

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

Chairman	Hon Secretary	Hon Treasurer/ Memb'ship	Editor/ Vice Chairman
David Cliffe	Vicki Chesterman	Martin Leake	John Dearing
1 Priest Hill	7 Norman Road	6 Waller Court	27 Sherman Road
Caversham	Caversham	Caversham	READING RG1 2PJ
READING RG4 7RZ	READING RG4 5JN	READING RG4 6DB	Tel: 0118 958 0377
0118 948 3354	Tel: 0777 634 0923	Tel: 07469 702004	john@jbdearing.co.uk
		martinleake4801@gmail.com	

Spring 2025

<http://historyofreadingsociety.org.uk>

No 65

THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

The 47th AGM of the Society has been and gone. It was notable because we voted two new committee members in – Martin Leake as treasurer, and Anne Garrison as a committee member – and bade fond farewells to Malcolm Summers and Joy Pibworth, who were stepping down. It was also different because we brought in a suggestions box, with slips of paper for members to jot down their ideas about how the Society might develop in the future. Membership levels are being maintained, and we have ample funds for new projects. That will give the new committee something to think about!

Several committee members have ideas for new publications – though we realise that nothing is likely to sell so well as the book we published on pubs and breweries in 2021. Some of the titles involve new research, and some are older unpublished texts which deserve to be read. My own pet project is the jumbled notes on life in Reading in the first half of the 20th century by W. E. Woodeson. The notes currently exist as a single copy in the strongroom of the Central Library, and I'm probably the only person to have read them since Mr. Woodeson wrote them. The author was born into a poor Reading family, and among many other things tells us what life was like for poor boys in Reading before the First World War, much of which you won't find anywhere else. He recalls the Poor Boys' Holiday Camps, the Reading Poor Boys' Home, the Ragged School, and the "Royal Horse Artillery" – the street orderly boys employed to sweep up the horse-droppings from the town centre streets. The text will take a good deal of deciphering and editing, but it will be well worth it in the end.

Remaining on a personal note, if I may, the repeat screenings of "Berkshire on Film" at the Reading Biscuit Factory cinema in April were obviously greatly enjoyed. The programme had been put together by Zoe Viney-Burgess of the Wessex Film and Sound Archive in Winchester, and my job was to provide running commentary for the silent films, some of which were without titles or captions on the screen. People seemed surprised and pleased that pieces of old film like this, taken across our region, were being looked after and made available for viewing. Again, we filled the cinema – perhaps one day the programme can be repeated, or another programme put

together. I know that the Wessex Archive has much else worth viewing, as has the Museum of English Rural Life here in Reading.

I was pleased to hear of the series of talks on Roman Silchester by Prof. Michael Fulford, who for many seasons has directed the archaeological investigations there, and even more pleased that the series had sold out, and the funds raised were to help fund the redevelopment of the Silchester Gallery at Reading Museum. It struck me as exactly the sort of thing that museums should be doing, especially at a time when many of the services funded by local authorities are strapped for cash.

I'm sorry that I can't somehow be more enthusiastic about the "Jane Austen 250" celebrations. Money has come from various sources to fund a plaque on the Abbey Gateway where Jane and her sister were at school, but it was only for a couple of years when they were children.

Anyway, I intend to go and look at the plaque on Saturday June 28th, if not before, which promises to be an interesting day. It's the day of the Waterfest, when I can always find something to look at, something to buy, and someone to talk to. But in the same part of Reading, we're also promised an event in Reading Gaol, by permission of the new owners, the Ziran Foundation. The Rabble Theatre, who brought us a play about King Henry I, founder of Reading Abbey, are now developing a play about his father, William the Conqueror, and will present a preview of the new production on that day.

So, along with our visits to the football stadium and the Church of the Most Holy Trinity in June and July, there are things to look forward to this summer.

David Cliffe, Chairman

NEW PUBLICATIONS

As David has mentioned the work of the sub-committee and his own work on the Woodeson manuscript, it would seem apt to add a note on two other possible projects on which the sub-committee has been working:

1. Malcolm Summers has kindly transcribed into 'Word' a manuscript left by the late Sidney Gold, detailing the history of the Reading School of Art. Malcolm considers that this will need some editing to make it suitable for publication and looks as if this task has fallen on the Editor!
2. The Editor also volunteered to look at the possibility of assembling a miscellany of articles on the history of Reading contributed by members over the years to the Society's Newsletter and other publications. A preliminary 'cull' from the Newsletter has taken place and we will now be looking at other sources such as *Berkshire Old and New*. Hitherto unpublished material could also be considered.

