

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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February 2003

RON WALKER & DOUG NOYES

2003 was not very old when we heard of the deaths of two very good friends of the Society, Ron Walker, aged 88 and Doug Noyes, aged 80. Both were active to the last, Ron having attended several meetings during the current session of our society, while Doug was under consideration as a possible speaker for next year's programme.

Ron Walker was Reading's funeral director emeritus, having worked in the family business for over 60 years and only retired from it reluctantly at the age of 81. He had an extensive knowledge of the history of Reading and gave many talks to other societies and meetings illustrated from his extensive collection of photographs. Indeed, it was at one such talk at St Mary's, Castle Street, billed as "Mr Ron Walker of the History of Reading Society", that I first became aware of our existence!

More recently, many of our members participated in the memorable tours of the Reading and Caversham (Hemdean Road) cemeteries, in which Ron was very much in his element. Some might find this slightly lugubrious fascination with mortality a little odd, although it is perhaps only in the last fifty to one hundred years that death has become such a taboo subject - replacing sex!

Two little anecdotes that have stuck in my mind follow. On our historical tour of Wokingham in 1993, the guide, taking us up Rose Street, paused in front a particular shop-front; "This used to be the premises of XYZ Ltd, the last funeral directors in Wokingham." Ron piped up: "O yes, I remember them very well. In fact we bought up most of their stock when they went out of business."

Some years later, on a similar tour of Ewelme, we passed a plain modern building behind the almshouses. Perhaps noticing Ron's interest, the guide said, "O yes, that's the mortuary." Before you could say "Jack Robinson", Ron was inside, exercising a professional curiosity, no doubt.

On a more serious note, as was mentioned at his funeral, Ron had a real sense of exercising a ministry to the bereaved. For many years, he was a devout member of the Broad Street Congregational (later URC) Chapel and latterly worshipped at the Grange URC Church in Southcote. The last minister of Broad Street, the Revd Albert Molyneaux was one of those who spoke at his funeral.

Doug Noyes was not a member but was a much-appreciated speaker, particularly for the series of illustrated talks he gave contrasting the Reading of today with that of the sixties when Old Coley was still standing and the IDR a planner's dream (or nightmare). However, perhaps equally memorable was his last talk to the society, which featured the history of the cinema in Reading. Doug had been a projectionist in his youth and this added special piquancy to his account of the early days of talking pictures pre-war. He was later a TV and radio engineer and Chairman and later President of the Reading Cine and Tape Recording Society, now known as Reading Film and Videomakers.

FREEBODY OF READING

In pre-war days boat building and boat hiring were busy industries in Reading. All types of small boats were made as well as steamers; there were punts, skiffs, canoes, randans, and camping boats. Hire costs were usually 1s 6d (7.5p) for the first hour and 1/- (5p) per hour afterwards. I had my own canoe which I had bought for £7 second-hand; I travelled for many miles in this canoe, upstream and down and sold it many years later for the same amount, £7.

A few of these boat builders come to mind, East, Cawston, Wheeler, Moss, and the longest established one of all - Freebody. This firm had a boatyard immediately downstream of Caversham Bridge on the north bank, where it had been for many hundreds of years. The Freebodys also operated a boat building business at Hurley, where they had worked from at least as early as 1533.

Ann Freebody was named in a directory of 1830 as the owner of the White Hart Hotel which stood close to the river just upstream of Caversham bridge on the Berkshire bank, and near it there stood a stout cast-iron bollard which served as a mooring post for barges and can still be seen there today.

Later, towards the end of the 19th century this hotel was in the hands of Antonio Giovanni Bona, an Italian who had it pulled down and rebuilt as the Caversham Bridge hotel farther away from the river on higher ground, less liable to flooding. That hotel was also demolished a few years ago and replaced by the present Holiday Inn.

Meanwhile the Freebody family continued boat building but the post war trend has been for motor boats and cabin cruisers which cause considerable damage to the river banks and have cost the Reading Waterways Trust a lot of money for bank repairs.

When Edward Freebody retired in 1964, the business was continued by his son, Peter, but a clause in his grandmother's will meant that the site had to be sold. It was then proposed by the town council that the Caversham boat yard be developed into luxury flats and Peter was alerted by a notice in the Evening Post, advertising demolition material for sale.

