



The History of Reading Society

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January 1984

MEETINGS - Winter and Spring 1984

- 19 January An Evening of Tiles in Reading Museum -
Roman, Mediaeval, Delft and Victorian
Leslie CRAM, Sue READ and Eric STANFORD
- 23 February Instant History, Just Add Water!
Mike HALL - Archaeologist for Thames Water
- 22 March Annual General Meeting and Members Evening
- 12 April The Work of the Archivist and the Reading Borough Records
Adam GREEN - The County Archivist for Berkshire
- 17 May The Great Western Railway - Calling at Reading along
the line
Matthew TURNER

All the above meetings are held in the Abbey Gateway, Reading at 7.30 p.m.

THE READING ABBEY WATERFRONT

At present much interest is centred upon the archaeological dig being undertaken by the Wessex Archaeological Trust on a site in King's Road. This was the site of the Abbey Waterfront and already it has been possible to discern the line of three different waterfronts as the Kennet formerly ran along a course closer to the present Abbey Steet. Although the site is open to members of the public on weekdays a special visit has been arranged for members of the Society at 2.15 p.m. on Saturday 4 February when a member of the team of archaeologists should be available to describe points of interest. Walkways have been erected to which the party will be confined but it should be pointed out that the site is inevitably very muddy and wet.

NEXT NEWSLETTER

It is intended to publish the next Newsletter sometime during the Spring. Any material for inclusion should be sent to the Editor by Saturday 31 March.

HAPPY NEW YEAR

The Committee wishes all members and friends a Happy New Year.

ARCHIVE OPEN DAY - contributed by Mr. Derek HUMPHRIES

On Saturday 11 June there was an Open Day at the Berkshire Record Office at Shire This is approached through a series of swing doors and corridors in what seems to be the remotest corner of the building.

For many of the visitors, an early visit to the strong-rooms seemed to be a popular choice. Having gathered a suitable size of party, the members of staff led the way through a reinforced doorway which is immediately locked once everyone is inside. The air is cooler in here as the whole area is air-conditioned. In the event of the smoke detectors discharging carbon dioxide there are only two minutes in which to get out! The bulk of the manuscript documents are stored in cardboard boxes on racks suspended on rails. The records span a period of about 800 years, a very small part of which included 11,000 wills from all over Berkshire, some recently having been transferred from the Bodleian Library. Elsewhere there are Tithe Maps, Parish Collections in the process of being sorted, Estate plans hung in plastic covers so that they can be traced in pencil without harm, Rent Books, Education Committee Minute Books; to name but a few. Many of the records and documents are colour-coded; a red reference relating to the Old Shire Hall system; green being a new reference and black being a document reference. The staff claim that deposited, but unsorted, documents can be found within 24 hours.

A small strong-room nearby stores documents which are not so frequently asked for. A separate search room has been set aside so that employees of the County Council can look at Legal documents, many of which may be merely months old, but some may date back as far as 70 years. Among the Local Authority archives, plans of sewage systems, public buildings and such like, are released for public inspection after a 30 year time span.

In the reception room there was a vast array of documents. Among the maps were Josiah Ballard's Estate map of Englefield dated 1762 by Powlet Wright showing in hand colouring strip tenancies and main enclosures with a scale in chains and perches. Other early maps included an Enclosure Map of Basildon Parish 1811, publications by John Speed and William Saxton, 19th century county maps by John Cary showing in very fine detail turnpikes, rivers, park-land, houses and Hundreds boundaries. Among the written documents was a most impressive 17th century Manorial record, 32 feet long, listing in Latin tenants to the Lord of the Manor including details of the land and the rent paid, etc. Other items included an order book of a family grocer dated 1881 which had been found in a building about to be demolished in the High Street of Abingdon; a Minute Book of a Parish Council; a 14th century Court Rolls written in abbreviated Latin; collections of Family Accounts and so on.

Anyone who became mind boggled by only glimpsing at the main exhibits in this room, undoubtedly found it a welcome departure to see the more practical side of things displayed in the Restoration Room. In here were the examples of highly skilled work showing the employment of an enormous diversity of techniques and materials. The member of staff there, who executes this intricate work, quickly made it clear that each item undergoing restoration had its own unique problems; no two cases are ever quite alike. During a normal working day, it is common practice for individual treatment to be given to about a dozen independent cases, since so often a document can only be given, say, an hour's attention and then perhaps has to be left for a day or so whilst the 'cure' has time to take effect. Many of the examples on display showed the condition of items before and after restoration. The commonest causes of damage being damp, rot or fire. It was most surprising to see just what can be achieved with even the most extreme of cases; the damage in some instances seemed so bad and beyond hope, that most people would think that disposal was the only choice.

