

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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We were sorry to learn recently of the death of Peter Russell who was Secretary of the Society for many years until his resignation in 2007. Peter carried out his duties conscientiously in a quiet and unassuming manner and he and Margaret also offered hospitality to the committee for their meetings at their home in Woodley. For much of his time as Secretary the late Bob Hutchinson was our Treasurer, another quiet man who got on the job! The Russells did not continue in membership after Peter's resignation on account of health and other issues, so that we rather lost touch with them. However, we do wish to express our appreciation of all that Peter did for the Society and offer our condolences to his family.

THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

I have delayed writing down my thoughts until today, because the History of Reading Society's July committee meeting took place yesterday evening. There might have been news that hadn't yet come my way.

Some committee meetings are better than others. During my five years of retirement I've had lots of experience with several different organisations! The meetings of the HoRS are among the best. Our membership holds up well – though I still think that in a big town like Reading we ought to have more than 100 members. There is money in the bank, which gives us scope to do things, and get things published. And it's my feeling that the hearts of the committee members are "in the right place," and they are always happy to take jobs on in order to make the Society even better.

Our website is developing, and we now have the beginnings of a Reading bibliography up and running. Thanks are due to Vicki Chesterman for starting this.

Then, if you remember at our A.G.M. in March, we were asked if it would be possible to put the notices of new publications and forthcoming talks and visits on the website. These are what, traditionally, the Chairman reads out at the beginnings of meetings. A lot of the information is picked up by Sidney Gold, and I'm always grateful to him for doing this, and writing it down for me. During the summer, Vicki and I will be working on this, with a view to getting the system ready for our September meeting. We

will also, of course, have to have a procedure for taking off the notices of talks and visits, once they have happened! This should be a useful service for our members, and especially for those who haven't been able to get to a meeting, as well as for anyone else looking at our website.

The sale of second-hand books at our April meeting was very successful and raised over £200, largely thanks to the people who donated the books and postcards, some of which were rare and valuable.

At yesterday's committee meeting, all kinds of ideas for our 2018 programme were in the air, and I have confidence that an interesting and varied programme will result. Some of the speakers have already been engaged, and of course, we're grateful to them.

The book about cinemas in Reading, **Picture Palace to Penny Plunge**, will be "launched", as they say, at Waterstone's bookshop in Broad Street at 12 noon on September 9th. This is during the Heritage Open Days, and the author will be there, signing copies. Since I am the author, you'll also have the opportunity to buy copies, and to get them signed, at our meetings on September 20, October 18, November 15, etc. The price of a copy is £9.99. Since the Society is financing the printing, I do hope you'll buy one, and consider buying another for a friend, maybe as a Christmas present. There are around 100 pages, and many illustrations.

One day soon I shall be going over to see the printers in Bracknell, with a view to getting the 2018 History of Reading Society calendar printed. This time, it will be a **Riverside Reading** calendar, with views of the Thames, the Kennet and the Holy Brook, as they were years ago. I hope that we can keep the price down to £5, as last year, when the calendars made well over £100 for the Society. I hope that the calendar, too, will be available from September 20th.

So, there is quite a lot going on behind the scenes this summer. I'm sorry I shan't be able to go on the visits this year. I hear that the visit to the Minster Church of St. Mary was enjoyed, and hope that the visit to the Royal Berkshire Medical Museum will be just as good. All being well, I'll be there at the Abbey Baptist Church in September, with good things to sell, and an interesting talk about the Mansion House in Prospect Park from Katie Amos.

David Cliffe

IF YOU MISSED IT

Here follow reports by Sean Duggan on the talks given to the Society during the first four months of 2017.

The subject of the January talk was the 'Hidden History of Reading's Great War Graves and Memorials'. The speaker was Liz Tait who retired three years ago after teaching for 38 years in Bracknell. Liz's interest in the town's war graves and memorials was kindled during a bus journey into Reading in 1995 from her home near Palmer Park. It was during the return journey that she caught sight of the Great War Memorial at the Wokingham Road Cemetery; it excited her curiosity enough to decide to visit the cemetery and find out more.

The cemetery was created by an Act of Parliament because the town's church burial grounds were full to capacity; its first burial was in 1843. The Great War Memorial is located in the extension to the non-conformists' section within the oddly shaped plot known as division 72. The Portland stone monument consists of a memorial screen inscribed with the names of the Fallen and, in the foreground, a 'Cross of Sacrifice' mounted on a plinth.



