



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 - SPRING 1986

Dear Members,

We have almost reached the end of our season of indoor meetings. The last of these will take place on Thursday 22nd May when Graham Horne of the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust will tell of something of the history of what was once Reading's commercial artery and of the work of the Trust. Two outdoor walkabout meetings follow. In June we go ourselves to explore Reading's waterways; in July, we leave the Borough to go as guests of Project Purley to tour their village. The highlight of the year's programme is, as always, our annual excursion. This year we go to Warwick to see both the town and the Castle.

Your Committee is already working on next season's programme. We already have some very interesting speakers for you. Don't forget that this is your Society so do please help us with suggestions for future talks, visits and activities.

Mary Southerton.

SUMMER WALKABOUTS - 1986

Thursday, 19th June

River Kennet Guided Walk with Graham Horn

Meet 7.30 pm outside the Fisherman's Cottage Public House, Kennetside.

Purley Village with Cliff & Jean Debney

Thursday, 24th July

Meet 7.30 pm outside Purley Church. It is hoped to arrange transport from Reading for those without a car. Please let Mary Southerton know if you need a lift.

AND NOW A WORD FROM THE TREASURER

I hope you won't be offended if I mention that there are still a few Members who have yet to pay their subscription for the current year. If you are among that minority, please let me have your cheque as soon as convenient.

The rates for 1986/87:

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|----------------------------|--------|
| Individual | £3. 00 |
| Family | £4. 00 |
| Senior Citizen or Student. | £1. 50 |

Cheques to be made payable to "The History of Reading Society".

WATERWAYS OF OLD READING

1. How many bridges were there in Caversham Road in 1836 (not including Caversham Bridge)?
2. The Crown once had a fishery in a brook in the centre of Reading. What was the name of the brook?
3. Caversham Road had another name in the 18th Century. What was it?

READING'S GAS SUPPLIES

Although William Murdoch lit his house and offices at Redruth Cornwall with coal gas as long ago as 1792, his invention was slow in being accepted. Some people, it seems, just couldn't believe that there could ever be such a thing as a light without a wick. Not until 1810 was a company formed to light part of London with coal gas. Two years later that company received a Royal Charter. The process having thus been given the impetus of respectability other companies began to spring up throughout the country.

Reading was one of the first provincial towns to produce coal gas for public use and in 1819, only 9 years after the formation of the first gas company in London the Reading Gas Light company came into being, its works being situated just off Bridge Street. An experimental plant was in fact already in operation there prior to the formal foundation of the company. The Reading Mercury of 10.11.1817 records that on Monday, 3rd November, the Subscription Billiard, News Room and Library were lighted by gas for the first time. A more public demonstration took the form of a street lamp "which threw a brilliant light on the Bear Inn and part of Seven Bridges." Later in the month the outline of a plan for lighting the town was published, funds raised, Trustees appointed and the Reading Gas Light Company came into being. Mr Cubitt, Civil Engineer, of Ipswich was instructed to draw up plans for a Gas Works and tenders invited. The foundation stone was laid on May 21st by Alderman Annesley following which ceremony the gentlemen of the Committee rounded off the day by dining together at the Upper Ship Inn.

At the Company's first Annual General Meeting on November 30th 1819, the statements of account were deemed highly satisfactory and it was resolved to raise funds with a view to supplying gas to every part of the town.

One of the benefits of gas lighting was that it replaced the feeble oil lamps which had hitherto illuminated the town centre. The funds available to the Commissioners of Paving were however so limited that they could only afford street lighting for eight months of the year. In 1821 a public appeal was made for funds to pay for lighting for the remainder of the year. The gas lighting said the Reading Mercury was "not only highly ornamental but a protection against nocturnal predators."

