



The History of Reading Society

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Jan 1983

MEET THE MEMBERS

Mr. Fred PADLEY who is one of our Honorary Members and a familiar figure at meetings was born in Reading - indeed he has always lived in the same house in Eldon Square. After attending Blue Coat School then in the Bath Road from 1905 to 1909 he worked for a time for C. and G. Ayres (carters to the Great Western Railway). In 1914 he had the opportunity to go to work in the Zoology Department at the University College under Professor COLE and apart from service in the Royal Naval Air Service during the First World War continued to work there until his retirement in 1961. In actual fact he has never retired as he still works there two mornings a week cataloguing the Cole Library. Ever since leaving school in 1909 he has been actively involved with the Reading Branch of the Workers Educational Association of which he is a vice President. In 1962 he published privately "An Unofficial History of the University of Reading" and has contributed articles to the Dictionary of Labour Biography as well as writing a history of the International Institute of Scientific Technicians. His book "A Village in the Town" about the area surrounding the former St. John's Church was first published in 1973 and re-issued in 1981.

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THANKS

Joan MASON would like to thank members for the refreshments which they kindly provided for our Christmas meeting. The Committee would also like to thank Joan for organising this essential part of the evening's activities and Clinton ELLIS for providing the mulled wine. Clinton's mulled wine at the Christmas meeting is now a long-standing tradition within the Society - long may it continue!

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MEDIAEVAL WELL DISCOVERY

Workmen excavating at the offices of a Building Society in Cross Street unearthed a mediaeval well which has laid unused since about 1350. Realising its obvious importance and the unique opportunity to investigate archaeologists from Reading Museum will carry out a full survey which will involve sifting through more than a hundred buckets of silt. Sue READ tells us, "So far our finds have included not only pottery and animal bones, but fruit stones from greengages, cherries and an early type of plum; and our first well beetle has yet to be identified!"

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GET YOU HOME SERVICE

If you normally use public transport to get home after meetings and would like a lift from another member please get in touch with Joan MASON ().

RECENT MEETINGS

Literary Gems from Nineteenth Century Reading - Thursday 16 December 1982

Using literary extracts collected by Clinton and Jo ELLIS, Peter SOUTHERTON wrote an imaginative script which together with photographs taken by Derek HUMPHRIES took the audience on a walk around nineteenth century Reading.

Starting from the Abbey Gateway Room where Mrs. LATOURNELLE and Madame St. QUENTIN ran a school for the daughters of gentlefolk which had in earlier days numbered Jane AUSTEN among its pupils Jo ELLIS read an extract from Martha Mary BUTT in which she described her experiences in the school.

Some years after the Abbey School had closed Madame St. QUENTIN opened another school in London which numbered among its pupils Mary Russell MITFORD, the author of "Our Village". In another of her novels "Belford Regis" she wrote of a county town which is obviously identifiable as Reading from her description of the Market Place in the extract read by Sue READ.

Passing the Forbury which was a dismal place until the gardens were laid out in 1862 the next port of call is the County Gaol which stands near to the deserted Abbey ruins. It is said that misery is built into every stone. The most famous inmate was of course Oscar WILDE and it was almost inevitable that the reading extracted from his writings should be the well-known "hand-bag" scene from "The Importance of being Earnest" with the part of Lady BRACKNELL read by Jean DEBNEY and Jack WORTHINGTON by Derek HUMPHRIES.

Other features of Reading have attracted writers and in 1883 William BARKER was led to eulogize in verse about the biscuit factory:

On the banks of Kennet's river
In Reading's famous town,
Stands a massive pile of buildings
Of fame and world renown.

Should a stranger ask the business
of the place, what may it be?
Say 'tis the biscuit city
Of the famous H & P.

It was by the river Thames that Jerome K. JEROME's "Three Men in a Boat" (to say nothing of the dog, Montmorency) approached the town in 1889 - though, alas, they were not very complimentary about it:

"We came in sight of Reading about eleven. The river is dirty and dismal here. One does not linger in the neighbourhood of Reading."

