

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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THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

First and foremost, I am pleased to announce that Malcolm Summers will be joining the committee as treasurer. He will be co-opted at our October meeting, and all being well, he will be elected at the A.G.M. next year. Many of us will remember Malcolm from his talk on the history of Greyfriars Church in May, and the visit to the church in June.

One of the many pleasant occasions I have enjoyed during the summer was the seventieth anniversary party at the Berkshire Record Office. It came just as the weather was cooling, on August 10th. Guests, and anyone who happened to be in the search room at the time, were invited into the Wroughton Room for tea and cake. Mark Stevens reminded us of the beginnings in the basement of the old Assize Courts in Reading, and how access to the documents was nothing like as straightforward as it is now. Subsequently, the Record Office moved to the new Shire Hall at Shinfield Park, before arriving at its present location at the top of Castle Hill in Reading in 2000.

Between June and August, besides doing a bit of reading (see the resulting book reviews below), I've been doing some local history research. I was given the opportunity of reading a part of the draft text of the Victoria History of Oxfordshire, volume XX. This is the volume that will include Caversham and neighbouring parishes. The ancient Caversham parish extended from the Thames up to Kidmore End, but the built-up part of it became part of the Borough of Reading in 1911. Having lived in Caversham for not quite 40 years, I was asked to comment on the text. Before I could do that, I had of course to do a lot of checking of facts. The author, Dr. Stephen Miles, and I have met and chatted over a decent lunch, and the co-operation, I believe, has been beneficial to both of us. The text for the medieval and early modern period seemed to me a model of its kind, but I was able to spot a few omissions when it came to more recent times. I'm hoping that in due course it might be possible to find the money to publish the Caversham section separately, maybe with some additional illustrations. It will be much more comprehensive than anything that has so far appeared.



Representatives from local history societies with the celebration cake – Sidney Gold (History of Reading Society), Joan Dils (President, HoRS and Berkshire Local History Association), Peter Durrant, M.B.E. (former County Archivist), Mark Stevens (current County Archivist), and David Cliffe (Chairman, HoRS and BLHA).

Among the roles I have taken on since my so-called "retirement" has been that of President of the Natural History Society, and part of the job involves the delivery of a presidential address in October. For some years, ever since I first came across them, I have been thinking of reading through the nature diaries of Thomas Marshall, which are now in the Berkshire Record Office. Mr. Marshall was President of the Natural History Society in the 1930s, as I am now. By strange coincidence, he lived at No. 43 Alexandra Road, in the Redlands part of Reading, where I lived in the 1970s. But whereas he probably owned the house, I could only afford a bed sitting room on the first floor! This talk will combine two of my enduring interests – local history, and natural history. I shall be talking about the places he visited, and the species he saw there, and about what has happened to those places in the last 80-odd years. There have been many changes in the distribution of species, and areas where Mr. Marshall heard nightingales and nightjars, summer after summer, are now under bricks, mortar, concrete and tarmac. His comments show how the management of the countryside round Reading has changed, as have attitudes to the collection of dead specimens, and the conservation of nature. I have dug out some photographs from the 1930s to illustrate some of the changes. In due course I may well write an article on these diaries for a journal. The diaries are mostly very repetitive, rather boring, and hard to decipher, but I have drawn out the interesting bits, and woven them, I hope, into a logical narrative.

Then in July my church decided that, to mark the centenary of the ending of the 1914-18 War, they would hold a flower festival and concert. As part of the event, they would put the roll of honour on display. This is in illuminated script, on cardboard. I rashly said that it would mean more if we had some details about the men who had served – who their families were, where they lived, what they did for a living, etc. So, naturally, I was asked if I would find out the facts and produce some text. Of the twenty-seven men

who served, four did not return, and of the four, I have managed to find photographs of two.

For the last two of these jobs, I needed to do some work on family history – for Mr. Marshall, and for the men who went to war. The old street directories and electoral rolls in the Central Library could get me part of the way, but I really needed access to one of those family history databases, and maybe to the British Newspaper Archive online. A year's subscription would have cost me £150 and more, so I thought I'd try the Centre for Heritage and Family History, adjacent to the local history collection in the Central Library.

