

SWINGING READING

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With additions, 2024

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Part 1 – 1832-1900

Amid all the speculation back in 2019 on the outcome of ‘Brexit’ and a possible General Election one paper described Reading West as a ‘swing seat’ – leading me to wonder how far this was true of Reading in former days. Certainly it has swung with the political wind in recent years but was this always the case with Reading West and the various other Reading seats past and present? The timeline below sets out the changes in the structure of parliamentary representation over the period covered.

TIMELINE

1832	First Reform Act with dawn of modern parliamentary democracy
1832-85	Reading, a two-member constituency
1885-1950	Reading, a single member constituency
1950-55	Reading North and Reading South
1955-74	Reading, a single member constituency again
1974-83	Reading North and Reading South again
1983-2024	Reading East and Reading West
2024-	Reading Central, Reading West and Mid-Berkshire and Earley and Woodley (Church and Whitley wards only)

Back in the 18th century, the modern party political system scarcely existed. Although MPs were usually labelled Whigs or Tories they also tended to form groups within these broad categories and there were no constituency associations for choosing candidates. Patronage, often laced with bribery and corruption, played a large part in things, especially if you were representing a rotten borough where ‘the electorate’ was likely to contain a larger number of sheep or even fish than human beings, as was the case with the notorious seats of Old Sarum and Dunwich¹. From 1640 to 1885, Reading was a two-member constituency and quite often elected both a Whig and a Tory, as in 1806 when Sir John Simeon, brother of the more famous Charles and Edward, was the Tory and Charles Shaw-Lefebvre the Whig. In 1831, despite the nationwide agitation over the tortuous progress of the Reform Bill, there were two candidates for the two seats and Charles Fyshe Palmer (Whig) and Charles

¹ Old Sarum had been replaced by New Sarum, better known as Salisbury, by the 13th century; most of Dunwich succumbed to coastal erosion during the 13th and 14th centuries. Both continued to send MPs to Westminster until 1832.

Russell (Tory) were elected unopposed². See the Appendix for brief biographical notes on both MPs and their successors up to the present day.

Following the modest but still important parliamentary reforms of 1832, things began to change and we see Reading starting to follow the national trend, so that in 1841 when Sir Robert Peel obtained a majority for the new Conservative Party (still nicknamed Tories to this day³) both Reading MPs were of that persuasion, Charles Russell and Henry Cadogan obtaining 58% of the votes between them, as against 42% for the Whigs. When Peel was voted out of office in 1846 after the repeal of the Corn Laws, the Whigs and Radicals gained the ascendant, with Francis Pigott and Thomas Talfourd topping the poll – again 58% - and the two previous MPs with the residue of the votes, losing their seats.



Bust of Thomas Talfourd in Stafford Shire Hall – photo by John Dearing

² It is interesting to note, however, that Russell was in favour of limited parliamentary reform.

³ It is perhaps surprising that this name has survived, whereas no one would dream of calling a Liberal Democrat MP a Whig(gamore). One explanation is that it slips off the tongue easily whereas ‘Conservative’ does not and the use of a diminutive such as ‘Con’ has unwelcome connotations.

By-elections were quite common in those days as MPs appointed to posts in the government were required to stand for election again⁴; as today MPs taking an ‘office of profit under the Crown’ were disqualified from membership of the Commons⁵, as happened in 1849 when Talfourd became a Judge. On that occasion the Tories regained the seat. There was a further by-election in 1857 when the new Solicitor-General under Palmerston, the Whig Henry Keating, was required to defend the seat he had obtained only a few months earlier, although he was perhaps fortunate to be returned unopposed, as had also been the case in the General Election.

⁴ Increasingly we find that these re-elections were not opposed, somewhat defeating their object. The practice was suspended during the First World War and finally abolished in the Re-Election of Ministers Act (1919) as amended in 1926.

⁵ In 1680, the House had passed a resolution that any MP accepting any ‘Office, or Place of Profit, from the Crown, without the Leave of this House ... shall be expelled [from] this House.’



George Palmer's Statue in Palmer Park, Reading – photo by Malcolm Summers

The period 1846 to 1874 was one of Whig (renamed Liberal) ascendancy, following the split in the opposition party and during this time with the exception of the 1849 by-election Reading returned MPs from the governing party. However, in 1874 when the country as a whole deserted Gladstone for Disraeli Reading continued to elect Liberals, Francis Goldsmid, one of the earliest Jewish MPs, and George Shaw-Lefebvre (nephew of Charles). This may reflect the enlargement of the franchise in 1867 when the Derby/Disraeli minority government had famously 'caught the Whigs bathing and stolen their clothes' and enacted the second parliamentary reform bill which would otherwise have been left to Gladstone, who

duly won the ensuing 1868 election. Goldsmid's successor was Reading's biscuit baron, George Palmer, also a Liberal.