Returning up the Kennet past High Bridge which is no longer the centre of activity that it was and into London Street, a broad and spacious thoroughfare where George LOVEJOY had his bookshop and publishing house from where the Sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett BROWNING first saw the light of day.

At the other side of the town in a house in Baker Street William Fox TALBOT was at work in his photographic studio producing his Book "The Pencil of Nature" the first book ever to be illustrated by the new photographic method.

Reading was never short of inns and in the tap room of "The Bear" there is a small group of troopers. One of them looks a little out of place - already the Army authorities have discovered that Trooper Silas COMBERBACHE has no affinity whatsoever with a horse. This was of course none other than Samuel Taylor COLERIDGE:

"His comrades soon came to regard him as a 'natural, though of a peculiar kind - a talking natural'. During off duty periods he would entertain his comrades with tales from classical history: the Peloponnesian War, the campaigns of Alexander the Great, the crossing of the Hellespont by Xerxes, the herpicks of Thermopylae, and so on - all recited with such verve that his listeners were convinced that these were anecdotes of contemporary, or very recent, military exploits."

RECENT MEETINGS (Literary Gems from Nineteenth Century Reading continued)

Once more to London Street to The New Hall, the meeting place of the Literary, Scientific and Mechanics Institute, a building that subsequently became a chapel where the President, Charles DICKENS, is about to give an address. Instead of a formal address he reads (for the first time in public) from "A Christmas Carol". This extract was read by David QUARTERMAINE who was suitably attired for the occasion. Indeed, Charles DICKENS was no stranger to Reading and "Pickwick Papers" is dedicated to a Reading man - Thomas Noon TALFOURD.

Visit to Reading Reference Library - Thursday 20 January 1982

Our host for this visit was Mr. David CLIFFE, Divisional Reference Librarian. David first outlined the functions of the library:

- (a) the Reference Library, which suffers greatly from lack of space making access difficult;
- (b) the Information Service, with some occasional strange enquiries;
- and (c) the Local Collection in the charge of Miss Daphne PHILLIPS, the County Local Studies Librarian.

There was a good display of maps, Minute Books, Voters Lists, Estate Agents catalogues and local periodicals together with Census Returns and the scrap-book of Mr. George LOVEJOY with many cuttings and photographs of former days in Reading.

Members were given the freedom of the Local Collection Room (which is not normally open to the public). This contains a large collection of books on all subjects connected with Reading and the surrounding area.

Several members went on conducted parties around the vaults underneath the Town Hall which contains yet more material including almost complete sets of the local papers.

Among recent acquisitions is the Computer File Index on microfilm which contains parish registers from 1538 through to 1875. This is an invaluable aid to the family historian.

It was fascinating to see the quantity of material which is available for public use.

Bert RIVERS

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NEWSPAPER INDEXING

One of the activities in which the Society has been involved is the indexing of the Berkshire Chronicle.

Two members, Mrs. Gill. TIFT () and Mrs. Elaine ELEY () have been recording Births, Deaths and Marriages for 1825 and 1827. They normally do this one Saturday morning per month.

Mr. Bert RIVERS () has been indexing music and transport.

The indexes produced will be available to the public. If you would like to help them with this or would like to tackle a different subject why not give one of them a ring?

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READING

A recent issue of the Library Association Record reported that in Sheffield the City Libraries has been issuing badges with slogans to encourage people to make use of their facilities. The report comments that one particular town might not be keen on the one which read: "I thought that Reading was a town in Berkshire until I discovered libraries".

