



The History of Reading Society

The object of the Society is to cultivate an interest in the History of Reading and to encourage research into the history of the town.

NEWSLETTER - AUTUMN 1984

Welcome, Members and friends, to another season of meetings. As you will see from the programme, your Committee has invited speakers on a wide variety of topics in the hope that there will be something of interest for everyone. Please remember however that your suggestions as to future meetings are always welcome. If therefore you would like to meet some specific speaker or would like to hear about some particular subject, please feel free to mention this to any member of the Committee or to myself.

The Newsletter now has a new Editor. Nigel Denton who has been responsible for so many well-produced editions feeling that he would like more free time in which to pursue his own varied interests has handed over the editorial chair and ball-point to Peter Southerton. Many thanks, Nigel, for all your hard work. Nigel will not however be disappearing entirely from the scene having kindly offered to continue with the printing.

Your Society continues in its happy relationship with the many local societies concerned with the many aspects of Local History. One of the highlights of the Summer Season was an enjoyable evening cruise along the Kennet at the invitation of B.I.A.G. who as well as showing us some relics of Reading's industrial past introduced us to some attractive views of the countryside complete with glimpses of herons and a kingfisher! Those of you who enjoyed the Victorian evening shared with the Berks Archaeological Society will, I know, already be looking forward to our next joint venture early in the New Year. On this occasion we will travel back in time to the Roaring Twenties - the era of the flapper and of Oxford bags.

Mary Southerton,
Chairman.

PROGRAMME FOR 1984/5.

Particulars of the meetings for the coming season are set out on a separate sheet. Further copies may be obtained from the Secretary, Sue Read or from Peter Southerton.

Although our membership figures remain healthy, the more members we have, the greater the scope for more exciting meetings and excursions. Do therefore tell your friends about the History of Reading Society, bring them along and encourage them to enrol.

RECENT MEETINGS

The G.W.R. - Calling at Reading along the line.

On the 17th May before a packed audience - which included members of the Great Western Society - Mr Matthew Turner treated us to an instructive and entertaining evening.

Illustrated by a very large number of slides, Mr Turner's talk covered the history of the line going back to its forerunners the Stockton & Darlington and the Manchester & Liverpool undertakings - the appointment of Isambard K. Brunel as Chief Engineer and the building of the line in various stages from Paddington to Bristol and later to Penzance - the many developments and innovations including the provision of Automatic Signalling in the engine cabs, road buses, diesel railcars etc. Many interesting sidelights were given on the life of Brunel in assisting his father in the construction of the Thames tunnel, his work in the great steamships, the Great Western, Great Britain and the Great Eastern and also the Clifton Suspension Bridge. Pictures were also shown of the replica of the Royal Waiting Rooms at Windsor Station and the engine sheds etc. of the Great Western Society at Didcot. By courtesy of Reading Museum and Art Gallery the name plate of the Castle Class engine "READING ABBEY" graced the assembly.

Altogether a fascinating evening.

A.E.R.

The Trees of Central Reading.

On July 5th, Miss Catherine Olver whose 'Tree Walks' have been greatly enjoyed on previous occasions introduced the Society to the trees which inhabit the

Town Centre. One could be forgiven for thinking in the first instance that she had chosen a particularly barren area. How wrong one would have been.

The Forbury Gardens contains no fewer than thirty five different varieties of tree, some being particularly fine specimens. Of particular interest is the huge narrow leaved ash, a great rarity, tucked away within the Abbey ruins. In the gardens proper may be found the exotic ginko, handkerchief and tulip trees, the latter in full flower, a variety of hollies and a magnificent black mulberry. In St. Lawrences churchyard may be found yew and sycamore, oak, beech, ash and the Judas tree. Recently planted around the former hospitium may be found specimens of hornbeam, purple maple and eucalyptus. In the vicinity of the Old Town Hall, the Market Place and the Yield Hall car park may be found silver maple, weeping willow and a fig tree. St. Mary's churchyard is another rich site boasting another tulip tree, also in flower, a catalpa (indian bean tree) and the rare willow leaved pear.

The trees planted in and around the Civic Centre whilst unobtrusive do much to soften the harsh lines of ferro-concrete and show that our Parks & Gardens Department is by no means unsympathetic in its approach to trees in the urban setting.

P.G.S.

Reading Churches

On a pleasant evening in June members met at S. Giles Church, Southampton Street for another architectural walkabout. Our guide on this occasion was Mr Godwin Arnold. Joined by members of his evening class he took us to three well known churches.

At St. Giles we were welcomed by the Vicar who told us of the church's association with the Oxford Movement and pointed out many features of interest. We then proceeded to St. Mary's, Castle Street. Here, due to a misunderstanding, the Vicar was not immediately available to show us his church. Our next call was at Greyfriars where we were welcomed by Mr Gordon Spriggs who, with other members of the congregation, had set out for us a collection of documents relating to the church's long and unusual history. We were made to feel very welcome and it was a pity that we had to take our leave more quickly than was intended, the Vicar of St. Mary's arriving full of apologies to collect us. We were able after all to see inside that church - a most interesting building. In contrast to St. Giles, this evangelical church is very plain, rectangular in shape with a gallery around three sides. Several members of the party ventured into the large pulpit to view the church from the preacher's point of vantage.

For this instructive and interesting evening we extend our sincere thanks to Mr Godwin Arnold and to the Clergy and members of the three churches visited.

M.F.S.