In 1885, however, Reading became a single-member constituency and celebrated with the return of a Tory MP, Charles Murdoch, who unseated Shaw-Lefebvre by 129 votes – the share of the votes was 49.1 to 50.9, which sounds very similar to that of a certain referendum of latter years! For the rest of the century Reading's choice of MP reflected the mood of the country but in 1898 in a by-election following Murdoch's death George Palmer junior was elected Liberal MP⁶ and retained the seat two years later when the country at large again returned the Conservatives under Lord Salisbury.

Part 2 – 1900-23

Moving into the 20th century, 1900 saw what became known as the Khaki election, held during the South African (or Boer) War, which divided the nation between hawks and doves, represented politically by the Conservatives and Liberals. The election saw the incumbent Tories nationally losing a few seats to the Liberals but holding onto power with another large (130-seat) majority. In Reading, therefore, G. W. Palmer held the seat he had won at the by-election but with a reduced majority (239) on a slightly lower turnout – down from nearly 92% to 88%.

In 1904, however, Palmer resigned because he was becoming severely afflicted with deafness and his successor was one of Reading's most distinguished and controversial representatives, Rufus Isaacs QC. Although the national mood was beginning to change by this time, the result was almost identical to that of four years ago, as Isaacs achieved a majority of 230 over Charles Edward Keyser, who seems at this point to have retired from the political fray after three consecutive defeats. Unlike his predecessor, Isaacs had no family connections with Reading but he went on to be re-elected with a majority of nearly 700 in the Liberal landslide of 1906, retaining his seat in both the 1910 elections⁷, although with his majority going down to just over 200 in January and to an ominous 99 in December. In between there was another by-election, following Isaacs' appointment as Solicitor-General, in which he was returned unopposed.

Later in the year he became Attorney-General and then in 1913 Lord Chief Justice, resulting in his elevation to the peerage – and yet another by-election! Lord Reading as he became continued on his distinguished career, serving as Ambassador

⁶ George Palmer senior had been a Reading MP from 1878 to 1885, losing to Murdoch in the latter year. His son, George William Palmer had previously represented Reading from 1892-5, coinciding with the last Gladstone government and that of Lord Rosebery. The by-election was also notable for the first participation of a Socialist candidate in Reading's affairs – this was Harry Quelch, representing the Social Democratic Federation, who obtained 275 votes.

⁷ Normally, as in 1974, a double election year occurs when there is a hung Parliament and a minority government. This was not the case in 1910 when the Liberals, supported by the incipient Labour Party and the Irish Parliamentary Party, had a working majority; in this instance, the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, was seeking electoral support to push through the Parliament Act, limiting the House of Lords.

to the USA, Viceroy of India and briefly as Foreign Secretary in the 1931 National Government, before his death in 1935, aged 75. It has also been suggested that Isaacs' removal from the Commons in 1913 removed an embarrassment to the Liberal government, as he had been a key player in what became known as the Marconi Scandal, in which leading members of the front bench purchased shares in Marconi USA at a time when the country was negotiating an important wireless telegraphy contract with Marconi UK⁸.

The 1910 elections showed the tide turning against the Liberals who were now neck-and-neck with the Tories in terms of seats and dependent on the Irish Nationalists to continue in power. It perhaps came as no surprise, therefore, that in the 1913 by-election Leslie Orme Wilson, defeated in December 1910, romped home for the Tories with just over half the vote and a majority of 1,131, helped no doubt by the intervention of a 'British Socialist' candidate. In the normal course of things a General Election should have taken place at the end of 1915 but the war got in the way of that and so it was December 1918 before we had the 'Hang the Kaiser' election. It is notable that Wilson fought both elections as a 'Unionist' – perhaps because the issue of Irish Home Rule and the position of Ulster were very topical at this time?

In the meantime the Liberals had been obliged to form a coalition with the other parties, in order to prosecute the war more successfully, with Lloyd George eventually replacing Herbert Asquith as Prime Minister with the same aim in view. The 1918 election was remarkable in that the wartime coalition sought re-election, candidates of whatever party endorsed by the government receiving a letter to that effect from Lloyd George, popularly known as the 'coupon'. It was also the first election in which all adult males could vote and women over the age of 30 finally enjoyed a limited suffrage. As a result the turnout in Reading increased from 10,000 to 28,000. Nationally while the Liberal, Lloyd George, remained Prime Minister, the Conservatives won a large majority of the seats and so held on to 'Swinging Reading.' Wilson was returned with 15,204 votes (53.9% of the total), helped by a three-way split in the opposition between Labour, in second place, Liberal and the well-known trade unionist, Lorenzo Quelch, standing as a National Socialist. This was a Marxist splinter-group and nothing to do with Adolf Hitler's subsequent abomination.

