

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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THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

The society's 45th Annual General Meeting took place at the Abbey Baptist Church on March 15th – our first “in person” talk for some months. At the meeting, Sam Breakwell was formally elected on to the committee: otherwise, the officers and members remain the same. It was followed by a fascinating talk, much more interesting and thoughtful than I had anticipated. Richard Stowell told us of the life and times of Mary Smart, the young black woman brought from Sierra Leone at the age of 16 to Reading by Christian missionaries to train as a teacher in 1848. She became ill, died in the following year. There was much in the talk about social life and public health in Reading, and contemporary attitudes of Europeans in Sierra Leone. We can only guess at what must have been going on in Mary's mind. I was pleased that the talk attracted a good-sized audience.

The AGM of the Berkshire Local History Association was held later in the month, and three of us went along, and set up a stall to advertise what we had been doing, and to display and sell our publications. It's always interesting on these occasions to see what other Berkshire local history societies have been up to. Our society is affiliated to BLHA, and our members are always invited to their meetings. This year's event was held in the new village hall in Marcham, just the other side of Abingdon, both of which were until 1974 in Berkshire. The meeting moves around the county, and next year will be at Wargrave. After a short AGM, we heard four short talks on the history of the village, and after lunch came a walk. Our hosts, the Marcham Society, had arranged for us to visit old buildings that the public don't normally get to see. They made us very welcome and provided tea and home-made cake at the end of the day.

Those of us who were at the Abbey Baptist Church for the April meeting were in for something of a surprise – and none more so than the committee members! Paul Joyce was due to give us his talk about the history of the printing industry in Reading. The talk had been planned for May last year – the occasion when the church had forgotten our booking, and we couldn't get in! This year it was the speaker who had forgotten the booking.

Somehow, our resourceful treasurer, Malcolm Summers, stepped into the breach and managed to provide us with a well-researched presentation on Dr. J. B. Hurry and Reading Abbey. This came complete with pictures, via the internet. Dennis Pibworth and church caretaker, Ash, helped on the technical side – goodness knows how they did it! I didn't see anyone leave because the subject of the talk had changed, and it was obviously enjoyed.

This meeting was the first occasion when members could book for the boat trips on the Kennet, due to take place in July. Of the 48 places on the boat, many had been taken by the time we went home. I was relieved because it had been my idea to run them. Let's hope for fine warm summer weather.

Paul was very apologetic when he read his e-mails and realised that he had forgotten us. He has promised to give his talk at some stage next year.

Changing the subject, many of our members will have spent many happy hours using the local studies collection in the Central Library. I used to work there, and well remember what was involved in moving the collection from the old Municipal Buildings in Blagrove Street to the new library on Abbey Square. It had been built on a piece of land which already belonged to the County Council, where the Inner Distribution Road had been intended to run. The idea of a dual carriageway cutting through the Forbury Gardens upset many people, and in the end, it took a much more circuitous route to join Forbury Road, leaving a spare plot on either side of the Holy Brook.

And now, less than 40 years later, it will be someone else's job to plan the move. The new library will be in Bridge Street, near to the Civic Offices. I have been assured by the library staff that special attention is being given to the extensive local studies collection and providing suitable storage areas. Besides the material that is readily accessible to visitors, there are at present an air-conditioned strongroom with shelves and map cabinets and rolling stacks with even more shelves. There are many rare and valuable items in the collection – including 300 years-worth of local newspapers. Perhaps, in the near future, we can have a talk about the past, present and future of this wonderful resource.

David Cliffe, Chairman.