Having worked in public libraries for more years than I care to remember, I feel a bit dismayed about what happened to the local history collection. It's still there, but for much of the time there is no member of staff on hand to help you find what you want – you have to go downstairs and ask. The day I ventured in was a very hot Saturday. The covered entrance by the Holy Brook looked a bit gloomy and uninviting, with pieces of corrugated cardboard lying round. There was a strong smell of disinfectant, following the anti-social behaviour of some of the “rough sleepers” the night before. Once inside, the ground floor was abuzz, with a children's activity to the left, and lots of activity round the counter.

I approached the desk at the Centre for Heritage and Family History, and a friendly wave invited me to take a seat. The Centre is run by the Berkshire Family History Society, and not by Reading Borough Libraries. I signed in, and the computers were there, ready to go, no passwords needed, just a click on the icon. And there I was, almost immediately, finding things out and scribbling them down in a notebook. I have made use of the Centre several times now, and it's always been the same – polite, quiet, with help on hand if you need it. At the end of the first session, I asked how much I owed. There was no charge – but there was a donations box. I'd had such a profitable few hours that I made a donation. For me, it had been as enjoyable and absorbing, as, say, going to the cinema.

And then I remembered that the Library, too, had a donations box. What should I do? When I go to a church that doesn't make an admission charge, I make a donation. If I go to a museum I do the same. Why hadn't I thought of making a donation to the Library, where I'd used the street directories and electoral rolls? I suppose it was partly because it is the statutory duty of a local authority to provide an efficient library service – whatever “efficient” may mean. But was it also partly the ignoble thought that I didn't want to pay towards children banging tambourines and singing about the wheels on the bus going round, or towards grown-ups reading novels that I would probably (and maybe snobbishly) consider worthless. So now when I visit the Library, I have this strange guilty feeling! Perhaps next time I'll make a donation.

David Cliffe

IF YOU MISSED IT

Here follow reports by Sean Dugganon recent talks given to and visits by the Society.

The subject of the **May** talk was the history of Greyfriars Church, Reading. The speaker was Malcolm Summers who has been a member of the church since 1981; in 2013 he published a history of the church.

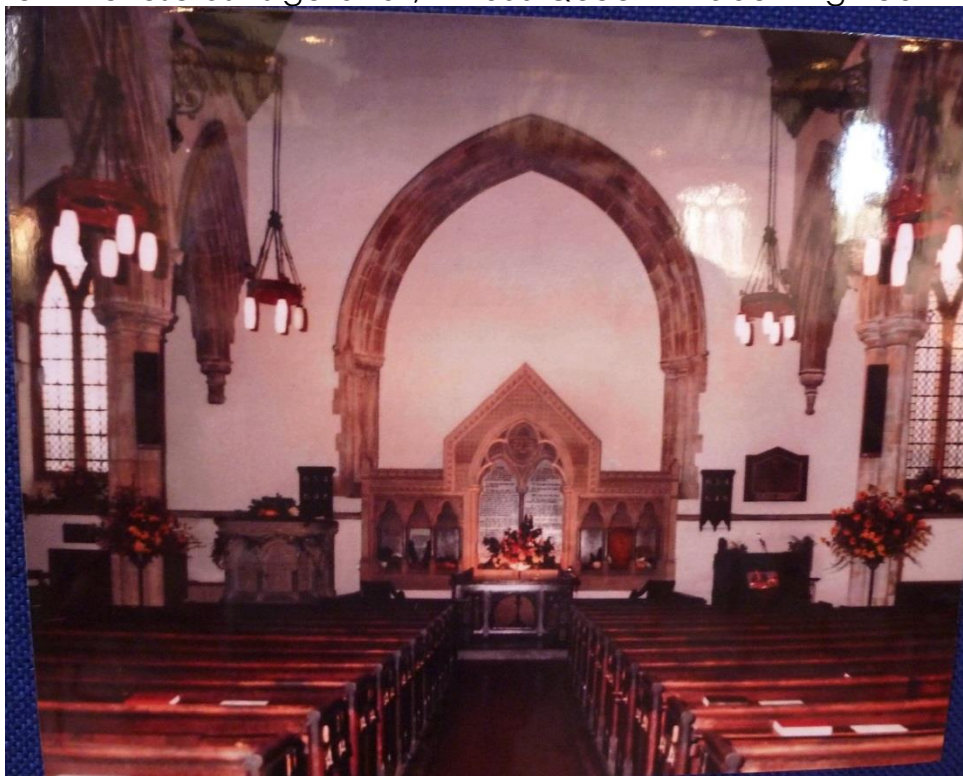
The Franciscan Order of Friars was founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1209; they were commonly known as the 'Greyfriars' because of their grey robes or habit. The monks were required to live an austere life and go out into the streets to preach, especially to the poor.

