



The History of Reading Society

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Dear Member,

I do hope that you have enjoyed the summer break and that you were able to take advantage of the fine weather to get out and about. You may have noticed that 1982 is Maritime England Year and the summer exhibition "Cleere Kennet, Stately Tames" at Reading Museum followed this theme. - did you manage to see it?

Nigel DENTON

MEET THE MEMBERS (or some of them)

Mr. Bert RIVERS who has recently joined the editorial sub-committee was born in Reading in 1902 and has lived in or near to Reading ever since. After being educated at York House School in South Street he worked for fifty years with Huntley and Palmers. Immediately prior to his retirement he was the supervisor of the Northern (Home) Accounts Section. Over the years he has been organist at several local churches including finally being organist and choirmaster at St. Laurence's from 1974-1977. In 1926 the year that it was granted its Charter he won the Reading University Organ Prize. Since 1971 he has been a Vice-President of the Berkshire Organists Association. Recently, St. Laurence's P.C.C. have asked him to re-write the parish history booklet. Among his other interests are archaeology and the Kennet and Avon Canal.

THE ROUND HOUSE, TIDMARSH

Our Treasurer, David QUARTERMAINE, has recently moved to this interesting address.

We are sorry to disappoint railway enthusiasts as the Round House is not a motive power depot but a hexagonal toll house built in 1812 to serve the Pangbourne to Theale turnpike road. David says that he would like to re-instate the collection of tolls but thinks it would be difficult to stop the heavy lorries, etc. thundering past at 40 m.p.h. or more.

We hope to bring you more about this fascinating house in a future Newsletter.

GET YOU HOME SERVICE

We have noticed that some members have to leave meetings early in order to catch their buses home. On the other hand quite a number of members have spare seats in their cars. If you would either like a lift home or can offer someone a lift please contact Joan MASON (Tel. 691393) and she will try to do her best for you.

NEXT NEWSLETTER

It is intended to publish the next Newsletter during December. Any material for inclusion should be sent to the Editor: Nigel DENTON, 12 Maria Court, Southcote Road, Reading, by Saturday 27 November.

SAFARI INTO THE WILDERNESS - Thursday 22 July 1982

The manor of Earley Regis, later Earley White Knights, appears in the Domesday survey as Herlei and extended some $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Kennet mouth to the Loddon. Several families held it over the centuries, the Erleghs, the Aldryngtons, Bekes and the Englefields until, in 1798, it was conveyed to the Marquess of Blandford.

A man of no ordinary literary and artistic taste, this heir to the Dukedom of Marlborough also possessed qualities of eccentricity and wild extravagance. Regardless of cost, he spent vast sums of money in converting his estate into an ornamental garden said to have had few rivals in the realm. Flowering shrubs, rare trees and exotic plants were collected from all parts of the world and introduced on a lavish scale; in the south-east part of the Park was designed and planted "The Wilderness". Open walks, shady paths and secluded bosers were contrived, an American garden was laid out and a variety of rustic pavilions, grottoes and fountains constructed. All the fashionable world of the Regency visited the grounds, mostly to admire although Mary Russell MITFORD wrote rather disparagingly of them to her father, describing the lake as "like a large duckpond". A detailed account, illustrated with engravings, by Mrs. HOFLAND, the novelist and her artist husband, was published in 1819.

Blandford's extravagance was not confined to landscape gardening; the mansion soon housed a library and picture gallery numbered among the most famous private collections of the day. But inevitably such prodigal expenditure led to retribution as the debts continued to mount, finally exceeding £600,000. By 1819, two years after Blandford had succeeded his father as the fifth Duke, the contents of the house and grounds, including the magnificent library, were sold up and dispersed.

Now in 1982, what vestiges of this bygone splendour can one hope to uncover? This is what some 30 members set out to answer under the expert guidance of Gordon ROWLEY and Ronald RUTHERFORD on a grey July evening.

Only a few yards beyond the University Library building, we approached the dense untamed woodland of the Wilderness, first pausing to note a rare wild pear-tree known to have been acquired from Lee and Kennedy's Hammersmith nursery and recorded in 1838. The standing stones, once forming an imposing entrance to the grounds have been removed and the site is almost lost in overgrown insignificance but in the University's botanical gardens is cultivated a pelargonium with small white blooms and divided leaves, which bears the Blandford name, a link with the flower-beds of 1804.

