

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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BOB HUTCHINSON

As many of you will know, our former Treasurer, Robert (Bob) Hutchinson passed away on the 16th April, following a short illness. Bob was Treasurer of the Society from 1989 and 2002 and was a greatly valued member of the Committee, along with Joan who for a number of years was our Programme Organiser. Following his retirement from the Treasury, he continued to attend meetings and was last seen, making a contribution to the debate on finance at our AGM. A number of members were able to attend Bob's funeral at Henley Road Crematorium on 29th April.

Bob was an industrial chemist by profession and met Joan while they were both working for Johnson Matthey. They moved to Emmer Green when the firm relocated to this area in the 1970s. Apart from the history of Reading, Bob had many other interests including cine film and video making. We shall greatly miss his contribution to the Society and we send our deepest sympathies to Joan and to their children and grandchildren in their loss.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

At our AGM this year the existing members of the Committee were (as it were) returned to power (I write this two days before the Election!) with the Officers, as shown above, together with John Starr as Treasurer. In addition we were pleased to welcome Vicki Chesterman as a member of the Committee. The others are Bent Weber (Technical Support), John Whitehead (Publicity), Noreen Hooper and Sidney Gold.

SUMMER OUTINGS

Following the mini-heatwave of the Bank Holiday it is pleasant to be able to announce our out of town events during June and July. On **15 June at 5.30 pm** we have a visit to the **BBC Monitoring Station at Caversham Park**. There is a strict limit on numbers and those interested in attending and you will need to have put your name down on Eddy's list to attend. Those coming, please note well the early starting time!

The Visit to the **Thames Valley Police Museum at Sulhamstead** will now take place on **Saturday 23 July**, meeting at the Museum **at 2.30 pm**. If using the M4 leave the motorway at Junction 12 and take the A4 towards Newbury. After taking the roundabout where the A340 meets the A4 proceed for a further 1.5 miles, turning left just before the Spring Inn. After a mile and crossing the Kennet, there is a left turn towards the Police Training School which is about 1.5 miles further on. If in doubt Eddy can supply you with a map!

WEATHER, CLIMATE AND HISTORY

For those readers who missed Dr John Starr's talk on following the AGM, here are some "edited highlights".

Histories of Civilizations seem generally to have been written without much-reference to the influence of Weather and Climate on Cultural Development or, indeed, survival!

The Aim of this article, then, is to redress this imbalance a little by looking at how Weather and Climate may have affected the history, cultural and economic development of, not only Europe, but Britain, the southeast of England and, indeed, Reading!

A realistic epoch to really start our Climatic History is some 10,000 years ago, as the glaciers of the Last Ice Age were melting and retreating and Britain became covered in forests. As the seas rose, so we gradually became an island, separated from the 'continent'. Our position as an island at the western edge of a mighty land mass and at the eastern edge of a mighty ocean will give rise to our interesting temperate climate - but awful weather!

Notable Events

- 5,500 years ago: Hunting the Hippopotamus - Cave paintings show the Sahara to be a wet area.
- 2 600 BC: Jeremiah comments on the frequent snows of Lebanon and abundant water.
- 3 6th to 8th Centuries AD. Several coastal floods - Cantref-y-Gwaelod, lost in Cardigan Bay 528 AD.
- 4 Late 8th Century. Comparatively storm-free but remarkable cold winters with heavy snow in 763/64 and 859/60.