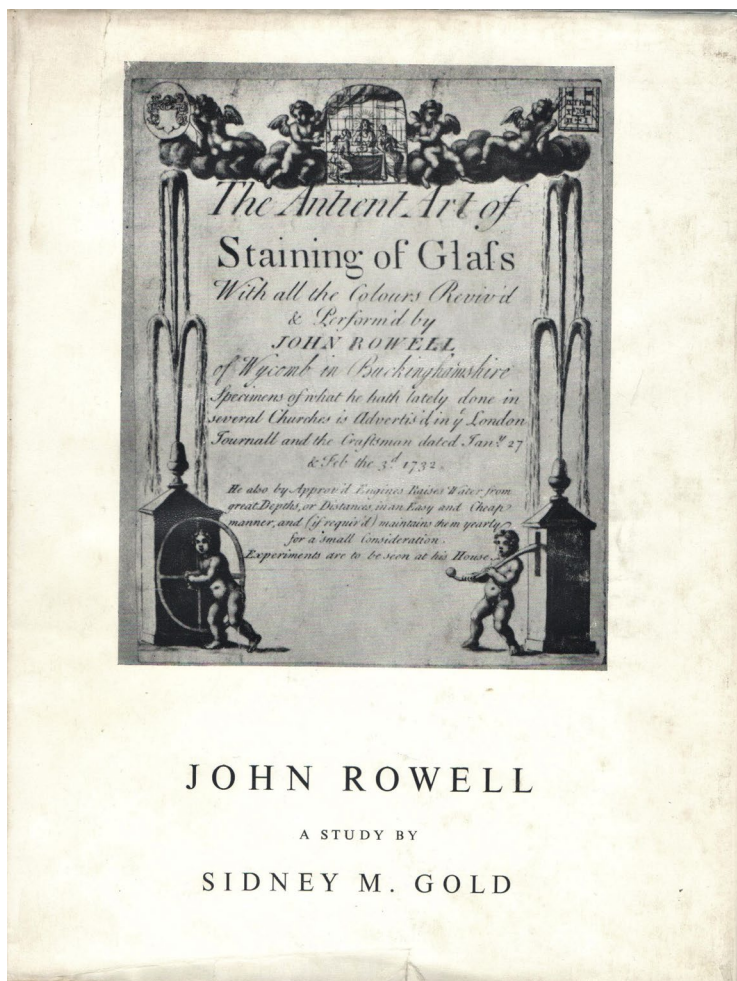
SIDNEY GOLD, A LIFE.

Sidney Gold, who has died aged 87, was an eminent local historian and committee member for many societies connected with the town of Reading.

Sidney was born in Islington on December 8th, 1935 to Israel Benjamin Gold, a barber, and his wife, Lillian. At the outbreak of war in 1939, the family was evacuated to the Thames Valley, first, to Sonning Common and then, in 1942, to Reading where, initially, they shared a house in Shaftesbury Road off the Oxford Road. This would be Sidney's home until shortly before his death.

He was educated at the Wilson Road Schools in Reading. He left in 1950 and joined his brother, Donald, and their father in the family hairdressing business at Oxford Road. After the death of his father in 1968, Sidney continued to work there until he retired.

His interests in local history and art encouraged him to submit an article to the *Berkshire Life* magazine on the subject of 'Early Reading Painters'. It was published in June 1956 and one of the artists included in the article was John Rowell; in 1965, Sidney would publish a biography about him. Rowell, born in 1733, was a stained glass artist who lived the last twenty years of his life in Reading.



Sidney's First Book, published in 1965

Sidney was a keen writer of books about local artists and architecture. In 1989, he co-authored an article with H Godwin Arnold, a local architect, for the Ancient Monuments Society on the subject of *Morris of Reading, A family of Architects 1836-1958*. Joseph Morris, architect, and County Surveyor of Bridges and Buildings for Berkshire was joined by his son, Frank and a daughter, Violet in his architectural practise. Their surviving built legacy around Reading includes many fine 'Arts and Crafts' style houses.



The shop of B. Gold and Sons, gentlemen's hairdressers, at 517 Oxford Road, Reading, in 1986. Photograph by Sidney Gold (c) Reading Libraries Local Studies Collection

Once again, in the 1990s, he and Godwin Arnold collaborated on a book about the local sculptor, George Blackall Simonds (1843-1929); Simonds's most prominent work in Reading is the Maiwand Lion War Memorial in the Forbury Gardens.

In 2013, Sidney was a contributor to the Reading Book of Days. It is a collection of local stories and events, one for each day of the year, written by members of the History of Reading Society and published by the History Press.

His Magnum Opus, published in 1999, was A Biographical Dictionary of Architects at Reading. This was a study of the architects, both local and national, who designed buildings in the town; it had the merit of being acknowledged in the 2010 revision of the Berkshire volume of the Pevsner Buildings of England.

