

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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Summer2005

EDITORIAL

Our 2005/6 programme begins on 21 September, which is also the normal date of the Autumn Equinox. The programme should come with this newsletter and once again comprises a varied pot-pourri of the history of Reading and its environs. I am particularly pleased that the Autumn session will include the story of the building we meet in, the Abbey Baptist Church by Victor Payne. It is described as a Brief History but I expect that does not mean it will be confined to the last 30 odd years of the current church building! This is but the inheritor of 350 years of Baptist witness in the town, of which I am sure Mr Payne will tell us something.

NOTABLE WEATHER IN THE READING AREA

Cold Spells

1363: Great feast on the frozen Thames at Reading.

1649, January: Ice in the Thames hindered the secret removal of the decapitated body of Charles I from London to Windsor.

1817: A cold miserable 'year *without a harvest*', due to volcanic dust from the eruption the previous year of Mt Pinetubo screening the Sun. Widespread food riots.

1867, January: Minus 13°C recorded in Reading. GWR Switchman froze to death ½ hr after going on duty.

1881: Minus 17°C recorded in Reading. According to the *Reading Mercury*:

¾ of shops closed in Reading. Hundreds of rail passengers crammed into local hostelrys, due to many rail blockages and buried trains, while the poorer classes shivered in unheated waiting rooms!

1890: 30 days of below 0°C. Reading temperatures never rose above minus 6°C on 14th December.

1895: Serious water shortages in Reading when pipes froze.

1940, January: Average of only minus 1°C at Reading.

1947: A 7-week freeze up. Road and rail chaos. On 12th February Reading experienced a daytime maximum of just minus 2°C after a night minimum of minus 13°C.

1963: Snow started on 30th December 1962 and did not finally thaw until March 1963! Coldest winter since 1740.

1970: A rare white Christmas! Then the struggle to get to work and many accidents on lethal roads.

1981, December to January, 1982: Minus 18°C recorded at Arborfield, a record. The Queen was caught in snowdrifts on way to Windsor! On 14th December Berks County Council spread 4000 tons of salt, but heavy rain then washed it off, in time for the next freeze!

1987, January: Gritters and snow ploughs to no avail against Siberian winds as diesel fuel froze in lorry-drivers tanks. Lorry believed to be carrying nuclear weapons skidded off the road near Hungerford!

Notable Hot Spells

1893: No rain from beginning of March until 16th May. Greatest spring drought of the 19th century.

1897: After a gloomy, wet start the 21, June Queen Victoria was blessed with brilliant sunshine for her Jubilee.

1906: The fine summer ended in a late heat wave. 35°C was recorded at Maidenhead.

1911: Six days above 32°C (90°F) with 36°C (97°F) in Wokingham. Death rate soared, particularly among London children. One of the great hot summers.

1933: 200 hours of sunshine above average for many south-eastern areas.

Notable for an all-night thunderstorm over Reading.

1947: Warmest August on record, averaging 27°C (81°F). Particularly amazing after the 'Winter of Discontent'.

1952: Particularly hot in early July.

1976: Heat wave was the longest for 130 years; our warmest summer equal with 1826 in a Central England Temperature series stretching back to 1659. Record 35.9°C reached a Cheltenham on 3'dJuly. The drought was aggravated by the dry conditions in 1975.

1990: Second warmest in 300 years.

1998: Warmest year in 20th century; probably warmest year in 1000 years.

2003: Exceptional August 10-day heat wave was confined to southeast England. It established a new maximum record of 38.5°C at Faversham (Wokingham, 36.9°C). Over 2000 heat deaths recorded. This heat wave was eclipsed by the 15-day spell (June/July) of 1976.

Notable Storms, Rainfall and Floods

1703: *The Great Storm*, recorded by Daniel Defoe. Extensive flooding, wind damage and loss of life. Thousands of mariners drowned at sea and in harbours. Reckoned to be perhaps the greatest storm recorded, and that includes 1987.

