

# 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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## SUMMER OUTINGS

On **Wednesday** 15<sup>th</sup> June the History of Reading Society members are invited to a visit to the Museum of Berkshire Aviation, Mohawk Way (off Bader Way), Woodley RG5 4UE. The tour party is to congregate at the main entrance to the Museum at **7.15pm**, ready for the tour to commence at **7.30pm**. Parking is available on site. Places are limited to **30**. **There is a £3 per person charge for this outing, payable upon booking (if possible).**

On **Wednesday** 20<sup>th</sup> July the History of Reading Society members are invited to a visit to St Peters Church, The Warren, Caversham, RG4 7AQ. The tour party is to congregate at the main entrance to the Church at **7.15pm**, ready for the tour to commence at **7.30pm**. Parking is available in The Warren. Places are limited to **30**. **There is a £2 per person charge for this outing, payable upon booking (if possible).**

Members are invited to book their places at our May meeting or by contacting

Please note also that there is a change of speaker for our May 2016 meeting: David Cliffe will give an illustrated talk called **Reading – a Town on Two Rivers**. It considers why Reading is located where it is, and the Kennet and Thames as a means of transport, of providing power for industry, as a source of water, and as a means of carrying away waste water. We hope to rearrange Dr Gillian Clark's talk on "The Foundling Hospital and its Berkshire Connections" for 2017.

## THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

The Annual General Meeting in March went off very much as anticipated and was mercifully brief, leaving plenty of time for the play about the Swing Riots. I'd seen it before, but was still impressed, and the Abbey Baptist Church proved a very suitable venue, with plenty of room for the rioting mob to march around. One lady told me she had found it so moving that she couldn't bear to look into the face of William Winterbourne, the condemned man. I knew what she meant. It was sobering to think that many of the events shown in the play took place not very far from where we were sitting!

I must admit that I was a bit disappointed that no-one came forward to express interest in serving on the committee. It would be nice to have someone to take over, if one of us wanted to retire!

April's book sale went very well, and raised £160. Much of this was the result of behind-the-scenes work on the part of Sidney Gold, to whom I'm very grateful. It was particularly good to have the books well-arranged over several tables, making it easy to look through what was there. I noticed a first edition of a play by Thomas Noon Talfourd (*Ed: See below*), and there were a fair number of books about Reading and Berkshire.

At its last meeting, the committee decided that we should produce another "Old Reading" calendar, and we've been thinking of different ways in which to use our funds to further the study of Reading's history. I'm being encouraged to write up a history of cinemas in Reading, which I researched a couple of years ago, as the first of what it's hoped may be a series of publications by the Society. And then we've been considering asking the Central Library and the Record Office to allow some of their rare documents which are important to the history of Reading to be digitised, and sold on CD.

One of my personal priorities this year will be to get one of the three books that have been sitting in my computer for years published and "out there." I'm not intending to make any money – I just want to see the results of my labours giving pleasure to other people. I realise that the readers will be people with an interest in the history of Macclesfield, my home town, so there won't be all that many of them!

I'm writing this on a Bank Holiday Monday which is still rather chilly, but the man on the radio tells me there's warmer weather on the way. On June 12 I'm booked in for a visit to Caversham Park – now the home of the B.B.C. Monitoring Service. There will be a talk on "Capability" Brown and his work there, a walk round the grounds, and a look inside the house. This seemed to me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, not to be missed, and there's a later visit on September 18. See the Berkshire Gardens Trust website for details.

I hope that you are looking forward to the summer, and wherever you choose to visit, I hope you enjoy it!

David Cliffe.

## **IF YOU MISSED IT ....**

***Here follow reports on the talks given to the Society during the early months of 2016.***

**Archbishop William Laud** was the subject of the January talk. The speaker was Ian Lowry: he was a teacher of history and English literature and, since retirement, has been a guide at Reading Museum.

William Laud was born in a house at Broad Street, Reading in 1573 to a wealthy clothier originally from Wokingham also named William. Baby William was baptized at St. Laurence's Church, where his father was a churchwarden. The font still exists and there is a memorial window to him. Laud was educated at Reading (Grammar) School which in those days was next door.

In 1589 he would attend St. John's College, Oxford as a scholar to study theology and there he would spend the next 32 years of his life, becoming chancellor of the University of Oxford in 1628. Later, St. John's College would establish at Reading today's university.

He was ordained a priest in 1601 and later, under the patronage of King Charles I, Laud's career in the church would flourish; he was ambitious and rose through the hierarchy of the church eventually to become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633.