⁸ While this smacked of insider trading the government was able to point out that the shares were in a separate company. There was little doubt, however, that they had acted unwisely.



Statue of Rufus Isaacs as Viceroy of India in Eldon Square, Reading – photo by Malcolm Summers

The Liberal decline continued in the 1922 election, when, following the national trend, a new Conservative candidate⁹, Edward Cadogan, with 16,000 votes gained a majority of 1,760 votes over the Labour candidate. Then came the 1923 election which saw the election of Reading's first Labour MP, Dr Somerville Hastings with 16,657 votes and a 1,542 majority over Cadogan. Here again Reading

⁹ Orme Wilson had chosen to fight elsewhere and the following year left politics to become Governor of Bombay, two years after his predecessor became Viceroy. .

was swinging with the tide, if that is not a mixed metaphor, for Hastings' election contributed to the formation of the first minority Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald and (as the saying is) the world was never quite the same again. As for Cadogan, he never fought Reading again but enjoyed an eleven year 'reign' as MP for Finchley from 1924 to 1935¹⁰, the last but one honourable member for that constituency before a certain lady came on the scene....

Part 3 – 1923-70

Somerville Hastings, elected in 1923 was not MP for Reading for long, for less than a year later the first Labour government fell, partly as a result of the spurious 'Zinoviev Letter' and Stanley Baldwin became PM for the second time. Reading moved with the tide and Herbert Williams was elected MP with a Tory majority of 3,001. The next election in 1929 was the first with full adult suffrage and it brought back the worthy Doctor, though with a lower majority than in 1923 of 852. The defeated candidate returned to the Commons for Croydon South in 1935.

Hastings' second term was twice as long as his first and he fell with the majority of his party's MPs in the election of 1931 which endorsed the National government formed at the urging of King George V in the wake of the deepening economic crisis engulfing both the British and the global economy. The new Tory member, Alfred Howitt, who was also a medical practitioner, had a comfortable majority of 15,000 over Dr Hastings. The same two fought again in 1935 but despite a determined effort by Hastings, reducing the deficit to less than 5,000, Howitt remained Reading's MP till 1945.

This was one of the landmark years in British politics, often compared with 1979 as not only changing the governing party but also bringing about a revolution in the future shape of the 'body politic.' I have been informed by our friend, Keith Jerrome, that it was a speech by the new Labour candidate, Ian Mikardo that led to the nationalisation of the railways being included in the Labour manifesto and that Herbert Morrison then said to him. 'Young man, you have just lost us the election.' If so history vindicated Mikardo and proved Morrison wrong. Reading once more followed the swing of the pendulum and returned Mikardo with a majority of 6,390 over a new Tory candidate, a member of the McIlroy clan. The same Labour landslide brought back Somerville Hastings as MP for Barking. It is perhaps worth noting that although he never served in government, Hastings is regarded as one of the architects of the National Health Service, as a member of a 1934 committee that produced a report entitled *A State Health Service*, which informed party policy.

By the time the next election was due in 1950 the Boundaries Commission's deliberations had entered into force, and Reading found itself with two seats, Reading North and Reading South. Unlike the dual seat arrangement today, those

¹⁰ He also served as MP for Bolton from 1940-45, after being returned unopposed in a by-election.

seats were confined to the borough of Reading and did not include extra bits of the adjacent countryside.

This was a remarkable pair of elections in which the Labour government largely retained its popularity, even to the extent of achieving its highest ever share of the popular vote at 48.9% in 1951, while at the same time the continuing long-term decline of the Liberal vote enabled the Tories to recover strongly from the 1945 debacle. In 1950 both Reading seats stayed Labour, with Mikardo taking the South and one Kim Mackay, an Australian, elected for the North. However, Mackay had a majority of only 527 and in 1951, when the Tories narrowly regained power nationwide, Reading North went the same way, returning Frederic Bennett with a majority of 302. Mikardo, however, hung on in the South with a majority just into four figures.

It was all change again in 1955 with Reading going back to being a single constituency – or nearly. In fact, the new Reading seat comprised most of the town except the western and eastern fringes, which came under Newbury and Wokingham. Despite the swing to the Conservatives which gave them a more comfortable majority nationally, Ian Mikardo held on to Reading seat but with a margin of only 238 over Frederic Bennett. It was not surprising then that in 1959, when Harold MacMillan bounced back from the Suez disaster with his assurances that we'd 'never had it so good,' Reading said goodbye to Mikardo after 14 years and welcomed Peter Emery as their new MP with a majority of 3,942. But Parliament had not seen the last of the pipe-smoking left-winger who returned in 1964 as MP for Poplar, remaining as representative for various East End constituencies up until 1987, when he retired aged 79. Mikardo was a staunch supporter of Israel so that one shudders to think what he would have made of the antisemitic sentiments that surfaced within his old party under Mr Corbyn's leadership.