Sidney at work in Reading Libraries Local Studies Collection

His last book, unpublished, would have been a history of the Reading School of Art 1860-1892. Sidney Gold died at a nursing home in Tilehurst on Friday, February, 24th 2023.

Sean Duggan



Note: We are grateful to Sean for permission to use this obituary which was based on notes dictated by Sidney himself.

MEMORIES OF SIDNEY

I first met Sidney Gold in rather unusual circumstances. I had joined the History of Reading Society in 1992, partly in order to help in the promotion of my forthcoming book, *The Church that would not Die*,

and by 1996 I found myself elected on to the committee. At the first meeting, the usual subject of next year's programme came up and I suggested that a talk on the work of Joseph Morris in Reading would be of interest. I possessed a copy of the authoritative work on the subject, the monograph mentioned in Sean's obituary, and I naturally assumed that the Society would look to one of its authors to address the subject. It appeared, however, that finances were tight and I found myself invited to give the talk myself! At that time I knew Godwin Arnold slightly but Sidney Gold was just a name.

I set about my task with enthusiasm, gadding round Reading, Wokingham and Sunninghill, taking slides of buildings designed by Morris and family, using the lists given by Arnold and Gold. Come the night, the audience was found to include a small man who was revealed to be Sidney Gold, sent, as I assumed, by Godwin as an observer, or even spy, to make sure I did not make any howlers! Sidney in fact was complimentary about my presentation and much to my relief helped field some of the questions afterwards.

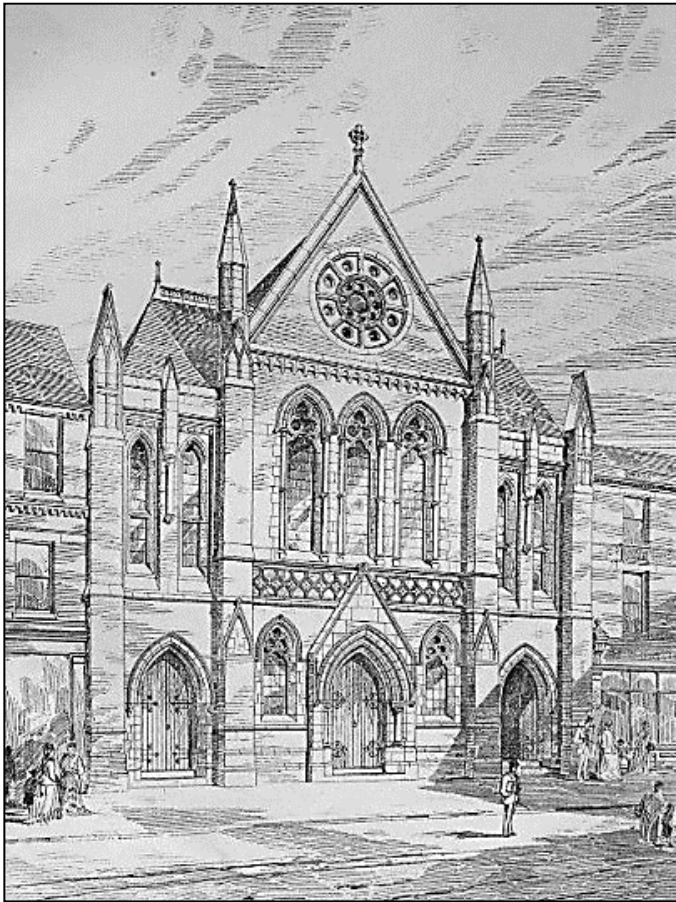
He rejoined the Society and in 2003 came onto the committee. By this time I had assumed the Chair and was moved to write in my 2004 Chairman's Report: 'Sidney Gold joined the Committee last year and we have gratefully benefited from his considerable knowledge of significant elements in the town's history.' This continued for many years with Sidney eventually becoming Vice-chair until his retirement in 2019. On one occasion we joined forces when neighbouring historical society, Project Purley, wanted a guided tour of Reading, Sidney doing the monuments and yours truly the inns and taverns.

When we decided to go forward with the commission to create the *Reading Book of Days*, Sidney responded with great enthusiasm. Once again, his knowledge of Reading, its buildings and artwork, was invaluable and altogether I think he contributed nearly a fifth of the 'days' – more than any other of the 20-odd contributors. He also took part in a number of promotional events for the book. Not surprising since, as a retired businessman, he was also a great salesman and enjoyed nothing more than taking his position behind the tables at our annual book sales!

