

# *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

<b>Hon Secretary</b> Peter Russell 5 Wilmington Close <b>Woodley</b> READING RG5 4LR  Tel: 0118 961 8559	<b>Chair &amp; Newsletter Editor</b> John Dearing 27 Sherman Road READING RG1 2PJ  Tel: 0118 958 0377	<b>Programme Organiser</b> Eddy Hooper
--	--	---

Christmas 2003

## **CHRISTMAS SHOPPING IN 1912**

During the Christmas shopping period in 1912 it is evident from an advertising puff. written by 'H.T.C.', that Reading shops were hoping for an increase in trade, a version of our Christmas shopping rush, for all manner of goods and services.

Dr Cecil Slade spoke to the society a few years ago on the use that can be made of newspaper advertisements in an eighteenth century local newspaper of a period for which local history sources are not plentiful.

However even for a later period, advertisements can throw extra light on the brief entries in commercial directories. These directories also carry advertisement pages which give details about local businesses and the products that they sold.

The Society has paid a visit to the helpful Local Studies department of Reading Library with its good collection of local history material, which is an invaluable resource and whose holdings provided the substance for this short article.

The recent talk we heard about 'Heelas' interested many members so that they will be aware that this department store catered for the carriage trade and

the more moneyed residents, the upper end of the consumer market. At the 'House of Heelas' the need to find the article that will suit everyone on the list so carefully written out at home beforehand will be satisfied, as the *Reading Record* for December 14<sup>th</sup> informs us. In the Toy Bazaar the children will eagerly watch Robinson Crusoe's Island with its real water and fleet of canoes to carry presents to the waiting child. For older boys there was a shooting gallery with its prize to be competed for. Children and their parents were advised to go and see demonstrations of modelling in plasticine, of weaving and to watch the antics of the walkabout animals and the mechanical toys. For the girls there was a huge array of dolls, pretty and grotesque, and a humorous 'glad eye' girl with adjustable eyes. After time spent amongst the toys, the tea rooms beckoned where a huge cracker was to be pulled on December 23<sup>rd</sup> and everyone would have a present. Heelas's tea was grown on their own plantation on the Niligiri Hills and a few pounds of tea 'is always such a safe present to make'.

Messes E. Hill and Sons, 38 Broad Street. had a good stock of toys. Older members will remember the large shop with its attractive displays. In 1912 accurate models of the British Navy warships were a feature, including dreadnoughts, cruisers, gunboats, submarines, and torpedo boats. Toy soldiers and constructional toys in vast numbers were stocked, and dolls of every kind and sort. For adults there was a special line in thermos flasks. Hill's had a good reputation for leather work and made fitted suit cases and portmanteaux on the premises. They held a large stock of brass and china goods, brass candlesticks in the newest designs and some handsome bronze vases with an iris design, prices being most reasonable.

Messrs. Awmack at 87 Broad Street, (wholesale hardware, & china, glass & fancy goods dealers), had 'Cordial Flasks' whose usefulness was only equalled by their price, being 'only 2s. 4½d.' The framing of pictures had been much simplified by this shop stocking gilt frames in nine different sizes in order that most pictures could be 'framed at a very low cost'. Their tea and dinner sets were 'surprisingly cheap and pretty'. The enthusiasm for the Japanese style still continued and antimony trinket boxes were on sale in this 'useful, untamishable' metal priced between 6½d and 3s. 6d.

The Talbot Cafe also featured Japanese toys, china and various articles in antimony. Its address and entrance was 29 Queen Victoria Street, but old members will concur that the tea room upstairs provided both tea and a wide view of Broad Street. Even in 1912 the enjoyment of watching passers-by as you sipped your tea in comfort was described as being in 'quaintly old-fashioned rooms'.

Messrs. J. Cross and Co., The Store Chemists, besides selling perfumery and toilet requisites, were the sole agents in the area for the Mirrorscope, frequently known as the picture postcard lantern, prices ranged from 15s to £4. 4s. They were also holding a demonstration of the art of preparing Horlick's Malted Milk, a 'delightful food drink, extremely useful when travelling, or when there is no time to prepare any other food'. The powder dissolved in hot or cold water.