Liz Tait with Chairman, David Cliffe. Photo: Sean Duggan.

There are individual headstones adjacent to the memorial and elsewhere in the cemetery. Liz gave short accounts of those buried there, including Private William Lewington, the earliest burial; he was tragically killed during a training accident at Maidenhead in November 1914. The earliest female burial was Agnes Maud Russell; she had served as a nurse in Malta treating soldiers evacuated from the Dardanelles campaign when she died in October 1915. Sadly, many of those who were wounded died from infections later.

At nearby Alfred Sutton School there is a wall-mounted memorial to schoolmasters who lost their lives in the Great War. Liz has done much research into the individuals listed on the memorial and has produced an unpublished work on the memorial's history.

A common sight for local people at Cemetery Junction were the funeral processions of servicemen killed in action. They would enter the cemetery through the gate lodge; their remains transported on horse drawn carriages accompanied by soldiers, the coffins draped in the Union flag. Liz told us that relatives would often request donations from the onlookers to help pay for flowers to be placed on the soldiers' graves.

In 2001 Liz Tait formed the Reading Remembrance Trust; its objective was to research and publish the names of the men and women who lost their lives in the Great War. Every year since 1998 she has placed a wreath on the memorial at Wokingham Road Cemetery.

The subject of the February talk was 'A Hundred Years of Reading's Weather'. The speaker was Stephen Burt who is a meteorologist at the University of Reading. Stephen has been a fellow of the Royal Meteorological Society for almost 40 years and is the author of *The Weather Observer's Handbook* published by Cambridge University Press. The meeting began with a short video that showed various cloud formations lumbering across the sky but speeded up using time-lapse photography.

Stephen's career in meteorology began with a physics degree and a research position within the Meteorological Office, based then in Bracknell, but his interest in the weather dates back to his childhood and the severe winter of 1962-3. During 2015 he co-

authored the book **100 Years of Reading's Weather** with fellow meteorologist Roger Brugge.

University College, University of Reading's predecessor, first began recording the town's weather at premises in Valpy Street in 1903. In 1908 this work moved to the new campus at London Road and was run by various departments over the years. After World War Two it moved to its current home at Whiteknights Park where the Department of Meteorology was established in 1965.

The department has five principal observers who monitor the local weather 365 days a year commencing at 9.00am. This includes the air temperature, surface temperature, duration of sunlight and wind speed direction. The instruments used to calculate these measurements are housed in a shelter known as a Stevenson's Screen which is a white louvered box with four legs.

Stephen showed photographs from the department's archive including: in 1929 a tradesman leading his horse to the drinking trough in Valpy Street only to find the water has frozen in the cold weather; in 1940 people walking on the frozen River Thames at Reading; in 1963 people skiing in Prospect Park; and in 1987 a snow plough clearing Shinfield Road.

Today the University of Reading's Department of Meteorology has an international reputation for research and teaching and is the largest such department in Europe.

The subject of the March talk was Southcote: An Historical Introduction. The speaker was Mike Cooper who is a well-known author and public speaker on the subjects of local and military history; after graduating from University of Reading he works in local government.

In 2016 Reading Borough Council launched a project to promote local history to a wider audience through the publication of booklets and public talks by their authors; Mike Cooper's contribution was histories of Southcote and Tilehurst.

The earliest mention of Southcote is found in the Norman **Domesday Book** in 1086 when the area was known as 'Sudcote' which simply means 'the southern cottages'; *Domesday* records that all the land in the area was the property of the Crown but was held by local nobleman William de Braose.

Evidence of earlier settlement in the area was discovered in the twentieth century; the earliest dates from the Roman occupation: coins, pottery and tools among the finds, curiously, no remains of buildings.

The last link with the area's ancient past, Southcote Manor, disappeared in the 1960s after fire destroyed the remaining gatehouse and stables; only the moat survives. The first house on the site was built by the Belet family in circa 1200 and over the years it was extended and its appearance altered by successive owners. The longest occupancy was by the Blgrave family who held it from 1604 until 1927.