We were now about to enter the woodland, but first stopped to examine another survivor from the past, a massive fastigate oak, the largest specimen, with its ten feet girth, of this rare tree in Britain. Within the Wilderness, all sense of direction was soon lost but our guides conducted the party unerringly to the scanty remains of Blandford's thatched Swiss Cottage, once in his vineyard but now only an overgrown stone base. Passing a giant hornbeam and a mysterious row of ancient yews not shown on the nineteenth century garden plan, we came upon the garden's major relic. Records of the famous grotto describe the massive rocks decorated with crystal and clamshells and forming the setting for an ornamental fountain. Only a chaos of great sarsens from the Marlborough Downs now remain almost concealed amongst invading trees and brambles. The spring is still there but is almost lost, marked only by the muddy lush hollow leading to the lake.

The site of the American garden is identified by three deciduous cypresses and a tulip-tree and close by, two rare hybrids, a Lucombe oak (turkey and cork oak) and a Turner's oak (English and holm oak) revealed the swollen ridges on their mighty trunks of the grafts of two centuries ago.

So as we emerged from the wood near the Earley Gate, was accomplished our quest for the surviving evidence of the Blandford period. The Marquess's mansion was demolished in 1840 and the Park was later split into six small estates with houses (mostly designed by Alfred Waterhouse who lived at Foxhill) still to be seen in their twentieth century role as part of the campus of Reading University which acquired the whole park in 1947.

J.G. GAFFORD

RELICS OF LESS LIBERAL DAYS

It was not until the middle years of the nineteenth century that there was any organised Police force in Berkshire. In Reading and other major boroughs the responsibility for the maintenance of law and order fell to 'The Watch', a band of untrained and often elderly watchmen employed to patrol the streets during the hours of darkness. In the villages, this was the task of the Constable, an elected officer of the Parish. All too rarely were criminals brought to justice. Not surprisingly, people fortunate enough to have possessions of value sought to make a dreadful example of those caught offending against property in the hope that this would deter others from doing likewise. By the end of the eighteenth century, not only murder but some two hundred other offences ranging from highway robbery to the theft of goods valued at one shilling could bring an offender within the shadow of the gallows.

An offender, once apprehended, would be brought before a Magistrate who, if the offence were minor, could deal with the matter on the spot. Those accused of more serious offences would be committed to stand trial at the Quarter Sessions or the Assizes. The accused would in the interim be detained in some secure place. An inhabitant of Reading would be detained in the town bridewell, the building which was originally the conventual church of the Grey Friars, later to become town hall, house of correction and gaol until its reconstruction in 1863 and re-dedication as Greyfriars Church. (A detailed history of this interesting building will appear in a later edition of this Newsletter). Many larger parishes provided themselves with a lock-up, generally in the form of a single cell, often windowless and provided with a heavy wooden door. A few of these 'blind houses' still remain, the nearest being at Aldermaston - a squat brick built building near the Hind's Head Hotel - and at Pangbourne, an elegant circular building with a conical roof situated in the garden of Church Cottage.

Sentence having been passed, the offender would be sent to the County Gaol. Only rarely were the early gaols purpose built. A liberal use of chains and fetters ensuring the inmates would not stray, almost any building would suffice. Reading's original County Gaol stood in Castle Street upon the site now occupied by St. Mary's Chapel. Of that building no trace remains. 'The Sun' public House, an inn of great antiquity, would however have supplied refreshment to those prisoners lucky enough to have the means for purchase.

Disorderly and dishonest youth together with vagrants and itinerant beggars could be ordered to undergo the humiliation of a public whipping administered in the market place by a Constable. The whipping post together with the town stocks and the mobile ducking stool, a device which appears to have been reserved for the punishment of unpopular women, were stored in a railed off section of the Blagrove Piazza, the arcade which until the 1860's adorned the south side of St. Laurence's Church. There was also a single cell incorporated in the Piazza. Known locally as 'The Hole' or, following the incarceration there of a local worthy, 'The Churchwarden's Pew', this temporary repository for drunks and other disturbers of the Peace was situated conveniently opposite the Town Sergeant's House where the local Magistrate held their daily court.

In earlier times capital punishment would be carried out as near as possible to the site of the actual crime, the bodies of the executed criminals being left hanging in chains as a dire warning to others. Displayed in Reading Museum are parts of the gibbet which once contained the remains of two young men hanged in 1787 at Padworth following conviction of robbery and murder. Later, the bodies of criminals executed other than for murder would be returned to family or friends for burial. The remains were not always however treated with due reverence. Indeed, it is recorded that following the hanging in March, 1820, of Thomas FIELD, a poacher, the bier upon which the body was being transported to Sunninghill halted at 'The Granby' Public House. The coffin was opened and a pot of beer placed to the lips of the deceased by a friend who proclaimed 'Tom was fond of a drop when he was alive and he shall have a drop now!' The following day, a Sunday, the corpse was placed on view at a charge of 6d per head.

