



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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NEWSLETTER - WINTER 1985

Dear Members,

I trust that you had an enjoyable Christmas and wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year. Your Committee, too, join with me in this greeting.

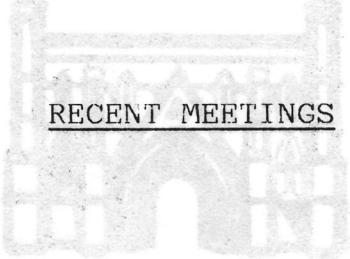
We have a varied programme of talks arranged for the coming months with evening walkabouts in the early Summer. In March, following the A.G.M. we are holding a Members Evening to which you are all invited to contribute. The prospect of addressing the meeting does not, of course, appeal to everyone. You may however have photos, postcards or other items of interest which you may care to put on display. There will be a Summer outing in July details of which will be circulated shortly.

Work has now started on preparing the programme for the Autumn. Any suggestions as to future topics or activities will be very welcome.

Mary Southerton.

SUBSCRIPTIONS for the year 1986/7 are now due.....

Renewal form enclosed herewith.



RECENT MEETINGS

SEPTEMBER.

David Downs took the title of his recent book, "Biscuits and Royals" in recounting the history of Reading Football Club. Reading's first home defeat was in the year 871 A.D. when the Danes played football with the heads of some of their opponents. A thousand years later in the year 1871 Reading F.C. was founded by a group of amateur footballers. Often drawn against well-trained professional sides defeats were not uncommon. The still unbroken record of 18 goals to nil in a match against Preston North End in 1894 was to lead to a decision to turn professional which they did the following season.

The disadvantages of playing on the water meadows at Caversham were overcome by the acquisition of the Elm Park ground. The team began to prosper. Their high point was in 1927 when Reading reached the semi-finals of the Football League only to be beaten by Cardiff City the subsequent Cup Winners. Promotion to the Second Division was sadly short-lived and for more than half a century the team has played in the Third and Fourth Divisions.

Mr Downes' enthusiasm has enabled him to compile and present a fascinating record of the team's fluctuating fortunes together with a splendid collection of photographs and mementoes.

OCTOBER.

This month's meeting took place not at the Abbey Gateway but in Holy Trinity Church, Oxford Road. Our guide for the occasion, the incumbent, the Rev. Brian Brindley.

erected in 1826 in a disused gravel pit, this proprietary chapel was once a very fashionable place to attend. Fortunes have fluctuated but of recent years Holy Trinity has again flourished. Behind the rather undistinguished facade is a veritable treasure house. Among the features is a carved screen designed by Pugin in 1840 which once graced St. Chad's R.C. Cathedral, Birmingham. This must surely be one of Reading's finest works of art. Ranking next is a splendid wooden pulpit from which John Wesley is reputed to have preached.

A most unusual feature of the church is its crypt and adjoining catacombs. The tunnels which we explored by candle light were used for interments until the practice was banned in 1850. Some fifty former residents of Reading however lie here behind their identifying inscriptions.

NOVEMBER.

Reading Green Girls School was the subject of a talk by Mrs Barbara Aldridge. This charity school was founded in 1782 by the Vicars of the three ancient parishes of the Borough to provide shelter and education for poor but deserving girls with a view to training them for positions in service. The pupils who were to become known as the "Green Girls" on account of their distinctive uniform appears to have been well cared for. Upon the successful completion of her training each girl would receive a Bible and the not inconsiderable sum of a Guinea. She would receive a similar sum if after a year her employer was willing to give her a good reference.

Established originally in St. Mary's Butts, the school later moved to Broad Street. Upon those premises becoming too expensive to maintain the site was sold and the school transferred to Russell Street. By the 1920's, domestic servants no longer being in demand, the school became redundant. Its name however lives on in a local charity to assist young girls embarking upon employment or further education.

In her researches into the history of the school Mrs Aldridge has made the acquaintance of several former Green Girls and illustrated her talk with items of uniform and other souvenirs loaned to her for the occasion.

DECEMBER.

"Lives and Loves in Early Stuart Reading" was the title of a light-hearted, pre-Christmas account by Joan Dils of some of her findings among the records of the Ecclesiastical Courts. It was before such Courts that disputes between husband and wife, neighbours quarrels and breach of promise actions were argued. The depositions relating to the various cases record the experience of the ordinary person and tell us far more about everyday life than can be learned from conventional history books. These records show us that the people who lived so long ago were neither ignorant nor unsophisticated and, further, that they felt and behaved in ways little different from ourselves.

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ANY OLD IRON?

Brian Boulter is looking into the history of the firm of Battings of Maidenhead who took over Rogers' iron-founding business and later became the Maidenhead Iron Works. Has anyone seen of this company's manhole covers or other street furniture outside of Maidenhead. If so he would be glad to learn of their location.

