that she thought her parents-in-law had been married in the chapel. "Do you know the date?" "Yes, I think it was 1918 – name of Baker." As it happened, we had on display the chapel's first marriage register (normally in the care of the Berkshire Record Office) dating from 1914 to 1922 and I was able to say, "Come with me" and we found the entry.

Equally memorable for your editor who had booked a "hard hat" visit to the "Abbey Quarter", including the abbey ruins, was an incident that occurred while crossing St Laurence's Churchyard. The safety helmets had not yet been donned but would have come in handy for a hard object struck me on the side of the head – probably a falling nut, rather than loose masonry! Happily, the editorial skull proved too hard to crack.

Another Valpy

Perhaps one of the more unusual connections with Reading concerns the Free Church of Scotland's missionary activity during the early days of the colonization of New Zealand. The Free Church had come into being as a result of the Disruption of 1843 when 400 evangelical ministers left the Church of Scotland on the grounds that the patronage system restricted the freedom they sought to proclaim the gospel. This coincided with the formulation of plans for a new Scottish settlement in the South Island provisionally called New Edinburgh. While this was originally to be a broad-based community, the scheme was eventually taken over exclusively by the Free Church and the man appointed to be its minister was the Revd. Thomas Burns (1796-1871), one of those who had departed from the established church in 1843. The scheme was some years in the melting pot and it was not until 1848 that

"a small, and, in some respects, unimpressive band of emigrants" arrived in Port Chalmers (named after Thomas Chalmers, leader of the Free Church in its early days) in two ships called the *Philip Laing* and (appropriately perhaps) *John Wickliffe*. By this time the principal settlement had become known as Dunedin rather than New Edinburgh. Including some later arrivals the initial settlement comprised around 600. In addition there were around 170 Maori inhabitants in the vicinity.

The Reading connection comes through W. H. Valpy, a son of Dr Valpy of Reading School:

"On the 7th of January, 1849, an important event took place in the arrival of the *Ajax*. Important because Mr. William Henry Valpy with his family was on board, a large employer of labour, and thus amongst other ways very acceptable to the requirements of the young community. This gentleman was born at the Forbury, near Reading, in Berkshire, in January, 1793. His father, the Rev. Richard Valpy, D.D., was the eminent schoolmaster and editor of the well-known Eton Latin Grammar, and his uncle, A. J. Valpy, the well-known publisher of the *Delphin* and *Variorum Classics*. At fourteen he entered the Royal Navy, but, not caring for the sea, exchanged with his brother Captain Anthony Valpy, and went to Haileybury College to prepare for the Honourable East India Company's civil service. He then proceeded to India, where he remained for thirty years, filling various appointments of district judge, governor-general's agent, &c. He married Caroline, daughter of the Rev. Richard Jeffreys, a chaplain in the Service. On his return he settled at Cheltenham, where, with a few others, he inaugurated the Church of England Training College. After a severe illness he was ordered to New Zealand as the only hope of perfect recovery. He brought out a large staff of servants and stores of all kinds; also flour and sawmills.

These were erected at the Water of Leith valley, where their ruins are still to be seen....



Caversham down under today [Photo: John Whitehead]

After a short time he settled at what is now known as St. Clair, on a property of about 120 acres which included the present cliffs. This he called the Forbury after his father's school. He owned also the whole of the Caversham flat—which he named after the birthplace of his mother near Reading—and many town sections, amongst them being Fern Hill and Mr. John Hyde Harris's Grange property. He had sheep runs at the Waihola and Horse Shoe Bush.... In the early part of 1851 he was nominated by Sir George Grey to a seat in the Legislative Council, which he accepted. For this unlucky step he was violently criticised and was drawn into a controversy for which his gentle nature was quite unfitted. He did not, however, take his seat. He died at the Forbury on the 25th of September, 1852, in his sixtieth year, leaving a wife, son, and three daughters, one of whom was married to Mr. James Fulton, M.H.R., of the West Taieri. Though an Episcopalian he was a warm supporter of Mr. Burns's ministry and of the religious scheme under which the settlement had been founded." (Quoted from *Contributions to the Early History of New Zealand (Settlement of Otago)*, Thomas Morland Hocken, 1898.)

In his political activities Valpy took a leading role in opposing the plans of the

Secretary of State for the Colonies, Earl Grey, to introduce convict labour to the Dunedin settlement, thus helping to preserve its predominantly Scottish free church ethos. However, perhaps inevitably, the Church of England succeeded in obtaining a foothold and in September, 1851, the appointed clergyman, a Dr. Frederick Richardson, of Cheltenham, arrived on the scene. "Prior to leaving England he collected from his friends for English church purposes in Dunedin a sum of £270, together with communion plate, a barrel organ, and a stone font." Nevertheless, Dunedin remains a strong outpost of Presbyterianism to this day – thanks in small part to an Anglican from Reading.