Southcote would alter very little over the centuries; there was no village centre as at Tilehurst, just a collection of farm houses scattered across the district. Not even the great expansion of Reading in the 1800s or the routes of the Kennet & Avon canal and Great Western Railway passing through the area made much impact. The majority of the tiny population continued to be employed in agriculture.

During the twentieth century this was to change: in the 1930s houses were built around Kenilworth Avenue and Burghfield Road. After World War Two, the borough Council built the estate around Circuit Lane: a health centre, library, churches, schools and shops were built. This would cause the population to expand to over 8,000 by the century's close. The majority of today's residents commute into Reading to work.

The subject of the April talk was 'Jane and the Thames Valley Austens'. The speaker was Joy Pibworth, a former schoolteacher and member of both the History of Reading Society and the Jane Austen Society.

When in 1869, James Edward Austen-Leigh, the vicar of Bray in Berkshire, published the Memoir about his aunt, Jane Austen, her literary works were out of print and mostly forgotten.

Jane was born on 16th December 1775 at Steventon, Hampshire, to the Revd. George and Cassandra Austen. Jane, their second daughter, was baptised at the family home because it was considered too risky to take her to the parish church in the cold December weather

George Austen was born at Tonbridge, Kent in 1731; both his parents died during his childhood and so his uncle Francis paid his school fees until he went up to St. John's College, Oxford as a scholar. Jane's mother, Cassandra, née Leigh, Austen, was born at Harpsden, near Henley, in Oxfordshire in 1739 where her father was rector. She married George Austen at Walcot Church, Bath in 1764.

Jane Austen was a pupil at the Reading Ladies' Boarding School with her sister Cassandra from 1784; it occupied a house and the adjoining Reading Abbey gatehouse in The Forbury. The curriculum consisted of dancing, French, sewing and music. The sisters were withdrawn from the school when their parents could no longer afford to pay the fees.

The Austens had many family connections in the Thames Valley: Jane Austen's mother's sister Jane, was married to James Leigh-Perrot of Wargrave. In 1799, she was accused of the theft of some lace from a Bath haberdashery shop but was able to use her social standing to avoid a prison sentence!

James Austen, Jane's brother, would succeed his father as the incumbent at Steventon parish church; his second wife Mary Lloyd, came from Enborne near Newbury where she would return to live after his death. Jane Austen died in Winchester of a mysterious illness in 1817, her sisters Cassandra and Mary, at her bedside.

CONSERVATION AREAS – HELP NEEDED

Reading now has 15 conservation areas, where the Borough Council must pay special attention to preserving and enhancing the appearance and character when considering demolition, alterations and new buildings.

Powers to designate conservation areas were granted under the Civic Amenities Act in 1967 – which is now 50 years ago.

The information used by the council in making decisions has to be reviewed every five years, and this is where help from volunteers is needed – from people who know and care about their local environment. Work in carrying out the re-appraisals is co-ordinated by the Conservation Areas Advisory Committee (CAAC), and a great deal of work has already been done recently. Tasks can involve historical research in libraries and the Record Office, but people are also needed to walk around the areas and note the changes since the last appraisal. Information about the work of the CAAC may be seen on the Reading Civic Society's website:

www.readingcivicsociety.org.uk/wordpress/?pageid=186

Representatives are in particular needed on the Committee for the Horncastle area, around the Bath Road on the western edge of the borough, and for the Routh Lane area of Tilehurst, and some help is also needed in the St. Mary's Butts and Castle Street area of the town centre.

If you are interested in finding out more, please contact Karen Rowland, or Richard Bennett, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Conservation Areas Advisory Committee. Their e-mail addresses are Karen.rowland@outlook.com and Bennettbaker@msn.com

CIVIC DAY

Staying with civic matters - June was a particularly active month for the Civic Society. Civic Voice, the national charity for the civic movement, set up Civic Day some years ago. This year they asked groups across the country to use Civic Day, June 17, as a focus to celebrate 50 years of conservation areas, and for people to participate in local and national events to recognise how conservation areas have helped keep many of our towns distinctive, the message being, 'My conservation area matters.'

Reading Civic Society, working with the CAAC, commissioned Margaret Simons to lead walks round the Market Place/London Street and St. Mary's/Castle Hill Conservation Areas. The Bell Tower Community Association also ran a walk round their area.