1964 was a repeat of 1951, a new government with a very narrow lead and with Peter Emery hanging on with a majority of only ten over his Labour challenger, John Lee. Lee not surprisingly was swept in at the landslide victory for Harold Wilson 18 months later with a majority of over 4,000. Emery like Mikardo, but more quickly, returned to the house at the Honiton by-election the following year and remained a Devon MP¹¹ for 34 years. When he died in 2004, Reading East MP, Jane Griffiths, testified to his kindness to her as a 'new girl' finding her way in 1997. John Lee, an old boy of Reading School, was a somewhat eccentric MP with a contrary mix of left and right wing views, anti-EEC and Vietnam but pro 'law and order.'

In 1970 Ted Heath won the second of the four elections he fought, and Gerard Vaughan became MP for Reading with a majority of around 1,100 over John Lee. Dr Vaughan, continuing the traditional of medical men representing the town, was also the last MP for Reading before further boundary changes came into effect for the 1974 elections. In the first of those same elections, Lee continued another

¹¹ As such, Emery was briefly a junior Industry and later Energy minister under Edward Heath (1972-4). Coincidentally Frederic Bennett had also obtained alternative parliamentary employment down in Devon and served as MP for Torquay/ Torbay from a 1955 by-election until 1987.

tradition of reappearing for another seat, Birmingham Handsworth, retiring in 1979 and living thereafter to the grand old age of 93.

The title of this work was partly suggested by memories of the ‘Swinging Sixties’ – usually referring to the revolutions in pop culture and sexual mores that characterised that decade. Certainly, politically the 60s in Reading can be said to have swung back and forth!

Part 4 – 1970 to the Present Day

The election in 1970 of Dr Gerard Vaughan was the last time that Reading elected a single MP. Over the previous 25 years, Reading had moved from a single constituency to two seats and back to one again but Dr Vaughan was to be the last member for Reading only. Barring a future significant reduction in the overall number of seats in the House of Commons, which might make a single constituency once again viable, he seems likely to retain this distinction for eternity.

For the 1974 elections, boundary changes devised by the Boundary Commission before the 1970 election were finally implemented, the delay being ascribed to the need to align the changes with the new system of local government due to be introduced. While there were accusations of political expediency at the time, it was certainly true that in the case of Reading, the two new seats, Reading North and Reading South, followed the borough boundary with Reading North taking in two wards, Tilehurst and Norcot, that had previously been in the Newbury constituency.

Despite the swing against Edward Heath nationally, in the February election Dr Vaughan retained Reading South comfortably with a 5,000 plus majority. However, the new MP for Reading North, Anthony Durant, had a harder fight, winning with a majority of 2,369, falling to less than 500 in the October election that followed. Dr Vaughan, however, went on from strength to strength increasing his majority to 6,666 – I wonder if there were any comments made about the ‘mark of the beast’ at the time?

These two gentlemen continued to represent Reading in parliament for the next twenty-three years which saw the extraordinary series of four elections in a row won by Margaret Thatcher and her successor, John Major. In 1983, there were yet more boundary changes with North and South giving way to the East-West divide that we still have today. Out went any talk of aligning the constituencies to local government boundaries: Reading East included Arborfield, Barkham, Finchampstead, Shinfield, and Swallowfield from Wokingham borough and Reading West reached into Newbury as far as Pangbourne. These changes only served to enhance the swing towards the Conservatives since these country areas were obviously more likely to vote on the right. In Reading East, Dr Vaughan enjoyed majorities ranging from 11,500 to 16,200 and in the western seat, Tony Durant peaked at 16,750 in 1987. Both men benefited from a high profile, serving at various times in government and both received a knighthood for their services. Even in

1992, when nationally, Labour began to recover from its poor showing in the 80s, both Vaughan and Durant received over 50% of the votes. It is interesting to note that as Vice-Chamberlain of the Household, Durant's 'responsibilities included writing a daily report of parliamentary proceedings for the Queen, and presenting her occasional messages to the House in morning dress and carrying what looked like a snooker cue!'

