

# 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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## NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Society's AGM will take place on Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> March 2016.

### AGENDA

1. Welcome and Apologies.
2. Approval of Minutes of 2015 AGM.
3. Matters Arising.
4. Chairman's Report and Review.
5. Treasurer's Report
6. Election of Officers and Committee for 2015/16.

Present Officers	
Chairman	David Cliffe ☒
Vice Chairman	Sidney Gold
Secretary	Vicki Chesterman ☉
Treasurer	John Starr ☒
Present Committee	
John Dearing [News Editor] ☒	
Sean Duggan [Archives and Publicity] ☒	
Joy Pibworth [Minutes Secretary] ☒	
John Whitehead ☒	

☉ Also Programme Organiser.

☒ Prepared to stand again. Mr Sidney Gold wishes to step down as Vice Chairman but is prepared to continue as a committee member. If you are interested in standing as Vice Chairman please speak to the Chairman, Secretary or retiring Vice Chairman. Any nominations for this or other posts with names of proposers and seconders should be submitted to the Secretary, prior to the meeting. As our Chairman stated recently, a bit of new blood wouldn't come amiss!

7. To elect an Independent Examiner of Accounts.
8. Any Other Business

## THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

There has recently been a lot of speculation as to the future of Reading Gaol – the listed Victorian building and the land within its walls.

From an aesthetic point of view, it is a great pity that the gatehouse, governor's house and chaplain's house were destroyed in the 1970s. From the point of view of someone trying to run a prison, perhaps it is understandable.

Closure of the gaol, by that time used as a Young Offenders' Institution, was announced in September 2013, and all the inmates and staff had left by early 2014.

Naturally, many people became interested in the archaeological remains which might lie under the site. Any redevelopment of the spaces between the four wings of the listed Victorian buildings would entail archaeological investigation, and there was talk of Anglo-Saxon and Viking fortifications, Civil War defences, and, of course, the mortal remains of the founder of Reading Abbey, King Henry I. This last was particularly newsworthy following the discovery of the remains of Richard III under a car park in Leicester, and their re-burial in March 2015.

The Borough Council produced an "Outline Development Framework" document for the site, and we waited to see what the intentions of the Ministry of Justice might be.

Would the site become a hotel, as happened at Oxford? Would it become offices? If the town wanted a replacement for The Hexagon, then maybe this could be the right place. The Victorian gaol, mostly still intact, has a certain tourist potential, and could be connected to "The Abbey Quarter." There must be many who would like to enter the cell once occupied by Oscar Wilde – though, surely, we couldn't contemplate the expense of opening up another museum there!

In October last year, the Ministry of Justice announced that the prison was to be "mothballed" as a contingency measure. This seems to have outraged some of the councillors, who saw it as creating a "dead" area in the middle of town for years to come.

Then, a month later, the Ministry announced that its "inner city" Victorian prisons were to be sold to property developers for residential use, with the money raised being used to build new, out of town prisons. "The Economist," on November 14<sup>th</sup>, had an article headed, "The Luxury Flats of Reading Gaol."

Personally, I feel that some measure of public access from the re-opened abbey ruins would be highly desirable – even if we can't have a new theatre and concert hall.

In the meantime, the Society presses forward. Sales of the calendar have been a bit disappointing, and it's particularly unfortunate that we didn't get a mention in the "Chronicle," despite my having made enquiries, and sent in a piece with pictures. That would not only have boosted sales, but enabled more people to enjoy what is a very good product, and made them aware of the existence of the History of Reading Society. Nevertheless, the calendars should still bring in around £120 in profit – a bit more than last year – because we put the price up! We sold almost 100 of the Christmas cards, bringing in about £13.

Our 2016 programme looks good and is certainly varied. After the A.G.M. in March, we have a play about the Swing Riots of the 1830s in this area. Although I've seen it before, I'm looking forward to seeing it again. I found it not only informative, but moving, and was impressed by the commitment shown by the players. Then in the summer, the two visits are varied. There's a church visit, which you would expect, but also a visit to the Museum of Berkshire Aviation in Woodley. I've been wanting to get to that museum for some time, and hope to see you there!

David Cliffe.

## GOODBYE TO 2015....

**Here follow reports on the talks given to the Society during the final months of 2015.**

**Policing Berkshire and Reading during World War One** was the subject of the September talk. The speaker was Tony Keep a former Thames Valley Police officer; he joined the Berkshire Constabulary, as it was then known, in 1963 and reached the rank of Chief Inspector before retirement in 1995.