There's a downside to everything and with Sidney it was technology. Although he could exchange emails with people, he never seemed to master the art of attaching a document to an email. So, all his contributions came to me in the form of A4 prints, which I then had to scan and copy into the master file. Unfortunately, in the scanning process one or two names came out wrong and this was not discovered till after the book reached the bookshops!

It was good to see many members of the History of Reading Society at Sidney's funeral service at Henley Road on March 28th, along with other local groups. These included the Civic Society, whose Chairman, Richard Bennett, gave a fine eulogy. We offer our condolences to his niece, Diane Thompson, and other members of Uncle Sid's family. Some members of the Society will remember Sidney's famous briefcase, of which Diane wrote: 'I have Uncle Sid's battered old briefcase here at home with me – I couldn't bear to see it thrown out. He used to bring it when he visited us as children, full of sweets and chocolates, bags of peanuts and sherbet lemons and after eight mints for my mum which he usually finished off before he went home.' (Source: Caroline Piller).

AUGUSTINE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, FRIAR STREET 1868–1886



Augustine Congregational Church¹ was founded following the secession of Rev. Samuel Clarke Gordon and 73 members from Broad Street Congregational Church. Mr. Gordon had joined the church in Broad Street as co-pastor to Rev. William Legg in 1866. Sadly, difficulties arose between Mr. Legg and Mr. Gordon, and also between Mr. Gordon and the deacons.

On 30 November 1868 the Trustees and members of Broad Street Chapel met to consider the steps needed to remove Mr. Gordon from his post.² Since Mr. Gordon would not leave of his own volition, the leadership of Broad Street Church took the case to law (*Cooper v Gordon*) in what became a test case regarding the tenure of a Congregational Church minister. In May 1869, Mr. Gordon lost and so had to leave the church, taking his supporters with him.³

In fact, Mr. Gordon and his adherents had already begun to meet separately at the Assembly Rooms, Friar Street.⁴ Since they celebrated their first anniversary as a church on 1 December 1869, it seems they deemed their new church to date from the day following the initial meeting by the Trustees and members of Broad Street Chapel. This first

anniversary meeting, held in the Bridge Street School Rooms, was attended by some two hundred persons.⁵

The Assembly Rooms in Friar Street were destroyed by fire late on Sunday 31 July 1870.⁶ Earlier that day there had been two services led by Mr. Gordon, the congregation in the evening numbering almost seven hundred. As a result of the fire, the new church not only lost its meeting place, but also its new harmonium, hymn books, bibles and schoolbooks. The congregation thereafter temporarily met in the Town Hall.⁷

The loss of schoolbooks in the fire shows that ‘Rev. S. C. Gordon’s school’ (soon to be known as Augustine School) had started by this point, although a purpose-built new building, the School Room, was not opened until 4 April 1871. The School Room was ‘large and lofty’ and could accommodate up to five hundred persons, and was used for the church services until the church was built.⁸ From the time of the opening of the School Room, the church became known as Augustine Congregational Church.

Progress towards the sum needed to pay off the debt of the School Room building and to build the new church was slow. The church held a variety of fancy goods sales, bazaars and concerts to raise the amount necessary. However, the church had still not been built when, on 13 October 1875, Rev. S. C. Gordon resigned his post, having accepted a move to Chatham.⁹ His successor was Rev. James Forbes Bisset Tinsling.

The new church was to be built in front of the school, on ground formerly occupied by the Reading Theatre. By July 1876 plans had been agreed, drawn up by Mr. Frederick William Albury of Messrs. Brown & Albury, Architects, of 154 Friar Street.¹⁰ Two foundation stones were laid on 4 October 1876¹¹ and the building, under the contractor Mr. Samuel Elliott of Newbury, was completed by late May the following year, and officially opened on Wednesday 27 June 1877.¹²

From 3 September 1878 the church was authorised to conduct marriages.¹³ As an example of the church’s meetings, *The Reading Yearbook for 1880* stated:

SERVICES.— Sunday, 11a.m. and 6.30 p.m. Communion 1st Sunday in the month. Children's service last Sunday in the month, 3 p.m. Thursday, Prayer Meeting and Lecture, 7.30p.m. Church Meeting, 1st Thursday in month, 8.30 p.m.

