

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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Winter 2018

No 46

NOTICE OF 41st ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE HISTORY OF READING SOCIETY

To be held at the Abbey Baptist Church, Reading at 7-30 on Wednesday 21st March 2018

AGENDA

1. Welcome and Apologies.
2. Approval of Minutes of 2017 AGM.
3. Matters Arising.
4. Chairman's Report and Review.
5. Treasurer's Report
6. Election of Officers and Committee for 2018/19.

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

All current members (marked*) are prepared to stand again, except John Starr. Therefore, we will be needing a new Treasurer. The Society cannot run without a Treasurer. If you feel you can help, please contact the Secretary at, as soon as possible. Any other nominations with names of proposers and seconders should be submitted to the Secretary, prior to the meeting.

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

THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

First of all, I'd like to wish all of our members a Happy New Year! Our 2018 programme of talks and visits looks as varied as ever – something for everyone!

I trust you managed to buy your 2018 History of Reading Society Calendar, with old pictures of Reading waterways. I have just a few left if you didn't. If you'd like a copy of the history of Reading cinemas, **Picture Palace to Penny Plunge**, I shall be bringing copies to evening meetings until all our copies are sold. If you'd like a copy, please buy it from me, so that we can get back our investment, and publish something else.

In 2017, I was disappointed that the local history pictures on the public library website don't work as well with the new cataloguing software as they did with the old. In particular, you can't zoom in on the images and see the detail – with the old system, you could sometimes see things better on the scanned image than you could on the original. Also, I'm not yet able to put new pictures onto the system, and in consequence now have around 2,000 scanned images on a USB drive, waiting to be catalogued and added. Hopefully, things will improve this year.

This does not mean that I have been idle. As well as scanning the images, I've been working on the text of my next book about superstition in the area around the town where I grew up – which is not Reading. It has been sitting in my computer for ten years or so, and needs to see the light of day. In addition, I've been working towards a book about pubs in Reading, and helping someone put together a speech about suffragists and suffragettes in Reading.



The future Prime Minister and Lord Chief Justice in Reading Tram Sheds

A member of the Berkshire Local History Association suggested to me that something ought to be done to mark the centenary of (some) women getting the vote. The committee members there thought it a good idea, but we failed to find anyone willing to give us a talk on the subject. So a couple of us had the idea of putting a talk together between us, and I've been reading the local papers to find out what people thought at the time, and what happened locally

I had thought that nothing much happened in Reading, but I was wrong. The best story to emerge so far was that of Miss Streatfield and Miss Hudson, who heckled the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the tram-sheds on New Year's Day, 1910. The Reading Liberal Association were seeking a venue for a rally during which Lloyd George would deliver a speech in support of the Reading Parliamentary candidate, Rufus Isaacs. The largest floor under one roof was the tram-sheds, which, with the trams parked outside, would hold around 10,000 people. Trouble was feared from the suffragettes, so only (male) electors were invited to attend.

Miss Streatfield and Miss Hudson, however, managed to enter the sheds in the early hours of the morning, unobserved, and hid until the evening. Their moment came when Lloyd George mentioned "robbers," when they cried, "You're the robber because you take the women's money and don't give them the vote." They were promptly escorted from the meeting. They later told the reporter that they had hidden in the inspection pit all day, and had sustained themselves by sucking meat lozenges!

The pubs book is a joint project between three members of our society. We are aiming to include every drinking-house that has ever existed within the borough. I would guess that there were at least 400 of them, so it's quite an undertaking, and we'll need a year or two to complete it, and to find some interesting photographs. It looks likely to be the next volume in the History of Reading Society publishing programme, which gives us something else to look forward to – and it should sell well.

David Cliffe

IF YOU MISSED IT

Here follow reports by Sean Duggan on the talks given to the Society during the last four months of 2017. But we begin with his photograph of Geoff Morris addressing members during their visit to St Mary's Church, St Mary's Butts in June. If you would like a copy of Sean's account of the visit and also his report of the talk by Paul Lacey (see below), please contact the Editor. Apart from the photo in St Mary's and that of the Reading School Chapel window, the remaining illustrations are from the collection of the late Norman Wicks.

The subject of the September talk was *The Mansion House: its History and Occupants*. The speaker was Katie Amos who is the head of the Local Studies Department at Reading Central Library where she has worked for 25 years.