When Britain entered the war in Europe during August 1914 the policing of Berkshire was the responsibility of Berkshire Constabulary and two separate borough forces for Reading and Windsor. The strength of the Berkshire Constabulary at this time was 275 officers, supported by a first reserve of 71 retired officers on an annual fee; additionally, a second reserve of nearly 4,000 unpaid volunteers was retained.

In addition to routine policing duties across the county, the three forces had additional responsibilities connected with the war: duties in connection with the mobilization of troops for war; making arrangements for the accommodation (billeting) of military personnel; the supervision and surveillance of enemy aliens; to protect transport and public utilities infrastructure.

The police were responsible for the registration of homing pigeons; it was feared that they could be used by agents to transport messages to the enemy. The keeping of pigeons at this time was a popular hobby and in Reading during 1914 officers made 1,160 visits and recorded 5,000 birds.

When the war ended in 1918 of the 95 police officers who had served in the military 79 had rejoined the Berkshire Constabulary, 4 were unfit for service because of injury and 12 were either killed in action or died later from their wounds.

**The History of Salters Steamers** was the subject of the October talk. The speaker was Simon Wenham who is a part-time research assistant to an Oxford academic and is on the tutor panel of Oxford University's Continuing Education Department, teaching history.

Simon told the meeting that in 1998 he got a job with the company based at its premises by Folly Bridge, Oxford. While employed there he rescued many documents that were being thrown in a rubbish skip; these discarded documents were an invaluable record of the company's history and he began to compile an archive.

The Salter family of boat builders moved their business from London to Oxford in 1858 because of pollution in the River Thames in the capital. Then known as Salters Brothers, they would become one of the largest non-university employers in the city.

As well as popularising pleasure boating on the Thames the company continued building boats: including pleasure, racing and military craft. Salters built all the Oxford boats that won the annual Oxford and Cambridge University Boat Race every year throughout the 1860s; they supplied the last boat built with a wooden hull to win the race in 1976.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the company had a fleet of 700 vessels. In 1905 it built its largest vessel for the Baptist Missionary Society, a steamer named the *Endeavour* which was used for missionary work in Africa. A dedication service for it was held at Folly Bridge before it was dismantled and sent to Africa.

Among many eminent customers for the company's boats were King Edward VII, T E Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) and the author C S Lewis; popular folklore has it that Lewis Carroll first told his story *Alice in Wonderland* to a party of children cruising on the Thames in a Salters boat.

Today, the company is still owned by the Salter family and continues to operate boat trips along the river Thames from Folly Bridge. It also has offices in Reading and Windsor.

**The History of Reading in the 1950s** was the subject of the November talk and the speaker was Stuart Hylton. Stuart is a local author who has lived in Reading more than 30 years and penned over 20 books on historical subjects.

Stuart's book *Reading in the 1950s: rationing to rock music* was the inspiration for the talk about this period of significant change for both Reading and Britain. Despite the war being over for five years, rationing of foods and consumables was still widespread: eggs, petrol, sugar and

tea were rationed until 1954. Many manufactured goods such as motor cars, television sets and vacuum cleaners were only available for export to earn the government precious American dollars.

Housing was another scarce resource. Although the borough council had embarked on a house building programme before the war, the halt to house building for the war's duration had led to an acute housing shortage and the shortage of materials and skilled labour forced the council to erect many pre-fabricated dwellings made in factories by unskilled labour.

The town's first supermarket (John Quality) opened at 59, Broad Street in 1951; for the first time frozen food was available for those who owned refrigerators. Young people began to emerge as a distinctive consumer group; these "teenagers" wanted their own distinctive fashions and music often influenced by American trends.

By the decade's end the town had expanded in all directions with new housing, both council and privately built in Southcote, Tilehurst and Woodley. The University continued to grow with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II opening new buildings at Whiteknights Park.

**The History of Whiteknights Park, Reading** was the subject of the December talk; the speaker was Joan Dils, the Society's President.

Whiteknights was conveyed to the Marquis of Blandford, George Spencer Churchill, in 1798 and thus began an intense period of activity as he transformed the park into one of the most celebrated ornamental gardens in England. In 1817, on the death of his father, he became the fifth Duke of Marlborough.

George spared no expense in realising his dream; the grounds with a wealth of magnificent trees he beautified everywhere. He erected a fine house for himself which overlooked an ornamental lake crossed by several bridges; one built of stone in the neo-classical style survived until the 1960s.

The park was divided into three parts: the landscaped parkland, the botanic gardens and the wilderness. The landscape park was the fashion at this time; its purpose to create stunning vistas of rolling countryside different from the more formal gardens of earlier times. The botanic garden contained many rare and expensive plants including magnolia and rhododendrons. The wilderness contained a grotto, rustic pavilions and much statuary.