SUNDAY SCHOOL.— 9.30 a.m. and 2.45 p.m.

Temperance Association.— Last Tuesday of the month 8p.m.

Band of Hope.— Wednesday 7 p.m.

Mothers' Meeting.— Tuesday 2.30 p.m.

Dorcas Meeting.— Second Tuesday in month, 4 to 8 p.m.¹⁴

After serving the church as pastor for five years, Mr. Tinling resigned in November 1880, having accepted a post in Eastbourne.¹⁵ The membership of Augustine Congregational Church met to consider whether it was desirable to re-unite with the congregation at Broad Street Chapel. The pastor of Broad Street, Rev. C. Goward, sought to clear the way by resigning so that the two churches might then move forward together. However, the reunion did not go ahead. Instead, Augustine Congregational Church appointed its third pastor: Rev. George Leach Herman, previously of Gravesend.¹⁶ Their new pastor only stayed for just over a year, moving on to a post at Wootton-under-Edge in September 1882.¹⁷

The church had a little difficulty appointing their fourth pastor. In the interim, Dr. Frederic Rowland Young took oversight of the church from the departure of Mr. Herman, initially for the remainder of the year. He was then engaged to continue into 1883,¹⁸ and was soon styled Minister of Augustine Congregational Church, although his status did not become official until the following year, possibly because he was not an accredited Congregational Minister. He had followed an unusual path to get to his current post. In early life Young had lost his Quaker faith, becoming a founding member of the Secular Society. From there, his journey back to faith led him first to become a Unitarian, and he became minister of the Unitarian church in Newbury in 1855. Other posts followed, until he withdrew from the Unitarians, becoming a convinced Trinitarian, and taking on the leadership of the Free Christian Church in Swindon. After a dabble in spiritualism, he reasserted his orthodoxy at the time of taking up his role in Reading.¹⁹

Along the way he began to call himself Dr. Young, professing an honorary D.D. conferred by the American Anthropological University in St. Louis, Missouri. In May 1883 he was challenged publicly through the *Reading Observer* to prove that he had not paid for a bogus degree. Young replied that he was wholly innocent of any deception and had had the degree conferred upon him without any payment or



desire on his part, but if he discovered that the degree was not genuine, he would immediately stop using the title. He undertook to contact the President of the University to ascertain the truth.²⁰ In September 1883 Young wrote again to the *Reading Observer*, having to hand a reply from the President of the University stating that the degree was genuine.²¹ Young never quite shook off the suspicion, however, that his degree was bogus.

By 1884 Dr. Young was officially recognised as the minister of Augustine Congregational Church. In 1886, he had to take complete rest for almost a month on medical advice, and later that year resigned his post. His last sermons and lectures at Augustine took place in September of that year.²² The church was then dissolved, the congregation joined the Castle Street Congregational Church, and the church buildings were put up for sale.²³

The building continued as an attractive feature on Friar Street for some years. Initially remodelled inside and opened as the Royal Assembly Rooms, in 1893 it was refashioned inside again to be a theatre. It opened as the Prince's Theatre in September 1893 under the management of Henry Brandon Ormsby Trench.

Two years later it was altered again, and this time its frontage was also modified, and Trench reopened it as the New Royal County Theatre on 16 September 1895. The building was completely destroyed by fire on 7 January 1937.

The photograph above shows the Royal County Theatre in 1937, as the fire brigade try to tackle the blaze. Compare the three arched windows in this photograph with the sketch of the Augustine Congregational Chapel above.

Augustine Congregational Church Pastors (Dates in post):

1. Rev. Samuel Clarke Gordon M.A. B.D. (1868–1875)

Gordon was born on 18 July 1840 in Clatt, Aberdeenshire.

Having attended Aberdeen University and then Lancashire Independent College, his first post was as co-pastor to Rev. William Legg at Broad Street Congregational Church, Reading, beginning on 29 July 1866. Dismissed from that post, he became the minister of Augustine Congregational Church, Reading, serving as pastor from 1868 to 1875, then at Chatham (1878 to 1884) and Newport Pagnell (1886 to 1897). He then retired to Hove, East Sussex.

