

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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| Hon Secretary Peter Russell 5 Wilmington Close Woodley READING RG5 4LR Tel: 0118 961 8559 | Chair & Newsletter Editor John Dearing 27 Sherman Road READING RG1 2PJ Tel: 0118 958 0377 | Programme Organiser Eddy Hooper |
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Winter (Feb) 2004

CHARLES THE FIRST'S READING

One of the highlights of the society's year is undoubtedly the Presidential address, which was given this year on 17 December by our President, Mrs Joan Dils. For those unable to attend, Joan has kindly given the following synopsis of her address.

In the reign of Charles I Reading was still a prosperous market town but the woollen cloth industry on which its wealth was based was in the early stages of terminal decline. In addition a series of poor harvests and two outbreaks of plague put further pressure on the finances both of townspeople and the authorities. Demands for taxes not granted by Parliament were an added burden.

More positively the town was given a magnificent bequest by John Kendrick, a new school was endowed by Richard Aldworth and several almshouses were built. The powers of the Corporation were increased by the Charter of 1638. Men from outside as well as townsfolk were still attracted both to the cloth trade and a large number of crafts supplying goods and services both to the local community and the region. Though it was not as highly ranked among English towns as in Henry VIII's reign. Reading was holding its own. It was the ravages of the Civil War which would do most damage to the people and the economy of the town.

ARCHBISHOP LAUD

Continuing the early 17th century theme, we look this week at Reading's most distinguished churchman, William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633 until his beheading on Tower Hill on 10 January 1645. Laud had been born in Reading, the only son of a clothier, in 1573 but his public life was largely lived out away from the town of his birth, as successively Bishop of St David's from 1621, Bath and Wells from 1626, London from 1628 and finally Archbishop. It will, however, I hope be of interest to readers to trace Laud's connections with his native town.

Laud received his early education at Reading School where his schoolmaster is said to have told him: "When you are a little great man, remember Reading School."

From there he proceeded in 1589 to St John's College, Oxford. The college had been founded 34 years earlier by another Reading man, Sir Thomas White, Master of the Merchant Taylors, who had endowed two scholarships for boys from Reading School at the new foundation. Laud was to spend most of the next 26 years at the College, as successively scholar, fellow and ultimately President.

During his time at Oxford one of his close friends was Sir Francis Windebank, who came up to St John's in 1599 and was later to serve Charles I as Secretary of State. Laud was a frequent visitor to Windebank's home at Haines Hill, near Reading (between Hurst and Shurlock Row).

It is not until Laud achieved national fame via his translation to Canterbury that he excited much attention back in Reading. However, a local man and Puritan sympathiser named Richard or Lodowick Bowyer made up for it by publishing a libel on the new Archbishop to the effect that Laud was confined to his house under an armed guard for treasonable connections with the Bishop of Rome. Poor Bowyer was made to pay for his errors with a range of punishments doled out by the infamous Star Chamber including a fine of £3,000 and hard labour in perpetuity. He was also made to stand in the pillory at Reading and elsewhere with a paper declaring his offence and his ears nailed. However, High Church he may have been, but Laud had in fact refused the secret offer of a Cardinal's hat in return to declaring his allegiance to the Pope.

Shortly after his elevation to Canterbury Laud did indeed remember Reading School by leaning on the Corporation to accept his nominee as schoolmaster and raising what had apparently hitherto been a very measly stipend for this post. He also instructed the Vicar-General, Nathaniel Brent, who undertook the metropolitan visitation on his behalf in 1634 to look closely into the spiritual health of Reading. In the same year, he disclosed to his diary an intention "to do the town of Reading good for their poor;: which may be compassed by God's blessing upon me, though my wealth be small." He determined "to settle a hospital of land in Reading of £100 in a new way" but it was not until March 1640 that he had sufficient wealth to acquire from Sir John Blagrave lands in Bray with an annual value of £200. These he conveyed to the Corporation with instructions that after his death the rents should be used two years out of three to provide £120 to apprentice twelve poor boys, ten from Reading and one each from Bray and Wokingham (his father's birthplace). In the third year the same sum was to be spent on marriage-portions for poor girls, five from Reading and one from Wokingham. In addition, the Vicar of St Lawrence was to receive £50 a year and the Master of Reading School £20.

