



The History of Reading Society

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Dear Member,

Greetings for 1982. I hope that the terrible snow and freezing conditions in the weeks before Christmas didn't interrupt your preparations for the Festival too much, and that you all managed to keep reasonably warm. Now everything has thawed and as I write this, there are floods and threats of floods everywhere. Let's hope that 1982 doesn't continue in this way and that things improve.

MORE OF THE COMMITTEE (in alphabetical order)

Derek HUMPHRIES was born in Reading and now lives with his parents in Caversham. He joined the Society in 1978 while attending a WEA class on industrial archaeology and reckons he is "almost a founder member"; he has served on the Committee for two years. A cartographic draughtsman for the Ministry of Agriculture, he recently used his expert knowledge to survey and map the churchyard of St Marys, Reading, when the monumental inscriptions were recorded. He is an active member of the T.A. and also enjoys cycling.

David QUARTERMAINE is a founder-member of the History of Reading Society and has been our very capable Treasurer for some time (about 3 years he thinks). Born in Reading he now lives in the west of the town with his wife, Carol, and golden labrador dog; he is a keen gardener and his hobbies include all aspects of history, especially of Reading, numismatics and motor cycling (from which I believe he still bears the scars of some mishaps in his younger days!)

The rest of the Committee will be in the next Newsletter.

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LOOK UP AND OBSERVE

Following his recent talk to the Society about Coley, Mr Bill DENTON wrote to me and his letter contained the following observations:-

"So much is quoted these days of how the historic buildings of Reading are so fast disappearing. I fully agree, especially if one is looking for buildings and areas. But there is still so much to be observed if one cares to take the time.

For instance, look at many of the upper structures of so many of our buildings. If one looks carefully there are clues to the identity of the former owners and what kind of business was carried out there; often there are dates included. Take for instance the large amount of Terra-Cotta ornamentations in Broad Street, Queen Victoria Street, Elgar

Road, Christchurch Road ... oh, I could go on.

This then points to an industry so prevalent in Reading's recent past. Terra-Clay was dug at Poulton's Kiln which used to be situated in Elgar Road. I think the seam of clay eventually ran out, although clay for bricks was dug there up to the Second World War.

So there is so much still to investigate of our past if one cares to take the time. Surely your Society could add so much in this direction."

SO HOW ABOUT IT FOLKS? WHAT CAN WE ALL DO TO HELP?

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PRISON LABOUR - Mid 19th Century

Assuming that he should be put to productive labour, the question as to how best a prisoner's efforts may be harnessed having due regard to the demands of security has proved a perennial problem to the prison authorities. Once employed, who should benefit by the fruits of the task? These problems were to confront the Magistrates of the County during the middle years of the last Century.

In 1844, the existing gaol (which had formerly housed one of the first treadmills to be installed in an English prison) was replaced by the building which today stands in the Forbury. To prevent 'moral and physical contamination', each prisoner was required to live in complete solitude. For the first six years of this prison's existence the inmates passed the greater part of their time in enforced religious study. By 1850, it was apparent that this was not the solution to the problems of crime and, following adverse comments by H.M. Inspector of Prisons, the issue was debated at the Easter Quarter Sessions of 1850. Despite the protests of the Chaplain, it was decided to investigate the possibility of a more effective means of carrying out the sentence of imprisonment with hard labour. The Surgeon in his report having pointed out the increasing incidence in the prison of pulmonary T.B., it was agreed in principle that a flour mill 'open to the atmospheric air' be erected. Here was a scheme which would not only engage the inmates in useful labour but which had the added attraction of effecting a saving to the County in the cost of their maintenance.

A proposal that a large mill operated by up to 40 prisoners turning a hand crank was rejected on the grounds of expense. The scheme finally approved was that whereby flour might be produced by prisoners operating individual hand mills, each in his own cell.

Then as now, times were hard and money short and it was not until Midsummer, 1854, that authority was given for the purchase of three handmills. At the same time it was agreed that a block of cells be erected in which the mills might be housed and that a baker's oven be installed. Total cost, £150. An order was duly placed with a supplier in Birmingham for five mills - four for everyday use and one in reserve.

By the Summer of the following year the mill cells had been erected and the bakery in operation, a Miller and Baker having been appointed at a weekly wage of 18/-. The mills had not however arrived, the supplier claiming that he could not keep up with the demand for his product. The order was accordingly transferred to another manufacturer who supplied the goods by return. By the end of the year it was calculated that the saving by the use of prison ground flour was in the region of £35 per Quarter, an economy sufficient to permit the Miller's wage being raised to one Guinea per week.

The mills were in appearance akin to an agricultural chaff-cutter, the grain being poured in through a hopper at the top and the flour collected in a sack beneath. The grain was ground between two horizontally opposed stones operated by a crank through a system of bevel gears. The gears, it would seem, were not enclosed as there is a record of one unfortunate prisoner suffering the amputation of two fingers, his hand having become caught in the machinery. The mills are said to have each been capable of grinding a bushel of wheat in a working day of 5½ hours. The finished product was somewhat coarse while the brown bread from the prison bakery was described as "perfectly wholesome but of a coarser kind than is used by consumers out of doors (i.e. receiving Poor Law relief in kind) and in Workhouses."