Messrs. E Jackson and Sons at Jackson's corner were making a speciality of men's scarves and neckwear, walking sticks and umbrellas, slippers, and handkerchiefs; their Duke Street Stores, on the opposite side of the street, was full of electro-plate, fancy leather goods, china and glass, and they had opened a toy bazaar at 19 King's Road. Also in King's Road was Mr. Stanford's collection of antique and modern art, along with old china, pewter and glass. In Castle Street, Mr. G Salmon had all the most brilliant burning oils and enamelled ware of every description.

Everyone hoped for increased sales. There were purveyors of Christmas beef and turkey, cooking ranges, gardening tools and ironmongery, household hardware and sundries, wicker work baskets, bicycles and sewing machines, high-class furs, fashionable ladies handbags, boys' suits, surgical belts, corsets and trusses, bric-a-brac, gramophones and records, photo Christmas cards, eye glasses, spectacles, pince-nez. and lorgnettes with tortoise-shell and mother-of-pearl handles, drapery, boots for the cold weather and fancy shoes and paste buckles for evening wear, even a shipping agent for dispatching presents to 'the dear ones over the sea'.

This phrase reminds us of the emigration to Australia, New Zealand and particularly Canada at this time, to find work and new opportunities. There was want as well as plenty. When recruitment took place for the Great War it was found that many of the men were in poor physical shape.

There was kindness. There was to be a Christmas tea and entertainment on Friday December 20th at the meeting for the 'Braves', guests of the Reading Branch of The Guild of Brave Poor Things, which promoted 'social intercourse between crippled and blind folk of all ages', and was undenominational. It met every Friday from October to May from 4.30 - 6.30 pm. The house-bound were not forgotten either. Founded because of Mrs. J. H. Ewing's book 'A Story of a Short Ute', the name of the society is not at all compatible with our current use of those words, but breaking down the isolation those 'Braves' could experience is an aim we can appreciate.

In 1912 the Christmas wish to *Record* readers was

'.....this I say:

Heaps of joy on Xmas Day

Jolly good health in the year to come,

Al little more money and much more fun !'

Pat Smart

We are grateful to Pat for her very appropriate and seasonable contribution to this Newsletter. We hope it will encourage others among our members to make similar contributions. A good idea for a New Year resolution so over to you all to put pen to paper.

We have received news that **James Gafford**, a long-standing member of the society, has moved to Clare House, a nursing home in Walton-on-Thames.

A Merry Christmas and a Happy New year to all our readers. 2004 will be the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the resignation of Reading's own Prime Minister, Henry Addington, later Viscount Sidmouth, to be succeeded by his predecessor, William Pitt the younger. I am not sure whether it was this switch or the earlier one in 1801 that inspired the priceless doggerel (almost a precursor of the clerihew):

Pitt is to Addington,  
As London is to  
Paddington.

Just to remind you that our programme for the first three months of 2004 is as follows:

21 January	History of Reading	Hilary Thomson	a guide for beginners, or a refresher course for old hands!
18 February	Biscuits and Royals - The story of Reading Football Club	David Downs	Did you know that Matt Busby once played for Reading?
17 March	AGM, followed by The Establishment of the New Reading Workhouse	Pat Preece	Very topical with the Battle Hospital shortly due to close

May we also remind members that subscriptions are due from 1<sup>st</sup> January and that the following rates apply, unchanged from last year: Full Single Subscription £10 (couples £13); reduced subscription (students and senior citizens) £7 (couples £10)

**Help!** Clare Bolton, who is studying history at Reading University, is looking for any information on a firm called Poynders who had premises in Gun Street and on the corner of Broad Street and Chain Street but closed in the late 1940s. They were printers and bookbinders and are understood to have taken over the business of Macaulay, one of the firms that produced a Directory of Reading. The Broad St premises traded as the Fancy Repository. If any of our walking mines of information can help please write to Clare.