Today Prospect Park and the Mansion House are well used public amenities; the estate was purchased in 1901 by Joseph Charles Fidler, a local seed merchant and grocer, his intention was to sell the estate, at an affordable price, to Reading Corporation on the condition it would be a public park. The sale was concluded in 1902.



Society members tour St. Mary's Church, Reading

The Mansion House was erected by Benjamin Child, a lawyer, in 1757 and was originally known as Prospect Hill House; it stood on land that was part of the Calcot Park Estate owned by the Kendrick family of Reading; Child would marry Frances Kendrick in 1706 and become High Sheriff of Berkshire. Today, a statue of Frances is on display in the house.



The Mansion House in a State of Dereliction

The next significant event in the estate's history was the tenure of John Englebarts Ziegenbien who inherited it from his uncle, John George Liebenrood in 1795; a condition of his will was that he change his name to Liebenrood. In 1800 John engaged the architect James Wright Sanderson of Caversham to "improve and extend the house". Among the improvements Sanderson added were flanking wings, a porte cochere and a conservatory; externally, at least, his design survives.

Among a succession of tenants during the 1800s of particular interest was the residency of the banker William Banbury, who was there between 1858-1880; he compiled an inventory of the house's contents which is now a valuable source of information for historians.

In the twentieth century the house's fortunes were mixed. During World War One patients from Battle Hospital were transferred there when the hospital was commandeered by the military. There was an unrealised plan by Reading Borough Council to establish a cemetery at the Honey End Lane boundary. For many years the house was derelict and suffered from acts of vandalism. In the 1980s after a campaign led by the Reading Civic Society the house was renovated and is now a restaurant.

In 2016 Katie published a history of the house based on her research.

The subject of the October talk was the *History of Reading School*. The speakers were Ken Brown and Chris Widdows who are former pupils of the school; they co-edit a magazine *The Old Redingensian* which keeps former pupils informed about the school.

Ken and Chris began the talk by showing a short film about the Queen's visit to the school in 1986 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of its re-founding by King Henry VII in 1486.

The school was established shortly after the founding of Reading Abbey in 1125 by King Henry I; each year a service to commemorate the King's benefaction is held at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Reading. The earliest mention of the school is in a charter of Roger, Bishop of Salisbury in 1139.

In those early years the pupils were taught by the Benedictine monks; the cloisters probably served as a classroom. The school's curriculum was focused on the training of young men for the priesthood.

When the school was re-founded as a royal grammar school in 1486 it moved into the abandoned Hospitium of St. John erected to accommodate pilgrims visiting the abbey.

With the dissolution of the monastic houses in the 1530s the school lost its main source of income and in desperation the headmaster, Leonard Cockes, petitioned King Henry VIII for financial support, which the king granted funded by the sale of Cholsey Abbey.

In 1781 after a long period of decline, the school's fortunes were restored under the long headmastership of Dr. Richard Valpy. He largely rebuilt the school, mostly at his own expense, on what is now part of the of the Town Hall. In 1830, he was succeeded as headmaster by his son, Francis.



Reading School Chapel Window

In 1866 the school's fortunes had again declined to the extent that only two pupils remained: the headmaster resigned and the school was closed. In 1867 the school re-opened and later moved to a 13-acre site off Erleigh Road; the eminent Victorian architect Alfred Waterhouse designed the new school in the then fashionable neo-Gothic style at the cost of £26,000.

Today Reading School is a grammar school with academy status for around 800 boys; in examination results it ranks in the top 5 per cent of schools in the UK.

The subject of the November talk was *Dicing with Death: Threats to Reading's Health c1550-1900*. The speaker was Joan Dils, the Society's president.

Joan quoted the eminent 18th century American statesman and scientist Benjamin

Franklin who said “nothing is as certain in life as death and taxes” and throughout the period covered by the talk the possibility of an early and painful death was a daily fact of life.

As a consequence of Reading's position as a commercial centre on an important trade route many diseases were brought to the town by visitors. Also, bad weather which led to poor harvests and consequently malnutrition among the population, particularly the poor, would weaken people's natural resistance to disease.

In 1563 bubonic plague struck London and the following year it arrived in Reading. Before the discovery of bacteria in the 1670s, it was believed that disease was the wrath of God for mankind's sins. Symptoms of bubonic plague included: blackening of the skin and abdominal pain; the treatments included: arsenic, eating ten year old treacle, and, in extreme cases, self-flagellation in public as a way of atonement for one's sins.