He married Elspeth Ann Gordon in 1881.

He died on 24 January 1930.

2. Rev. James Forbes Bisset Tinling (1875–1880)

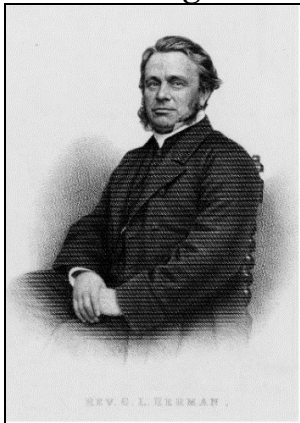
Tinling was born about April 1841, in Liverpool, Lancashire.

He attended St. John's College, University of Cambridge, gaining a B.A. in 1864, and M.A. in 1901. He was ordained into the Congregational Ministry in 1875. Minister of Augustine Congregational Church, Reading from 1875 to 1880, then Eastbourne 1880 to 1886, East Finchley 1886 to 1893, City Road 1893 to 1898. Retired to Ealing, Middlesex.

He married Isabella Tarleton on 24 September 1867.

He died on 17 January 1933 in Ealing, Middlesex.

3. Rev. George Leach Herman (1881–1882)



Herman was born in Bristol on 16 October 1819.

In early life he was Moravian, becoming a Congregational minister in 1855, serving at Hoxton Academy Chapel. In 1859 he moved to Vineyard, Bath, then he served from 1861 to 1873 at Chatham. He then moved to Gravesend where he stayed until his move to Augustine Congregational Church, Reading, in 1881. He was not there long, moving in 1882 to his final post at Wootton-under-Edge. He retired in 1887.

He married Sarah Elizabeth Smith in 1847.

He died in 1896 in Weston-Super-Mare, Somerset.

4. Dr. Frederic Rowland Young (1882–1886)



Born 22 June 1828 in Aldershot, Hampshire.

He was a founding member of the Secular Society in 1853. He was Unitarian minister at Newbury from 1855 to 1857, Yeovil from 1857 to 1860, and New Swindon in 1860 to 1875. Having left the Unitarian church, he was minister of the Free Christian Church in Swindon from 1875 to 1877. Minister of the Augustine Congregational Church from 1882 to 1886. Amongst several works, he wrote *Indirect Evidences in the New Testament for the Personal Divinity of Christ*, which was published in 1884 while he was at Reading. After leaving Reading he took various temporary ministry posts.

He married Olive Wilson in 1849.

He died suddenly on 16 January 1893 in South Hornsey, Middlesex.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS ON

It is now over 18 months since the publication of Abbot Cook to Zerodegrees. The initial print run of 500 is close to being exhausted and has already achieved a healthy profit for the Society. During this period quite a lot has happened on the Reading pub and brewing scene and we summarise these developments below.

The **Alehouse** was closed for over a year from the start of the first COVID lockdown until August 2021, when it reopened under the previous Manager, Carl Mellors.

Alley Bar. The **Grumpy Goat** off-licence and cheese shop, mentioned as occupying these premises, now has an upstairs lounge, for on sales of beer, in the form of craft keg, and of course consumption of cheese. The **Bugle** closed in 2021 and has since been acquired by Thackeray Estates along with adjacent property as part of a scheme for the rejuvenation of this part of the town centre. The developers' original plan seems to have envisaged its demolition but following campaigning by members of the Civic Society, CAMRA and the Reading Conservation Area Advisory Committee it is now expected to be incorporated into a new Jury's Hotel. The extent to which it retains its current features and accessibility to the general public remains to be seen. The pub has also been added to the list of locally important historic buildings. The **Eldon Arms**, latterly known as the Weather Station, closed its doors again during 2022. Reports suggested that the tenants, Wild Weather Brewery, found the new rents proposed by the owner unacceptable and were also planning a move to new premises in Reading with a tap room. More recently they have announced a possibly temporary move to South Wales! Currently there seems little prospect of the pub reopening.

Eldon Brewery. We have identified a brewery of this name, operating in the Kings Road area c. 1848.

The **Fruit Bat** is now trading as MNKY which seems to be more a café than a bar.

FutureState is a new brewery, operating in Earley since 2021.

George and Dragon (2) seems to have closed.

