

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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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Reading Museum service has announced that it has been awarded a £50,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Aside from any views members might have on the morality of the Lottery and any tinges of regret that the old Blakes Lock museum evidently proved to be an unviable enterprise, this must be regarded as good news. The grant will also be matched by "substantial investment" from Reading Borough Council, enabling the planned redisplay at Blake's lock to be completed by Spring 2004.

Reading's riverside history will be the focus of the new displays, from prehistoric times to the present day. The refurbished museum will be renamed the Riverside Museum at Blake's Lock to reflect the new themes. Among the displays will be an ornate gipsy caravan made in Reading by the Kennet and a mediaeval pit wheel from a watermill found during the Oracle excavations.

The major drawback to the scheme is that it will involve Reading in having yet another pub restaurant. This may sound strange from a former Chairman of the Reading branch of CAMRA but in this instance I believe that the museum and borough have chosen the wrong partners. When I first came to live in the Thames Valley in 1969 one of my favourite "watering-holes" was a charming hotel in Cookham, called the Bel and the Dragon, believed to be a unique inn-name, referring to the late additions to the Book of Daniel in the Greek version of the Old Testament. When the present owners acquired the Bel in the mid-90s they gutted its interior and substituted Edwardian charm with Habitat frigidity. They then went on to set up several other pub-restaurants, naming them "Bel and the Dragons" - so that the Cookham inn lost what little was left of its uniqueness. We can only hope that a more sensitive and sympathetic architectural approach is adopted towards the Blake's Lock buildings.

GEORGE SIMONDS

George Simonds of the brewery family is best remembered as the sculptor of the **Lion**, standing proud upon its plinth in the Forbury Gardens, erected as a memorial to those of the Royal Berkshire Regiment who fell at Maiwand during the Afghan War of 1879/80. The completed work was unveiled on 26 May 1886. From that day it has become a symbol of the town of Reading, as much as the Statue of Liberty has for New York or the little Mermaid for Copenhagen. Reading, though, has seven other works by Simonds on public display.

Following the success of the Lion, he was once again commissioned to create an heroic statue to **Queen Victoria** to mark her Golden Jubilee. The Duke of Cambridge performed the unveiling on 27 July 1887 to much pomp and ceremony. **George Palmer**, MP for Reading, was to be Simonds' next major work for the town in 1891, the unveiling take place on the same day as the opening of Palmer Park. Though the statue was originally erected in Broad Street, owing to traffic problems it was removed to the park in 1930. These three are the sculptor's best loved works on general view in Reading. Three other busts, though rather more hidden, are atop of pedestals in the Town Hall buildings.

Henry Bilson Blandy, head of another brewery and member of a long-established Reading family, was Mayor of Reading in 1879; his bust was presented to celebrate his 25th Wedding Anniversary which occurred during his mayoral year, following a public subscription. In 1888 another bust was commissioned to commemorate the services of **Alderman Arthur Hill**, Mayor of Reading from 1883 to 1887. Hill was half-brother of the philanthropist, Octavia Hill, and father-in-law to Dr Jamieson Hurry of Reading Abbey fame. Finally in 1900 a subscription was raised by friends and constituents as a token of respect for their late MP, **Charles Murdoch** (1837-98). All three busts are described as excellent likenesses.

In more recent years Reading Museum has acquired two small reliefs, **Uses of Fire and Food** and **Uses of Fire and Faith**, which are now on permanent display in the Windows Gallery. But what of the artist himself? He was born at the Brewery House, Bridge Street, Reading, the son of George Simonds senior, in 1843. He was educated first at Bradfield College, and then from 1857 at Dresden, where he entered the Royal Saxon Academy under Prof. Schilling, an eminent sculptor. From there he continued his studies under Prof. Jehotte at Brussels, but by 1864 he was settled in Rome, where he was to remain for the next ten years. There he fashioned what has since become his most enduring and important work, **The Falconer**, now in Central Park, New York. In 1876 he set up his studio at Buckingham Palace Road, later moving to St John's Wood in the house previously occupied by George Eliot. In 1884 he became the first Master of the Art Workers Guild.

By his American wife, the former Miss Gertrude Prescott, he had an only son who was killed in the early months of the First World War. On the death of his brother, Blackall Simonds in 1905 George moved to the family home at Bradfield, where in 1922 he designed the **War Memorial** with his son's name inscribed upon it.