Reading Dispensary in Chain Street

The infected were confined to their homes for up to six weeks and their belongings burned; so called 'plague cabins' were built to quarantine whole families. The victims of an outbreak of plague in St. Giles's parish in 1608 accounted for more than half of the deaths in that year. The death of an infected person was marked by the ringing of a bell in the parish church.

In 1643 during the siege of Reading in the English Civil Wars the victory of the Royalist army, led by the Earl of Essex, was short lived because many of the soldiers, who'd endured appalling living conditions and a poor diet for many months, were infected with typhus or 'camp fever' as it was known then. The disease was transmitted by body lice and so many soldiers were infected that Essex had to abandon his campaign.

In the nineteenth century cholera and typhus were a constant threat to public health in the town; the influx of agricultural workers, displaced by land enclosure and the mechanisation of farms, brought in their wake the enormous growth in sewage. These diseases were spread in tainted water drawn from the town's many wells which drew supplies from polluted local rivers. The inadequate supply of clean water and disposal of the town's sewage led to the establishment of the Water Works at Bath Road in 1852, and the building of a mains drainage system.

At the close of the nineteenth century the Reading Dispensary at Chain Street had for nearly 100 years been administering advice and medicine to the town's poor; its founders would go on to establish the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Later, the town's workhouse on Oxford Road would become the Battle Hospital.

The subject of the December talk was *Georgian and Regency Reading*. The speaker was Dr. Margaret Simons who sits on the committee of the Berkshire Local History Association and is a tutor of local history for the Workers' Educational Association.

The Georgian and Regency era covered the consecutive reigns of the monarchs of the House of Hanover from the succession of King George I in 1714 to the death of King William IV in 1837.

Dr. Simons quoted a passage from Daniel Defoe's *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* where he described Reading in the 1720s as "A very large and wealthy town, handsomely built, the inhabitants rich, and driving a very great trade".

The predominant sector of Reading's economy for much of the period was agriculture; at its close the new manufacturing industries would be in the ascendancy. Reading was an important market for the sale of agricultural produce; the annual Michaelmas Cheese Fair in September was a major draw. Local author Mary Russell Mitford gave an account in her novel *Belford Regis* (her fictional name for Reading) of the regular throng of people and wagons descending on the town to sell their goods.

During the 18th century Acts of Parliament to improve the nation's road network were passed that would greatly benefit Reading. The town's principal thoroughfare, the Bath Road, became a turnpike road, where a toll was charged to users for its upkeep, in 1714. It was now possible for stagecoach passengers to travel to London and back in a day.

In 1785 the Simonds family established a brewery at Bridge Street, and in 1806, John Sutton opened a plant seed shop at Market Place. In 1822 Joseph Huntley opened a shop in London Street to sell biscuits to the many travellers arriving and departing by stagecoach in the street. These businesses would come to dominate Reading's economy in the 19th century and beyond.



London Street in the Recent Past

The opening of the Kennet and Avon canal between Newbury and Reading in 1723 would cement the town's position as an important inland port; annually around 100,000 tons of waterborne goods were exported/imported through its many wharfs compared with 100 tons by road.

During the long reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901 the population would increase from 8,000 to nearer 100,000. In 1837, the town's landscape was still dominated

by the towers of the parish churches and many of its buildings were timber framed but this would change during the industrial revolution as factories and railways came to dominate Reading's landscape.

Further back Paul Lacey addressed us in May on the subject of Smith's Coaches and his book, **Smith's Coaches of Reading 1922 to 1979** is now available from the author at £30 (post-free). Smith's were an integral part of the local scene for six decades, also seen all over England on excursions, extended tours and their seasonal coastal expresses. The book runs to 288 pages and includes 100 full colour illustrations, as well as 500 black and white. Cheques for £30 (post-free) should be sent to Paul Lacey. If you would prefer to collect a copy please contact Paul on 0118.

BERKSHIRE STORIES AND WORLD WAR ONE

Ann Smith writes:

The **Berkshire Stories** website www.berkshirstories.org.uk was set up in 2015 with money from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Most of the information on it relates to the First World War. The Heritage Lottery Fund gave money to digitise materials in Reading Central Library. A team of volunteers researched and produced a book **Berkshire in the First World War** (available to buy or borrow from the library and as a free download on the website).