All this, though, was to change in 1997 with the advent of 'New Labour' and Reading was ready to swing once again. At least Sir Gerry and Sir Tony retired gracefully rather than having to face the ignominy of defeat. Jane Griffiths won Reading East with a 3,795 over a Tory candidate, John Watts, who had previously represented Eton and Slough and thought he was moving to a safer seat! At the same time Martin Salter won Reading West on a slightly lower majority over a former Tory MP and minister, Nicholas Bennett; in both constituencies defeat brought an end to the parliamentary aspirations of the Tory 'would-bes.'

Both Griffiths and Salter increased their margins in 2001 but the double act came to an end in 2005 when for the first time since the 1951 election Reading returned two MPs of different political complexion. Jane Griffiths had a difficult relationship with the Reading Labour Party and was deselected but her intended successor, Tony Paige, failed to attract the voters who gave a majority of 475 to Conservative newcomer, Rob Wilson, although Martin Salter held on fairly comfortably in the West with a 4,000 majority.

Salter retired in 2010 and with the swing against Labour that year and the election of a Coalition government the Conservative candidate, Alok Sharma then won the seat with a 6,000 majority to become Reading's first MP from the ethnic minorities, retaining it in the three succeeding elections. In 2019, he also became the town's first MP to attain cabinet rank, as Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Rob Wilson was a junior minister under PMs, Cameron and May, until his (perhaps) surprise defeat in 2017 by Labour's Matt Rodda. Rodda gained Reading East with a majority of over 3,700 and retained it in 2019 with a near 6,000 margin. Here at least was a sign of Reading going decidedly against the swing, possibly an indication of the town's pro-EU majority. As far as I am aware, Matt Rodda is also the first Labour member for Reading to become a shadow minister, so that the tradition of the town's MPs attaining ministerial office may well continue if or when a new Labour government comes to power. In addition it seems likely that, under Boundary Commission proposals, at the next General Election Reading will revert to becoming a single seat, although excluding parts of Tilehurst currently within Reading West. Given the present make-up of Reading Borough Council, this would seem likely to become fairly safe Labour territory.

This pamphlet is based on a series of articles published in the History of Reading Society's Newsletters during 2019-20. The author is a former UKIP candidate in local elections, as well as a former member of the Reading Labour Party, but has attempted to maintain strict political neutrality in its composition.

Since the above was written we have had another General Election, based on drastically altered constituency boundaries. Reading Central has replaced (RC) Reading East and Reading West has become Reading and West Berkshire (RWB). Two wards have been transferred to a brand-new constituency, Earley and Woodley (E&W), largely sourced from outlying parts of the Wokingham and Maidenhead constituencies. The 2024 election will perhaps be remembered as one of the strangest in electoral history but amid all the extraordinary events including the gains by the Liberal Democrats, Reform and the Greens, Reading certainly hung on to its swinging tradition with Matt Rodda comfortably retaining Reading Central and Olivia Bailey and Yuan Yang taking RWB and E&W for Labour. Biographical details for Matt Rodda and Alok Sharma have been updated with Olivia Bailey added. I have not included Yuan Yang as this constituency is mainly outside Reading's boundaries.

Appendix: Brief Biographies of Reading's MPs 1832-2024

Bailey, Olivia Joanna. Born 1966 in Reading. A former Women's Officer for the National Union of Students, Olivia Bailey unsuccessfully contested Reading West in 2017 before being elected in 2024 for the new Reading West and Mid Berkshire seat with a majority of 1,361 over the Conservative candidate.

Cadogan, Sir Edward. 1880-1962. Younger son of the 5th Earl of Cadogan but unlike his grandfather (below) he did not inherit the title. He was Secretary to the Commons Speaker for 11 years before joining the club in 1922 as a Conservative with a 1,760 majority over the Labour candidate. The following year, he was defeated by a new Labour hopeful, Somerville Hastings. However, he returned to the Commons in 1924 as MP for Finchley until 1935. Cadogan did not stand in the latter year but was tempted back in 1940 to fill a vacancy at Bolton, being returned unopposed in a by-election. He did not stand in 1945; had he done so he would have been unseated.

Cadogan, Henry. 1812-73. Second son and ultimately heir to the 3rd Earl of Cadogan, also styled Viscount Chelsea prior to his succeeding as 4th Earl in 1864. Tory MP for Reading from 1841 to 1847, he was later MP for Dover (1852-57) and as a peer Captain of the Yeoman of the Guard in the Derby-Disraeli administration of 1866-8. His son, the 5th Earl, was also a minister in the Conservative governments of Disraeli and Salisbury.

Durant, Sir Robert Anthony Bevis. 1929-2016. More usually known as Sir Tony Durant. The division of Reading into North and South in 1974 brought the then Mr Durant into the Commons, as the North MP with a majority of 2,369, falling to 468 at the October election. Thereafter he enjoyed comfortable majorities, especially after taking on the new Reading West seat in 1983, peaking at 16,000-plus in 1987 with 55% of the popular vote. He served as a government whip under Mrs Thatcher from 1984, latterly as Vice-Chamberlain of the Household from 1988-90. As a backbencher in 1994 he successfully moved an amendment, reducing the homosexual age of consent to 18.