Over in Caversham, the Caversham and District Residents' Association organised a talk by Dr. Megan Aldrich, F.S.A., on the architecture of Caversham.

RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS FOR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW STUDY

Katrina-Louise Moseley, a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge, is researching the social and cultural history of food consumption in post-war Britain. She wrote to us because she is currently conducting research into people's memories of food and dietary change. She is particularly interested in talking to mature adults (men and women aged 60 and above) about their attitudes towards food, body weight and 'healthy eating' in childhood, adolescence and early adulthood and asks whether any of our members might be interested in participating.

Should any of member wish to partake in this study, their involvement would of course be entirely voluntary. (They would be free to withdraw from the research process at any point in time, including during the interview itself). The interviews would be audio-recorded to enable transcription and analysis to take place – however, Katrina would not use participants' names or any other identifying information in her written analysis. The anonymous findings would then form part of her doctoral thesis.

Participation in this study would consist of two or three relaxed interview sessions over a cup of tea and some light refreshments, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each time. These would be arranged to best suit the schedule of the participant, and would ideally take place in a quiet location of their choosing (perhaps in an office, in a community centre, or in their home). The interviews would not require any written preparation, and are intended to be as relaxed and informal as possible.

Please do not hesitate to contact her if you have any further questions. Katrina can be reached via email at or via telephone on. Please state that you are a member of the History of Reading Society when contacting Katrina.

Vicki Chesterman

PASSCHENDAELE

Berkshire Family History Society are seeking your assistance in a new project. We are looking for your family stories and histories surrounding one of the worst battles in WW1 – Passchendaele. We would like to hear about those from Berkshire who were wounded, survived or were killed in this offensive. Photos and written stories would be great, memorabilia would be even better (we could photograph these). The aim is to gather enough material to create display boards to mark the centenary of this battle, which will be viewable from September at our Research Centre at 131 Castle Hill, Reading, and, ultimately we hope as a virtual memorial to those affected by the battle. If you have anything you are happy to share please email it to.

I died in hell –
(They called it Passchendaele.) My wound was slight,
And I was hobbling back; and then a shell
Burst slick upon the duck-boards: so I fell
Into the bottomless mud and lost the light.
Siegfried Sassoon, **Memorial Tablet**

CHEADLE'S MINERALS, CAVERSHAM

Can you help solve a question which was asked of our chairman by the owner of an old mineral water flagon? The name on it is "Cheadle," a name which doesn't really belong in this part of the country. The lettering reads: "J. Cheadle, botanical brewer, Caversham. Anyone illegally using or detaining this bottle will be prosecuted."



Perhaps strangely, there is no Caversham address given. Did Mr. C. expect his flagons to be returned to his premises in Caversham? Or maybe he delivered them to customers from door to door, and collected the empties at the same time, which was a usual practice up to the 1950s. When the business was sold in 1918, motor lorries were included.

Some things are known about the Cheadle family in the area: it is the whereabouts of the Caversham premises that have proved elusive. John Henry Cheadle was born in Shropshire in 1862, he joined the Shropshire Militia, and in 1883 he joined the regular army – the Oxford Light Infantry. This could indicate a connection with Caversham, which was in Oxfordshire until 1911. He left the army in 1895, and in 1900, when he married, he was a coffee house keeper in Chertsey, but his wife had been born in Winkfield. They had two daughters, Dorothy and Winifred.

In 1908, John took over the mineral water business of Sidney Weaver, at 12a Eldon Place, Reading, and was joined in the business by his nephew, Alfred. John lived at 19 Princes Street, and Alfred at 24 Eldon Street, both close to the works, and to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. The business closed in 1918, when the local paper advertised that “Frank Cooksey and Walker have been instructed by J. H. Cheadle to sell the valuable machinery and plant, motor lorries, 5,000 botanical jars, 1,000 dozen bottles, and numerous effects.”

But the only Caversham connection to have turned up so far is a report of the Sunday school prize-giving at Caversham Free Baptist Church in 1908, when Dorothy Cheadle, John's daughter, was one of the winners. This strongly suggests that the family lived in Caversham at the time, but a search of the street directories has failed to locate their house or business premises.

Does the fact that Mr. Cheadle described himself as a “botanical brewer” owning 5,000 “botanical jars” indicate that he was a bit more than a manufacturer of fizzy drinks? In the Reading directories of the day, he is always classified as a “mineral water manufacturer.”