The story of Greyfriars Church in Reading goes back more than 700 years to 1233 when Reading Abbey granted land to the Franciscans so they could build themselves a

monastic house. The church was built on a remote site near the River Thames that was surrounded by marshland and floods would be a constant problem.

In 1282 the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Peckham, when he learned of the Greyfriars' plight, sent a request to Robert of Burgate, Abbot of Reading, to grant additional land to the friars nearer the town; accordingly, from 1285 a new friary church was built at New Street (modern Friar Street) where it stands today.

In 1536 with the closure of monastic houses ordered by King Henry VIII the friars were ejected from their church two years later with little more than the clothes they wore. In 1540 the Crown sold the surrounding land to Robert Stanshawe and the building was rented to the town for use as its guildhall; in 1560 Queen Elizabeth I gifted it to the town.



Greyfriars interior in 1980 – from Michael Penfold's collection



And as seen today – captured by the Editor

In the 17th century the building was converted to use as a 'poor house' which could accommodate 14 of the town's 'deserving poor'. During the siege of Reading in the English Civil Wars of the 1640s it was used as a barracks by Royalist, and later, Parliamentary soldiers. By the close of the century the building had become the town's

prison known as 'The Bridewell': the former nave was used as the exercise yard and the aisles were converted for use as cells; the inmates had only straw for beds.

By the 1860s the Bridewell was in a very poor state. The minister of Holy Trinity Church, Reading, the Reverend William Whitmarsh Phelps, had the idea of restoring the old building for use as a parish church; he bought it from the Corporation and through a public subscription fund raised over £8,000 towards the cost of re-building.

Work began on the restoration in 1862 under a local architect, William Woodman, and on 2nd December 1863 the Church of Greyfriars was re-consecrated by the Bishop of Oxford Samuel Wilberforce. In 2000 the church was re-ordered with the pews removed and the east end re-modelled, the pulpit was re-located to a less prominent position. Today Greyfriars is a lively Anglican church in the Diocese of Oxford.

In **June** Malcolm invited the Society's members to visit the church.

In **July** members of the Society visited the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) at Redlands Road, Reading. Our hosts for the evening were Kaye Gough and Caroline Piller, both volunteers at the museum.



MERL TODAY – Sean Duggan

By the early 1950s the University of Reading's Department of Agriculture had already gained a reputation for excellence, particularly in research, and a staff member, John Higgs, set out to establish at Reading a museum of the history of the countryside. It would house the national collection of all aspects of farming life. In 1952 the vice-chancellor of the University, J F Wolfenden, made a public appeal for funds and exhibits.

The museum's first home was at Whiteknights House on the Whiteknights Campus; previously, items were scattered across the university. John Higgs was the first keeper and the first exhibit was a cow bell donated by a student. Important early donations came from the writer H J Massingham; the 1951 Festival of Britain; and Lavinia Dugan Smith; she had used her collection to educate children.

In 1964 the museum moved to purpose-built accommodation on the campus and there it remained until 2004. That year the museum transferred to a former university hall of residence in Redlands Road known as St. Andrew's Hall; it opened to the public in 2005. It was originally the home of Alfred Palmer of Huntley & Palmers' Biscuits; he bequeathed it to the university in 1911.

Today the collection comprises material that reflects the changing fortunes of the rural economy, items include: a steam powered threshing machine, horse-drawn wagons, ploughs and modern diesel powered tractors. MERL has a large archive including such items as agricultural produce catalogues, farmers' account books, photographs and letters. The collection includes a number of artworks of particular interest including the Festival of Britain tapestry. At the end of the visit members were invited to view the library: its collection of 75,000 books is the nation's foremost facility for the study of the history of agriculture.