The digitised materials on Berkshire Stories are:

The Reading Standard newspaper supplement *Berkshire and the War 1916-1919*

Kelly's Directories of Berkshire, Bucks and Oxon from 1911-1920

Kelly's Directories of Reading from 1914-1919

The four newspapers *The Reading Mercury*, *The Berkshire Chronicle*, *The Reading Standard* and *The Reading Observer* from 1914-1920

All the above are searchable by names and keywords.

READING IN FICTION - Postscript to the previous issue.

Ann Smith wrote in with the following addition:

I enjoyed John Dearing's article about writers who have featured the town of Reading in their books, and would like to add my personal favourites: **The Big Over Easy** and **The Fourth Bear** by Jasper Fforde.

These are comic detective stories with a fantasy twist. The Nursery Crimes Division of the Oxford and Berkshire police is in Reading and is headed by Inspector Jack Spratt and his assistant Mary Mary. *The Big Over Easy* starts with the discovery of Humpty Dumpty's body in a sleazy part of town and has jokes about Reading's one way system as well as scenes set in a biscuit factory, Reading Gaol and other local landmarks.

The Fourth Bear is the sequel to *The Big Over Easy* and is also set in Reading. The books are full of jokes about crime writing and literary allusions, and are enjoyable to read.

One that I missed out in my previous discussion of Reading in fiction is Patrick Hamilton's **Mr. Stimpson and Mr Gorse**, the second of his Gorse trilogy, concerning the adventures of a psychopathic con-man.

Many of Hamilton's novels are set in public houses, not surprisingly as he was a heavy drinker, eventually becoming an alcoholic and dying at the age of 58 in 1962. Once again, quoting from the "work in progress" referred to by our Chairman above:

Friar, Friar Street. This is the name of a fictional pub in Patrick Hamilton's 1953 novel, *Mr Stimpson and Mr Gorse*, televised as *The Charmer*. It is here that the psychopathic con-man, Ernest Gorse, meets the wealthy but gullible widow, Mrs Plumleigh-Bruce in 1928. To the best of my knowledge Hamilton gave no clue as to which specific pub, if any, he had in mind but it was clearly one of the up-market 'improved' pubs that flourished at that time, following the lead set by the nationalised Carlisle State Management Scheme, which were designed to make lady clients feel at home:

The Friar ... had only recently been ye-olded, and this had been lavishly done... Its principal feature was, of course, its dark-stained wooden panelling, with which the walls of all its bars were lined.

He goes on to refer to a fireplace above which were three shields with brightly painted coats of arms, all designed to create "a 'baronial' effect of the most painfully false character." Lunches were given upstairs.

While there was in Friar Street at that time a pub called Ye Olde Friars, I do not, however, find any evidence of its having been 'ye-olded' whereas this description does fit the former Tudor Tavern, originally Marquess of Lorne, which was Tudored in 1914 and, moreover, had an upstairs restaurant. Other candidates might include the richly panelled Traveller's Friend and the genuinely old Boar's Head.

John Dearing

BOOK SALE

We'll be holding another sale of second-hand books likely to be of interest to our members before and after the talk at our April meeting. The sale will be on a more selective and modest scale than last year, and it doesn't look as though there will be any "star" items, so please bring some change, but cheque books won't be necessary. Already, we have been given a number of new items. If you have any unwanted books, postcards, pictures or documents connected with local history, and the local history of this area in particular, please bring them along, and hand them to me, or to any committee member. The money raised will help in the running of the society, and in keeping subscriptions low.

David Cliffe



We were sorry to learn of the passing of Angela Spencer-Harper, who died on 14th October 2017 aged 85. The long-term editor of the local Stoke Row village magazine, she as a South Oxfordshire social history recorder who put much of her research into her book ***Dipping into the Wells***, then wrote ***The Old Place***, a fictional account of her home and the generations that lived there. Angela twice addressed the society on these matters and was also a frequent lecturer on cruise ships on the subject of graphology.

Readers also may have noticed in the deaths column of the *Reading Chronicle* a reference to the passing of the Revd. Albert Molyneaux, aged 96. Mr Molyneaux was from 1966 to 1983 the last minister of the Broad Street Congregational Church, now Waterstones, overseeing the change to United Reformed Church in 1972. He also took part in the funeral service for History of Reading Society member and Undertaker Emeritus, Ron Walker in 2003.

SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR 2018

Many thanks to those who have paid their subscriptions for 2018. We are taking new and renewing subscriptions at our meetings by cheque or cash. Membership subscriptions can also be paid by standing order. Please contact Secretary at for details.