

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 & Programme Organiser	Hon Treasurer & Membership	Editor
David Cliffe 1 Priest Hill Caversham READING RG4 7RZ 0118 948 3354	Vicki Chesterman 7 Norman Road Caversham READING RG4 5JN Tel: 0118 947 3443	John Starr	John Dearing 27 Sherman Road READING RG1 2PJ Tel: 0118 958 0377 gpwild@btconnect.com

Summer 2015

No 40

SUMMER OUTINGS



Peter Van Went speaking to Society members during their July visit to the Blue Coat School at Sonning. Photo: SD



Interior of Reading Synagogue, showing the Parochet. Photo: JD

In June, the society's members visited the Reading Hebrew Synagogue at Goldsmid Road. We were welcomed by Sue Krisman, a member of the congregation for 50 years; in 2000 she wrote a book to commemorate the synagogue's centenary.

Sue guided us to the Sanctuary of the synagogue, where worship is conducted. When members were seated Jack Album, whose family were founder members of the congregation, explained the layout of the synagogue and form of worship. The most sacred part of the synagogue is the Holy Ark where the Torah scrolls are kept; it is situated at the eastern wall so the congregation face Jerusalem where the Holy Temple once stood. The Holy Ark is concealed by a

curtain called the *Parochet*. The Torah is a large scroll of parchment containing the Five Books of Moses. The *Bimah*, the raised podium in the centre of the Sanctuary, is where the Torah and some prayers are read aloud. Surrounding the *Bimah* are bench pews and above them a gallery where traditionally women worshippers sit.

Later, the members adjourned to the Hermann Gollancz Hall where Sue talked about the history of the synagogue. In the late nineteenth century the large Jewish communities in London were encouraged to move to rural areas to help improve their lives and many chose to move to Reading. The foundation of the synagogue was the culmination of many years' hard work by the town's small Jewish community; at first, they worshipped in each other's homes and by 1899 they were holding services at Queen's Hall, Valpy Street. It became clear that they would need a synagogue as a focus for their community; among many, generous donations were received from the family of the late MP for Reading, Sir Francis Goldsmid.

The site at Goldsmid Road was purchased for £450 in April 1899 and the foundation stone was laid 11 months later. The Hebrew date engraved above the ornate entrance to the synagogue reads 5661, equivalent to the Christian year 1900 when it was opened and consecrated.

Sean Duggan

For our July visit we were entertained by the erudite presentation on Blue Coat School by Peter van Went. Peter had already talked to the Society last year - and who better to take us around the School - a Blue Coat scholar, then, after a Cambridge History degree, a teacher there for 38 years and the School Archivist. Blue Coat was founded by Richard Aldworth; his 1646 Will made provision for the education of a number of twenty poor boarders in Reading. In fact several other bequests were needed before the provision of a dilapidated building, The Talbot Inn, and a schoolmaster could be realised!

Eventually, in 1852, the School was given a new lease of life in the Bath Road. However, by 1946 the School's very survival was at stake again. Backed by the Bishop of Reading a future was seen at Holme Park and on 21 January 1947 150 boys and teachers set off for Sonning to fulfil the extraordinary 'act of faith' referred to by the Bishop on the purchase of Holme Park. There are now some 750 pupils with a co-ed sixth form. The ideals of Richard Aldworth are maintained by the provision of a number of bursaries.

Peter escorted us around the grounds, enabling us to imagine the mediaeval palace of the Bishop of Ramsbury, then inside School House to view early photographs and finally enjoy a much appreciated sit down in 'The Buttery' with coffee and homemade biscuits! Our guide's booklet on the History of the School is entitled *Truth Conquers All* (Shire Library, ISBN 13:978 0 74781 307 1).

John Starr

THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

As I have discovered, retirement is a fine thing, so long as you have good health and enough to live on. When I was working for a living, most days were divided into two – what you did for your employer during the day, and what you did for yourself, in the evenings. I found that when I retired, the day divided itself into three, or even more parts.

Yesterday was one such day. During the day time I was cataloguing pictures of Wallingford in the Central Library's collection. At lunch time I had a good meal at a restaurant, and then went to Reading Market in search of fruit and vegetables at prices much below those in the supermarkets. I found some of those little knobbly Kentish strawberries, so good for making jam.