Book reviews

“Reading Abbey Records: a New Miscellany” edited by Brian Kemp. Berkshire Record Society, 2018.

Some of us will remember Professor Kemp, and his talk, “Reading Abbey’s Royal Connections,” in 2015. Some may have dipped into the monumental two-volume Reading Abbey Cartulary which he edited. The present volume contains four diverse documents from the abbey, with the Latin text on the left-hand page, and the English translation on the page opposite.

The first of the four documents is “The Annals of Reading Abbey,” containing national news, local news, and news relating to the Abbey in the 12th and 13th centuries. We learn, for instance, that the abbey was struck by lightning and set on fire on 12 March 1209. There follows a series of documents on the miracles at the hand of St. James. This dried-up hand was the most famous of the abbey’s relics, which brought in pilgrims and, doubtless, revenue. It was contained in a reliquary, which was periodically dipped into water. In many instances it was the drinking of this water by sufferers which effected the miraculous cures which are related here. Then comes a list of the ceremonies held by the monks on the anniversary of the death of Henry I, the founder of the abbey. These involved adorning the church, burning candles, ringing bells, wearing of vestments, and the chanting of various offices and psalms. Special meals were eaten, with wine, and the surplus food was given to the poor. Finally in the book comes a list of the feasts and anniversaries which were celebrated at the abbey.

The original manuscripts are in several different libraries – Lambeth Palace, St. John’s College Cambridge, Worcester College Oxford, Gloucester Cathedral, and the British Library – and most of the texts have not been published before. Many facts relating to England in the Middle Ages are not recorded elsewhere, and the documents give interesting insights into the life of the monastery and religious beliefs. So much so, that I found reading the book entertaining!

The task of editing and translating the texts could not have been put in more capable hands. Each set of documents has an introduction, there are copious footnotes, most of which I read, and there is a good index at the end. All concerned should be congratulated on producing this worthwhile volume.

142 pages. On sale at the Berkshire Record Office, £12.50.

“Reading’s Forgotten Children: the Start of Schooling in the Town” by R. S. Bray. Published by the author, 2003.

Although published as long ago as 2003, I came across this book only in July this year, in the shop in Reading Museum and Art Gallery.

The title is rather misleading: the book is really about board schools in Reading from 1871 until 1902 when school boards were abolished, and the Borough Council took over from them. And then I fail to see why the children who went to board schools were any more “forgotten” than the children who went to church schools and charity schools in the same period.

That said, the book tells its story rather well, and it’s a story that hasn’t been told before in an accessible form like this. The pages are large, and the illustrations are of good size, with good definition. I suppose it was inevitable that most of the pictures come from the post-board school era. The photographs of school buildings are modern, and those of school classes, with the children in rows, date from 1928-1936. But there is a picture of a Reading School Board certificate of merit, issued by the Swansea Road School in 1902.

The author was mistaken in saying that the Swansea Road School was in Lower Caversham. It’s now known as the E. P. Collier School, and is off Caversham Road on the Reading side of the Thames. And I was a bit puzzled by the photograph of George Palmer School, which was built by the Borough Council in 1907.

Perhaps the price is a little “steep” - £5.99 for 32 pages – but it’s well produced, and the text is well researched.

“Reading. Unique Images from the Archives of Historic England,” by Marion Field. Amberley Publishing, 2018.

This is another publication where I feel the need to take issue with the title. The images are almost all from photographs. There is, or would have been, a unique negative of each image, but that image may have been printed and sold many times. Some of the images started out as picture postcards, which may have been sold in their hundreds. I have already seen many of the images in the book in other collections in Reading, so I wouldn’t have used the word “unique” if I’d had any choice in the matter.