In 1819 he commissioned artists Mr and Mrs Hofland to produce a series of drawings of the estate's attractions; only 50 volumes were made one of which is in Reading Central Library; this is the only visual record of the park's appearance at that time. In that year, as a consequence of his profligacy, his debts reached £600,000 and, eventually, the estate was sold as six lots at auction. The mansion was demolished in the 1840s and replaced with smaller Victorian villas some of which survive among the modern buildings of the University.

Sean Duggan

## **NEWS FROM THE FAR WEST**

A unique archive documenting all aspects of the Greenham Common Peace Women's lives and campaigns was made available to the public for the first time at Berkshire Record Office in November 2015. Known as the Lynette Edwell Collection, it comprises primary source material entrusted to Ms Edwell by Greenham women over a period of 30 years. A second collection housed at West Berkshire Museum includes a 'Greenham Getaway' (the tent specially designed by Quaker supporters for use at the camp), a hat, coat and megaphone used by Lynette Edwell together with a collection of badges, banners, pictures and embroideries.

*This gives the Editor an opportunity to encourage members to visit the West Berkshire Museum when in Newbury. He has a personal interest as his cousin, Steph Gillett, worked as a consultant on the transformation of the old museum over a period of several years. For railway buffs, Steph's book on the Somerset and Dorset Railway (Slow and Dirty) is about to be published by Amberley.*

## **BOOK SALE**

*Sidney Gold* writes: There will be another book sale at the April 20th meeting, before and after the talk. The church doors will be open from 7.p.m.

To make this successful depends upon the books donated. If you have any books you can give to the Society, preferably on local history or non-fiction you think will be of interest to our members, please bring them along to one of the intervening meetings and pass them to either David Cliffe or Sidney Gold for storing. Thank you.

## **ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF READING WEATHER by Roger Brugge and Stephen Burt**

Daily weather observations have been made at the University of Reading since 1901. This new book by two meteorologists from the University tells the story of Reading's weather over more than 100 years using logbooks, contemporary photographs and automatic weather station data. The rich diversity of Reading's weather is here in the form of weather commentaries by month and season, updated to 2015, as well as a chronology of over 800 notable weather events by day of the year - all within 200 pages!.

46 photographs, 43 line illustrations ISBN 978-0-9569485-1-9 £9.95 Published June 2015

## **READING 1800 TO THE PRESENT DAY: THE MAKING OF MODERN READING**

**By Stuart Hylton. Amberley Publishing, 2015, £16.99.**

Stuart Hylton gave a talk for the Society in November last. The topic was "Reading in the 1950s," but he had brought with him some copies of his latest book, hot off the press. I purchased a copy, took it home, and eagerly devoured it.

It is not the kind of traditional town history which proceeds in chronological order. Instead, each chapter looks at Reading from a different point-of-view over the last 215 years. We have "Reading and the Motor Car," "Office Town," "Sickness and Health," "Seats of Learning," etc., etc.

Each chapter could in itself be the subject of a book, and so, with the average chapter taking up 11 pages, each can only be a summary – and very good summaries they are, too. They are the kinds of summary that are only possible after a great deal of research. Mr. Hylton already has eight books on Reading to his name, with titles such as "A Reading Century," "Reading at War," and "Reading: the 1950s," which must have stood him in good stead. On top of this, his first-hand knowledge of the workings of local government in Berkshire, as a strategic planner, over many years, must also have been a distinct advantage. By and large, what you might expect to find is there, plus a bit more – the facts, the dates, the references, and a reasonable index.

Everyone who knows the town will have quibbles, which will vary according to personal interests. For instance, in my case, in the chapter on "Travel and (Public) Transport," he mentions the short-lived Bee Line buses – but not the Thames Valley Traction Company.

I would have liked a chapter on public utilities – water, mains drainage, gas and electricity. They are mentioned in passing, but I would have liked something on the power station in a shed on the island by County Lock, which was superseded by the monster with the smoking chimneys by the Thames between the bridges. I would have liked the story of the rival gas companies, and water-tower on Mill Lane, and the ingenious way in which the sewage was pumped in the main sewer up the Kennet to Manor Farm using turbines. The Manor Farm sewage works and "Whitley Whiff" are mentioned, but not the short-lived Caversham sewage works on Amersham Road.