Emery, Sir Peter Frank Hannibal. 1926-2004. Librarian of the Oxford Union in his earlier days, Peter Emery captured Reading from Ian Mikardo in 1959 with a majority of nearly 4,000. Coincidentally, Emery had earlier fought the safe Labour seat of Poplar in 1951, later to become Mikardo's province, and he was also a member of the same trade union, Association of Supervisory Staffs, Executives and Technicians (ASSET) to which Mikardo also belonged. He survived the 1964 election by just ten votes he fell in the 1966 labour landslide by 4,133 votes. He returned to the Commons at the Honiton by-election in 1967 and continued to represent the seat till 1997 when he conquered the new seat of East Devon, retiring in 2001. He was a junior minister in the Heath government from 1972-4, mainly as Parliamentary Secretary, Industry in the DTI, moving to the new Energy department for the last two months. He was probably a bit too 'wet' for Mrs Thatcher!

Fyshe Palmer, Charles. 1771-1843. A landowner, first elected for Reading in 1818, Fyshe Palmer was one of the 'Advanced Whigs' who were to the forefront of opposition to the Tory government of Lord Liverpool. However, he supported the Wellington government of 1828-30 over Catholic Emancipation and the 'Beer Act'. In his support for the Reform Bill he stated that it was 'founded on reason, and a perfect regeneration of the English constitution.' He did not stand in 1835 but returned to the Commons in 1837, retiring finally in 1841.

Goldsmid, Sir Francis Henry. 1808-78. The first of several Jewish MPs to represent Reading, Goldsmid was elected as a Liberal at a by-election in January 1860 to succeed Sir Henry Keating with a majority of 110 over his Tory rival. His election was made possible by the passage in 1858 of the Jewish Disabilities Act, removing the requirement for members to 'make this Declaration upon the true Faith of a Christian.' He continued to represent Reading until his death. The Goldsmid family owned Whiteknights Park, which they gifted to the University in 1947. Goldsmid Road, location of the Reading Synagogue, is also named after Francis Goldsmid.

Griffiths, Jane. Born 1954. Jane Griffiths' association with Reading began when she joined the BBC Monitoring Service in 1984; five years later she was elected to the Borough Council in the Labour cause. In 1997, she defeated John Watts by 3,795 votes to take the seat in the Labour landslide, increasing her majority to 5,595 in 2001. Following disagreements with her local party over bullying and sexism she was deselected in 2004 and her parliamentary career concluded in 2005. Had she stood again successfully, it is possible she would have been disqualified as a result of impending bankruptcy proceedings. Griffiths is married to another former Reading councillor, Andrew Tattersall, and currently lives abroad.

Hastings, Somerville. 1878-1967. Son of a Wiltshire clergyman, Hastings trained as a doctor at University College and the Middlesex Hospital. He defeated Edward Cadogan at the 1923 election by 1,642 votes to become Reading's first Labour MP but lost the seat a year later to Herbert Williams by 3,001 despite increasing his vote in a straight fight with the Tory. He regained Reading in 1929, ousting Williams by 852 votes, only to lose again heavily two years later against the Conservative supporter of the National Government. He later served as MP for Barking from 1945-59, where his successor was the controversial Tom Driberg. Hastings founded the Socialist Medical Association in 1930, which campaigned for a National Health Service and was also active in providing medical support for the republican cause and the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War.

Howitt, Sir Alfred Bakewell. 1879-1954. The victor over Somerville Hastings in 1931 was another doctor, who had trained at St. Thomas's and served in the RAMC during WW1. He retained the seat with a reduced majority in 1935 and retired in 1945.

Isaacs, Sir Rufus, 1st Marquess of Reading. 1860-1935. Son of a fruit-merchant in Spitalfields, Isaacs entered the family business in 1875, later went to sea but eventually emerged as one of the leading QCs. Elected for Reading in 1904, he retained the seat in three successive general elections, later serving as Solicitor-General (1910) and Attorney-General (1910-13). He left politics in the latter year to become Lord Chief Justice and later served as Ambassador to the USA and Viceroy of India. In the course of these career moves he became successively Baron, Viscount and Earl, and from 1926 Marquess of Reading. As such he made a brief return to the cabinet in 1931 as Foreign Secretary in the National Government under Ramsey McDonald. His statue originated in India but was relocated to Eldon Square post-independence.