Great Expectations. This closed in 2022 for a major refurbishment, reopening at the end of the year under the new name, Hotel 1843 x Calico Bar and Eatery. The Dickensian theme is gone and the ambience appears to be more that of a wine bar than a pub.

Hat and Feather. This should probably be the Hat and Feathers.

The **Hop Leaf** was closed for over a year from the start of the first COVID lockdown until September 2021, when it reopened under new management and following an extensive refurbishment.

The **Horn** closed in 2021 on the expiry of the previous lease. Since then some structural work has been done in order to maintain the building, in particular roof repairs, but it would still require considerable investment to restore it to its previous status as an attractive town centre pub.

The **Lyndhurst** has received a refurbishment during the early months of 2023.

The **Prince**, formerly **Prince of Wales** (4), closed for refurb at the end of 2022 reopening in March 2023.

Reading Railway. The former Railway Staff Club in Station Approach is now trading as a pub.

Red Cow (1). Rather surprisingly this re-emerged as a solicitors' offices rather than an Indian Restaurant and without the replacement of the controversial extension. However, there seems to be little sign of legal business being transacted there.

Red Lion. Demolition has taken place.

Rose and Thistle (2). This remained shut during and after the lockdown era but reopened in 2022 after an extensive refurbishment.

Sun (2). The Sun closed in 2022 and has been placed on the market with a price tag of just under £1 million. As with the nearby Horn it needs considerable investment in order to compete in the market.

Warwick Arms. In 2022 this was converted from an Indian restaurant into a shop selling oriental produce.

Welsh Pony. Not listed in the book but a pub of this name, possibly located in the Castle Street area, has been identified by Margaret Ounsley in Reading Poor Law records.

Woodley Arms. Following demolition, construction has commenced on the site.

Zerodegrees. According to the 2023 Good Beer guide, brewing is currently suspended.

Notes to the Article on the Augustine Chapel

¹ Sketch of the church from *The Architect* 26 May 1877

² *Berkshire Chronicle* 5 December 1868 p5 c2

³ William Henry Summers, *History of the Berkshire, South Bucks, and South Oxon Congregational Churches* (W. J. Blacket, Newbury 1905) p170-1

⁴ *Berkshire Chronicle* 23 January 1869 p5 c1

⁵ *Reading Mercury* 4 December 1869 p5 c3

⁶ *Reading Mercury* 6 August 1870 p2 c7

⁷ *Berkshire Chronicle* 13 August 1870 p4 c5

⁸ *Reading Mercury* 8 April 1871 p5 c3

⁹ *Reading Mercury* 23 October 1875 p5 c3

¹⁰ *Berkshire Chronicle* 8 July 1876 p5 c3; *Reading Mercury* 15 July 1876 p5 c3

¹¹ *Reading Observer* 7 October 1876 p3 c4–5

¹² *Berkshire Chronicle* 30 June 1877 p5 c3

¹³ *Reading Mercury* 7 September 1878 p6 c5. The first marriage I can find was reported in *Reading Observer* 25 January 1879 p8 c6 – “On the 18th inst. at Augustine Congregational Church, Reading, by the Rev. J.F.B. Tinling B.A., Donald Kennedy of Lorne-street, Reading, to Mary, elder daughter of the late Augustus John Bush of Denny, Chew Magna, Somerset”

¹⁴ *The Reading Year Book for 1880* p140

¹⁵ William Henry Summers, *Op. cit.* p202; *Reading Mercury* 20 November 1880 p8 c2

¹⁶ *Reading Observer* 3 July 1881 p5 c2

¹⁷ *Reading Observer* 23 September 1882 p5 c6

¹⁸ *Reading Observer* 7 October 1882 p4 c6, 20 January 1883 p5 c3

¹⁹ Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England*, chapter 3 p50-71 (OUP 2006)

²⁰ *Reading Observer* 19 May 1883 p8 c3 (letter), p5 c6 (editorial); Young’s reply 26 May 1883 p6 c1

²¹ *Reading Observer* 22 September 1883 p8 c2

²² *Reading Observer* 16 January 1886 p4 c6, 18 September 1886 p5 c5

²³ William Henry Summers, *Op. cit.* p202; *Reading Observer* 1 May 1886 p4 c6