John Dearing

The HoRS Calendar, 2015

This year, as a new venture, we have produced a calendar, using old postcards and photographs of our town, kindly lent by members. There's a picture for each month, and one on the cover. All of them are images which haven't been generally available for a long time – you won't find them in the "old Reading" or "Reading then and now" books. Among the pictures, you'll find Oxford Road, Caversham Road, Christchurch Road, Norcot Road in Tilehurst, floods in Great Knollys Street and snow at Little End in Caversham. The cost is £4, and even at this modest price, the Society can make a little on each calendar sold. The committee has been anxious to avoid having left-over copies in January, and at the September meeting, we sold half of our stock, and have already broken even on the venture. So if you would like one (or two) calendars, there will be some at the October meeting, but after that, we can't promise. If there turns out to be a large demand, we can of course have more printed, and we may be motivated to do something similar next year.

**Book Review: WAR AND AUSTERITY:
READING'S MUNICIPAL TRANSPORT, 1939-
1950, by Ray Smith and John Whitehead.
Reading: Millane Publishing, 2014.**

This is a book primarily for bus and trolleybus enthusiasts. It is comprehensive, detailed, and meticulous – everything that could be desired – without being narrow-minded or obsessive. To say that it was well researched would be an understatement.

People are never forgotten: those who managed the undertaking, those who worked for it, their trade unions, the councillors who made the decisions, and those who paid their money and travelled on the vehicles. The book has appeared in time for the authors to have known many of the people they mention.

The Second World War occupies 6 of the 11 years. We start with the closing of the tramways in 1939. The trolleybuses had started in 1936, and were seen as the shape of things to come. The extension of the system to serve the Whitley area during and just after the war is recorded, though trolleybuses never did cross Caversham Bridge, as had been intended. Motorbus routes continued to develop, but during most of the period under consideration, the buses and trolleybuses often had difficulty in coping with the demands made on them.

Like most people, I suspect, I began by looking at the pictures, starting with the arresting photograph on the front cover, which appears to show a plane that has just dropped a bomb on a bus in the middle of Broad Street. It was a defence exercise! Photographs are well reproduced, and of a reasonable size. The book is in hard covers, and printed on good quality glossy paper throughout, which means that the pictures can be placed in appropriate places in the text.

For “old Reading” enthusiasts there is a great deal of fun to be had looking at the backgrounds to the pictures. Many long-gone, but well-remembered Reading establishments appear – such as the Reindeer pub in Southampton Street, the Tower Café in Tilehurst, the Rex Cinema in Oxford Road, and Fossett's tripe shop on St. Mary's Butts. I was intrigued to see a “level crossing” traffic sign by the railway bridge over Vastern Road – presumably a line from the Great Western Railway's sidings to the corporation's power station went over the road.

There are many insights into what went on in Reading during the war. Some transport services were curtailed, and various objects were painted white in an attempt to prevent accidents during the back-out. On the other hand, many new services had to be introduced. It is reckoned that 1,000 people a day had to be got to Reading West railway station, from where they were taken by train to the new private siding of the Royal Ordnance Factory at Burghfield. In the beginning they were the construction workers, and later, munitions workers. There were also special runs to the Co-op jam factory at Coley, the Pulsometer Engineering Company at Norcot, Huntley and Palmers, and the Royal Army Pay Corps at Balmore House, Caversham, to name but a few.

All this had to be achieved despite shortages of fuel, no new vehicles being built, shortages of spare parts for existing vehicles, and shortages of staff.

It's also good a letting you know about local events, and when they happened – when the council first allowed the cinemas to open on Sundays, when the tram-lines were taken up in various streets, when the Olympic torch was carried through, and when the original Whitley Pump was removed. These are not indexed – though there is a

reasonable index referring to the transport undertaking itself.

Quality of this kind does not come cheap. If you want to buy a copy of the book, it will set you back £30. However, there is a copy for loan at Reading Central Library. If you are interested in the history of Reading in the not-so-distant past, this book should keep your brain stimulated for many hours, as you pick your way through the text and

pictures, preferably with a notebook and pencil to hand.

It is a labour of love, produced over many years and without compromise. I would guess that the publishers, Millane Publishing, are the authors themselves, determined to produce the book that they wanted, unrestricted by the demands of commercial publishers. They are to be congratulated. Dare we now expect a further volume? The inter-war years, maybe?

David Cliffe

AN EASIER WAY TO RENEW MEMBERSHIP FROM JANUARY 2015

You may find it easier and more convenient to set up a Standing Order for when your Annual membership is due **in January 2015**. The details your bank will need to process this are as follows:

Current Membership: £9 single, £18 couple

Add: Your Name and 'HORS membership renewal' as reference to identify your payment.

Thank you. This form of payment will certainly ease the pressure on your Treasurer at the beginning of the year even if some of you prefer to continue payment by Cash and Cheque (which will, of course, still be accepted by your Treasurer)!

John Starr

The Editor is always very pleased to receive items for inclusion from the wider membership – not just the committee! They can be handed to him, posted or better still submitted in electronic format to: gpwild@btconnect.com. All contributions gratefully received