The previous December (1639) the Archbishop was called upon by the Privy Council to "trouble-shoot" over problems that had arisen in Reading in the administration of John Kendrick's charity. Apart from the funding of the Oracle, Kendrick had also instructed that a stock of money should be used to provide loans to poor clothiers to enable them to further their trade. However, with the decline of the cloth trade in Reading, to which Joan Dils has referred, the richer merchants had borrowed large amounts from the stock in order to squeeze the poorer tradesmen out of business. Laud's solution was for the stock to be invested in land, with the rents used both for the original purpose of providing loans in limited amounts to the small traders and at the same time to fund apprenticeships and marriage portions, as in his own charity.

Without Laud's intervention the terms of Kendrick's will were such that the benefits of the charity would have been transferred to Christ's Hospital. Laud thus deserved the thanks of the town for this and for his part in securing a new charter for Reading in 1638. He was determined to use his new popularity to advantage. In the current political climate, he doubtless needed all the support in Parliament he could get and

therefore wrote to the Mayor and Corporation, requesting the right to nominate a burgees to represent the town. His choice was Edward Herbert, Solicitor-General in 1640 and a cousin of the poet, George Herbert. Herbert did not prove popular with the Corporation but was nevertheless elected as Laud's nominee. However, he was also elected for Old Sorum and chose to represent that constituency (later notorious as one of the rotten boroughs abolished in the 1832 Reform Act.) The Short Parliament of 1640 was followed by the Long Parliament but for this Laud declined to nominate a candidate, on the grounds that he did not wish to involve Reading in his growing unpopularity in the rest of the country.



William Laud, after Sir Anthony Van Dyck, Date: (circa 1636).
On display at the National Portrait Gallery.

History tends to judge William Laud as a failure both as a politician and ultimately as a prince of the Church. However, the people of his native city had reason to be grateful for the concern he showed to them during his primacy and their descendants in the 20th century finally gave visible expression to that gratitude by naming a new road after him.

Bibliography: Archbishop Laud by H R Trevor-Roper; Reading Places, Reading People by Stuart Hylton; Concise Dictionary of National Biography.

The West Berkshire Museum at the Wharf, Newbury Is celebrating its centenary this year with an exhibition entitled "How Times Have Changed", comprising a look back at circa 1904 through photographs and paintings. The exhibition lasts from 24 January to 27 March and is open every day except Wednesday and Sunday from 10 am until 4 pm. It is the first of a series of events throughout the year including an exhibition during the summer on the 1600s in west Berkshire entitled "Civil War Century - War on your Doorstep.

NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

To be held at the Abbey Baptist church, Reading at 7.30 pm (prompt) on Wednesday, 17 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 2004/5.

| 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 | John Starr | | Wendy Preston [Publicity] | |
| | | | Sidney Gold | |
| | | | 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 **The Establishment of the New Reading Workhouse: a talk by Pat Preece** - clearly quite a topical subject, as the workhouse, now better known as Battle Hospital, will soon be no more. Readers will note that Wendy Preston who has been a committee member for a good few years has decided she wishes to stand down. Wendy has done a tremendous job, ensuring that our meetings get good publicity in the local press and thereby boosting turnout at and income from our meetings - a big thank you!

Members who saw Bent Weber's first selection of Reading pictures from the Peter Southerton Slide Collection were avid for more and very disappointed that Bent was prevented through ill-health from showing the second selection last year. We are very pleased that he is now able to do so - don't miss April 21st's meeting - it's the Queen's birthday too!

It has suggested among the Committee that the Society might occasionally - either annually or perhaps less frequently - publish a more durable record of its work, featuring work by members on subjects related to the History of Reading. Any members who would be interested in contributing to such a collection or who have any views (e.g. would love to buy/ wouldn't touch it with a Kennet bargepole) are invited to contact the Chairman/ Editor or any other member of the Committee.

Subscriptions for the year became due on 1 January and we should like to ask members who have not so far done so to pay their dues to our Treasurer, John Starr.

We also wish to remind all readers (once again) 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!