When the library closed, I returned home, to find a proof copy of the History of Reading Society 2016 calendar on the mat. I made the jam: it took about 20 minutes of boiling to make it set, and the berries were still recognisable in their jars afterwards. Then I turned on the computer, and the first e-mail I read was from the Editor, reminding me that he needed a "Thoughts" article!

Today dawned bright and fine – just the opportunity, I thought, to start a bit of home decorating. The preparatory work was done by one o'clock, so I had a wash and change of clothes, and went to a restaurant in Caversham, near my house. After lunch, a brief wander

round the garden, looking at butterflies feeding on flowers. And then, I reckoned, the time had come to write this piece.

There have been advantages, as well as drawbacks, in feeling that I belong in two different towns. The idea for the History of Reading Society calendar came from seeing the one produced by the Macclesfield Historical Society. When I proposed producing a calendar to the Reading committee, there was some scepticism. "Why?" – they asked.

My feeling was that a calendar could bring a bit of extra money into the Society, it would bring the Society before the public as an organisation that was active and had something to offer, and it would give people pleasure over a whole year. I think I have been proved right. There was no question about producing a 2016 calendar.

I was very careful over the captions for the pictures in this one, checking with committee members Sidney and Sean that they were happy with them, and typing them very deliberately. I wish the type-setter had been as careful! The corrected proof will go back tomorrow. Nevertheless, the pictures are good, it's only July, and the calendars should be with us in good time for our meeting on September 16th.

The price will be a modest £5, and I'm hoping to get something in the "Chronicle," based on the pictures and mentioning the calendars and where you can buy them. If this happens, I expect that we can sell at least twice as many as last year's 149 copies.

The 13 pictures (one for each month, and one on the cover) are in colour, using slides by the late Norman Wicks (whom many will remember). They date from the late 1960s and early 1970s, just before the Inner Distribution Road cut a swathe round the town. My thinking is that if I remember with pleasure most of those shops and pubs that have now disappeared, and patronised some of them, so will many other Reading people.

I mentioned earlier that I was continuing cataloguing pictures in the Central Library's local studies collection, which covers the whole of Berkshire. I've got as far as Wallingford, and have Wantage and Windsor still to tackle. Wokingham was done years ago, because it is nearer to Reading.

The threats of further cut-backs in staffing in libraries, and the possible closure of branch libraries, coming from the council, are worrying. I'm wondering what I shall find myself saying in November, when the Central Library celebrates the 30th anniversary of the move from Blagrove Street to Abbey Square. It is anticipated that the demand from present and former staff, and from customers and the general public, will be so great, that the celebration will need to be repeated. Two Tuesday evenings – the 17th and 24th November - are being proposed. I have agreed to give a talk about the history of the library at both. I hope that "celebration" will be the right word!

Until we start the meetings again in September, please enjoy the summer, and remember to look out for the Heritage Open Days, September 10-13.

David Cliffe

JUST IN CASE YOU MISSED THEM....

Here are reports of our three most recent talks.

The **Royal Abbey at Reading** was the subject of the March talk. The speaker was Emeritus Professor Brian Kemp who lectures at University of Reading on Medieval Studies and is president of the Friends of Reading Abbey.

The Abbey at Reading was founded by King Henry I in 1121 for the salvation of his soul and those of his family. On his death in 1135, Henry was buried there before the High Altar. King Henry invited monks of the Benedictine Order of Cluny in France to form a community in Reading, this act acknowledging his Norman- French ancestry. The Order was held in high regard for its care of the poor and for encouraging art.

King Stephen paid a visit in 1140 on his way to Wallingford Castle and during the following year Empress Matilda, King Henry I's daughter, was received with great honour.

In 1164, during the reign of King Henry II, the building of the abbey was completed and in the presence of the King and noblemen the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Beckett, presided

at the consecration service to dedicate the abbey to St. Mary and St. John the Evangelist. King Henry gave much land and many religious relics to the Abbey.

In 1359, during the reign of King Edward III, his son, John of Gaunt married Blanche of Lancaster at the Abbey; their son, King Henry IV, was the first Lancastrian King of England. During the reign of King Henry VI parliament was forced to meet at the Abbey because of outbreaks of plague in London.