Nevertheless, there were many images I hadn’t seen before, and it is good to have them, well reproduced and reasonably large, in a handy book. Personal favourites include the premises of William Ridley & Son, timber merchants, on Abbey Wharf; Orwell House in Craven Road, the sumptuous residence of Owen Ridley; Cressingham Park, another sumptuous residence; some interiors of Caversham Park while the Crawshay family was still in residence; some of the departments in Wellstead’s store in Broad Street in 1920; and the interior of the Odeon Cinema when it opened in 1937.

I spotted only one obvious error in the captions: the aerial photograph on p. 45 is supposed to have Castle Street running through the centre. I can make out London Road, Kendrick Road, Mount Pleasant, etc., but Castle Street is off to the left in the distance somewhere.

The price is £14.99 for 95 pages and just over 130 images.

David Cliffe

Our New Treasurer



Malcolm Summers is originally from Birmingham and studied mathematics at London University, and then trained as a teacher at Chester College. He moved to Reading in 1981 for his first job as a maths teacher at Little Heath School. In 1988 he took the post of Head of Maths at The Willink School in Burghfield Common, and in 1993 became the school's Deputy Head. He retired in 2017, and later that year published a biography of Henry George Willink, after whom the school is named.

He has been a member of Greyfriars Church since coming to Reading and in 2013 published the history of the church. In May this year he gave a talk to the Society based on this research and led members on a guided tour of Greyfriars in June.

He is married to Cathy and they have two children, now in their twenties. Cathy is the 4x great granddaughter of Nicolas Appert, who invented the process now used in canning food. Malcolm researched his life in the days of Revolutionary France and published his biography in 2015. Cathy and Malcolm celebrated their 34th wedding anniversary this year.

When not researching and writing, Malcolm spends his time reading, avoiding gardening, trying to remember to get enough exercise and following the varied fortunes of West Bromwich Albion. He is also the treasurer of the charity Kisiizi Partners, which supports the work of a hospital and local community in south west Uganda.

He is currently working on a book that gives the stories behind various Reading memorials, to be published by Two Rivers Press in June 2019.

Postscript

As some readers will know I have been working for eight years on a history of Reading's connections with overseas missions. I am hopeful that this will be published in its final shape soon. A chat with Malcolm Summers after the visit to Greyfriars led to a valuable contact with Patricia Chiu in Hong Kong who was able to provide additional information on the first two missionaries from Greyfriars. As a foretaste of the book and an epilogue to the Greyfriars talk and visit, here is what resulted.

THE REMARKABLE FLETCHER SISTERS

Miss Helen Selena Fletcher, generally known as Selena, was the younger daughter of Admiral John Venour Fletcher (1801-77), who after his retirement from the Navy had served as Manager of the Reading Savings Bank from 1863, the year of Greyfriars' reconsecration. Miss Fletcher had moved to Wimbledon after her mother's death in 1891 but came back to Reading the following year in time to be 'sent off' from Greyfriars. However, she went out to Hong Kong for the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East (FES) 'on her own means'. FES was a non-denominational society which had worked in collaboration with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Hong Kong and China from the 1850s and when it was dissolved in 1899 its assets and staff were transferred to CMS. In Hong Kong she was engaged in educational work in a team led by Miss Margaret Johnstone, principally at the Diocesan Girls' School, Fairlea.

Their work focused on vernacular day schools for Chinese girls, mostly daughters of new converts, and a boarding school where poor and orphaned girls took shelter, and were clothed and fed. The FES ladies also participated in parish work of St Stephen's Church, the first Chinese Anglican church in Hong Kong, which included Sunday school teaching, visiting women in the neighbourhood, and training of Chinese women converts to become bible women (assistants of missionaries). In Selena's case her ministry also extended to work among sailors and soldiers, reflecting perhaps her naval background. Here it is interesting to note that her father had served as second in command of the *Wellesley* in the Chinese Expedition of 1839 which led to Hong Kong becoming a British colony. Selena's independent means also enabled her to give financial support to the work of FES in particular, 'as well as supporting fellow missionaries from humble background.

In December 1894, she contributed an article to the *Female Missionary Intelligencer*, a magazine published by the FES, in which she says something of her attitude to mission:

This year we have not extended our work in any way, being hindered by the Plague; but next year we shall be glad to do more. Even this winter, without waiting for the new year, something might be done. For this more money will be needed. I wish some of the good people at home who do very little, and those who do nothing for the perishing ones in heathen lands, could know the joy there is in being the Lord's stewards, remembering that we are put in trust with the Gospel, and with our lives and money too.