By 1835 however the fortunes of the Company had begun to flag. The time was ripe for the arrival on the scene of a rival concern. The following year saw the floating of the Reading Union Gas Company, with its works in Kings Road near Huntley & Palmer's factory in King's Road. The fierce, even ruthless rivalry between the two companies brought repeated reductions in price. Whilst the consumers were able to enjoy "the novelty of

cheapness" - the Commissioners of Paving were able to make a saving of '800 p.a. - the effect upon the Companies was disastrous. In 1862, by which time both were near to ruin, an Act of Parliament was obtained for the amalgamation of the two concerns to form The Reading Gas Company which was to serve the town until nationalisation when it was incorporated in the Southern Gas Board.

Following the amalgamation of the two companies gas was produced for a time at both gas works. A new and larger gas works was soon to be built on the banks of the Kennet and the old site transferred to Huntley and Palmer. By 1891 the increased supply enabled gas to be supplied for both heating and cooking as well as for lighting. Improvements in methods of gas production during the early years of the 20th Century not only satisfied the demands of the rapidly increasing number of consumers in the town but permitted the extension of the mains to outlying areas. By this time not only had the quality of gas lighting improved due to the advent in about 1902 of the incandescent mantle but it was freely available to people with lower income thanks to the introduction of the coin operated prepayment meters

Peter Southerton

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RING ANY BELLS.....?

Whilst browsing through the Encyclopaedia Britannica as is my wont, I came upon a reference to Reading. This was under the heading 'Jack' which among its many meanings can refer to a figure which strikes bells on a clock. The earliest known reference to this usage occurs in the Parish Registers of St. Lawrence, Reading, for 1498/99. (*). According to the explanation, 'jack' has long been a word to describe a mechanical substitute for a man or boy e.g. 'boot-jack' or 'meat-jack'. This is no casual reference as it is the derivation given in the Oxford English Dictionary. Unfortunately, as with so many of these chance finds, one is left to speculate about the nature of both the figure and the associated clock.

* In Kerry's "History of the Church of St. Lawrence, Reading" (1883), that item in the Parish Register is reproduced:

"It. payed for the setting of the jak with the hangyng of his bell and mendyng his hond. iiii"

Nigel Denton.

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WATERWAYS OF OLD READING (Answers)

1. Six
2. Gunter's Brook
2. Caversham Water.

"A PLACE OF TERRIBLE DISORDER"

Further jottings from 'The Diary of an Unknown Citizen'.

At election times Reading in the 19th Century was a place of terrible disorder. All decency and order fled, the town giving itself up to drunkenness and crime. Bribery and corruption were rife. Barrels of beer stood open on the pavements each side supplying supporters with an over generous allowance.

May 6th, 1819. It being expected that a dissolution of Parliament will soon take place, an active canvass is carrying on. The candidates, Mr Weyland, Mr Palmer and Mr Lefevre.

June 3rd. At a meeting of the Lodge of Oddfellows this evening, a friend of Mr Weyland's offered to treat them at that gentleman's expense to whatever they may chose to have (there were 32). Mr P...proposed that they should have dinner at their own expense. They had it at Mr P... 's house.

As soon as Mr P... 's patriotic professions became known he was waited upon by the Mayor and Mr Tanner, the brewer, to whom the house he lives in belongs, who told him that unless he votes for Mr Weyland he must turn him out of his house. Mr P... 's patriotism vanished into the air.

Dinners and suppers have been given at several houses this week. The scenes of drunkenness asnd confusion that ensued at these treats was a disgrace to any cause - particularly at the 'Coach and Horses', Silver Street, where there was not one voter. Dinners were called at the 'Barley Mow' and at 'The Post Boy' on the same day but the gormandizing voters altered that at 'The Post Boy' so that they might attend both.

June 16th. They began distributing the colours of the different candidates:- Mr Lefevre's, purple; Mr Palmer's orange tied with green with a cockle shell in the middle; Mr Weyland's, blue and white.

June 17th. Polling began at 11 o'clock. The Wesleyan preachers received an order from their superior to vote for Mr W. while Mr Garrard and Mr Tanner threatened to turn out of their homes all who did not vote for him. Some were offered money not to vote for Mr W. Mr Nicholson, cork cutter, was offered £50 for his vote.