In 1520, during the reign of King Henry VIII, the Abbey's thirty-first and final abbot, Hugh Cook Faringdon, was elected; in 1539 he would be executed for treason for refusing to accept the King as the Supreme Head of the Church of England. This year the Abbey was closed on the King's order and thus began a period of deterioration as its treasures and fabric were plundered by the Crown and townsfolk.

The **Royal Flying Corps** (RFC) during World War One was the subject of the April talk. The speaker was Andrew Bird, a local historian, novelist and broadcaster and by profession a graphic artist who studied at the Reading College of Art and Design.

The No.1 School of Military Aeronautics was established at Reading in December 1915 as a training school for the Royal Flying Corps, the predecessor to the modern RAF. Students enrolled for courses there from all over Britain and the Empire. At first the training was for flight instructors; in 1916 it was expanded to include cadet pilot and observer training.

The school's headquarters was at Yeomanry House, Castle Hill whilst most of the lessons were taught at Wantage Hall, a hall of residence commandeered from University College, Reading. In 1915 there were 200 officers and 1800 other ranks enrolled on its courses, by 1918 15,000 officers and 100,000 other ranks had passed through the school. Cadets were taught theoretical aspects of powered flight including map reading, gunnery and mechanics. Mock aircraft fuselages were wedged between the branches of trees to simulate height whilst trainers shouted instructions from the ground. Other courses included: rigging and fitting, wireless operation and Morse code, and how to build and dismantle aircraft.

In 1917 a jam factory at Coley was commandeered for technical training courses and a small airfield provided. At this time the first females were enrolled on courses; 300 of them were engaged in illustrating the first air training manuals. The sexes were strictly segregated, the ladies separately billeted at the University College's St. Patrick's Hall.

Local residents complained about the unruly behaviour of the cadets: some would race around the area on motorcycles; this practice was punishable by a fine of one week's wages. Notable graduates of the school included: Francis Howard Bickerton, the Antarctic explorer, Ian Bonham Carter, a senior RAF Officer in WW2 and a relation of the actress Helena, and William Earl Johns, author of the Biggles books.

At the end of the war in 1918 the RFC wanted to continue at the site on a permanent basis but the University College declined their request and so the school moved to Halton, Buckinghamshire where it is today. Andrew is working with University of Reading to document the university's connection with the RFC.

The **Timms family of Reading and London** was the subject of the May talk. The speaker was Katie Amos who works within the local studies department at Reading Central Library.

Katie is a keen family historian whose interest in the Timms family began while researching her family tree ten years ago. She was delighted to discover that her four times great-grandfather, William Henry Timms, had drawn twelve views of prominent buildings around Reading and published them in 1823: the drawings of churches are of particular interest because later many were drastically restored by the Victorians; a book that contains prints of these views is held in the library's collection.

With the help of our own Sidney Gold, Katie began to trace William Henry's descendants. He was born at Reading in 1791 to William and Sarah Timms, his father was the publican at the Lower Ship Inn on Duke Street; at the time of William Henry's birth his father was declared bankrupt.

It is not known where William Henry was educated, though his artistic training may have been with either Edmund or Luke Havell of the famous family of Reading artists. At the time of his

mother's death in 1832 he was established in London with his wife and children; later, they would move to Margate, his wife's birthplace. Timms specialized in colouring prints; his most important commission was on the book *A Voyage Round Great Britain* about the artist William Daniell's views of the British coastline published in 1815.

One of William Henry's sons, Charles Alfred Timms, born in 1819, began his career as a painter but during the 1850s, he switched to the new technology of photography. He specialised in producing photographic portraits, Carte de Visites, a recent French invention where a photograph is mounted on a small card that can be carried conveniently. He ran the business with his wife Anne and they were among the earliest pioneers of this art form in England.

A grandchild of William Henry's, also named William Henry and his younger brother Arthur, became eminent designers of furniture in London; William Henry would become co-author of a magazine on the subject.

In 2014, Katie published a book on her researches into the Timms family and she told the meeting that she would continue her research.

Sean Duggan

CAVERSHAM AIR RAID

Some correspondence originally relating to my book "Reading Pubs" has brought me into contact with Robin Gardner, who came from Caversham but now lives in Flackwell Heath. As the correspondence developed it became clear that Robin had an interesting gloss on one of the stories in the "Reading Book of Days". Here it is.