TWENTY YEARS AGO:

From the Spring 2005 edition of the Newsletter

BOB HUTCHINSON

As many of you will know, our former Treasurer, Robert (Bob) Hutchinson passed away on the 16th April, following a short illness. Bob was Treasurer of the Society [between] 1989 and 2002 and was a greatly valued member of the Committee, along with Joan who for a number of years was our Programme Organiser. Following his retirement from the Treasury, he continued to attend meetings and was last seen, making a contribution to the debate on finance at our AGM. A number of members were able to attend Bob's funeral at Henley Road Crematorium on 29th April.

Bob was an industrial chemist by profession and met Joan while they were both working for Johnson Matthey. They moved to Emmer Green when the firm relocated to this area in the 1970s. Apart from the history of Reading, Bob had many other interests including cine film and video making. We shall greatly miss his contribution to the Society and we send our deepest sympathies to Joan and to their children and grandchildren in their loss.

NEW TREASURER AND COMMITTEE MEMBER

Martin Leake writes: My background is in commercial banking, where I still work. I am also the treasurer of a children's charity. Many, many years ago my favourite subject at school was history – A Level specialist subject was Henry VIII. Since then I have taken a keen interest in Roman history. Having recently moved to Reading, I would like to get to know the local history.

Anne Garrison writes: I have lived in Reading since 1988, I am originally from Yorkshire and have also lived in London and Scotland. I have had a lifelong interest in history and for the last 25 years have had a keen interest in family history although none of my family are from the Reading area. Although I have lived in Reading for a long time, I recently realised that I didn't know much about its history.

I am also a volunteer at the Museum of English Rural Life where I take groups round the Museum and also do outreach talks.

REVEALED IN SOUTHAMPTON STREET

Walking down to town along Southampton Street today I spotted a shop front that is being refurbished and the work revealed signage from a past time. The shop in question is in the row between the IDR and the previous 'Red Cow' public house on the east side of the street.

The writing on the facade is very faint so it took some photographic manipulation to show what the shop had been in a previous life.

What it says is 'E Bolton' and that the shop had been a tobacconist, confectioners, newsagent and stationers. However, no indication of dates.



My initial thought was to look in directories of around 1930s and 1940s as I hadn't expected the façade to have lasted for too long, but it didn't look modern. This yielded nothing, so I turned to newspapers. These showed the shop under Mr E Bolton was operating in the late 1890s. The one incident with the owner's name in our local papers was from February 1899 when two boys were accused of stealing from the shop. Edward Pocock (14) of 2 Southampton Street and George Ackerman (12) of the 'Jack of Newbury' were charged with stealing a cigar case and a cigarette case from the shop of Mr E J Bolton, tobacconist, worth 10 shillings combined. As punishment Edward Pocock was sent to reform school and George Ackerman was given eight strokes of the birch rod.

Knowing the rough date, I was able to find Ernest John Bolton, tobacconist of 58 Southampton Street in Kelly's Directory of Berkshire 1899. Knowing his full name, I could track him down in various other sources. The Reading Standard of 21st June 1946 revealed that our man had died, aged 76, on 8th June at 10 Eastern Villa Road, Southsea but that he had previously been living at 40 Zinzan Street, Reading. This allowed me to find that he was born in Reading in late 1869 and married to Minie May Cook in 1891, when he was described as a coach painter at 44 Pell Street. By the 1901 census he is a coach painter and tobacconist living at 56 Southampton Street, then the 1939 Register has him retired at 40 Zinzan Street. He ends his days buried in Henley Road cemetery on 14th June 1946.

The life and times of Edward Pocock have been harder to trace because his name seems to be a fairly common name for boys of this era in the town, but using the book 'Abbot Cook to Zero Degrees' (of which our esteemed editor and our chairman are co-authors) the 'Jack of Newbury' public house was in Bridge Street in central Reading. Nothing I have found has linked George and his family to the pub as landlords, but I know from my family that taking lodgings in a public house was not unusual especially when you were poor. Without spending much longer on research, it does look to be that Edward and George may have both been killed in WW1.

Now this started as a short walk to town, and I have already spent well over an hour looking at directories, newspapers, census, registers and birth, death and marriage data. I think it is time to get on with the things on today's to-do list and add the shop and the people to a long list of things for later so that maybe one day I will know what happened to them all and what else that building was used for.

[Editorial note: As a local resident of longstanding, I hope Jo will not mind me adding a few additional thoughts. I have often used the shop in times past. When I moved here in 1980 it was in fact two separate businesses, one a newsagents and the other a post office. Eventually the Post Office was closed and the two shops combined as a newsagents and general corner shop - though not on the corner. It closed several years ago, following allegations, as I recall, of underage alcohol sales and connections with drug dealing. It would be a real asset to the area if it were to begin trading again.]

