

THE HISTORY OF READING SOCIETY

News and Information

September 1978

The holiday season having drawn to a close, your Chairman trusts that all our Members had an enjoyable time unaffected by problems of weather and travel. We now embark upon our Winter programme of meetings and activities. You will find a wide range of subject matter which, it is hoped, will offer something of interest to you all.

- * The membership of the Society continues to expand at a most encouraging rate. This does however mean more and more work for your Committee. In order to spread the load a little and to bring fresh minds to bear upon the task of seeking out suitable speakers, arranging meetings and special activities and keeping the membership informed of what is going on, more helpers are needed. Joan Dils would be delighted to hear from anyone willing to help.
- * Help is needed also on the domestic side. To the present Joan and Sheila have undertaken the preparation of the coffee at the monthly meetings. If a few volunteers were to join with them, this vital service could be undertaken on a rota basis with Members needing to assist in the kitchen only once or twice a year.
- * We are pleased to hear the the Silchester Collection of Roman relics is to stay in Reading. This was announced by the Borough Council's Policy Committee in July. Valued at £140,000, the collection which is being sold by the Duke of Wellington to meet death duties is offered to the Council for £70,000. It is understood that the amount to be paid from the rates will be between £20,000 and £25,000 with the balance coming by way of grant aid from the Victoria and Albert Museum and other sources.
- * We are glad to report that as a result of his request in the last newsletter for information relating to Civil Defence in Reading, Mr Guy Smith has received valuable help from Mr Padley who put him in touch with material at the University and Record Office.
- * A group of members of the Society is now engaged in the preparation of a measured drawing of St. Mary's churchyard to enable the survey of memorials and inscriptions to be carried out.
- * Anyone who has attempted research entailing reference to the local press will be only too well aware how tedious a task this can be in the absence of any form of index. To assist not only the members of this Society but all future students of Reading's history, a Newspaper Indexing Group is to be established. The task of indexing will be slow but not devoid of interest. Those taking part will work in the Reference Library at times most convenient to themselves and at their own pace. We are fortunate to have as organiser, Mrs Janet Clark. See Jaan Dils for details.

* PLEASE may we have the questionnaire forms relating to your special interests. Those already to hand have been of enormous value in planning future programmes and in drawing up a list of members' preferences and skills. We would like however to hear from you all.

* Finally, a report on a recent Society activity.

"Keep your eyes open, look around you but, most important of all, look up". Such was the lesson well illustrated by Ken Major, architect and local historian, who on Sunday, 16th July, escorted some 30 members on our first Town Walkabout.

Having met at the Railway Station (erected in 1904 and sadly not Brunel's original construction) the group passed along Station Road and Queen Victoria Street taking notice of the fine terra cotta work, the majority of which was produced at Collien's Tilehurst works. In Friar Street, tucked between the 20th Century bank and Post Office premises was discovered a range of shops, the steeply pitched roofs and hand made tiles of which point to medieval origins, timber buildings encased in masonry of a later date. Next, the Market Place, still an area of commercial importance. What an interesting jumble of styles! Here the exuberant classical rubs shoulders with the austere lines of the 1970's whilst opposite buildings of the Victorian and Georgian age stand beside wooden framed buildings surviving from the Middle Ages. It is refreshing to note that the developers in clearing away the buildings at the southern end of the Market have retained the existing facade - a tricky and expensive operation. The one discordant note here is the manner in which the handsome Simeon Memorial has been lost amid the superstructure of a public convenience. In the Butter Market, our attention was drawn to the frontage of 'The High'. The attractive green ceramic tiles which date from 1903, a product of Carter of Poole, make this an outstanding example of art nouveau work. Like the Market Place, King Street and Broad Street display a varied range of buildings demonstrating many periods and styles. The 'Selfridge' style of Debenhams and Heelas which date from the 1930's when the departmental store was in its heyday contrast with the clean lines of shop buildings erected in the 1960's and 70's. Above the shop fronts can still be detected the 'house style' of many of the chains of company shops - Burton, Boots and Joe Lyon to name but three. There are however still survivals from early days, timber framed buildings re-cased in brick or stone and fitted with contemporary shop fronts. At street level they may appear modern but the roofs tell a different story.

A brief detour through Yield Hall Lane unfolded an unfamiliar vista of timber framing, the former workshops and domestic buildings behind the modernised frontages.

Whilst returning to the starting point, the group paused for a while in Union Street. Although much changed of recent years, this is nevertheless a surviving medieval street, the ground line almost unchange from the time it first grew up.