FROM THE DIARY OF AN UNKNOWN CITIZEN

During the latter years of the 19th Century there came into the possession of the Rev. P.H.Ditchfield, Rector of Barkham, a diary recording events of local interest which occurred between the years 1813-1819. The identity of the writer was never discovered but it was clear that he possessed keen powers of observation and was not wanting in a keen sense of humour. Feeling that the entries reflected faithfully the life of a country town when George III was King, these were published in 1887 under the title "Reading Seventy Years Ago."

The entries now related to a Reading of one hundred and seventy years ago. A selection of these may be of interest at the present time.

Dec.17 1814. The severest sudden frost ever remembered.

Jan.19 1815. The frost very sharp still with deep snow. A boat was drawn round the town by the bargemen, begging.

Jan.21 People walked from one side of the Thames to the other below Caversham Bridge.

Mar.9 Two boats laden with Wednesbury coals arrived. The first since Christmas.

Mar. 16 As cold as yesterday; wind very rough all morning; in the afternoon the sun appeared which made it pleasant.

A TRICK UPON EXCISEMEN. Some time since, Mr Burgess, grocer of this town, received two chests of tea from London, which (not being so good as he expected) he applied at the Excise Office for a permit to send them back; they refused. The Excisemen thinking he meant to send them without, watched him very closely. He filled a chest with rubbish and sent it by the wagon; the Excisemen followed and overtook the wagon by Colnebrook, seized the chest and carried it off in triumph to an adjoining public house, where, to their inexpressible disappointment, they found in it sawdust and brickbats.

In the next Newsletter we will see what the Unknown Citizen has to say on the subject of local elections.

ELECTRICITY

The small group of local citizens who in 1889 pooled their resources to establish the 'Reading Electric Light Depot' were true pioneers. Only eight years previously at the Paris Exhibition the world's first "combined engine and dynamo for generating electricity' had been demonstrated. Electricity was still regarded as a rather dangerous commodity.

Reading's original power station comprised three belt driven generators in a corrugated building on an island in the Kennet below Yield Hall Lane. The supply was taken to the consumers, of whom there were 30 at the end of the first year, by overhead cables carried on brackets.

This small but profitable concern was later to amalgamate with 'The Reading Electricity Supply Co.' whose generating station was in Vastern Road. Here, three flywheel alternators driven by a Fowler Waring slow speed steam engine each yielded 2000 watts. Electricity at 2000 volts was conveyed to sub-stations in West Street and Friar Street where it was stepped down to a manageable 110 volts. Further sub-stations were later set up in Bath Road, London Road and at Cemetery Junction. In 1900 the system was varied to supply electricity at 200 and 400 volts. The only premises to retain the former 110 volt system was Wellstead's shop in Minster Street.

The heavy demand for electricity after the supply was extended in 1910 to Caversham, Tilehurst and Theale demanded better plant. Gas engines installed to provide a more efficient service proved a complete failure, the Company suffering heavy financial loss. These were replaced by compound steam generating units powered by water tube boilers.

The undertaking was purchased by Reading Corporation in 1934 at a cost of £443,000. Prices were reduced and meters replaced the former fixed tariff. A showroom for the sale of electrical appliances was established in the Market Place and better after-sales facilities offered.

Prior to 1935 the only electric street lighting in the area was in Caversham. In that year part of the Oxford Road was lit experimentally by electricity. Such was its popularity that by 1940 electric lighting had been introduced in all main roads.

The Corporation continued to supply electricity to the satisfaction of the town until nationalisation required its transfer to the Southern Electricity Board on March 31st, 1948.

Peter Southerton

FOR YOUR DIARY

FUTURE MEETINGS

20th February, 1986

The Story of Reading's Aerodrome
at Woodley - Julian Temple.

17th April

Reading's 19th Century Enterprizes
in Industry - Dr Tony Corley

22nd May

The Kennet & Avon Canal 1788-
1988 - Graham Horne

Particulars of the Summer evening walkabouts and
of the annual outing, this year to Warwick, will
be circulated shortly.

DAY SCHOOL

ARCHAEOLOGY IN BERKSHIRE IN 1985

The University, London Road Saturday 1st March 9.30

9.30 am - 5 pm

A review of archaeology in the County during 1985.
The subject will be covered in its widest sense,
from prehistory to industrial archaeology and buildings,
at a non-specialist level.

Tickets at £2 available from The Extra Mural Dept.,
University of Reading, London Road.

SPRING TOUR

READING AND THE 1066 COUNTRY

The B.A.S. invites you to share an exploration of
the connections between Reading Abbey and the Cluniac
Priory of Lewes.

Week ending 18th-20th April. Visits will include
Lewes, Battle and the original Norman beach head.
Friday and Saturday nights will be spent in the
beautiful medieval town of Rye.

£40 inclusive of travel and two night bed & breakfast

For further details please contact:
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(Tel: [REDACTED])