In our next edition we will cover the opening of the library and museum which took place on Thursday 8 February 1883.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

The Royal Berkshire Hospital

"The Royal Berkshire Hospital was erected in 1839 with accomodation sufficient for forty four patients. A few years later additional wards were provided, making the building capable of holding eighty beds. At that time a chapel for the use of officers and patients was erected in a position which seriously interfered with the ventilation of the wards etc. of the Hospital. From time to time further additions were made, until at last the accomodation was increased to a hundred and fifty beds. During this last growth the accomodation for the staff had remained stationary, although the latter had increased proportionately with the number of patients. Rooms for nurses and staff were therefore found to be an absolute necessity, and the valuable collection of books and specimens had far outgrown the accomodation afforded by the old library and museum. The position of the laundry which was under the wards, was felt to be most unsatisfactory from a sanitary point of view and the outdoor nursing staff, which meets with such appreciation had grown to such an extent that additional rooms were urgently needed.

"After very careful consideration, the Governors determined to remedy these defects and accepted the plans which have now been carried out, including the building of a steam laundry, the removal of the old chapel, library and operating room, and upon the site of the latter the building of a new chapel, thereby materially improving the sanitary condition of the Hospital. The erection of a block of dormitories for the Hospital servants, the raising of the outpatients departments to form an upper storey for the library and museum, and the raising of the nurses home to increase the accomodation by another storey. This scheme which necessitated an outlay of about £15,000 has been the means of not only vastly increasing the comfort and health of both patients and staff, but has also added to the noble appearance of the building."

from: BERKSHIRE CHRONICLE - Saturday 27 January 1883

Commenting on the new facilities the same article later gives the dimensions of the new chapel as 34 feet by 30 feet with a nave and side aisles and a chancel of 14 feet by 9 feet. The new library and museum measure 30 feet by 14 feet.

The chapel was dedicated on Tuesday 23 January 1883 and last month was the scene of centenary celebrations.

Every week a report used to appear in the same newspaper giving the number of patients in the Hospital:

	Men	Women	Men	Women
Number of patients as per last statement			62	43
Accidents during the week	3	0		
Admitted during the week	5	0		
Admitted this day	5	15	13	15
Remaining, January 23 1882*			75	58

14 vacant beds, Males, 3; Females, 5; Children, 6; besides what may be occasioned by patients to be discharged the next Board day.

Out-patients, Number of patients on the books last Board day, 297.
Admitted during the week, 29 - 326.
Discharged during the week, 12.
Remaining January 23 - 314.

*This was a misprint - they are not a modernism!

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO (continued)

Reading Dispensary Trust

Members will recall that our October meeting was a history of the Reading Dispensary from its founding in 1802 right up to the present day. In 1870 a providence scheme was introduced enabling members to be assured of treatment being given should the need arise. It is therefore perhaps of interest to read part of the report of the Annual General Meeting of the Governors held at noon on Thursday 25 January 1883 in their Board Room in the Chain Street premises:

"During the year 2,962 new provident members have been admitted, and the estimated total membership now totals 14,992. The number of cases treated by the surgeons during the year is 17,813 and the number of attendances 93,150 upwards of 42,000 of which have been made at the homes of patients. In comparing these figures with those of the previous year, the committee would note the increase in the number of attendances, they cannot but consider it a matter of satisfaction that so large a number of the working classes have availed themselves of the benefits of the institution, and thus secured medical attendances and medicines in times of illness.

"The number of members nominated by the Governors for free membership is less than in the preceding year, viz.: 494 nominations, comprising 923 individuals as against 603 nominations, comprising 1,025 individuals in 1881. But the number who have applied for immediate treatment, which necessitates the payment of an extra fee of 7/6 (due to their not joining when in health), has increased from 138 to 227. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that a large number who would otherwise have procured Governor's nominations have this year obtained from the Reading Charity Organisation Society and advance on loan, to enable them to pay the necessary fee to become provident members; the actual number who have joined through the assistance rendered by the Society has been 103."

