

## *The History of Reading Society*

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

<u>Secretary</u>	<u>Chairman</u>	<u>Hon. Treasurer</u>
Miss Sue READ, 15, South Street, Caversham, READING RG4 8HY	Mrs Mary SOUTHERTON 25, Barnwood Close, READING RG3 1BY	Lt.Cdr Graham NAISH 19, Denmark Road, READING RG1 5PA
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### ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Despite the raw March weather, there was a good attendance at the A.G.M. which was held in the Abbey Gateway Room on Thursday, 21st March.

In her report, the Chairman, Mary Southerton, recalled a year's programme of varied and interesting lectures, outdoor meetings which were much enjoyed and a pleasant day excursion to Lacock Abbey and the Fox Talbot Museum. Members also participated in recording particulars of a former bakery in Prospect Street, Caversham, now in course of redevelopment as a bookshop. Our Hon. Treasurer, Nigel Denton, who this year announces his decision to retire - temporarily, we hope - from office reported an encouraging increase in membership and, despite increases in the charge for the hire of our room as well as in the cost of printing and postage, a healthy balance in the bank. Thank you, Nigel, for stewarding our funds so well.

Mary Southerton and Sue Read were re-elected Chairman and Secretary respectively for the coming year. Graham Naish, a staunch supporter of the Society for many years was unanimously elected Hon. Treasurer. Mr Bent Weber who has for many years scrutinised the accounts was re-appointed Auditor.

The Committee for the coming year will comprise, in addition to the Officers of the Society, Mr A. Crump, Mr J. Gafford, Mrs E. Naish and Mr P. Southerton.

The formalities completed, Amyas Crump, a devotee of the Great Western Railway, drew the attention of the meeting to the fact that 1985 marks the 150th Anniversary of the incorporation of the G.W.R. In a talk well-illustrated by slides, he outlined the achievements of the G.W. Society and spoke of the celebrations and attractions planned for the coming months. As part of its contribution to this very special year, the History of Reading Society is to meet the cost of the renovation of the nameplate of the former Hall Class loco "Reading Abbey" now in the care of Reading Museum (the nameplate, not the engine.Ed.)

The once all too familiar sign of the three brass balls, the insignia of the pawnbroker, has almost disappeared from the urban scene. Reading's last "Uncle", Frank Eyles of London Street, who closed his pledge office in 1980 is about to put up the shutters of his shop for the last time within a week of the meeting. In order that some record of the premises in which this long-established business has been conducted since the latter years of Queen Victoria's reign might be preserved, Ken Major, working in conjunction with Reading Museum went behind the scenes to capture a photographic impression of both the premises and the mode of operation of what was once a valuable social service for the less well off. His account of what he found there opened a door upon an unfamiliar but fascinating aspect of social history.

#### WE VISIT BRADFORD-ON-AVON

Our visit to Bradford-on-Avon on Sunday, 28th July is proving most popular and demand for places on the coach is brisk. Members are advised to secure their places as soon as possible to avoid disappointment.

If you have not yet booked, please send the enclosed form to me with your deposit of £2.00. The total cost of £5.00 (children £4.00) is inclusive of coach fare, conducted tour led by members of the Bradford-on-Avon Preservation Trust and a cream tea in the historic Priory Barn.

Whether your interest be in old churches, picturesque towns or delightful scenery there is something here for you. All are welcome - bring along your friends and relations for a pleasant excursion.

## THE HAND OF FRIENDSHIP

I feel that the time has come for me to mention a group of dedicated individuals whose names will never be made known but whose services to the less fortunate people of Reading ought nevertheless to be placed on record. I refer of course to "The Samaritans."