Then the subject of how Reading's citizens were employed seems to have been missed. Something about commuting, out of and into Reading, would not have gone amiss, and while we have mentions of Huntley and Palmer's, Simonds' Brewery and Sutton's Seeds, other large employers are not mentioned. There were brick and tile works, Huntley, Boorne and Stevens, the Reading Ironworks Company, Pulsometer Engineering and the Great Western Railway's Signal Works in the town. How they declined, and newer "service" and computer-based industries took over would have made a good chapter.

Also, a mention of the attempts to have Reading become a city might have been interesting.

Picking holes in other people's books is, of course, all part of the enjoyment they give. I liked the fact that the references were there on the page with the text, though I wish they had always gone back to the primary source, rather than saying "quoted in" such and such a book. I also wish the book had been better proof-read. I was a bit dismayed to find the name of Lord Reading given as Rufus Isaac, when he was Rufus Isaacs.

Nevertheless, for anyone with an interest in the town, this is a really good read. I sat there time and time again, thinking "Oh, yes – I'd forgotten that," and sometimes, "Oh, that's why it happened."

The price, £16.99 for 160 pages, is a bit steep. The illustrations, well reproduced, are presumably to a large extent the reason for the price. They're hardly necessary to enjoying the book, but I suppose Amberley know what sells books. I do think, though, that since we have the illustrations, the author might have referred to them in the text.

Reading local historians will be impatiently waiting for the new volume on the history of Reading from our President, Joan Dils, which is likely to be a very different kind of history. In the meantime, I can thoroughly recommend this latest volume from Stuart Hylton.

David Cliffe.



The Society exhibited its "wares" at the Christmas Tree Festival at Abbey Baptist Church. Thanks to Vicki Chesterman and Joy Pibworth for producing such a splendid display! *Photo by Sean Duggan.*

## GOOD NEWS FROM THE FRIENDS-OF READING ABBEY

*The Society is a corporate member of FORA so we rejoice them that their Heritage Lottery Fund Bid has been successful. Secretary John Paynter writes:*

Very good news and an excellent Christmas present. Reading Borough Council has been successful in its bid for £1.77M Heritage Lottery Funding for the Reading Abbey Revealed project, which will repair the Abbey Gateway roof and conserve the Abbey Ruins to allow them to be re-opened to the public. The Council will contribute a further £1.38M to give a total budget for the works of £3.15M. Work will start on site in September 2016, and will be completed by 2018.

FORA has been working actively in partnership with the Council on **Reading Abbey Revealed**, and has given strong support to the bid and to the two public consultation exercises that accompanied it, both of which generated very high levels of response. We are proud to be associated with the project, which will meet our working objective of getting the Abbey Ruins re-opened to the public on a regular basis by the 900th anniversary of the Abbey's foundation in 2021. There will be much more to do before 2018, and we look forward to continuing to work with the Council to help deliver a really exciting scheme.

## ALMOST FORGOTTEN – THE CHAMPAGNE SOPRANO

*In the last issue I promised some further reminiscences from Robin Gardner. Here they are. Robin writes:*

My elder brother, Tony, who was born in Nov '32, started school at Hemdean House, a private school in Caversham Heights. At first my mother would take him and collect him later, from our home at 1 Church Road, having to drag me, aged about 2½, along as well, as Dad was out to work. One day, a pretty 12 year old girl, Betty Webber, saw my mother doing this chore and volunteered to take Tony there and back each day, which she did until he was old enough to cope on his own. Betty lived on the other side of Caversham Bridge just past the Moderation pub in Caversham Road. Mother said later she was very pretty and a talented girl, seeing her sing in school concerts at Balmore Hall in Caversham.

### **Lizbeth Webb (1926~2013)**

On 17th January 2013, Lizbeth Webb died at the age of 86, a leading actress on the stage in the late 40s and 50s, who was known as the Champagne Soprano.

Elizabeth Sandra was born on 30th January 1926 to Ethel and Fredrick Holton, who lived in Tilehurst. She was their third child, but sadly her mother died in childbirth. Her father could not cope with her and her two older sisters; they were all adopted by different aunts. She was adopted by Ethel and Alfred Wills-Webber and took the name of Betty Webber, as she was known throughout her school life. The Webbers live at 197 Caversham Road, Reading. She started school at E P Collier Junior and later attended Hemdean House School and finally Queen Anne's School in Caversham. She excelled in rowing, swimming & running.