During his episcopate, Laud tried to reverse the Protestant religious reforms enacted during Queen Elizabeth I's reign, however, this policy made him many enemies among churchmen and parliamentarians and eventually, in 1643, he was found guilty of treason and executed by beheading at Whitehall, London.

As a surprise, at the close of the meeting Ian invited from the audience John Butler to show a silver memorial medal in his possession minted in the 1680s to commemorate William Laud which he recently bought at an auction.

**Feeding Reading in the Two World Wars** was the subject of the February talk the speaker was Mike Cooper. Mike is a well-known public speaker on local and military history; after graduating from University of Reading he worked in the local library service and has published books about local history.

On the eve of the First World War in 1914 Britain was a mostly urbanized industrial society with agriculture a relatively small part of the economy. 60% of the country's food was imported from the colonies which made it vulnerable to a sea blockade by an enemy.

During the war many agricultural workers joined the armed forces leading to a severe labour shortage; the authorities had to take action and the Women's Land Army was formed; many were trained at Reading's University College. The government encouraged citizens to grow their own food. Public parks and school playing-fields were requisitioned for the growing of food.

In 1916 food rationing was introduced and many basic food stuffs were affected: meat, butter, eggs, beer and tea for example. Meatless days were introduced and fish served as an alternative. In Reading communal kitchens were established; one at the British School in Southampton Street served two thousand meals in its first couple of weeks.

When the war ended in 1918 the British Government's food control measures had proved successful in keeping the country fed, unlike in Germany where there was widespread starvation and public unrest.

At the start of the Second World War in 1939 the first commodity to be rationed was petrol. In January 1940 many food stuffs would be included: bacon, butter and sugar for example. With the German invasion of Western Europe later that year the enemy was able to operate submarines (U-boats) from French Atlantic ports, this would cause severe disruption to Britain's imports of foods and raw materials.

Citizens were issued with ration books to buy food and the government established workers' restaurants to provide cheap, wholesome meals; three were opened in Reading, one of which, the People's Pantry in Friar Street, was bombed in an air raid in 1943 with great loss of life. In the event of enemy action disrupting the town's food supply emergency feeding centres (mobile canteens) could be established to feed most of the population and they would be staffed by the Women's Voluntary Service.

Mike concluded the talk stating that rationing continued for some items until 1954, nearly ten years after the war ended.

In March after the Annual General Meeting was concluded the members were given a performance of the **Swing Riots** by volunteers from the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) in Reading.

The MERL Players Company was formed in 2012 to entertain and educate children on aspects of rural life and local history. In 2013 the idea for public performances of the Swing Riots as part of an outreach programme to senior school pupils and community groups was realised.



**MERL Players Company after the Performance – photo: Sean Duggan**

During the summer of 1830 agricultural labourers in the south of England rebelled against their employers in a bid to improve living standards. The protests started in Kent and were caused by recent poor harvests, steep increases in the price of bread and the introduction of labour saving technology. The rioters were said to be led by a Captain Swing who in fact was a mythical figure.

The performance focused on the unrest in the Berkshire towns of Hungerford and Kintbury where the uprisings were led by William Winterbourne. The tableau comprised re-enactments of conversations between the wives of labourers on the hardships suffered by their families because of high food prices and the unemployment caused by the introduction of threshing machines, local farmers recounting attacks on their farms by angry labourers and the testimonies of witnesses heard by magistrates. Between the acts accounts as reported in the *Berkshire Mercury* were read aloud.

The performance concluded with the trial of the ring leader William Winterbourne and his two co-conspirators for machine breaking and robbery for which they were all found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. Eventually, only Winterbourne was executed; the sentence was carried out at Reading Gaol on 29th December 1830 where a large crowd gathered to witness his execution.

**Derek Buckler, His Cars and Karts** was the subject of the April talk; the speaker was David Montgomery. David has been a Buckler owner since 1971, he lives in Sandhurst not far from the Buckler Company's old Crowthorne works and is the editor of the quarterly journal devoted to the brand, *the Bucklering*.

Derek Buckler established the Buckler Car Company at 67, Caversham Road, Reading in 1939 as a precision engineering business. In 1947 Derek made his first car,

registration DDP 201; based on this model he produced his first production racing cars in 1949 using Ford running parts. They were called the Mark V because Derek didn't want people to think it was his first car.

The cars were unusual in that they featured the lightweight and rigid spaceframe chassis to which the owner could add a wide range of components, cars could be supplied with a works body or one of the owner's choice. In 1950 the Mark VI model was launched. it had a longer wheelbase and four seats and was available for the export market only.

In 1947 the company had outgrown its Reading premises so it bought Welco Farm Implements at Crowthorne and used its premises for car production; model development and marketing would continue at Reading.