It all began in London. Hidden away behind the Mansion House stands the Church of St. Stephen, Walbrook. Here in 1953, the Rev Chad Varah assembled in the crypt a small band of voluntary workers whose task it was to offer help and support to those unfortunate beings, so many of whom are to be found in the cities, the weight of whose problems had brought them to contemplating ending their lives. His group, taking their name from the Parable of the Good Samaritan, offered an opportunity to talk over one's worries either cloaked by the anonymity of the telephone or informally over a cup of warming tea with a sympathetic friend. From the outset strict anonymity and confidentiality were observed. The caller need never identify himself whilst the worker was known only by his or her Christian name. Whatever might be discussed was treated with the secrecy of the confessional. So successful was this experiment that before long branches sprang up all over England and before long in many other parts of the world.

The Reading branch of the Samaritans was set up by the Rev. Philip Miller, Vicar of St. Giles, and opened up its lines on Sunday, 12th July, 1962. In the first year no fewer than 303 anxious or despairing people had either telephoned or had come in person to the little office in the basement of St. Giles Hall. The number of contacts has grown steadily year by year. At no time has the branch ceased to operate even whilst in course of moving its premises. In mid-1969 the Samaritans moved to more spacious accommodation on the first floor of Trinity Hall, Sidmouth Street. With the closure and demolition of Trinity Church and its various buildings the Samaritans again moved house, this time to their present home at 154, Southampton Street. This body which is funded entirely by freewill offering and draws not a penny from any public monies is staffed around the clock by a team of volunteers from all walks of life, all carefully selected and highly trained to understand and to win the confidence of depressed, troubled, frightened or angry people. Contrary to popular belief, the Samaritans are concerned not only to help potential suicides but to offer counsel and comfort to anyone who in the face of personal problems does not know which way to turn.

The Rev. Canon Miller passed away in 1984 at the age of 85 years. The Samaritans links with St. Giles, one of Reading's ancient churches, are perpetuated in the annual service of thsnksgiving which is held there. Of all the many groups who have worshipped there, few can be as worthy as the Samaritans whose warmth and friendship, unconditionally offered, has helped rebuild many a life - God bless them.

Tony Mansfield.

## FROM GUILD-MERCHANT TO TOWN COUNCIL

Although medieval man was generally self-sufficient there were nevertheless specialist trades and services upon which he came to rely. The weaver, dyer, clothier, shoemaker, metalworker, butcher, baker and barber are cases in point. Within the towns the various tradesmen tended to live and work together, each establishing for themselves a well-defined community. In Reading, Butcher Row and Shoemaker Row are but two examples. It was therefore a natural progression for these tradesmen to band together for mutual support and for protection against unfair competition. These groups or "Companies" were soon to discover the advantages of coming together in a single body which could more efficiently control trade within the town thus increasing the prosperity of the members. Thus was formed the "Guild-Merchant", a body which came to play an important part in local affairs. In some towns, as in Reading, it became so powerful as to take over completely.

The first records of Reading's Guild-Merchant date from the 13th Century although it had already been in existence for some time. The members of the Guild, entrance to which was a jealously guarded privilege, were known as 'Burgesses'. Originally, the Guild was headed by two Stewards elected by the Burgesses from among their number. The Abbot seeing the Guild as something of a threat to his own authority saw to it that they were supplanted by a Warden nominated by himself. In practice the Burgesses had the right to refuse any nominee whom they considered unsuitable. Later the process was reversed, the Abbot selecting the Warden from a short list submitted by the Guild. The Warden wielded considerable power and anyone, even a Burgess, who insulted or disobeyed him ran the risk of severe punishment. Greatly to the disapproval of the Abbot, the Warden claimed the privilege of having a mace carried before him on formal occasions.

There was no set number of Burgesses. Before the dissolution of the Abbey they fluctuated between twenty and fifty. This meant that the town's trade and government was in the hands of a small group of privileged people. Even Reading residents who were not members were regarded as "foreigners" and could trade, if at all, only after payment to the Guild of substantial dues. The Burgesses on the other hand, by virtue of a Charter granted by Henry III, had the right to trade freely without payment of tolls of any kind throughout England. The terms of the charter were confirmed by successive monarchs with only minor amendments. The Charter of Henry VII besides confirming the Guild in its earlier privileges goes on to speak of "The Mayor and Burgesses of Reading" thus implying that the Warden was the chief citizen of Reading and, under the Abbot, its governor.