The stocks and lock-ups are now preserved as curiosities. The few remaining traces of old gaols are largely unnoticed. Stories of ancient crime and punishment progress from historical fact to folklore and are eventually lost without trace. The pageantry of the law was much diluted with the passing in 1971 of the Assize in favour of the streamlined system of Crown Courts. Gone is the ceremonial which once marked the arrival of the 'Red Judge' upon his arrival in the town. One must, it is supposed be thankful that the opening of the Legal year is still celebrated by a short civic service in St. Laurence's Church in early October followed by a procession of Judges and Court Officials to the former Assize Courts in the Forbury for a formal reading of the Letters Patent. To the local historian and to the student of social reform these are tangible reminders that, not all that long ago, the boundaries between what was acceptable and that which was not were as distinct as white from black and that the process of correction was undertaken with a heavy hand.

Peter SOUTHERTON

FOBNEY WATER WORKS AND READING SEWAGE TREATMENT WORKS

On 22 July 1982, the Thames Water Authority formally opened their newly completed extensions to the water and sewage treatment works in South Reading. Two days later an Open Day was held to enable the public to visit these essential parts of Reading services.

There has been a waterworks since 1697 when water was taken from the River Kennet. In 1850 Reading Water Company purchased Southcote Mill (which was formally a wire mill) and two years later Reading residents had their first filtered water. New works were opened at Fobney in 1878 and later expanded. In 1916 chlorine filtration was first successfully introduced at Southcote Mill and Fobney followed suit - Reading was the first borough in the country to use this process.

Before the sewage works were established in 1873, Reading relied on cesspools and earth closets which often contaminated the water supply. Statistics showed that the death rate in the town was far higher than in other parts of Berkshire.

The most recent extensions have been occasioned by the building of housing estates at Lower Earley and the new Courage Brewery near to the M4 motorway.

Extracts from some of the nineteenth century reports in the Central Reference Library:

"The surface water is not readily carried off; and, from the distance it has to travel before it finds an inlet, the streets have in numerous localities a damp and filthy appearance, especially where proper fall is not obtained. This is particularly the case in Hosier-street and Friar-street, where the water courses are nearly level; in Alfred-street and the Oxford-road, where the surface water lingers in its course for a distance of nearly half a mile; in Silver-street and its courts; and on the east side of London-street and its courts. The surface water from East-street combined with quantities of impurities from the various houses, tenements, and courts is carried by a drain under the London-road, to the old pump well at the lower end of the Kendrick-road, which being thoroughly saturated is now relieved of its surplus fluids by a surface drain from thence in front of Portland-place into the Orts-lane and Kennetside."

From: A Committee Report - Monday 7 December 1846.

Appended to this report are some notes by Mr. John BILLING:

"It is to be observed with reference to the water supplied by the water company that a considerable amount of impurity is poured into the mill stream above the Company's works; this evil, however, admits of an easy and speedy solution."

"The well water is generally of good quality; but instances of wells becoming polluted from cesspools are not unfrequent; as will be found by inspecting the statistics, where these cases are registered; and where the locality in which they occur are specified."

He estimates that for every avoidable death there are twenty-eight cases of sickness.

The Registrar General's figures for deaths for earlier years are included in the report:-

1839 22.8 (per 1000); 1840 25.6; 1841 23.8

"All the well waters of Reading, so far as I have examined, are clear, colourless and free from perceptible taste and smell; they contain, however, a large proportion of dissolved saline substances, and, in addition organic matter and carbonic acid gas."

From: A Report of Experiments carried out by W.L. COLLIER 1866.

"There is hardly a kettle in Reading which is not internally coated with mineral incrustation owing to the deposit of lime, magnesia and occasionally iron, by boiling."

From the same report

"It will be seen that London and Birmingham have been during the last quarter more healthy than the country in general. There can be no doubt to what such a result can be attributed. We are reaping the reward of our vast sanitary works of gigantic systems of draining, of better supplies of water, and of measures for improving the condition of lodgings and dwelling houses."

From: A Report to the Local Board of Health 6 August 1867.

This report recommended the building of the new Fobney Water Works and noted that the rivers were still polluted. It also suggested that the same authority should be responsible for both the water supply and the disposal of sewage. In 1868 the Borough bought the water works.