On this land there also stood an old flint and tile cottage known as Willow Grotto where the Freebodys had lived and worked for centuries. So he stepped in and bought the old cottage, paying £26 for the walls and £30 for the roof tiles. He had the building surveyed and every stone, flint and tile numbered and the material transported to Hurley in four lorries. There he had it rebuilt as a lounge and kitchen extension to his boat house.

Peter's experience inspired him to research his family history. He discovered a will of 1642 by a John Freebody in the Bodleian Library and another at Aylesbury of 1533 by Edmund Freebody. One early member of the family was a book-keeper to Henry VIII. The family coat of arms forms part of the arms of George Washington who was linked to the Freebodys by marriage. Altogether, his investigation traced the family line back to the time of the Domesday Book. Few, if any, other Reading inhabitants can prove so long a sojourn in the town as this.

Norman Wicks

[When the Editor describes himself to comparative strangers as a marine consultant working in Reading the response is often: "Not much in the way of shipping there." It is good, therefore, to have this reminder from Norman of Reading's aquatic heritage.]

JOHN WESLEY (1703-91)

A theme which we will doubtless hear much of this year is the bi-centenary of the birth of John Wesley on 28 June 1703. Wesley was a frequent visitor to Reading, partly because it was so conveniently situated between London and the one hand and Bristol - both major centres of Methodist activity. However, he did not always receive a warm welcome in our town as this extract from the Journal for 1 November 1739 indicates: *I set out and the next evening came to Reading, where a little company of us met in the evening; at which the zealous mob was so enraged, they were ready to tear the house down. Therefore I hope God has a work to do in this place. In thy time let it be fulfilled!*

NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

To be held at the Abbey Baptist church, Reading at 7.30 pm on Thursday, 20 March.

AGENDA

1. Welcome and apologies.
2. Approval of Minutes of 2002 AGM
3. Matters Arising.
4. Chairman's Report and review
5. Treasurer's report
6. Election of Officers and Committee for 2003/4.

Present Officers		Willing to stand again	to Present Committee	Willing to stand again
Chairman	John Dearing [also Newsletter Editor]		Eddie Hooper [Programme Organiser]	
Secretary	Peter Russell		Noreen Hooper	
Treasurer	Peter Trout*		Wendy Preston [Publicity]	
			John Starr	
			Bent Weber	
			[Technical Support]	

*Co-opted.

7. To elect an independent examiner of accounts
8. Any Other Business - Data Protection Acts

The AGM, will be followed by **""Turnpike Roads around Reading": a talk by Alan Rosevear**. (This is a change in the advertised programme, as Bent Weber is unable at the present time to undertake his second selection from the Peter Southerton slide collection. Bent may either speak on 15 May or an alternative speaker will be found for that date.)

Other Society matters:

Members who attended the past 2 meetings will probably be aware that from September we shall no longer be able to meet on Thursdays at the Abbey Baptist Church. Unfortunately, it has not proved possible to find a suitable central Reading venue at which we could continue to meet on Thursday evenings. Your Committee has been faced with a difficult decision to meet on Wednesdays at the Abbey Baptist Church which may cause considerable problems for key members of your Committee. We shall confirm the change at next month's AGM.

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 the rest of 2002 / 3 as now revised

20 Mar	ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING followed by Turnpike Roads Around Reading - Alan Rosevear
10 Apr	THE HISTORY OF HEELAS AND THE JOHN LEWIS PARTNERSHIP Cheryl Dibden
15 May	To be advised- see this Newsletter above
	<i>Summer guided walks and visits - <u>for members only</u></i> (Full details to be published in the Society's Newsletters also from 0118 947 2470 nearer each date)
19 June*	DEPARTMENT OF TYPOGRAPHY & GRAPHIC COMMUNICATION, Reading University- Martin Andrews
17 July*	CHRISTCHURCH Reading John & Christine Croton
ALL WILL BE MOST WELCOME at meetings except those marked* which are restricted to members only - however a small charge (currently £2) per meeting is made for non- members.	
<i><u>Annual Subscription Rates (2003):</u></i> <u><i>Sin le £10 I Cou le £13 Senior Citizen/Student £7I Cou le £10</i></u>	

How about a contribution from you to fill this space?

Your Society needs YOU!

(with apologies to the W W I recruiting poster)

N B (24.02.03): The Society apologies for the delayed distribution of this Newsletter but as some members may know, our Technical Support Officer, Bent Weber, who undertakes the printing and distribution of our newsletter is seriously unwell. The Society wish him well in his recovery, even though this may take some time.