



AUTUMN 1985

The History of Reading Society

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

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Dear Members,

The Summer of 1985, despite the poor weather, has proved a memorable season for local historians.

The new Central Library in King's Road, which opened its doors on July 1st has among its many facilities the County Local Studies Library. Here, readily accessible, is a magnificent collection of material including books, maps, photographs, census returns and newspapers, relating to the whole of Berkshire including those parts annexed to Oxfordshire in 1974. The part of the collection relating to Reading is particularly comprehensive. I hope that you will all avail yourself of this service. Miss Daphne Phillips and her staff will be happy to advise and assist you in every possible way.

We are happy to see that attention is at last being paid to the remaining fragments of Reading's once noble Abbey. Earlier this year the Mayor successfully launched his Abbey Ruins Appeal to augment the monies made available by the Local Authority and the Department of the Environment for restoration work. The mammoth task of conserving the rapidly crumbling fabric has already commenced. Long may it continue. The Friends of Reading Abbey celebrated their

their society's first birthday on June, 18th. Several members of the History of Reading Society, I am pleased to say, are involved with that body whose aim is to increase public awareness in this link with Reading's monastic and royal past.

The highlight of the Summer season was without doubt the opening of Blake's Lock Museum. Situated in an attractive Victorian building which once housed pumping machinery, this museum offers a variety of attractive displays illustrating life in bygone Reading.

Looking ahead, your Society offers as varied a program of meetings as one could wish for. The season commences on Thursday, September 26th, with David Downes, author of "Biscuits and Royals" recalling the history of Reading Football Club. Full particulars of the coming year's programmes have been printed on a separate sheet which accompanies this newsletter. Further copies are available free on request. Give a copy to your friends!

Our New Year's party with the theme "Bakers, Barbers and Boatmen" will take place at Blake's Lock Museum on Thursday, 9th January. Further walkabout meetings are planned for early Summer and will, we hope, include a guided tour of Reading's waterside.

Mary Southerton.

MORE ABOUT THE NEW YEAR'S PARTY.....

Thursday 9th January, 1986

Our New Year's party will be held again with the Berkshire Archaeological Society. The theme will be that of Blake's Lock Museum centring on the Waterways, Trades and Industries of Reading in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Join with the atmosphere of the building and the displays and come in the costume of a barber, baker, boatman, shopkeeper, printer, dairyman or any type of customer.

The refreshments will have an early 19th century flavour following the traditions established by the specialist food supplier, Charles Cocks, famed for the 'Reading Sauce' which came into production in 1802. Musical entertainment will be provided by the Southern Comfort Barber Shop Quartet.

Venue: Blakes Lock Museum, Gasworks Road, off Kenavon Drive, Forbury Industrial Park, Reading.

Tickets: £2. Available at meetings, or by post from Sue Read, Reading Museum & Art Gallery, Blagrove Street, Reading. RG1 1QH (S.A.E. please)

RECENT MEETINGS

The Summer season concluded with two out-door meetings. The first of these took place on June 13th when we crossed the Thames for a guided tour of Caversham Court and St. Peter's Church conducted by Mrs Molly Casey. Standing on the site of what was until the 1930's a truly historic building Mrs Casey told of the well-known families who had lived there and pointed out the scattered remnants still to be seen - the crinkle-crankle wall to the rear of the former kitchen garden, the stables and, of course, the 17th century gazebo, happily saved from complete dilapidation by the Civic Society. From the riverside gardens we walked a short way up St. Peter's Hill past the chalk pits once worked by William Blackall Simonds, Reading brewer and banker, to view the houses which he built for his estate workers and thence to the parish church. A church, we were to learn, had stood on this site from Saxon times. The church that we know today has over the years undergone extensive alteration and rebuilding, each generation leaving its own distinctive mark. Despite the rain which made the latter part of the evening rather uncomfortable the visit was greatly enjoyed and we hope that Mrs Casey will lead us on further tours in the not too distant future.

The second walkabout was led by Ken Major who on July 4th took us into the Watlington Street/Redlands area. After an introductory talk and discussion as to the origins of the name 'Livesey' in terra-cotta on the wall of a house opposite our starting point we set off noting on our way the diversity in the size and style of the properties within this compact neighbourhood. This was particularly apparent in Watlington Street where with Ken's help we were able to look afresh at features which we might have otherwise passed without a second glance. More than one of the local people came out to look with amazement (and possibly with alarm and suspicion) at the group of strangers intently studying their doors and windows. The architectural richness of this part of the town is quite surprising and we thank Ken most sincerely for sharing his enthusiasm with us.

Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire, was the destination of our annual excursion on July 26th. Within a small space this interesting little town offers monuments from Saxon, medieval and late Elizabethan/early Jacobean times. Situated in the heart of a sheep rearing area and having copious supplies of water for processing and for power Bradford on Avon was formerly an important centre of the cloth trade. Here the clothiers not only built fine houses for themselves but provided good accommodation for their workers. Many of these buildings have been carefully and sensitively restored. Upon arrival we were met by members of the Bradford on Avon Preservation Trust who conducted small groups around the features of the town - the restored Saxon church, the 14th century tithe barn, the bridge with its chapel cum lock-up and the steep, narrow lanes leading up to St. Mary Tory with its fine views of the Avon Valley.