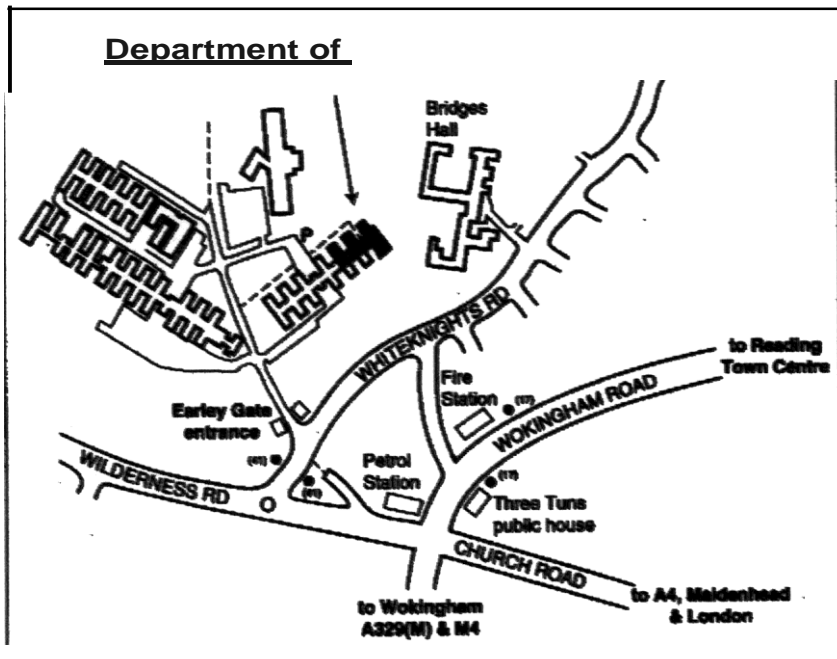


fictitious. Other works of George Simonds to be seen in public places are another *The Falconer*

From 1910 till his death in 1929 he was Chairman of the family brewery. So the legend that he committed suicide because of the misplacement of the Lion's paw is entirely **Queen Victoria** at Weymouth, **Frederick Tollemache** MP at Grantham, the engineer, **Sir Joseph Bazalgette**, on the Victoria Embankment, **Caritas** at Lincoln and **John Collingwood Bruce**, the antiquary at Newcastle Cathedral.

Sidney Gold

Ed. *We were pleased to welcome Sidney Gold as a new member of the Society's Committee at our AGM. Sidney is a noted authority on artists and architects associated with Reading and author of A Biographical Dictionary of Architects at Reading.*



Other Society matters:

Dr John Starr has succeeded Mr Peter Trout as Treasurer of the society with effect from the AGM. We thank John for agreeing to take on this work and Peter for his contribution during 2002/3. We are pleased to hear that Mr Bent Weber has had a successful operation and look forward to seeing him among us once again, following his convalescence. We also wish to remind all readers that the Committee would appreciate any help members can give with the catering at our meetings. Even one meeting a year would be welcome - and it will take up at most half-an-hour of your time!

Contributions for the Newsletter from among our members would be most welcome & gratefully received by the Editor, our Chair - John Dearing. We can then avoid having white blank areas. How about it then, all those budding authors among our members?

The Programme for Summer and Autumn 2003

Please note that from September all meetings will be held on Wednesday evenings at Abbey Baptist Church.

19 Jun	DEPARTMENT OF TYPOGRAPHY & GRAPHIC COMMUNICATION, READING UNIVERSITY - Meet there at 7.30pm. See Map on Page 3
17 Jul	CHRISTCHURCH, Reading - Meet at the church in Christchurch Road at 7.30pm.
17 Sept	THE HISTORY OF CAVERSHAM PARK - Brian Rotheray
15 Oct	ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF THE WEA IN READING Marvin Clarke & Penny Hunter
19 Nov	THE BERKSHIRE SWING RIOTS OF 1830 Margaret Escott
17 Dec	CHARLES I'S READING Joan Dils
ALL WILL BE MOST WELCOME at meetings - however a small charge (currently £2) per meeting is made for non-members.	
<i>Annual Subscription Rates [2003]:</i>	
<i>Sinale £ 10 / Couple £13 Senior Citizen/Student £7 / Couple £10</i>	

How about a contribution from you to fill this space?

Your Society needs YOU!

(with apologies to the W W I recruiting poster)