- 5 This comparatively storm-free period in the N Atlantic encouraged Norse conquest and exploration (e.g. to 'Vinland' - perhaps near present day New York?). Danish marauders came up the Thames and '*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*' records a major sacking 'when the army came into Wessex to Reading' in 871AD.
- 6 In the last 1,000 or so years we have more and more direct and quantitative evidence of climate from, for example, pollen and seed type documentation as well as tree rings, abbey and Borough Records, Cofferers' accounts etc. Later came diaries and, from the 17th Century, data from instruments (Central England Temperature Series from 1649), rainfall from 1740 etc., pressure. Published weather charts from ~1890.
- 7 The beginnings of viticulture in England is recorded in a terracotta relief of Emperor Probus, late 3rd Century at *The Vyne* in Hants (recorded in William Camden's 'Britannica' 1581). The Peterborough Psalter, 1175, shows that viticulture was well established in 12th century E Anglia - not a place to grow grapes now!
- 8 *Then came the climatic deterioration that was to last 500 years. The Black Death* of 1348 hit an already malnourished population. In 1363 the Thames froze at Reading - at a feast on the river monks waited on the poor and needy! The Thames was to be increasingly frozen in the 16th to 18th Centuries indeed, right up to the early 19th Century (1814 etching, Figure2).
- 9 Villages were deserted as hill conditions grew worse- Whatborough, Leics 1430-80 for example. John Rous of Warwick in his 'History' 1485, wrote "*58 villages in the Midlands have tumbled in my lifetime*".
- 10 1565. A landmark painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder - *Hunters in the Snow*, was the first to show a real, as opposed to an allegorical, background. He later re-cast his 1560 Nativity scenes, set in open buildings in Italy, in a harsh N European winter. *Hunters* was to change the nature of Flemish painting (e.g. Avercamp, Teniers the Younger).
- 11 1588 - the scattering of the Spanish Armada by severe gales.
- 12 Icelandic burials show decreasing stature of people through the *Little Ice Age*.
- 13 More burials than deaths in England from 1660 to 1730 (Great Plague, though, 1665). Marriage age for women at 30 years after 1700.
- 14 1703, late November - *The Great(est) Storm ever recorded*. Thousands drowned in storms at sea and hurricane force winds lasting several days. Graphic descriptions of damage by Daniel Defoe. Some say the length and ferocity exceeded even the Storms of 1987 and 1990.
- 15 1707- *Act of Union* between England and Scotland followed a decade or more of appalling harvests in Scotland. *The Scots ate snails in the streets of Aberdeen*.
- 16 1720-40. Period of improvement. Bath Terraces built up hills in contrast to 16th Century valley sites.
- 17 Dickens was born in 1809 and would have childhood memories of the 6 snowy winters over the following 10 years. Reflected in his novels and our 'traditional' Christmas cards of stage coaches dashing through a snowy landscape!
- 18 Warm, humid summer of 1847 brought *potato blight* to Ireland and the near continent, leading to political turmoil and mass emigrations.
- 19 Forecasters, working at the limits of their meteorological knowledge, forecast the narrow 'weather window' which enabled the D-Day landings to go ahead 6th June 1944 in comparatively tranquil weather.

Complementing these UK/European events, John detailed notable weather events, mainly in the Reading area as reported in the local press over the past 150 years or so. We hope to reproduce these in the next issue of the Newsletter.

Global Warming

Since the early 1800's - increasing pollution by anthropogenic CO₂. A rise of temperature~ 0.5 to 0.6°C globally, but not uniformly (e.g. mainly from 1910-40 and from 1970). All glaciers have retreated, but there have, inevitably, been major cold snaps: 1903, 1947, 1963 and 1979. (Note: 16 year period in latter spells - not repeated).

9 of the 10 warmest years recorded have been in the last decade. 2003 was the fifth warmest; 1998 was possibly the warmest year for 1000 years!)

Generally researchers agree that by the end of this century temperature increases in middle latitudes will rise by about 2°C or more, with increasing rises in sea levels, increased storminess and flooding. However, water shortages will get worse in tropical areas, there will be forest die-back and ecology will suffer. 'Environmental refugees' will become commonplace. Decision-makers must act now!

Summary

As we have seen Reada's people have experienced, and survived, considerable climate variations over the past millennia. If we were to return to that early 6th Century Saxon settlement by the Thames, however, there is one phenomenon that would NOT have changed - we would recognise the same cloud types and formations, as well as rainbows, that we see everyday in present-day Reading.

Perhaps Reada himself, as well as being a dynamic leader, was a skilful weather observer and, gazing skywards one day, saw a portent - perhaps a giant bird-cloud and cried: *'Here will I found a village for my people, which shall come to be known as READING!'*

Bibliography

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