A glance at the 1887 Kelly's shows that the tobacconist was then a Mr James Holt, while next door at No 56 was William Thorp, baker. It is also interesting to note that in the 1964 Kelly's, the confectioners' is still listed as 'Bolton Edwd.' despite Mr Bolton's death some 18 years previously! This was now no 59 after renumbering with the Post Office at 61 (Laurence Snook, sub-postmaster). By 1980 the shop had become known as Berkeley News and later under Asian proprietorship it bore a more exotic name which I fear escapes me. Further up the hill beyond Crown Street the old derelict shops and the Co-op Funeral Parlour have now been replaced by an apartment block of very unenthralling brickwork – rather disappointing when one compares them with the more attractive recent developments in Crown Street and Pell Street.]

WEBSITE UPDATE

If you have recently visited our website, you may have noticed a new article has been uploaded. This is a piece written by our youngest member, who has produced a well-researched article on re-fronted buildings in Reading. Please take a few minutes to have a read as it certainly gets you thinking about the buildings that we frequently walk past without really paying attention to.

If you have an article, that may be too long to be suitable for our newsletter, that you think others may enjoy reading, please submit it to historyofreadingsociety@yahoo.com. Don't forget your newsletter editor will welcome articles for inclusion in that publication too.

ALYCE CHAUCER FESTIVAL 16-18 MAY

Quite a long time ago the Society visited Ewelme on one of its summer outings. It was very welcome, therefore, to receive the following message from Professor Robert Hazell:

I am writing to ask if you might be able to help us publicise a Festival we are organising in Ewelme in mid-May to mark the 550th anniversary of the death of Chaucer's granddaughter Alyce Chaucer, who is buried in a magnificent alabaster tomb in Ewelme church. She inherited the manor of Ewelme from her mother, and with her husband William de la Pole built the almshouses and village school, still going strong in the original medieval buildings

The buildings will be open to visit the whole weekend, and there is to be a two day programme of talks, a concert of medieval music, an exhibition about Alyce's life and times, and a commemoration service sung to a medieval setting of the mass.

We have created a website for the event, which you can find here: <https://www.alycechaucer.uk/>

NEW MURALS

Or should that (with apologies to Hilda Ogden) read Muriels? Readers may have noticed that a number of murals have started sprouting up in Reading, depicting historical themes. Evelyn Williams explains as follows 'Reading Borough Council have granted CIL [Community Infrastructure Levy] funding for a mural in the underpass by the Hook & Tackle (now Namaste). Commando Jugendstil who did the work on the mural on the substation in St Mary's Butts, at Holybrook Nook and elsewhere in Reading will be carrying this out.' The Holybrook murals can be seen at (<https://streetartcities.com/markers/89b509dd-80d3-47ab-b068-eb64c71bc673>). The murals for the Hook and Tackle underpass (just before the former ski-slope) will replace the rather attractive set of decorations that were based on children's artwork but regrettably ruined by graffiti 'artists.' The electricity substation in the Butts is itself a historic site, as it was built on land previously occupied by an Episcopal School set up by St Mary's Castle Street, which closed in 1906.

CHARLES DICKENS AND READING

Queen Victoria, famously, never visited Reading. Charles Dickens, however, visited the town a total of three times: in 1851, in 1854 and in 1858.

Dickens's main connection with Reading was his close friendship with Thomas (from 1849, Sir Thomas) Noon Talfourd, to whom Dickens dedicated *Pickwick Papers*, his first novel, published in 1837. Talfourd was a native of Reading and was its radical, or liberal, Member of Parliament three times, from 1835 to 1837, 1837 to 1841, and 1846 to 1849.

On 24th October 1843 the New Public Rooms on London Street were to be opened. They were designed by the architect William Brown, senior, of High Street, Reading, and had had a foundation stone laid by Mary Russell Mitford. Talfourd was to be a guest of honour at the opening, as was his good friend – undoubtedly by association with Talfourd – Dickens. However, on the day, Dickens sent his apologies, disappointing the many hoping for a sight of the great man. Incidentally, it is often said that Dickens opened the building (now Hotel 1843 – see their website for one such claim), but not only was he not actually present, he would not have been the one to open it anyway. William Blandy, Mayor of Reading, presided at a grand dinner in the rooms, which was followed by a great number of toasts and speeches. No single person could be said to have opened the Rooms, rather the event had accomplished it.