ARCHIVE OPEN DAY (continued)

The other major exhibits were in the Ancestry Room where the Berkshire Family History Society have a display. In this room there were a series of well-presented display boards showing how families can be traced using records from Parish Registers, Census Returns and various other transcriptions from a wide range of documents. It was clear that a wealth of detail can be pieced together particularly from 19th century sources, including portrait photographs. Graveyard tombstones are also a useful source of information as was demonstrated by an additional display which included an excellent scale model of St. Michael's Churchyard, Tilehurst.

It is not just the past that is being preserved but also the present. The Council's current files and records are in a separate central area away from the main strong room. The current stock is as large as the permanent historic collection. Only about 5% of this is kept - the bulk being reduced by either destruction or micro-filming. Unfortunately, microfilms only last for about 25 years so any that require to be kept for longer will have to be re-copied.

The Record Office remained open all day to visitors which was essential to those who wanted to gain an overall insight of what they have to offer. The public response certainly appeared to be a great success and it is only to be hoped that the staff are tempted to stage a similar exhibition again in the near future.

RECENT MEETINGS - contributed by Mr. James GAFFORD

Reading at the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century - Thursday 29 September 1983

If we could be conveyed by some time machine back some three centuries, could we adapt and survive? Our President, Dr. Cecil SLADE was in no doubt that we could. Much might depend on the stratum of the social structure in which we found ourselves for differences of class were then of great importance with widespread poverty an accepted feature. The Poor Law relief administered by the Justices went some way to alleviate hardship with apprenticeships for children, workhouses and, in Minster Street, John Kendrick's 'Oracle', for the able-bodied and for 'rogues and vagabonds' the House of Correction or Bridewell at Greyfriars. There were also a few almshouses provided by charitable bequests for the fortunate elderly.

Although job security was always at risk in hard times, there were numerous retail shops, many with associated workrooms, in the town, some sixty or seventy trades being recorded. The shopkeeper was a freeman and was assisted by apprenticed craftsmen and unskilled labourers working normally a 12 or 15-hour day according to the season. Master and man lived 'over the shop' or in overcrowded courts nearby. The population of Reading is believed to have grown from seven to eight thousand between 1700 and 1750 but the boundaries of the three parishes remained unaltered. Drinking water, often polluted, from wells, only primitive sanitation and the presence of horses for transport and animals for slaughter in the town centre led to frequent epidemics and high infant mortality, unchecked by the limitations of medical knowledge.

It is no wonder that our forbears sought variety and entertainment with fairs and celebrations always marked by bell-ringing, and the many inns were well patronised. The churches played their part in urban life but were not widely attended by ordinary folk.

Without doubt, we should be more than ready to return to our cleaner, quieter more salubrious Reading and to leave our ancestors, Ann, John or Elizabeth, to compare their lot with harsher times in the past and to look upon the year of grace 1700 as the height of modernity.

RECENT MEETINGS (continued)

The History of the Berkshire Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society - Thursday 20 October

Although prisons have existed since earliest times they were first used mainly for debtors and felons awaiting trial. Long term imprisonment became necessary when public opinion turned against such penalties as hanging and transportation for a wide variety of crimes. Attention then was focussed on the problems of offenders after release and Peter SOUTHERTON, whose recent book "An Ever Present Help" is familiar to us, described the work of the Berkshire Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society from its origins in 1802 and since its formation as a charity in 1883.

It was largely through the efforts of the Rev. Martin T. Friend, Chaplain of Reading Prison and former curate of St. Laurence's that the Society was launched on 3 March 1883 with the support of the Visiting Justices and the Prison Governor. A certificate of approval from Quarter Sessions was soon granted and enabled the Society to claim a part of the sum of £4,000 set aside nationally by the Government, limited to the amount raised from private sources. During the first year 48 prisoners were helped and soon two small properties at 18/19 Gosbrook Terrace, Lower Caversham were rented and fitted out as an 'Industrial Home' for accomodating three discharged men on a short term basis. Until they could find lodgings and a permanent job they earned a small wage from gardening and chopping and bundling firewood. Two years later the venue was transferred to larger premises at 67 Bedford Road with a spacious yard for the now flourishing firewood business.