A VOYAGE UNDER READING

.....'To begin at the beginning'..... The Holy Brook was built by the Monks of Reading Abbey to power their mill. It runs for about 8 miles from Theale to the west of Reading where it comes off the River Kennet, through Reading at a slightly higher level than the Kennet, under the Abbey Mill to rejoin the Kennet at the Abbey Wharf by Chestnut Walk. It is not known whether the monks used a watercourse which existed before Reading Abbey was founded in 1121, or whether they dug the channel all the way....

One sunny Saturday in June of this year I took a kind of 'voyage of discovery' or 'a water trip back in time' when I went under and along the course of the Holy Brook. Arriving at the Courage's Brewery site in Castle Street I was handed a crash helmet and a 'Mae West', the first to safeguard my head as the arches under which I was to go were very low indeed in some places, the other to save me from sinking to the bottom should the canoe topple over! I then descended a rope ladder into a small two-man canoe, was handed a lamp and with a whoosh of the paddle we were off, sailing 'underneath the arches' which roof the Holy Brook which at this point runs underground in a general west to east direction. As we moved downstream I shone my 'Florence Nightingale' lamp upwards lying very low in the canoe at this point as the brick arching was near to my face - I noticed that soon the brick arching gave way to a low curve of squared limestone blocks extending for some 60 to 70 feet. This then changed to about 36 feet of moulded limestone ribbing in the same curvature. Brickwork then took over again as the Holy Brook ran under Bridge Street. In places during the course of the journey I noticed that the roof was sagging rather badly and ducked my head accordingly! The carved stone ribs which my lamp revealed have only recently been examined by staff from Reading University and Reading Museum. These MAY date back to the time of the Abbey. We were literally swept under part of what was once Courage's Brewery, the current being quite strong here, then onwards past 'The Happy Dane' (formerly Le Corbiere Restaurant). I had previously noticed that an old sewer seemed to run into the Holy Brook and was informed that this was now a rainwater drain. I also noticed in the light of my lamp that in some of the arches quite different stones were apparent and about thirty of these had definite markings and carvings still be to seen on them. These are from Reading Abbey itself. Unfortunately they will have to remain in situ as possibly everything would collapse were these to be removed. The canoe then sailed under the Ship Hotel where not only did I see some rusty knives and forks in the water but also espied a Sainsbury's trolley! Then under the stone bridge over which Duke Street passes - here the south wall of the Abbey runs along the northern side of the Holy Brook until it

rejoins the Kennet. Finally we sailed by the site of the Wharf of Reading Abbey, recently excavated and now being developed into yet more office accommodation. Here goods for the Abbey were unloaded and from here the body of Henry I was taken from the state barge in which he was carried up the Thames for burial in 1136. Then by Chestnut Walk along the north of the River Kennet and behind the walls of Reading Gaol - immortalised by Oscar Wilde who, for a time, occupied a cell there.

The Holy Brook originally ran through Reading 'open unto the fields and to the sky' all the way save where it passed under bridges. Over the centuries more and more of it has been covered over and built upon until now it runs for half a mile under the centre of Reading (which is the part I found most fascinating) hardly seeing the light of day at all.

The stones and bricks making up its walls echoed for me the history of the town across the 800 years since the monks first built the water course - known as 'The Holy Brook.'

Daphne M. Baker.

Thames Valley HERITAGE

- A NEW PERIODICAL

Thames Valley Heritage was started this year by a husband and wife team, Peter Hiley, who for 12 years was editor of the Evening Post, Reading, and Christine Hiley, a local teacher. The magazine has been delivered free to some 15,000 homes in the Reading area in the early stages and has now been put on sale (price 80p or £1 including p.&p); there will be extra items in the magazine for sold copies. The hallmark of the magazine is quality, which we will not diminish; if we cannot maintain the quality we will not produce it. Our objective is to increase people's awareness of the world about them and to cater for the needs of those whose interest in our rich heritage is aroused. The magazine is intended to be informative but not stodgy, lively but not trivial. It will be prepared to comment upon matters of local importance. It also hopes to help people to do more than take an interest in the area; it will encourage readers to write to the magazine and provide drawings and other illustrations, thus sharing their enthusiasm with a wide audience.

P.H.

All enquiries to Peter Hiley, Editor, Thames Valley Heritage,

(Well produced and beautifully illustrated, we commend this publication to all Members. Excellent value for money.)

Editor.

ONE-DAY SATURDAY SCHOOLS

Of the one-day schools organised by the University of Reading in conjunction with the W.E.A. the following promise to be of particular interest to Members:

"Reading Abbey Waterfront". Saturday 16th March, 1985 at the University, London Road.

A symposium at which will be presented reports of the recent excavation (which many of you will have visited) together with the results of various specialist studies including seeds, wood, leather and pottery.

"The Civil War around Reading". Saturday, 13th April, 1985, at The Abbey Gateway.

The staff of Reading Museum and Art Gallery and others will present an account of the dramatic story of the siege of Reading in 1643, the military actions in and around the town, the local and national personalities involved and the military equipment used.

The cost of each course is a modest £3.85. For further particulars contact

Extramural Office,
Room G13, School of Education,
The University,
London Road, READING.
(Tel: 875234 ext. 230)

FROM THE TREASURER

Since September, 1983, we have recruited a number of new members bringing the total membership to about eighty.

Sadly, there are still a few members who have yet to renew their subscription for 1984/5. For your convenience there is a completed membership form enclosed with this newsletter. All you have to do is to return it to me with your remittance.

The rates remain unchanged from last year:

Individual Membership	£ 3.00
Family Membership	£ 4.00
Students and Senior Citizens	£ 1.50

Nigel Denton.