Until the 1960s, every town had at least one of these makers of fizzy drinks. In Reading, the best-known was Tunbridge Jones, in Castle Street. Today, the trade is almost entirely in the hands of the “big boys” and the drinks come in plastic, throw-away bottles.

If you have come across the whereabouts of the Mr. Cheadle's Caversham premises, please let the editor know, so that the message can be passed on to the owner of the flagon.

David Cliffe

READING IN FICTION

The current work on a Bibliography of Reading by Vicki Chesterman led me to enquire whether fictional works would be included. There are probably not that many fictional works entirely or largely set in Reading. The best known is probably **Belford Regis** by Mary Russell Mitford, published in 1835, which I can boast of having read cover to cover. It is a series of short stories or “sketches” to use her preferred expression, written with great charm and perception in a similar manner to her most famous work, **Our Village**. It is a matter of regret that **Belford Regis** is not in print at present (except on a print-on-demand basis) though I had no difficulty securing a copy via that valuable online resource abebooks.co.uk.

A more recent novel set in Reading is by an American authoress, Julie Cohen who lives in Berkshire. I came across a review which mentioned that part of the story was set in a pub supposedly based on the now defunct County Arms, so again secured a copy via abebooks. As a result I penned the following paragraph for my work in (slow) progress, the

A to Z of Reading Pubs:

Towards the end of its innings, the County Arms formed the inspiration for a pub located near the Royal Berkshire Hospital that featured in a ‘chick-lit’ novel published in 2008 by local author, Julie Cohen, entitled **One Night Stand**. The heroine, Eleanor Connor is a barmaid in the pub, although Ms. Cohen was at pains to point out that the real pub was ‘not as dingy or seedy’ as the one portrayed in the novel, which masqueraded as the Mouse and Duck.

It's quite a good story, by no means as lurid as the title might suggest, and it has a happy ending! Julie has been back in Reading recently signing her latest effusion at Waterstones. For those not entirely au fait with contemporary trends in popular literature the term 'chick-lit' has been defined variously as 'literature which appeals to young women' and 'heroine-centered narratives that focus on the trials and tribulations of their individual protagonists'. Both definitions admirably suit **One Night Stand**.

Going back even further, one of the earliest English novelists was Thomas Deloney who lived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. His best known works are **Jack of Newbury** and **Thomas of Reading**, both celebrating denizens of the clothmaking industry. The most celebrated scene in the book concerns a murder that takes place at the Ostrich in Colnbrook but here is Deloney's description of King Henry I's visit to Reading and his somewhat fanciful explanation of the genesis of Reading Abbey:

And when his Grace came to Reading, he was entertained with great Joy and Triumph: Thomas Cole being the chief Man of Regard in all the Towne, the King honoured his House with his Princely Presence, where during the Kings Abode, he and his Son and Nobles were highly feasted.

There the King beheld the great Number of People, that was by that one Man maintained in Work, whose hearty Affection and Love toward his Majesty did well appear, as well by their out-ward Countenances, as their Gifts presented unto him. But of Cole himself the King was so well persuaded, that he committed such Trust in him, and put him in great Authority in the Towne. Furthermore the King said, that for the Love which those People bore him living, that he would lay his Bones among them when he was dead. For I know not, said he, where they may be better bestowed, till the blessed Day of Resurrection, than among these my Friends, which are like to be happy Partakers of the same.

Whereupon his Majesty caused there to be builded a most goodly and famous Abbey: in which he might shew his Devotion to God, by increasing his Service, and leave Example to other his Successors to do the like. Likewise within the Towne he after builded a fair and goodly Castle, in the which he often kept his Court, which was a Place of his chief Residence during his Life, saying to the Clothiers, that seeing he found them such faithful Subjects, he would be their Neighbour, and dwell among them. [Spelling modernised.]

Reading also gets a mention in quite a number of other novels, not least, of course, Hardy's **Jude the Obscure** where it masquerades as Aldbrickham.

John Dearing

FLAG DAY

Your committee with not entirely unbounded enthusiasm has taken part in a process that has led to Berkshire having its own flag. Here it is!



Whether this will lead to a Berkshire Unilateral Declaration of Independence, time will tell....