1809, January: Rain froze and the soil froze so that subsequent torrential rain could not soak in and ran straight into the rivers. Disastrous floods, central arch of Wallingford Bridge swept away.

1894: November: Reading shops flooded putting 6000 out of work. 4000 laid off at Huntley and Palmers when floods extinguished the furnaces.

1903: Wettest summer and year in the Thames Valley in living memory.

1947: The snows of the severe winter melted in late March causing massive flooding.

1600 houses were inundated in Caversham.

1987: Massive wind and flood damage. Massive tree loss. Lack of warning by Met. Office made this into a catastrophic event; fortunately it was at its peak overnight.

1990: The Bums Day Storm. Massive destruction and tree loss. 80,000 homes lost electricity. Largest weather-related death toll since the 1953 East Coast floods. Occurred during the day, but Met. Office had learnt its lesson and gave ample warning!

Other Weather Events:

1840, 24th March: Henry West was thrown from the GWR Station roof by a 'tornado'. You can see his inscribed headboard in St Laurence's churchyard.

1991, 13th March: Overnight fog resulted in 10 deaths in an M4 pile-up. The fog had dissipated by 09am.

Dr John Starr

A GREAT MUSICIAN - BORN 200 YEARS AGO

We have a huge inheritance of fine hymns for worship, and we think a lot of the poets who wrote them, but the well-known hymn tunes that bring out their meaning so wonderfully tend to be taken for granted and the musicians who composed them little appreciated.

One such is associated with St Mary's Episcopal Chapel in Castle Street, Reading and that was Dr John Henry Gauntlett, the commemoration of whose birthday 200 years ago we should be celebrating this month. He

was born on 9th July 1805 just before his father became Minister of "the well-known semi-episcopal chapel at Reading" (though he was only here for a very short time until 1807).

Church Music and the standards of worship were then at their lowest ebb, and the state of music and choirs in our cathedrals was an absolute disgrace. Amongst those who deplored this and devoted themselves to fighting the appalling decadence of "Protestant! Anglican clergy on their corruption and "fat slumbers" were the great Samuel Sebastian Wesley (son of Samuel Wesley) and our Dr. Gauntlett. Organs In the churches were then a right up to a point but Insignificant and Inadequate, and Gauntlett, having been the first organist for 200 years to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Music by the Archbishop of Canterbury, greatly influenced the building of enlarged and magnificent Instruments by William Hill and other major early Victorian organ builders to set a very high standard. As a lad of 15 (then a Law Student) he conducted a performance of "Messiah" to celebrate the accession of King George IV. Later he was admired by none less than Mendelssohn, who selected him to play for the first performance of "Elijah" in 1846.

Gauntlett claimed to have written some 10,000 hymn tunes (about 200 per annum!), the most famous of which is **Irby** ("Once in Royal David's City"). A recent search through at least six different hymnbooks has revealed 12 well-known ones, including **St Albinus** ("Jesus lives!") and **St Fulbert**, set to that probably finest of all our hymns, "Ye choirs of New Jerusalem" - superbly translated from the Latin of that great 10th century reformer, Saint Fulbert of Chartres. The search has also revealed 13 more tunes, which are never used, while the other 9,975 seem to have completely disappeared. We thank God for people like Henry John Gauntlett, who was deeply spiritual and sincere.

To complete the picture, the musical among you may like to look up In the index of your hymnbook: **Ardwick, Hawkhurst, Houghton, Laudate Domnum, St Alphege, St George, Stuttgart, Triumph and University College.**

Reprinted with slight modifications from an article by F. Gordon Spriggs.

NB. The Editor will be giving a talk on Hymn-writers of Reading and Berkshire to the **Wargrave History Society** on Tuesday 13 September.

We are very grateful to **Mrs Joan Hutchinson** for kindly donating Bob's slide projector to the society, together with an older model that can be used for spare parts. This fulfils a long-standing need of the society to have its own equipment available. Thank you very much, Joan.

Pour memoire - help with serving refreshments after the meetings is always appreciated - volunteers need!