from: BERKSHIRE CHRONICLE - Saturday 27 January 1883

An evening with the Deaf and Dumb

"The fourth anniversary of Mr. SALMON's Sunday afternoon class for the deaf and dumb was held at the Victoria Hall on Thursday evening. Sixty six members, including twenty eight deaf and dumb persons, were present at the tea. The tea tables were presided over by Mrs. SALMON, Mrs. W. MOORE, Mrs. EISDALE, Miss SALMON, Miss COLEBROOK, Miss LONG and Miss GRAHAM. After tea an address in the finger and sign language was given by Mr. SALMON and afterwards explained. About four hundred persons were present at the entertainment. Mr. G. PALMER, M.P., who was among the number, made a few remarks. He congratulated Mr. SALMON on the success of the cause and wished him God speed. The entertainment concluded with the exhibition of a number of dissolving views."

from: BERKSHIRE CHRONICLE - Saturday 27 January 1883

The Oxford English Dictionary defines dissolving views as pictures produced on a screen by a magic lantern, one picture being caused gradually to disappear while another gradually appears on the same field.

Committees

For those of you who have to suffer seemingly endless committee meetings it is interesting to note that in a report of a Council Meeting:

"Mr. J.D. BROWN said that the Farm Committee had not much to tell. They were getting on farming as well as they could, considering the weather (laughter) and endeavouring to keep their cattle from disease, which was near them.

from: BERKSHIRE CHRONICLE - Saturday 3 February 1883

PLUS CE CHANGE ETC.

As part of the 1851 Census, the Registrar-General asked for details of church attendance on Sunday 30 March 1851.

The Congregational/Independent Church in Castle Street reported a poor attendance (520 in the morning and 460 in the evening) because the regular minister was too ill to officiate. Similarly the Broad Street Independent Chapel where 403 attended in the morning, 308 in the afternoon and 341 in the evening said this was lower than average "the day being wet at the time of afternoon service". St. Giles Parish Church could muster only 700 in the morning and 750 in the evening with 260 Sunday School children, against an average of 900 to 1,000 "owing to influenza and bad weather".

We can sympathise with the citizens of Victorian Reading preferring to stay at home on a wet day instead of walking to church. But how happy would contemporary clergymen be to see such large congregations, even in good weather!

Just as a footnote, St. Mary's Parish Church was attended by 700 people in the morning and 900 in the evening and St. Laurence 1,200 in the morning and "about 1,000" in the evening!!

(Source: P.R.O. 1851 Religious Census HO 129/128)

Joan DILS

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FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

As we visited the Central Reference Library and Local Studies Collection in January it is worth remembering that Reading Libraries have published a number of interesting booklets of a local nature which are on sale in the Central Reference Library in Blagrove Street:

Coronation Reading	20p
The Queen's Peace	25p
Reading Theatres	75p
Mayors of Reading: 14th to 20th Century (1970)	10p
Cofferers, Chamberlains and Treasurers of the Town of Reading (to 1966)	10p
Charters of the Borough of Reading: 1253-1953	10p
Old Farm Implements of Berkshire	10p

Only recently they have re-printed John Rocque's Survey of Berkshire. The large Reading map costs £1.75 in black and white or £2.15 hand coloured. It was originally published in 1761 and pre-dates the Ordnance Survey.

In addition to Rocque's Survey they also stock maps of Reading for various dates: 1802 (50p); 1840 (30p); 1861 (30p).

They also sell several sets of post cards of old views of the town and the area in sets of six at 55p per set or 10p each. Two new sets were published recently.

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FUTURE PROGRAMME

- 17 March 1983 Annual General Meeting followed by a Members' Evening
 - 21 April 1983 "The Forlorn Hope - Fortress to Family Home" - Eric STANFORD
- The Committee is busy finalising the Summer meetings. Details will be given in the next Newsletter.

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NEXT NEWSLETTER

It is intended to publish the next Newsletter in April. Material for inclusion should be sent to the Editor: Nigel L. DENTON, 12 Maria Court, Southcote Road, Reading (Tel. 585576) by Saturday 9 April 1983.