In a further report in June 1895 for the same periodical she describes the work at Fairlea which included a Boarding School with 34 Chinese and 13 Eurasian girls and four Day Schools, though here numbers had been reduced by the Plague from 150 to under 50. In addition a further 75 scholars were taught at three village schools served from Fairlea. She also refers to visiting work among the poor people and the difficulties in presenting the Gospel to those who are 'very dark' and whose 'minds move slowly over their daily work and daily food':

Amongst such people, the Bible-woman visits, talking to those who will listen, sometimes getting several women, sometimes one or two, to hear the new doctrine...

A year ago, five women who had been under instruction were baptized, and quite recently after further instructions, confirmed. Pray for these and for others who hear the Gospel story, that, whether they be very ignorant, or partly enlightened, they may not rest, until they have found Him, who is the Light of Life.

Selena's elder sister, Sophy, joined her in 1903 but served only eight years before her death in Hong Kong on 11 August 1911, aged 59. Although Sophy had lived in Burbage, Leicestershire, for some years prior to her departure for Hong Kong, she was regarded as a Greyfriars missionary and on her death the then Vicar, the Revd. H. C. Boulton, referred to her as 'for many years a valued Sunday School teacher and District Visitor' in the parish and noted that 'it was while she was Sunday School Superintendent that the call for foreign service came to her.' During her time in Hong Kong as a voluntary worker she taught successively at Fairlea and St Stephen's College and then shortly before her death she was called to a new work in Hok Shan (now Heshan) on the Chinese mainland. In an obituary in St John's Cathedral Church Notes of September 1911 we read that her funeral service was conducted by the Bishop of Victoria, Gerald Heath Lander, and the Revd. C. N. R. Mackenzie 'when many Europeans and Chinese were present to show their respect for one who "had spent and been spent" in the work of the Lord.' In the obituary writer's view 'many will there be in the Last Great Day who will be ready to rise up and call her blessed.'

Selena returned to England in 1912 but subsequently went back to Hong Kong, finally retiring in 1920 after 28 years' service. During this latter phase she was involved with the work of Holy Trinity church. She died in Bedford in 1944.

JD

Those with no memorial...

While researching the stories behind memorials in Reading, I have been very conscious of many famous Reading people who have no memorial to remind us of them. Every time I walk through St. Laurence's churchyard I think of one of them as I pass his grave, which is beside the footpath:

*Sacred to the memory of Mr. James Cocks who departed this life
April 29th 1827 in the 60th year of his age*

The *Berkshire Chronicle* gave a short, but notable obituary:

On Sunday last ... [died] Mr. Cocks, of Reading, well known inventor and manufacturer of the Reading Sauce. Mr. Cocks was highly respected by his fellow-townsmen, and obtained the good will of all classes by the kindness and general amenity of his manners. He was generous without ostentation; and an appeal of distress was never made to him in vain. In him the poor have lost one of their best benefactors, his family an indulgent parent, and the world an honest man.

James Cocks opened his first fishmonger store in 1789 in Butcher's Row. This was one of two rows in the middle of Broad Street at the Kings Street end, creating narrow – and smelly – alley ways. A long and happy marriage began in 1794, when, aged 28, he married 31-year old Ann Cooper of Caversham.

In 1797 Cocks moved to a property in Duke Street, rented (as was much of Reading) from the Blagraves. He advertised in the *Reading Mercury*

JAMES COCKS, FISHMONGER,

Respectfully informs his friends and the public that he has removed from Butcher-Row to Duke-Street where he solicits the continuance of their favors (sic).

