



The History of Reading Society

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FROM THE EDITOR

It is hard to realise that the Society is now into its sixth year following its inception in February 1978. At the Annual General Meeting held on Thursday 17 March the Officers elected for the following year were:

Chairman:	David QUARTERMAINE
Secretary:	Sue READ
Treasurer:	Nigel DENTON

Derek HUMPHRIES and Peter SOUTHERTON were re-elected to the Committee to which we were also pleased to welcome James GAFFORD, Tony MANSFIELD and Mary SOUTHERTON. At a subsequent Committee meeting various functions were assigned:

Press Officer:	James GAFFORD
Minutes Secretary:	Derek HUMPHRIES
Publicity:	Tony MANSFIELD
Refreshments:	Mary SOUTHERTON
Newsletter	
Distribution:	Peter SOUTHERTON

Of course, the above changes meant that inevitably we said farewell to people who have faithfully served the Society over the years. Jean DEBNEY joined the Committee two years ago and became Chairman last year but has unfortunately had to give up because of other commitments. However, such is her involvement in the local history field with husband Cliff in both the Berkshire Family History Society and Project Purley that I am sure that we will see her from time to time. Clinton and Jo ELLIS retired after a number of years on the Committee - Clinton in producing our posters and Jo in ensuring that meetings were publicised in various local bulletins. However I am pleased to be able to tell you that Clinton will continue to produce his posters. We also said farewell to Joan MASON who joined the Committee last year and had been responsible for organising the Get You Home Service.

The most important change at the Annual General Meeting was the adoption of a new Constitution of which you should have received a copy. There was nothing of any particular significance in the changes - the Committee felt after much discussion that one or two points needed clarification as minor modifications had been made since the original one was produced in 1978.

You should also have received a Questionnaire about your interests. If you have not already done so perhaps you could return it when completed to Sue READ or any Committee member.

RECENT MEETINGS - contributed by Bert RIVERS

The Young National Trust - Thursday 17 February 1983

To this meeting at which Mr. Robert HARLAND was the speaker we were pleased to welcome several members of the Young National Trust and of course many of our own members are also members of the National Trust and the local centre.

In the locality the National Trust has a number of properties such as the Vyne, Basildon Park and Finchampstead Ridges.

Like everything else the National Trust has been hit by inflation and although the subscriptions of 1,200,000 members go a long way towards the running costs of its properties there is always the need for a substantial amount of volunteer labour. Thus it was that about fourteen to fifteen years ago the National Trust started its Acorn Camps for young people who might be interested in helping the Trust during their summer holidays. The first local group was started in Reading during the early 1970's and now has about seventy members.

After his introductory talk Mr. HARLAND showed the film "The Trust in Young Hands" which was made by members of the Reading group and showed them engaged in activities as diverse as hedge-laying, planting trees and clearing undergrowth. One of their current activities is clearing the drainage ditches at the Chase near to Newbury. Besides organising work parties they are also involved in stewarding at many of the Trust's properties in the area.

Members' Evening - Thursday 17 March 1983 (following the Annual General Meeting)

Broad Street Independent Chapel was the subject of a talk by Mrs. Win. WALKER. This is the second oldest Free Church in Reading and came into being because of the 1662 Act of Uniformity. The first building was erected in 1680 on the present site and was known as the Presbyterian Meeting House until 1718 at which stage the Presbyterians moved out after a schism. In 1796 after a revival under the Rev. Archibald the present chapel was built opening for worship on 2 December 1800 - at that stage it was open to the street until the shops were built in front in 1895. A school for 30 children aged 8-12 years was founded and in 1895 a Working Men's Evening College was instituted which lasted until the opening of the University College. The Centenary of the present chapel was celebrated in 1900 with the installation of electric lighting.

The second talk was given by Mr. James GAFFORD who outlined the brief histories of two local insurance companies. The first company the Borough of Reading Insurance Company was founded in December 1822 after a letter to the Editor of the Reading Mercury in August 1822. Its shields were attached to a number of local buildings and a few are still visible. Mr. GAFFORD discounted the old story that when fires occurred fire brigades only attended if their company was the insurer - not least of all as the firemen were paid an attendance allowance! In fact, this company did not have its own fire engine. The company's express intention was to cover houses, buildings and merchandise within the borough of Reading and it was thus restriction that led to its demise in 1840. The second company was the Berkshire Life and Fire Assurance Company which was founded in 1826 and expanded rapidly with agencies in all the main Berkshire towns as well as parts of Oxfordshire. There was also an office in Cheltenham. Although it was still expanding in 1830 it was wound up in 1831 and the business transferred to the Phoenix Company.

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BUILDINGS OF BERKSHIRE

This is the title of a One Day Meeting and Exhibition organised by the Berkshire Local History Association to be held on Saturday 21 May at Berkshire College of Agriculture, Hall Place, Burchetts Green, Maidenhead from 9.00 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. The lecture sessions will include 'Domestic and Religious Buildings' and 'Industrial Buildings'. The fee for the day is £5.50 (inclusive of morning coffee, lunch and afternoon tea).

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

It is just over one hundred years ago that the Free Library and Museum were officially opened on Thursday 8 February 1883. The Mayor Mr. Blackall SIMONDS held a conversazione for the purpose. The Berkshire Chronicle of Saturday 17 February carried a full report of the proceedings of which we re-print a part:

'The library and museum were thrown open for inspection, and the New Town Hall was used as an assembly room. The guests began to assemble at eight o'clock.