Keating, Sir Henry Singer. 1804-88. A barrister who took silk in 1849, Keating was a Whig/Liberal MP for Reading from 1852 to 1860. He had to 'fight' two by-elections (1857 and 1859) on his appointment as Solicitor-General in the administrations of Lord Palmerston, on both occasions returned unopposed. In 1860, he resigned his seat on appointment as Judge of Common Pleas.

Lee, John Hubert. 1927-2020. Educated at Reading School and Cambridge University, John Lee was a colonial civil servant in the Gold Coast (later Ghana) and barrister before becoming an MP. Having lost by ten votes in 1964, he defeated the incumbent Peter Emery by more than 4,000 in 1966. He was defeated in 1970 by 867 votes but later served as MP for Birmingham Handsworth from 1974-79, standing down in the latter year. He was broadly on the left of the parliamentary Labour party.

Mikardo, Ian. 1908-93. Reading's longest-serving Labour MP and also the first member born in the 20th century, Mikardo was born in Portsmouth to Ukrainian Jewish migrants. His connection with Reading began when as an industrial consultant he worked on efficiency improvements in aircraft manufacture at Woodley. He was elected in 1945 with a 6,000-plus majority over local retailer, William McIlroy. With the division of the seat he was elected for Reading South in the 1950 and 1951 elections with smaller majorities, then returning for the combined Reading seat in 1955 with just over 50% of the vote in a straight fight with the Conservative, Frederic Bennet. However, he was swept away in the MacMillan landslide of 1959 and did not return to the Commons until 1964 when he was elected MP for Poplar with a

majority of 14,000 and nearly 78% of the vote over future Tory cabinet minister, Kenneth Baker. He continued to represent East End seats till his retirement in 1987.

Murdoch, Charles Townsend. 1837-98. An Old Etonian banker, Murdoch became the first Tory member for Reading since 1852 and at the same time the first MP for the new single-seat constituency arising from the latest parliamentary reforms. He served until 1892 and then from 1895 till his death.

Palmer, George. 1818-97. The Quaker co-founder of Huntley and Palmers was a late entrant into politics, succeeding Sir Francis Goldsmid in a by-election held when he 60. He had a majority of 658 over his Conservative opponent, called, it seems, Richard Attenborough! Re-elected in 1880, with Reading reduced to a single-member constituency, Palmer fought the next election in 1885 in Newbury, where he was unsuccessful. Whereas most of his predecessors came from the landowning or professional classes, Palmer was the first Reading MP drawn from the new breed of entrepreneurs. He is commemorated in Palmer Park by the statue of him that originally graced Broad Street.

Palmer, George William. 1851-1913. One of the sons of George Palmer (above), George William avenged his father's defeat in 1892 with a victory over Charles Murdoch. The latter then regained Reading in 1895 but on his death in 1898 George William won the consequent by-election with a majority of 694. Increasing deafness led to his resignation in 1904.

Pigott, Francis. 1809-63. A member of a prominent landowning family in Oxfordshire and Hampshire, Pigott was elected Whig MP for Reading in 1847, topping the poll with 614 votes, 18 more than Talfourd, also elected. He served till 1860 when he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of the Isle of Man. He died during home leave in Hampshire in January 1863 as a result of an internal abscess. He is also known as Francis Pigott Stainsby Conant, using additional surnames adopted by his father in relation to inheritances of property.

Pigott, Sir Gillery. 1813-75. A younger brother, of Francis, chosen to succeed him in 1860, winning the second by-election of the year by 151 votes over his Conservative rival. He served for just under three years until his own appointment as a judge in the Court of Exchequer led to yet another vacancy.

Rodda, Matthew Richard Allen. Born 1966. A Reading councillor from 2011, and former journalist and civil servant, Matt Rodda contested Reading East in 2015 but lost by 6,520 votes. However, in Theresa May's snap election, he captured the seat from Rob Wilson with 49% of the vote and a majority of 3,749. He retained it in 2019 with a margin of nearly 6,000 votes. He has held various shadow cabinet roles since 2018. Rodda retained the new seat of Reading Central in 2024 but losing some votes to the Green Party. He was subsequently appointed Parliamentary Private Secretary to Hilary Benn, SOS Northern Ireland.

Russell, Charles. 1786-1856. Son of Sir Henry Russell, Bt., Russell served in the army in India until 1822. He was Tory/ Conservative MP for Reading from 1830-37 and 1841-47. Increasingly one of the Peelite Tories who supported moderate reform. He also played a key role in the growth of Reading as Chairman of the Great Western Railway Co. from 1839-55. Retiring through ill-health. In 1856 he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head; according to the coroner's verdict this was due to 'temporary insanity.'