Female offenders were not forgotten and were catered for in an associated 'Refuge' in Castle Street. But difficult times lay ahead. Success brought its own problems, demand outstripped resources and the Bedford Road hostel had to be given up. The Society had to cope with the increase in its work during a period of widespread unemployment and later the lack of it when the County's only prison at Reading became an Internment Centre during World War One and public support fell away. As some of the aid formerly provided became the responsibility of official agencies, the Society's role was forced to change.

Today the Berkshire Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society is able to call upon a panel of volunteer experts from all walks of life who are ready to offer advice to offenders and their families. One of these volunteers, local solicitor Mr. John FRANCIS, reminded the meeting that financial help is still needed if ex-offenders are to be re-instated into society and the risk of commission of further crimes reduced.

The Work of the Museum of English Rural Life - Thursday 17 November 1983

On 30 October 1982 some of our members attended a day seminar at the Museum of English Rural Life at Whiteknights whose work was described in the Newsletter of last December. Roy Brigden, the Museum curator, in his illustrated talk this November showed us something of the vanished life of the local countryside which lay behind the tools and implements on display.

Crafts such as the making of besom brooms at Tadley and hayrakes at Pamber, once widespread, have left little more than overgrown coppices, derelict sheds and the memories of the few surviving workers. Hurdle-making, mainly for garden fencing nowadays is still carried on at Herriard. Occasionally a rare relic of a lost way of live has been preserved. A farmhouse at Woodley with its nineteenth century contnets and kitchen range was discovered and recorded shortly before demolition. Even more interesting, perhaps, are the few farm dairies still to be found. Their lofty rooms, slate shelves, constantly running natural water and ingenious ventilation systems reveal how the essential hygiene and coolness could be achieved by cream and cheese makers before the days of refrigeration.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO

Sale of the late Mr. LOVEJOY'S Books

"The first sale of books accumulated by the late Mr. George LOVEJOY took place on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday last. Mr. John MILLER was the auctioneer. A good company of buyers assembled, collectors or dealers being present or represented from London, Southampton, Bath, Bristol, Edinburgh, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leamington, Oxford and Reading. A number of local gentlemen were also present, and commissions were received by the auctioneer from many old friends of Mr. LOVEJOY in various parts of the kingdom. In his preliminary remarks Mr. MILLER explained that this sale in no way interfered with the value and efficiency of the Southern Counties Library which would be maintained in its completeness as heretofore. The biddings were rapid and spirited. Good modern works fetched the highest prices, topography and biography especially being in demand. Two copies of "Ruskin's Modern Painters", with first editions of the plates, sold for £26 10s and £27 respectively.

"The Stores of Venice" a presentation copy to Miss MITFORD, with the author's autograph, sold for £25 10s; the last trade bidding, however, was £20, the final competition being between two gentlemen who desired to secure the lot for other reasons than its monetary value. A small lot of poems by Elizabeth BARRATT ('BROWNING') 2 vols., 12mo., with TALFOURD'S 'The Castilian', made £4. 'Bewick's Quadrupeds and Birds', three volumes 1816, £5 4s, 'Notes and Queries', a complete set of scrap books of much local interest, £7 10s (bought for the Free Library); 'Berry's County Genealogies', with 'Weaver's Village Architecture', £5 10s; 'Skilton's Oxfordshire', £2 12s 6d; and 'Houres Ancient Wiltshire', £14."

from: BERKSHIRE CHRONICLE - Saturday 15 December 1883

Although The London Street Bookshop (probably better known to Redingensians as William Smith's) can trace its origins back to the eighteenth century it really began in 1832 when George LOVEJOY set up his own business by taking over a small stationery business and circulating library in London Street. In 1834 he purchased a bookselling and stationery business from COWSLADES to whom he had previously been apprenticed. He was responsible for first publishing the sonnets of Elizabeth Barratt BROWNING. He tried (unsuccessfully) to persuade Charles DICKENS to seek election as M.P. for Reading at the 1841 Election. George LOVEJOY was born in 1808 and died in 1883.

The scrap books mentioned in the above newspaper extract were among the treasures that members of the Society were able to see during last year's visit to the Central Reference Library.