Membership of the Guild demanded certain responsibilities of the Burgesses including the maintenance of law and order, the cleanliness of the town and the smooth running of the fairs and markets. It fell to the Guild therefore to appoint and pay various officials including Constables and Clerk to the Markets.

The Guild had its meeting place in a building beside the Kennet at the foot of Yield Hall Lane. With time these premises became too small for their purpose and, it is said, unbearably noisy on account of the local washerwomen who carried out their work nearby. Upon the dissolution, the Guild was given the church of the Grey Friars standing at the western end of the town in which to make its new home.

The long-established power of the Abbey having been swept away, the Guild Merchant had no longer to defer to the ecclesiastic authorities in the management of local affairs. What had originated as an organisation for the control of trade in the interests of its members now had complete charge of the government of the town, subject only to the laws of the Realm. Although the town of Reading was to change and expand, the constitution of the Guild-Merchant, now the Corporation, was to remain largely unchanged for some three centuries. Although governed and taxed by the Corporation, the ordinary townspeople were allowed no part in the choice of its members. The Corporation itself not only filled any vacant places within its membership but also carried on its business in private. A 19th Century commentator relates that prior to the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, legislation equally as important as the great Reform Act of 1832, which gave the right to elect the Corporation to all rate-paying householders, "Government was in the hands of a close corporation, self-electing and confined in practice to a small clique, mostly related by birth to one another." With this far reaching change in electoral law, the way was open for the introduction of the democratic system which is today taken for granted.

Peter Southerton

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From the Berkshire Chronicle, 30th April 1825.

Mr Graham (the aeronaut) begs leave most respectfully to inform the nobility, gentry and inhabitants of Reading and the vicinity that he intends making his seventeenth ascent in his magnificent balloon from The Oracle, Reading on Wednesday next, the fourth of May.....

Admission to the process of inflation and ascent 2/6.

A band of music will attend.

## READING IN THE CIVIL WAR

Reading, standing as it does astride the main road from London to the West and at an important crossing point on the Thames, was of great strategic importance during the Civil War. The King, having established himself at Oxford, felt that whilst he held the town his enemies could not readily advance upon him from London. In the Winter of 1642 he established here a garrison of 2,000 foot soldiers and a regiment of horse under the command of Sir Arthur Aston. The long expected assault by the Parliamentary army under the Earl of Essex came in the Spring of the following year. The Royalist governor having stoutly refused to surrender, Essex made his headquarters at Southcote Manor and laid siege.

Although its low lying position made it a most difficult place to fortify, Reading's defences were strong. A line of ramparts were thrown up from Greyfriars Church along the line of Sackville Street, Garrard Street and Forbury Road to the Abbey. Forbury Hill would have been an important observation point affording clear views to the Thames, Caversham and the high ground to the north whilst the Abbey itself offered a ready supply of stone for the construction of the many redoubts and strong points around the perimeter. The line continued along the boundary of the Abbey enclosure as far as the bridge over the Kennet. For a short distance the Kennet itself served as moat. The earthworks resumed at the northern extremity of Sidmouth Street, running I suspect a little to the west of the present day line of the road, and half way up Kendrick Road. Somewhere near to where The Abbey School now stands was a fortified position marking the south-eastern corner of the line. From here the defences ran westwards along the narrow footpath which today still leads to Silver Street and onwards to the ridge upon which Alpine Street is situated before plunging steeply down to the Kennet. At river level the already marshy ground had been rendered impassible to military traffic by the flooding of the water meadows. The ramparts began again at the top of Castle Hill and ran in a direct line back to Greyfriars. The western sector being under the greatest threat from the enemy forces encamped at Southcote would have been the part most strongly defended. An advance post, 'The Forlorn Hope' was situated near the junction of the Bath Road and Tilehurst Road to delay any attack from that direction.