The visit was brought to a pleasant close with a tea of generous proportions in the historic Barton Farm laid on by our hosts.

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FIRE IN KINGS ROAD

A brief item in the Reading Mercury of February 17th, 1883, illustrates very clearly the somewhat chaotic arrangements for fighting fire which existed in the Borough of Reading during the latter part of the 19th century.

A little after midnight on Thursday, 15th February, alarm was raised that the shop premises of Mr A.J. Simmonds, clothier, of 79, Kings Road were on fire. Help was fortunately to hand and Mrs Simmonds and her six children were helped from the bedroom windows of the building by a neighbour, Councillor King and two Police Constables, Wickens and Pullman.

News of the fire being conveyed to the Police Station in Bridge Street, Superintendent Purchase took charge of the situation. His first orders were that the hand pump be sent at once to the fire and that the Borough No.1 engine be made ready. This steamer was under the charge of Captain, Mr R.L. Clarke assisted by Foreman Pecover and six firemen. The first appliance to arrive at the scene was Huntley & Palmer's engine manned by the factory's night watchman and several of the company's constables.

Of the insurance company sponsored engines, the "County" came up from Mill Lane. Another privately owned engine, "The Volunteer", was however delayed as insufficient horses could be found and it was too heavy to be dragged along by hand.

Copious supplies of water being available from the Kennet to the rear of the premises, the fire was quickly put out. It is reported that whilst much damage was done to Mr Simmonds premises and stock the fire was contained and little damage done to adjacent buildings.

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OFTEN HEARD BUT SELDOM SEEN

Whilst much has been written about Reading's churches, their architecture and their monuments, little has been published concerning their bells. These bells whose music one tends to take for granted provide a direct link with Reading's past.

St. Lawrence is notable in that it houses the only ring of twelve bells in Berkshire. The tower took its present form in 1458 and its bells have sounded for over five centuries. Throughout this time the parishioners have spared no expense to keep them in good order and in accordance with the fashion of the day. The churchwardens' accounts show that there were originally three bells in the tower. By 1499, a large bell dubbed "Harry" had been cast locally and presented to the church by Henry Kelsall, a rich clothier. By the beginning of the 17th century another bell had been added making five. In 1663, these were taken down and recast making a ring of eight smaller bells. Careless handling having caused some of them to crack they were again recast in 1748 and two more added to produce a ring of ten, the first of that size in the county. Of these four remain in their original condition and are as well tuned as when first hung two hundred years ago. In 1929 it was found that the original timber frames in the belfrey were in urgent need of renewal. A successful public appeal made it possible to replace these with cast iron frames with modern bearings yet retaining the traditional ringing gear. At this time two more bells were added to the ring making it the finest in Berkshire. Having survived the reformation, the rigours of the Civil War and the hard times of later years all was nearly lost when in 1944 an enemy bomb seriously damaged the church. By a miracle the tower and belfrey remained intact and have since that time sounded many a memorable peal.

The Churchwardens' accounts of St. Mary's tell us that in medieval times that church had a ring of five bells. Two of these were however sold, presumably to raise funds, at the time when the church was rebuilt with materials from the redundant Reading Abbey.. The church continued with a ring of three until 1604 when two new bells were bought partly by way of private gift and partly from donations by parishioners. Of these one was cast in Reading by Henry Knight, one of a family of well-known Reading bell-founders, the other in the famous Whitechapel foundry. Both bells were hung by "Old Father Barnes" whose services appear to have been much in demand throughout the county. A sixth, treble, bell was added in 1617 at a cost of £51.10.5. The ring was enlarged to its present size by the gift in 1740 of two further treble bells by William Strode and John Blgrave. Other than two cracked bells

being recast in the late 19th century the ring remained unaltered until 1929 when all eight bells were retuned and set in a new cast iron frame similar to that at St. Lawrence's.

Whilst the bells of St. Giles are of more modern origin they are said to possess a particularly fine tone and represent the best products of the Whitechapel foundry. Here we find a ring of eight, six dating from 1793 with two trebles added in 1890. These are not however the original bells as the Churchwardens' accounts make mention of a ring of five there during the 16th century. What became of these original bells? One suspects that they were casualties of the Civil War as in 1643 the tower was severely damaged by the siege guns of the Parliamentarian army.

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From the "Berkshire Chronicle", 20th June, 1863.

KING EDWARD 1's DYING REQUEST

When he perceived he could not recover he called to him his eldest son, who was after king, and made him swear in the presence of all his barons, by the Saints, that as soon as he should be dead, he would have his body boiled in a cauldron until the flesh should be separated from the bones, and that he would have the flesh buried and the bones preserved: and that every time the Scots should rebel against him, he would summon his people, and carry with him the bones of his father, for he believed most firmly that so long as his bones should be carried against the Scots, those Scots would never be victorious.

His son did not however fulfill what he had sworn but had his father carried to London and buried.

-- G.G. Scott's "Gleanings from Westminster Abbey":

(Contributed by Bert Rivers)

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FROM THE TREASURER.

A few members have yet to pay their subscription for the current year. If you have not yet paid, would you kindly settle up with me as soon as possible, thank you.

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