Betty had a fine soprano voice and after she left school, she started to earn her living in 1943 as a teenage band vocalist, singing under the name of Betty Webb. She sang with most of the famous British bands and singers of the time - Geraldo, Henry Hall, Jack Payne, George Melachrino, Mantovani, Richard Tauber, Henry Rabinowitz, Stanley Black and Max Jaffa, to name a few. She was broadcasting daily, sometimes up to three shows a day and was a regular on such shows as Hippodrome, Music Hall, Workers Play Time, Variety Bandbox, Forces Show and Follies of the Air, working with more household names including Bob Monkhouse, Richard Attenborough and Hermione Gingold.

In 1946 Geraldo introduced her to Charles B Cochran. Initially cast her as understudy, she later took on the lead female rôle in Ellis & Herbert's *Big Ben*, changing her name to Lizbeth Webb. The following year she was Lucy Willow in *Bless the Bride* with George Guetary as the male lead, another Ellis & Herbert's show, singing the well-known duet *This Is My Lovely Day*. On the *Goon Show* in 1951 she met Peter Sellers and was briefly engaged to him but she soon broke it off. She took the rôle of Sarah Brown in the first London production of *Guys and Dolls* and in 1953 she appeared in the Royal Command Performance in front of the new Queen Elizabeth. She

continued to entertain the troops between West End productions in Austria after the war, Korea in 1953 and in 1956 she appeared with Ginger Rogers on TV in *Carissima* before going to South Africa in 1956.

She was first married to D H Parker, an RAF pilot, in the early 50's, but they divorced after a few years. When she was in Tripoli she met her second husband to be, Colonel Guy Campbell, MC, OBE, heir to a baronetcy which came to him in 1960 as the 5th Baronet. They were married in the year they met, 1956, later having two sons and four grandchildren. In the 70's they lived in Marbella, Spain, and had been married for 37 years when Guy died in 1993. She retired from the stage in the late 1950's but came back once in 1969 in the title rôle in *The Merry Widow*. After her husband's death she moved to London, where she died.

In later life she was largely forgotten and overlooked despite the star she was. Surely she deserves at the least a blue plaque on 197 Caversham Road, in her memory?

## **PUBS GROUP**

For those with an interest in this subject, Society member, Evelyn Williams, has done some splendid work researching the history of 29 local pubs and the results can be seen on the Reading Museum website at:

<http://collections.readingmuseum.org.uk/index.asp?page=topic&mwsquery={collection}={topic}&filename=REDMG&hitsStart=25>

## **INFORMATION, ANYONE?**

From time to time, the Association receives requests for information, usually by e-mail but sometimes by letter. Recently, three of them have proved a bit more intractable than usual. If you have information, please reply to me, the HoRS Chairman, who will pass it on to the enquirers – and see that the information appears in the next Newsletter. My address and phone number are on the front page: my e-mail address is davidcliffe438@btinternet.com.

The first enquiry concerns Kennet Valley Nurseries, which were off Burghfield Road. Underwood Road and Lea Close now occupy the site. Our correspondent wrote that prisoners-of-war worked there at the end of the Second World War, and that Sir Felix Pole, General Manager of the Great Western Railway, was part-owner of the nurseries. However, the old street directories, between 1949 and 1960 record the business as C.W.S. Kennet Valley Nurseries, so it looks as though the co-op was running them during that period. You can see from old Ordnance Survey plans that the nurseries were extensive, and that much of the land was occupied by glass-houses. Please get in touch if you know about ownership, what was being produced, if you have photographs of the nurseries, etc.

Then we had an enquiry from Romsey in Hampshire about a boys' preparatory school in Reading, about 1900 – so this one is a bit beyond living memory. The enquirer wanted to find the name of the school where the pupils wore badges showing the faces of the generals "at the Transvaal front of the Boer War." If you can let me have a photograph of one or more of the badges, better still!

And thirdly, we've been asked for information about the Berkshire Girls' Fire Brigade. We were sent a photograph (which we have been asked not to reproduce) showing six young women, aged around 18. They wear thick, heavy double-breasted coats, each with two rows of brass buttons, broad leather belts with big brass buckles, and brass helmets. One of the girls is proudly holding a trophy. Unfortunately no date is suggested for the photograph, but it looks as though it dates from the first half of the twentieth century.

David Cliffe

## **FORTHCOMING BOOK**

Local transport historian Paul Lacey is currently working on a book about Smiths Coaches, the well-remembered blue and orange coaches from Reading. If any HoRS member has any Reading charabanc photographs or ephemera, especially pre-war, or memories of outings they wish to share, or if they were related to drivers, Paul would be keen to hear from you. His address is 3HT Tel: eMail:



## **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, whose address is on the front cover. So far 13 Members have used a Standing Order for paying their 2016 Subscription; the total Membership for 2015 was 101.

Dr John R Starr