Although three centuries of urban growth and development appear at first sight to have obliterated every trace of these quite extensive military works, can this really be the case? Can the line of the defences be accurately traced onto present day maps of the town. Whilst it cannot be denied that in some places the extent of modern building and earth moving has been so cataclysmic as to

have removed every trace of what may formerly have existed on the site, there must on the other hand still be odd areas where the ground still retains traces of 17th Century ditches and embankments. It may be possible also to identify sites about to be cleared which may yet reveal their past through excavation.

Following the recent, very successful Day School on Reading in the Civil War, Mr Leslie Cram, Keeper of Archaeology at Reading Museum, has suggested that it would prove both interesting and useful if the line of Reading's defences could be accurately traced and a record made of any surviving traces. Negative evidence as to those sections which have been totally obliterated could also be of value. This is perhaps a project which could be undertaken by Members of the History of Reading Society. Is there anyone among us with a little knowledge of surveying who might like to gather a small group of friends to pursue this fascinating piece of detective work.

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FOR YOUR DIARY.....

- Thursday 16th May "Readings own carbuilders". David Quartermaine  
7.30 p.m. at the Abbey Gateway.
- Thursday 13th June A Caversham walkabout led by Molly Casey  
Meet 7.30 p.m. at Caversham Court.
- Thursday 4th July We explore Watlington Street and the Redlands  
area led by Ken Major.
- Sunday 28th July We visit Bradford-on-Avon. See leaflet.

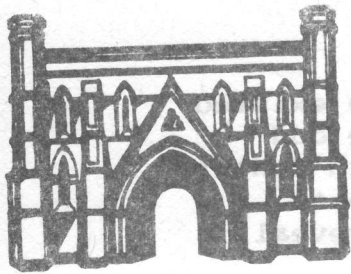
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AND FINALLY.....

the long awaited opening of the new  
Museum at Blake's Lock will take place on Saturday, 28th June.

Following the formal opening there will be a day of celebration and festivity. Among the attractions will be the Reading Barber Shop Quartet (performing in an appropriate setting), Punch and Judy, the Reading Cloggies and lots, lots more.

Situated in former industrial buildings over a century old, the new museum will present displays relating to Reading's waterways, a reconstruction of an early 20th Century barber's shop, part of Huggins' Bakery which formerly stood in Crown Street and a corner of Parnell's the Printers. Much imagination and hard work has been invested in this venture. Let us as a Society offer Mr Sizer and his staff our congratulations and support.



# The History of Reading Society

SUNDAY 28th JULY,

WE VISIT.....

## BRADFORD-ON-AVON

Bradford-on-Avon is an exceptionally picturesque town on the banks of the River Avon. Among the places of interest here are the ancient bridge with its former chapel, fine 17th and 18th Century houses, old weavers' cottages and quaint steep alleyways. St. Lawrence's is perhaps the finest complete Saxon church in the country.

We will be met by members of the Bradford on Avon Preservation Trust who will lead us on a tour of the town. The visit will conclude with a cream tea in the Priory Barn.

### Choice of tours:

Churches walk - Saxon church, Holy Trinity, St. Mary Tavy, the Terraces and view over the town

Town Walk - Barton Farm, Bridge and lock-up, almshouses and chapels (avoiding the steep hills)

Industrial Archaeology Trail.

Coach leaves Reading Station, 10.30 am. Returns 6.30 pm

Cost: Adults £5.00 Children (under 12) £4.00

Certain fees having to be paid in advance it is necessary to call for a deposit of £2 per head upon booking, the balance to be collected on the coach.

ALL WELCOME - bring along your friends and relations.

Please return the booking slip with your deposit to Peter Southerton, 25, Barnwood Close, Reading (Tel:56867) at your earliest convenience.....

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### VISIT TO BRADFORD ON AVON, SUNDAY 28th JULY, 1984

Please reserve places for.....adults and .....children

I enclose herewith £..... by way of deposit.

My preference is for Churches walk  
Town Walk  
Industrial Archaeological Trail

NAME:..... ADDRESS:.....

Tel:.....