After all this it is gratifying to read:

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

"The Registrar General's quarterly report ought to gratify the inhabitants of Reading. It shows that of the seventy eight large towns in England the healthiest is Reading. For the quarter ending June 30 the death rate was only 13.6. When this is compared with the death rate of Manchester, which was 27.9, and with Preston and some other towns in which it was upwards of 26, it will be seen that the mortality in Reading has been extraordinarily low. There ought to be some mode of persuading mankind in general that the most likely mode of attaining a good old age (no one ever speaks of a bad old age) is straightway to take up an abode in the town of Reading. The Registrar General ought to prove one of the best friends of the town. He has on former occasions spoken favourably of the health of the town, but his latest report is the best of all. There ought to be no empty houses in the town. The Town Council or some other public-spirited body ought to make it known throughout the world that the City of Health of which Dr. RICHARDSON dreamed has been discovered. It is on the banks of the Thames and only thirty-five miles from London."

From: BERKSHIRE CHRONICLE - Saturday 19 August 1882.

Today, figures are not quoted for the Borough by the Registrar General but for the Oxford Regional Health Authority; the latest available figures for the death rate are 9.4 for women and 9.5 for men.

FISH AND SWANS

A recent leading article in "The Times" (1982) about the return of salmon to the Thames after almost a century and a half said that "as little as fifteen years ago, if you fell into the Tideway, it was a toss-up whether you died of drowning or poison". So even in recent times things have been far from perfect - upwards of twenty-five swans have been reported as having died of botulism this last year. (Ironically, some experiments are being made with botulism to cure eye squint!)

BRONZE AGE COFFIN BURIAL DISCOVERY

A coffin burial was revealed in gravel workings in early July 1982, at the Burghfield Site of Hall Aggregates Ltd., at Smallmead on the outskirts of Reading and was excavated by Reading Museum.

The coffin is made out of a hollow oak tree, which had been cut down to a 9 foot length and shaped in the form of a dug-out canoe. The skeleton is thought to be of a woman of some 30 to 40 years of age. No objects were otherwise found in the coffin, except the possible remains of a wooden coffin cover which had collapsed on top of the skeleton.

BRONZE AGE COFFIN BURIAL DISCOVERY (continued)

The burial is thought to date from the Bronze Age - some 3000-4000 years ago. A sample of wood from the canoe is at present undergoing radio-carbon dating which will give a more exact age to the find.

The coffin is now in the museum conservation laboratory awaiting treatment over the coming months.

Report from Reading Museum

FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

History on your Doorstep by J.R. RAVENSDALE

This is the book published to accompany the series shown earlier this year on B.B.C. Television with Fred HOUSEGO as the presenter. It is a useful introduction to finding out the history of your neighbourhood. He lists the many sources available to the local historian, and explains how you can build up a detailed picture of the landscape, buildings and people of your locality as they were in the past.

(Published by B.B.C. Publications at £4.50. 152pp with many photographs, drawings and maps. Obtainable from Mrs. Jean DEBNEY, 8 Huckleberry Close, Purley, Reading (add 62p for postage), from Society meetings or from bookshops).

Kennet and Avon Canal Towpath Guide No. 12

The Kennet and Avon Canal Trust have recently published a series of useful pocket guides to the Canal. The last of these, the twelfth, covers the stretch from Southcote to Kennet Mouth and contains much useful information. Published at 25p.

FUTURE MEETINGS

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| 23 September 1982 | Portrait of a School, Newtown Reading - Peter SOUTHERTON |
| 21 October 1982 | Reading Dispensary Trust - William DEAR |
| 18 November 1982 | Transport for Reading Borough - Michael DARE |
| 16 December 1982 | Christmas Social Evening -
"Literary Gems of Nineteenth Century Reading" |
| 20 January 1983 | Visit and Guided Tour of Reading Reference Library - David CLIFFE
(details to follow) |
| 17 February 1983 | To be arranged |
| 17 March 1983 | Annual General Meeting and Members Evening |
| 21 April 1983 | 'The Forlorn Hope' - 158 Castle Hill, Fortress to Family Home
- Eric STANFORD |

Except for the Library visit all meetings commence at 7.30 p.m. in the Abbey Gateway Room.

FOR YOUR DIARY

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| 6 October 1982 | Mary Rose Lecture - Margaret RULE, Hexagon, 7.30 p.m. |
| 30 October 1982 | Behind the Scenes at the Museum of English Rural Life
10.30 a.m. - 4.30 p.m., fee £2 (numbers limited) |

COURSES

There are quite a number of evening and one day courses available over the next few months in addition to the list we published last time. If you are interested in any of these contact either Sue READ or Jean DEBNEY.

A CAUTION

Sir, Permit me to caution your readers against a tall man of gentlemanly appearance, who has been hiring superior apartments in Reading under an assumed name, and posing as a doctor at the jail.

A VICTIM

From: BERKSHIRE CHRONICLE - Saturday 19 August 1882.