MEET THE MEMBERS

Sidney GOLD who was born in 1935 was evacuated to Reading during the war and has been here ever since. After being educated at Wilson Central School he has been in the hairdressing business for over thirty years. His chief interest lies in British Art History. He has compiled a catalogue of pre-nineteenth century British painters, including a transcript of the apprentice register of the Painter Stainers Company, copies of which are in the British Museum as well as Reading Reference Library. In 1965 he published "Life of John Rowell, stained glass painter" and other articles on Reading painters. In 1970 he founded the Reading Centre of the National Trust being its secretary and a tours organiser for thirteen years. Recently he has been elected as Vice-President of the Centre. Reading was the thirty-sixth Centre to be founded. There are now one hundred and fifty and in 1982 he helped to form a Centre at Newbury. He was also a co-founder of the Young National Trust of which there are now forty branches. Apart from all this he is also interested in the history of Reading School of Art, architects and buildings of Reading, local artists and London Street, and Reading in the nineteenth century.

FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

Through the generosity of Caversham Bookshop the Society is able to provide a bookstall at meetings stocked with all recent local publications. Anything requested can be obtained and the Society benefits financially from all sales. If you have any suggestions for books to be made available please contact David QUARTERMAINE.

Berkshire Old and New

This is the first of what is intended to be an annual publication and consists of a number of articles contributed by members of the Berkshire Local History Association (to which the Society is affiliated) and covers all aspects of local history in the county. Among the subjects in this issue are the local banks, Thatcham churchyard, petty crime in Berkshire as well as an analysis of the local hostelrys in 1577. Another useful feature is a recent local bibliography. (Published by Berkshire Local History Association at 95p. 48pages with a number of photographs, maps, charts and tabulations).

TROLLEYBUSES

Part of Reading's past was on display in the Hexagon during the autumn when the British Trolleybus Society staged an exhibition about Reading's trolleybuses. Inevitably, this consisted mainly of photographs though there were also a number of relics. Accompanying each part of the display was a more than adequate text describing it. The first trolleybuses came to Reading in 1938 but, alas, their days were short as they had all been withdrawn by 1968. Some of Reading's former trolleybuses are preserved in the Society's museum at Sandtoft - unfortunately, funds were not forthcoming to bring one to Reading to form part of the exhibition.

BAYEUX TAPESTRY FACISIMILE

A little known treasure owned by Reading was recently on display in the Art Gallery when the facisimile of the Bayeux Tapestry was given one of its only too infrequent showings. It was woven by thirty-five ladies from Leek in Staffordshire in 1885-1886. In 1895 it was purchased by Alderman Arthur HILL, Mayor 1883-1886, and given to the Borough. Of course, it is really the precursor of the documentary film as in a series of scenes it shows (from the Norman point of view) the events leading up to the Battle of Hastings in 1066. It is strictly embroidery rather than tapestry and is executed in eight colours of worsted on a piece of linen 230 feet long by 20 inches wide. Over fifteen hundred objects are depicted and as so often with modern strip cartoons the animals along the border are as fascinating as the main theme. If you missed the full display one of the twenty five panels into which it has been divided (along the original seams) is usually on display in the Museum. It is not so surprising that Reading should have this - William I founded Battle Abbey in thanksgiving for his victory and gave ti an estate in Reading known as Battle Manor of which the name has survived to this day in Battle Hospital and the like. Thus the connection has been long.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

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| Saturday 21 January
10 a.m. - 5 p.m. | Rural Industries in Central Southern England since 1800
Museum of English Rural Life, Whiteknights (£3.60) |
| Saturday 4 February | Visit to Reading Abbey Waterfront Dig (see page 1) |
| Tuesday 14 February
7.30 p.m. | Woodley Aerodrome - Colin OXLADE (Berkshire Industrial
Archaeology Group), M.E.R.L. (admission charge 80p) |
| Friday 17 February
8 - 10 p.m. | Informal Evening (Berkshire Local History Association)
Memorial Hall, Glebe Road, Purley |
| Saturday 3 March
9.30 a.m. - 5 p.m. | Archaeology in Berkshire 1983
University, London Road (£2) |
| Saturday/Sunday 24/25 March
10 a.m. - 5 p.m. | Weekend School - Silchester Workshop (£7.20)
Department of Archaeology, University, Whiteknights |