The company's prolific success declined during the 1950s as competitors began to produce similar racing cars, so a new market was developed making racing go-karts with the first model developed by Jack Barlow launched in 1958. Poor health forced Derek Buckler to sell the business in 1962 for £6,500; he died in March 1964 and its new owners closed the business the following year. Today a plaque marks the site of the Crowthorne premises.

Sean Duggan

## REMEMBERING THE RHYTHMICS



Do you remember the musicians in this local dance band, or recognise the hall where they were photographed? Please get in touch if you do.

It's thought that the lady saxophonist was Ann Lesser, and that one of the gentlemen was Norman Hackett, who had a music shop in The Arcade, which was damaged by bombing in 1943. After the war, the shop was in the Bristol and West Arcade, where Norman's son eventually took over the business.

The photograph was taken by Cyril May, of No. 90 London Street. It was probably taken around the time of the Second World War, and my thanks are due to Reading Central Library for allowing me to show it here.

The hall where the musicians are seated is unusual – it has a curved wall behind the stage, with windows set high up, above a curtain. Reading had several dance halls around that time. The Olympia, in London Street, held 500, but at The Majestic, Caversham Road, there was room for 1,500 dancers. It had been built as the corn exchange. Then in Eaton Place, just off Oxford Road, was The Oxford, which had two adjacent separate dance floors. As well as these, there was often dancing at the Town Hall, the Great Western Hotel, the Caversham Bridge Hotel, and The Grosvenor, on Caversham Heights. The late-lamented Top Rank Suite, with the bus station underneath, came along a bit later.

Older readers will doubtless remember George Watkins and his orchestra at The Majestic, and Don Turk and Max Seeburg at The Olympia – but what of The Rhythmics? In this picture, they certainly look smart – but not a smile between them! Presumably this is how they wanted to appear, but I don't expect that this picture got them many bookings!

David Cliffe.

## **WHERE THAMES AND KENNET MEET**

*With the announcement of change and speaker for the May meeting the Editor was reminded of the following lines attributed to Anon.*

Two rivers meet here, one renowned  
Wherever Englishmen have gone,  
Whose winding length, two hundred miles,  
Has witnessed battle, skirmish, siege,  
Etched in the unfolding tale and song  
Of England's history, proud and long,  
With many a scenic reach or bridge  
Portrayed by artists, skilled with brush.

The other, of a beauty less,  
More modest length and local fame -  
Yet waterfowl seem drawn to it,  
Mallard and moorhen, as to home.  
Perhaps it is more homely too  
For those who dwell in Reading town,  
Small-minded, urban, like these birds  
That scarcely care to take to wing  
And never do migrate abroad;

Who to the Jolly Anglers flock  
To talk of pigeon-lofts and crib.

1996

## SERENDIPITY IN STAFFORD AND READING



Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd's bust at Stafford by John Graham Lough. *Photo: John Dearing*  
*The photographer regrets the blurring of part of the lettering. The photo was taken from an awkward angle!*

On the last day of March on my way up to the annual conference of another learned society to which I belong, held in Liverpool, I decided to spend a night in Stafford, for no other reason than that I had only been there once before nearly 40 years earlier. Happily I decided to take with me Pevsner's volume on Staffordshire and there in a

footnote was a reference to a bust of Thomas Noon Talfourd. Talfourd was twice MP for Reading in the Whig cause, friend of Dickens and the alleged model for his character, Thomas Traddles in *David Copperfield*; himself too a noted author in his day whose blank verse tragedies were performed with some success by the great actor, William MacReady. I found my way to the splendid Shire Hall which was open to the public and there I found, in a courtroom that had been recreated in 19<sup>th</sup> century style, the said bust.



Shire Hall, Stafford. *Photo: John Dearing*

Pevsner did not explain why there should be a bust of Talfourd in Stafford, a long way from home, but on my return to Reading I discovered that the great man, having become a judge in the Court of Common Pleas in 1849, actually expired, following an apoplectic seizure while giving directions to the jury in Stafford in 1854.

There was a further happy piece of serendipity to come. At the Book Sale in April, our Chairman happened to remark in my hearing that there was a copy of Talfourd's *Ion* for sale and I duly purchased the said copy – so thanks to the unknown benefactor!

John Dearing

## **BOOK SALE**

*Sidney Gold* writes: I would like to thank those members who contributed to the book sale at the April meeting, creating an excellent display and choice, also the helpers for transporting the books and the cashiers, and not forgetting Steve the Church caretaker for setting up and dismantling the tables and allowing access to layout the books earlier in the afternoon. Overall we took £160. A really worthwhile effort.