Salter, Martin. Born 1954. Martin Salter came to Reading in 1980, already active in Labour politics, and was elected to the Council in 1984, becoming Deputy leader in 1987. In 1997, he took Reading West with three votes short of a 3,000 majority. Increasing this 8,849 in 2001 and maintaining a healthy majority of 4,682 when the tide began to turn against Labour in 2005. He retired at the 2010 election. He was a briefly a PPS (Parliamentary Private Secretary) during the 2005-10 Parliament.

Sharma, Alok. Born 1967. A native of India, Sharma moved with his parents to Reading in 1972. Having taken a degree in Applied Physics with Electronics, he later became a chartered accountant, specialising in corporate finance. In the May government, Sharma held junior and middle ranking posts in the FCO, Communities and Local Government and Work and Pensions

Ministries; he finally joined the cabinet in 2019 as Secretary for International Development, moving to Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in the following year. In 2021, he was appointed President of the COP26 Climate Change Conference, retaining a seat in the cabinet. Sharma retired from the Commons at the 2024 election.

Shaw-Lefebvre, George, 1st Baron Eversley. 1831-1928. Elected unopposed in 1863 in a by-election to succeed Gillery Pigott, Shaw-Lefebvre was confirmed in office in the General Election of 1865 and continued as one of the town's MPs until 1885. During this period and after he held various high offices including Civil Lord of the Admiralty (1865-6), First Commissioner of Works (1881-5 and 1892-4) and Postmaster General in 1884-5. Rejected by Reading in 1885, he became MP for Bradford Central from 1886-95, serving as President of the Local Government Board under Rosebery. He joined the Lords in 1906.

Stanford, John Frederick. 1815-80. Became Conservative MP for Reading by winning the 1849 by-election following Talfourd's appointment to the judiciary. Did not contest the seat in 1852.

Talfourd, Sir Thomas Noon. 1795-1854. Son of a brewer and grandson of a dissenting minister, Talfourd pursued a legal career, becoming a Serjeant-at-Law of the Middle Temple in 1835. Elected for Reading in 1835 as a Radical, he served till 1841. He was re-elected in 1847 but retired in 1849 on his appointment as a Judge of Common Pleas. Talfourd was also a noted literary figure, having several verse tragedies performed on the stage and as MP, fought to secure authors' rights by introducing a Copyright Bill, which eventually became law in 1842. He died in 1854 while addressing the jury at Stafford Shire Hall.

Vaughan, Sir Gerard Folliot. 1923-2003. Reading's longest-serving MP since Francis Annesley (1774-1806), the then Dr, Vaughan was first elected for Reading in 1970. Moving to Reading South in 1974 and Reading East in 1983, finally chalking up 27 years on his retirement in 1997. He held junior office in the latter days of the Heath government and the early days of Mrs Thatcher, serving as Minister for Health from 1979 to 1982. He advocated proposals for replacing the NHS with medical insurance which were not pursued and his ministerial career ended when he was sacked following some controversial remarks linking Citizens Advice Bureaux with CND.

Williams, Sir Herbert Geraint, Bart. 1884-1954. An engineer and secretary of the Machine Tools Trade Association, Williams captured Reading in 1924 from Dr Somerville Hastings, serving for nearly five years, before ousted by the doctor. He served as Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade during the second Baldwin government. He returned to the Commons in 1932 as MP for Croydon South, till defeated in 1945 and finally from 1950-54 as MP for Croydon East. He was opposed to the implementation of the Beveridge Report.

Wilson, Sir Leslie Orme. (1876-1955). The son of a stockbroker and the defeated Conservative candidate in the December 1910 General Election, Wilson won the 1913 by-election as a Unionist with a 1,000-plus majority over the Liberal candidate. In 1918 he was re-elected with Lloyd-George's 'coupon' but in 1922 he stood for Westminster St George's and lost; he was then elected for Portsmouth South in a by-election. He served as Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury under Lloyd George and Bonar Law from 1921-3. In 1923, however, he left Parliament on appointment as Governor of Bombay (now Mumbai), holding this office till 1926. He was later Governor of Queensland from 1932 to 1946. As a one-time professional soldier, he fought in both the Boer War and WW2 – doubtless, his blend of military and political experience made him well-qualified for colonial service.

Wilson, Robert Owen Biggs. Born 1965. A former President of Reading University Union and member of the SDP, Rob Wilson took the Reading East seat for the Conservatives in 2005, amid the fall-out from Jane Griffiths' deselection with a majority of 475, increasing to 7,605 in 2010. He retained the seat in 2015 but unexpectedly lost to Labour in 2017. In the various Cameron and May governments he served as Minister for Civil Society within the Department of Culture, Media and Sport from 2014 till his defeat.

Source: Online, mainly History of Parliament and Wikipedia.