We lived at 1 Church Road, Caversham from 1936 to the mid 50's. Some time during the war, an incendiary bomb was dropped on the house, but I never knew the date, until I read the Book of Days, and know now when it was (see entry for April 9th). And so I have been able to update my autobiography, as follows:

On the 30th January 1941, a Thursday, a lone German aircraft, probably a Dornier, dropped several hundred incendiaries that fell in an extensive area in Caversham which included us at 1 Church Road. The house, which is still there, is over 300 years old with a very steep sloping roof, which saved our lives and the house. My brother and I were in bed with either the measles or chicken pox at the time, in a double bed under the said sloping roof. One of the bombs hit the roof on the street side, it did not penetrate the roof but slid down and landed on the front door step, where Dad put out the fire, and brought the steaming offending item up to show us in a bucket of water. When he got down, someone had pinched the tail fin, much to Dad's disgust, it was "our bomb!" Across the road there were 2 storey buildings with flat roofs and shops on the ground floor. A bomb went through a roof & caught light. The fire brigade were soon there climbing up ladders and putting it out.

Robin has also sent me some further reminiscences of members of his family and acquaintances which may well appear in future issues.

BRIAN EIGHTEEN RIP

Brian Eighteen, who died on 4 April after a long illness, will be best remembered for his fabulous collection of postcards featuring buildings and natural features, many now vanished or completely changed. However, he was far more than a collector. A keen member, and later Secretary and then Chairman of the Reading and District Card and Postcard Club, he organised its highly successful gatherings and sales in Reading which attracted nationwide enthusiasts. His own collection numbered many thousands, all so efficiently catalogued that he could immediately locate any one he needed.

In later years he began to collect cards depicting local scenes including watermills and others showing locations in Reading. His interest in Winnersh, where he had lived for many years, prompted him to found the Winnersh and District Historical Society of which he was a long-serving chairman. The society's Research Group published two very well researched and informative booklets: *Winnersh Reflections* (2005), an oral history collection, and *Exploring Winnersh, Now and Then* (2006), a series of walks using clear hand-drawn maps marking historic and contemporary

features along the routes. They are a valuable record of the past in this rapidly changing community, sandwiched between Reading and Wokingham and beset by ever-growing volumes of traffic.

After his funeral at Easthampstead, Brian's family arranged a celebration of his life, appropriately at Sindlesham Mill. It was a chance to meet a few of his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and some of his wide circle of friends and local history colleagues. From an obituary written by his family, it appears that Eighteen is a corruption of Etienne, the name of one of Brian's ancestors who came to Reading in about 1796. One of Etienne's descendants, Brian's grandfather, was a successful fish salesman and horse dealer in Victorian Reading, eventually serving as borough alderman.

It was a pleasure to meet Brian, always cheerful and friendly, and eager to share his deep knowledge about the places depicted on his postcards. He will be sorely missed.

Joan Dils

BOOKS AND THINGS

Perils of Internet shopping: "Your package has arrived but unfortunately it contains a book in Welsh by John Meurig Edwards which appears to be about Wales's achievements in the Olympic Games rather than the book about Welsh Chapels which I ordered....."

THAMES VALLEY CENTENARY

Sunday, August 2nd, was the centenary of the start of motor bus services in Reading. Initially, the British Automobile Traction Company, with offices and garage at 113 Caversham Road, Reading, ran services between Maidenhead, Reading and Streatley. A century later, more than 20 preserved vehicles arrived outside Reading Station on a sunny Sunday morning. Two of them had helped provide the initial service. There were free bus rides and a lot of happy people, thanks to the Thames Valley and Great Western Omnibus Trust. Our picture shows a 1938 Tilling Stevens B9A with bodywork by Brush, in the livery of the Thames Valley Traction Company.



AN EASIER WAY TO RENEW MEMBERSHIP FROM JANUARY 2016

You may find it easier and more convenient to set up a Standing Order for when your Annual membership is due **in January 2016**. The details your bank will need to process this are as follows:

Current Membership: £9 single, £18 couple

Cash and cheque will, of course, still be accepted by your Treasurer.

Dr John R Starr