'The Free Library and Museum, which contains an excellent collection of curiosities, admirably arranged by Dr. STEVENS, were first examined. The guests then assembled in the New Town Hall, where the Mayor addressed them.

'The Mayor said, "Ladies and gentlemen - It is my privilege this evening to invite you here and so assist in putting the finishing touches to a work which has been for a long time in preparation, which has cost much labour, thought and money, and which you have watched with interest and which, I believe, is worthy of the intentions of those who first projected it and of the town in which it is placed (applause). Now it is complete let us see what we have got. We have a museum which is better housed than any museum of its size that I know of, containing many interesting objects, and will form the nucleus, I hope, of a museum of great value. The curiosities presented by the executors of Mr. BLAND were the result of a life long collection. The animals, the minerals, the weapons and the dresses worn in savage countries are worthy of careful observation. And in addition to that we have kindly lent to us for this occasion, and I hope for some time longer, some valuable objects from the collection of Dr. STEVENS (applause) to whose great industry and energy it is due that the museum is in such a presentable state, because the work is far from finished. And there are some objects which have been presented which are too large to have been placed at present; as for instance the splendid elk's head presented by Mr. F. WILDER; and the crocodile presented by Mr. F. BULLEY; still I hope that these objects will be placed in good positions, and that the museum may be a place of intellectual entertainment for the inhabitants of Reading for many years to come (hear, hear). I mention the museum first because it seems to me that the museum is the decoy for the library. The careless passer-by who looks into the museum and sees the implements, collected by Dr. Stevens, may be led to think of what has passed in ages long gone by, and be induced to go into the library and search out some of the books which treat of the subject. The students of conchology, or zoology, or mineralogy may have his tastes gratified by the sight of the objects therein, and may employ himself profitably by searching for further knowledge. It is a good thing for men to have a hobby, to take up some subject of that sort (applause), and therefore I think the museum is a thing which will be of great advantage to the town by being a stimulus to intellectual enjoyment as against the grosser enjoyment of sordid nature. Then passing from the museum we have the library. It contains ten thousand volumes; nine thousand of them are already catalogued."

He goes on to list some of the more notable volumes in the library of which 3,500 came from the West Street Library. His speech was followed by program of music by the band under the baton of Stanton JONES and Mr. F.J. READ playing the organ.

'The company having finished the inspection of the various rooms, light refreshments were supplied by Mrs. COCKS of the Queen's Hotel, with here accustomed skill. Altogether, a very enjoyable evening was spent by the large company numbering fully a thousand, who expressed themselves highly gratified with the entertainment provided through the liberality of the Mayor, who must be congratulated on the great success which accompanied the gathering.'

NEXT NEWSLETTER

It is intended to publish the next Newsletter at some time during the Summer. Any material for inclusion should be sent to the Editor.

SUBSCRIPTIONS - from the Treasurer

For the first time in the Society's history the Committee felt it necessary to propose an increase in the Annual subscription which was accepted by the Annual General Meeting:- Single Membership: £3; Family Membership: £4; Senior Citizen: £1.50; Full time Student: £1.50

After the Annual General Meeting a query was raised about the period of subscriptions. The position is that they run from April to the following March. Thus at the end of our financial year we carry forward one quarter of the subscriptions paid into the following financial year.

It would obviously make my life easier if subscriptions were paid as soon as possible. If you have not already paid there should be a form with this Newsletter. Inevitably we are human and you may get a form when you have paid for which I apologise - I suggest you pass it to a friend!

IN THE DAYS OF REAL MONEY - contributed by Gil TIFT

Under Marriages:

At Arnold, Mr. Henry ELLERS, to Miss Elizabeth WOOD. After the ceremony was over, the bridegroom paid the fees, to the astonishment of the clerk, in farthings, amounting 2/6.

from: The Berkshire Chronicle, 20 October 1827.

FUTURE MEETINGS

19 May 1983 "An Acorn - Early Days of Whitley Park School and its Area"
- Tony MANSFIELD
(7.30 p.m. in the Abbey Gateway Room)

9 June 1983 Reading Walkabout led by Ken MAJOR
(Meet at the Abbey Gateway at 7.15 p.m. - note the slighter earlier start than usual)

24 July 1983 Afternoon Boat Trip to Mapledurham and Visit to Mapledurham
(Sunday) House and Mill
(details to follow - cost approximately £3.75)

LOCAL AIRFIELDS

A member of the Berkshire Industrial Archaeology Group is hoping to publish something about Woodley Aerodrome. He is also interested in the old Reading World War I airfield and training establishment. If you have any material especially photographs perhaps you might like to get in touch with Mr. G.J. LEWIS, ()

PAYING FOR PEEPING - contributed by Elaine ELEY

The other day an exciseman intercepted a hearse on its return from a funeral in Essex under suspicion that it contained some smuggled goods. The driver declared most energetically that it contained nothing of the kind but the exciseman was very inflexible and insisted upon searching the vehicle. This was reluctantly acceded to by the driver who opened the doors at the end, and while the exciseman was introducing his head in order to take a strict survey, took hold of him by the breech, popped him in and drove home. On getting into his master's yard he jocosely said that he had taken away one body and brought home another, exemplifying the truth of his assertion by exhibiting the half dead exciseman.

from: The Berkshire Chronicle, 4 November 1826.