

# 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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Christmas/ New Year 2004/5

## A NEW YEAR

This issue often has a Christmas focus but this year I felt that the New Year deserved a mention. For me personally it will mark two milestone anniversaries. In October, I will celebrate 25 years in Reading and more immediately 4th January is the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary - half the Biblical lifespan - of my taking up residence in the Thames Valley. That was in a bit of Buckinghamshire that was about a hundred yards from Maidenhead Bridge and in all respects apart from administrative authority a part of Maidenhead. History records that in taking up possession of my bedsit "I tried out the [Baby Belling] cooker with a vile Heinz Spaghetti Bolognese" and later visited a nearby hostelry where I was shocked to find the beer costing as much as 3s 2d a pint (just under 16p). A lot of water has flowed under Maidenhead Bridge since then, not to mention a few other bridges.

## NUFFIELD PLACE

Planning your New Year excursions? The **Friends of Nuffield Place**, home of William Morris, Viscount Nuffield, which we visited corporately some years ago, have written to inform us that the following Sundays in 2005 will be open days between 2 and 5 pm (last admissions 4.30): 24 April, 8 & 22 May, 12 & 16 June, 10 & 24 July, 14 & 28 August, 11 & 25 September.

## **From William Darter's Reminiscences of Reading**

During the incumbency of the late Dr Wise, it was customary on New Year's Eve for the ringers of St. Lawrence's parish to ring a few peals of changes and leave the bells on their stays, and a short time before midnight to return. At the same time the Militia Band assembled at the upper part of London Street, and all was still, until the moment of St. Lawrence's clock began to strike twelve, when off went the merry peal of eight bells, and at the same moment three loud strokes of the big drum led off the Berkshire Band down London Street to the Market Place, and from thence through a portion of the town. Seventy one years have elapsed since I first experienced the magic effect of this music of the band and the merry peal of St. Lawrence's bells breaking out in the stillness of midnight, suggesting that the old year had passed away, and welcoming the dawn of its successor. After a short interval, the old watchman, Norcroft, went up London Street, calling out 'Past twelve and a starlit mornin'.'

*Quoted from Daphne Philips' abridgement, pages 82-3. As Darter was writing in the mid-1880s, he is referring to a period around 1815.)*

### **GLUED TO THEIR SEATS?**

Talking of St Lawrence's, the outcome of the church's latest re-ordering will be eagerly awaited. We understand that in future the ministry will be largely targeted at young people. We very much hope that they do not have a similar experience to those who attended the re-opening ceremony and dedication following an earlier restoration of the church.

"There was one marked defect in the arrangements at which considerable annoyance was manifested. We allude to the condition of the seats, the staining of which (we understand) was not completed many hours before the service commenced. The result was that many of the ladies had their handsome dresses injured by the quantity of oil absorbed from the seats. It would have been by far the wisest course, if time did not permit of the staining of the seats, simply to have left the, in a rough and unvarnished state, by which the annoyance now so generally complained of would have been avoided."

*Quoted from the Reading Mercury of 16 May 1868 and contributed by Sidney Gold who comments that the 1867/8 restoration of St Lawrence's was undertaken by the Reading architect, Joseph Morris.*

## THEIR LAST PINT ON EARTH



**The Oxford Arms. Reading.** *Reproduced by kind permission of Mrs Mavis Wilkinson. Technical editing by Bill Hughes.*

Having mentioned my Reading Pubs project in an earlier edition, I have to confess that I have not yet put pen to paper, but now is perhaps the time to start! The Oxford Arms in Silver Street performed a very important function in the days when hanging was a not uncommon fate for miscreants. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century it was the custom for the condemned man with his

executioner to call into this establishment for a lost drink on the way to the Gallows Tree Common in Lower Earley. The last recorded "Hangman's Drink" took place in 1793.

In more recent times the Oxford Arms acquired a reputation as rather a rough pub, in keeping with the area where police would normally patrol in pairs. The landlord for many years, George Rose, recorded some recollections before his death aged 74 in 1960. These have been given to me by George's daughter, Mavis, who still lives in Reading.

"Women used to bring their children in the bar with them and peel their potatoes and shuck their peas on the bar table, and the children used to have their drop of beer out of their mothers' pint cup....

"The rabbit poachers used to call into my pub - they used to bring three or four dozen rabbits about five times a week, about 7.30am in the morning and put them under the bar seat and sell them for 4d and 6d each. One of the poachers' names was Shadow Clark. He has a drink or two as he liked a pint of beer - he used to say he would be hanged for a gallon of beer. So they stood him up on an empty lemonade case in my Taproom at the back, tied a piece of rope round his neck and put the rope through a hook in the beam on the Taproom ceiling...One of them kicked the case away and at the same time there was an accident outside the front door. So they all ran out to see what was wrong and when they came back he was nearly dead...

"This Shadow Clark was a terror. He did not care for anything or anybody..."

### **Subscriptions for 2005 are now due.**

#### **subscription rates**

Single (rate A)	£11
Couple (rate B)	£15
<b><u>senior citizens (60+)/Students</u></b>	
Single (rate D)	£8
Couple (rate E)	£12

Cheques should be made payable to *The History of Reading Society*. The Treasurer, John Starr will be pleased to have your subscription renewal at the next meeting or by post to *Dr. John Starr, Hon. Treasurer, History of Reading Society,*

**A prompt response please will save on reminders**

**SEASONAL GREETINGS** to all our members with best wishes for 2005