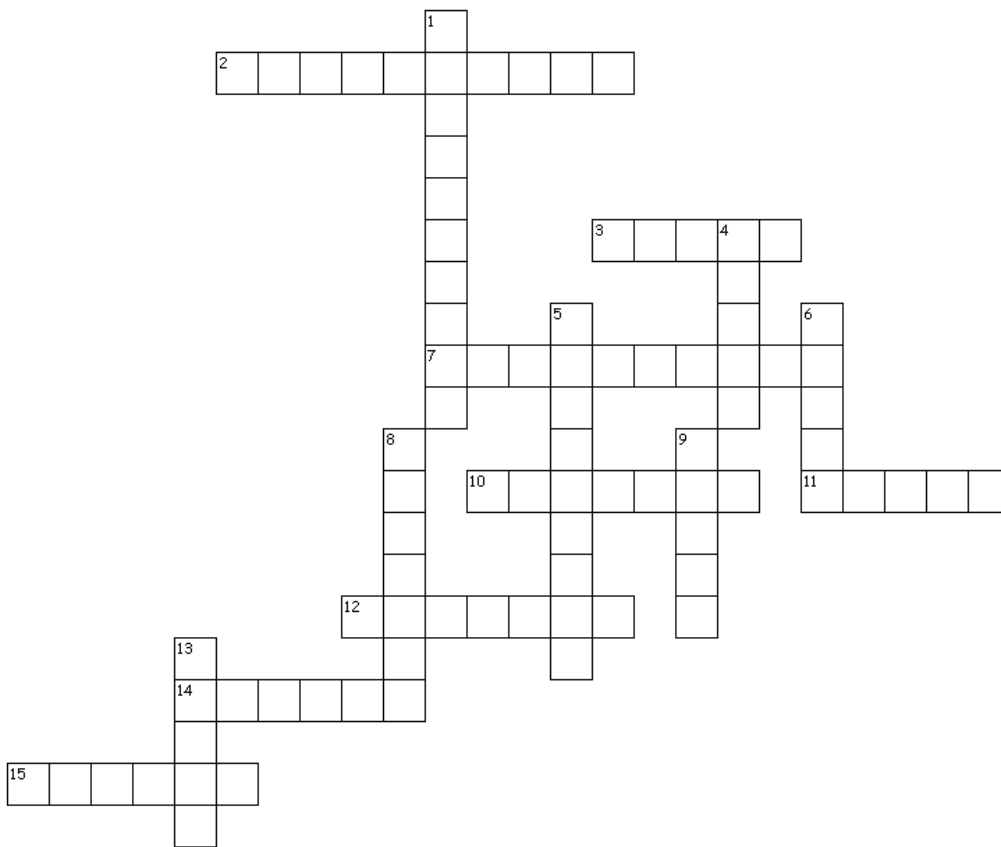
Cocks produced his Reading Sauce from 1802. It is not certain where the inspiration for the sauce came from, but it soon became famous and sought after. One of their adverts in 1811 ran: "The great reputation J. Cocks has gained by his celebrated Reading Sauce, which has for many years been patronized and recommended by most of the first families of the Kingdom, renders it unnecessary for him to make any comment on its qualities; it is supposed that no sauce ever met with such approbation and extensive sale..."

Cocks had chosen his shop location well, next to the busy Kennet and Avon Canal, and close to High Bridge and its wharfs. By 1819 he claimed that Reading Sauce was being stocked by 250 shops in London and even 30 in far away Edinburgh. The business went from strength to strength and in 1821 the premises were re-built in Duke Street.

When he died in 1827 he left an estate worth £14,000, a considerable sum for the time. St. Laurence's Church was full to overflowing at his funeral, remembering a man who had placed the name of his town on dinner tables throughout the land and beyond.

Malcolm Summers

HISTORY OF READING CROSSWORD set by Joy Pibworth



Clues Across

2. Architect of Reading Town Hall
3. Reading street, site of Simmonds brewery in 1785
7. Modern name of Cadeles Grove
10. First Baptist mayor of Reading
11. Monastic name for 18th century Reading MP?
12. Local 18th century authoress
14. Prominent Reading family, friends of Oscar Wilde
15. Lane where the first Baptists worshipped in 1640's Reading

Clues Down

1. Owners of tannery
4. Royalist commander at the start of the Siege of Reading
5. Aka Henry I
6. Mixed with grass to provide soft capping on the Abbey ruins
8. Brick manufacturer in 19th century
9. Charcoal clearing in Anglo-Saxon
13. Rapid 17th century map maker