A local historian, John B. Jones, who visited the prison in 1870, says of arrangements there: "The hard labour of the males consists principally of pumping water, grinding wheat and breaking stones. The pumping and grinding are carried on in a narrow detached building at the back of the prison. Down the centre of this building runs a passage, on each side of which there are small cells; those on one side of them have handmills for grinding wheat. Prisoners are locked in each of these cells while a Warder from the passage looks through holes in the doors to see that the workers do not cease grinding or pumping. The corn mills, at which I tried my hand, do not seem hard to work but, no doubt, to keep them going an hour and a quarter, which is the length of time the prisoners work without stopping, must be a trying task."

These handmills remained in operation until 1878 when, the prisoners having become the responsibility of the State, a centralised system of victualling and standardised employment made superfluous the need for flour ground on the premises.

Peter SOUTHERTON

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RECENT MEETINGS

PANGBORNE - A Rural Parish (Tues 20 Oct 1981 at the Museum)

This was a very interesting talk by Mrs Mary Trembath, who lives in Pangborne and has been studying the history of the parish for some time. Illustrated by the enormous Tithe Map (circa 1840) which we managed to hang up on the wall, she told us all about the Saxon settlement and now the old field names had developed. I personally had no idea that the parish of Pangborne extended so far to the west - one can see so little of the village when you drive through the centre in a car. Despite the change of day and venue, the meeting was well attended.

THE BERKSHIRES IN THE SUDAN WAR - 1885 (19 Nov 1981)

Bill WRIGHT is the Chairman of the Victorian Military Society and an expert in his chosen subject. His lecture was geared to non-military minds and fairly anecdotal - in fact he spoke as if he had actually been fighting in the War himself. Without referring to a single note, Mr Wright gave us reams of facts, dates and figures and amazed us all with his memory. He had been in touch with the Regimental Museum at Salisbury and the Colonel had loaned him certain items from the archives which were examined with great care by us all and brought the Sudan to life for us.

The Royal Berkshire Regiment is now amalgamated with the Wiltshires to form the Duke of Edinburgh's Regiment.

CHRISTMAS MEETING: TRAVELLERS / VISITORS TO READING (17 Dec 1981)

Despite the various titles given to this meeting of entertainment by the Committee, the overall result was same. We were promised "music, readings and pictures" - and we also had mulled wine (made by Clinton and Jo Ellis from a Victorian recipe) and enjoyed some tasty refreshments which included biscuits donated by Huntley & Palmer from their new range.

David Quartermaine acted as "link-man" between readings by various members of the Committee of extracts by, or about, folks who had visited Reading. Topics ranged from the Danes through to modern times, and were illustrated by slides (Cliff Debney operated the projector at short notice & caused some hilarity by pressing several wrong buttons!)

By request here is the anonymous letter written to Mr Peter Darvel, bargeman of Maidenhead, objecting to the opening of the Kennet Navigation through to Newbury, which David read in a suitably broad accent:

"Mr Darvall, wee bargemen of Redding thought to Acquaint you before 'tis too late, Dam You, if y work a bote any more to Newbery we will kill you if ever you come any more this way, wee was very neer shooting you last time, we went with too pistolls and was not too Minnets too late. The first time your bote lays at Redding loaded, Dam You, we will bore hols in her and sink her so dont come to starve our fammeleys and our Masters, for Dam You if you do wee will send you short home."

Our thanks are due to Peter Southerton for so ably pulling together all our suggestions and extracts, and for creating an entertaining evening.

FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

BERKSHIRE IN CAMERA - SUE READ has collected photographs from many sources to create this magnificent record of Berkshire as it was from the golden age of the Victorian era up to the end of the First World War. Few of them have been published in book form before.

Sue very kindly autographed copies of her book which members purchased at the Christmas meeting. Further copies will be available, whenever possible, at future meetings.

Published jointly by Countryside Books & Reading Museum & Art Gallery (1981) at £4-95.

FUTURE MEETINGS

- 14 January 1982 - Mr Michael THOMAS - Architecture in Reading.
- 11 February 1982- Mr Alf ISON - Finding out about the past.
- 25 March 1982 - A.G.M. & talk by Mr M CROMPTON - Fire Brigades of Reading.
- 22 April 1982 - Members' Evening - topic to be announced.
- 20 May 1982 - Mrs Jean DEBNEY - Purley Village.

ADVERTISEMENT from the READING MERCURY - 24th October 1835:

"Mr BEWLEY, Dentist, purposes attending at Mr WHITING's Umbrella & Parasol Manufacturers, Northbrook St, Newbury, on Thursday next, from Ten until Three O'clock, and also every alternate Thursday - 153 Friar Street, Reading."

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Bye for now.

THE COMMITTEE