June 18th. Second day of voting. Before the Town Hall doors were opened many of Mr W's supporters got in through a window from Mr Blandy's garden. This soon put Mr W. ahead of Mr P. for a while. Mr W's friends entered a protest against Mr P's eligibility to sit in the Commons because he received a pension. This delayed business for some time, until the Recorder said the objection was not valid as the pension was his wife's.

June 19th. Final day of polling. Mr W. behind in the poll but still continuing to call for votes. No more votes forthcoming notice of close of poll was given. The Mayor declined to close the poll but intended to keep it open as long as possible. Mr

THE COUNTRY CARRIER

From Medieval times until well after the bus and the car had become an accepted feature of rural life, the Carrier provided an important service to the community. In Berkshire, by the early years of the 17th Century there was already a fairly well organised network of carriers operating between villages. With the improvement of the roads following the Turnpike Acts they were able to extend their range and operate a regular timetable. Whilst the coming of the railways made the long distance haulier redundant, the local carrier had even more work on account of the increasing amount of goods needing to be transported from the railway station to outlying villages.

The Carrier would usually set out from some convenient town centre inn. He would take goods of all kinds from town to village returning with assorted produce. Many would for a small commission undertake simple shopping errands. The order having been placed the shopkeeper would take the goods to the starting point. The Carrier for his part would leave these at some handy village inn or shop or deliver to the customer's home if this were not too far from the route. The Carrier would also carry passengers for a modest fare. To travel by Carrier's cart was however a slow and less than comfortable experience.

In 1900, over 125 towns and villages were served by Carriers working from Reading. Most would serve places up to 10 miles distant but a few had journies of 20 miles. Many villages had a choice of Carrier - no less than eight passed through Mortimer. Two local Carriers were authorised to carry mail - Mr Johnson to Theale, Aldermaston and Brimpton and Mr Brown to Pangbourne.

Ten of Reading's town centre inns served as starting places for the Carriers. Of these the Royal Oak in Broad Street was the most popular, some 20 routes starting from here. The Sun in Castle Street with its underground stabling was the base for another 17. For the temperance-minded, Long's Coffee Tavern in Caversham Road was the starting place for two more.

A few Carriers undertook daily journies. The majority however set off twice or three times a week. Departure time was usually during the mid-afternoon and for an hour or two the streets of the town would have been crowded with horses and carts.

Many of the Carriers were well-known local characters. Mr Page who went from Long's Coffee Tavern to Kidmore End and Sonning would announce his arrival on a bugle. Owing to his late hours he was nicknamed "Midnight Page". Mildenhall who ran from The Royal Oak to Nettlebed and Peppard was a Sunday School Teacher and was locally known as "Grumpy".

Mary Southerton

With acknowledgements to Mr Fred Padley.

COMING EVENTS

THE READING COMMUNITY FESTIVAL. Saturday, 31st May.

An afternoon of entertainment and activity in Prospect Park.
All proceeds to the 'Give a Child a Chance' Appeal.

The History of Reading will have a promotional display there to attract new members. If you can spare just one hour between 1 pm and 5.30, to keep any eye on things, your help would be much appreciated.

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THE FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY.

Supper in the Dormitory - Wednesday 18th June. 7.30 p.m.

The annual picnic supper among the Abbey Ruins is an event not to be missed. The Friends of the Abbey and all well-wishers meet to celebrate the arrival of the first Cluniac monks in June 1118. There will be a conducted tour of the ruins with special reference to the restoration work at present being undertaken.

Tickets price £2 from Peter Southerton.

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BERKSHIRE RECORD OFFICE/HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION READING BRANCH

Day Conference

EDUCATIONAL RECORDS 1800-1920

Saturday, June 7th 9.30 am Bulmershe College

The conference will look at the records produced at national and local level by bodies involved in providing public education and will learn how these can be used in historical research.

The conference fee is £4.50 including coffee and tea. Application with remittance, please, to Dr Peter Durrant, Berkshire Record Office, Shire Hall, Shinfield, Reading RG2 9XD.

This conference could be very helpful to anyone writing the history of a school.