The people of Reading next hoped to see Dickens when he was invited by Talfourd, now President of the Reading Literary, Scientific and Mechanics' Institution, to a *fête champêtre* held at Whiteknights on 1st July 1847. However, Dickens was again prevented from attending and sent his apologies.



Dickens aged 40 in 1852

Dickens did finally come to Reading on Tuesday evening, 23rd December 1851. He brought his “Amateur Company of the Guild of Literature and Art” to the Town Hall, to perform Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton’s play *Not so Bad as We Seem*, and his own one act farce *Mr. Nightingale’s Diary*, co-written by Mark Lemon. Dickens produced and directed these and acted several roles in each. This was a charity performance to raise money for improvident actors through the Guild of the troop’s title. Dickens was accompanied by several other famous names including Wilkie Collins, John Forster, Mark Lemon, John Tenniel, Fanny Young and Augustus Egg. The entertainment was virtually sold out and was very well received and extensively reported in the local press.

On 13th March 1854, Talfourd, now a judge, died of an apoplectic seizure as he addressed the Grand Jury in Stafford Crown Court. The

Reading Literary, Scientific and Mechanics’ Institution, of which Talfourd had been President since 1844, wrote to Dickens asking him if he would consider taking the Presidency as a mark of respect for his great friend. Dickens agreed. He held the Presidency from 1854 to the Institution’s demise in 1860.

It was in connection with this role that Dickens’s other two visits to Reading were made. These were both fundraising evenings for the Reading Literary, Scientific and Mechanics’ Institution that took place in the New Public Rooms, where Dickens read from his own works. In the first, on Tuesday 19th December 1854, Dickens read *A Christmas Carol*, raising over £65 for the Institution’s funds.

At the second, on 8th November 1858, Dickens read ‘The Story of Little Dombey’, adapted from *Dombey & Son*, and then the famous Bardell v Pickwick trial scene from *Pickwick Papers*. Dickens donated 5 guineas to the Institution from the proceeds.

Although these three occasions are the only times Dickens set foot in Reading, he did have one other interesting link to the town. In the summer of 1841, Talfourd decided not to stand as Reading’s M.P. mostly because he had heard that the radicals of Reading (led by George Lovejoy) had approached a third person to stand as a liberal, for the two Reading seats, and Talfourd took this as a sign of their growing disloyalty to him. It must have come as an even greater shock when he discovered that that third party was Charles Dickens! To give Dickens his due, he did not seem to realise the position he was putting Talfourd in. Dickens pondered the opportunity for a short while but then declined on financial grounds. The political damage for the liberals was done, however, and they were faced with not only not having Dickens as a candidate, but no Talfourd

either. Then the other sitting liberal candidate withdrew as well, leaving the party to find two late replacements. The liberals failed to gain either of the two Reading seats.

To find out more of the friendship between Talfourd and Dickens, buy my biography of Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd. Go to [Amazon](#) and search for “Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd” – the speech marks are needed – or buy it from [Reading Museum Shop](#).

Malcolm Summers

[Ed: For those of a psephological tendency this was the result in Reading in the 1841 election:

General election 1841: Reading (2 seats)

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
<u>Conservative</u>	<u>Charles Russell</u>	570	29.4	+13.1
<u>Conservative</u>	<u>Henry Cadogan</u>	564	29.1	+12.8
<u>Whig</u>	<u>Thomas Mills</u>	410	21.1	+4.5
<u>Whig</u>	<u>William Tooke</u>	397	20.5	+3.9
Majority		154	8.0	N/A
Turnout		984	82.4	-2.1
Registered electors		1,194		
<u>Conservative gain from Whig</u>		<u>Swing</u>	+4.5	
<u>Conservative gain from Radical</u>		<u>Swing</u>	+4.3	

Source: Wikipedia.

The old Whig Party was gradually being transformed into the Liberal (now Liberal Democrat) Party, just as the Tories had recently been renamed the Conservatives. However, whereas nobody today talks about the Whigs, the Conservatives have never been able to shake off the ‘Tory’ label – some of them, I think, prefer being called ‘Tories’ to ‘Cons’! Nationally in the 1841 election that brought Sir Robert Peel to power the Conservative vote increased by only 2.6% whereas the Whigs/ Liberals lost 4.5% of their supporters; so it does seem that the local issues referred to in Malcolm’s article led to a larger swing here in Reading. Arguably Peel who had the courage to repeal the Corn Laws, splitting his party in the process, was a more Radical Prime Minister than his predecessor, Lord Melbourne.]

JEREMY CLARKE

We are sorry to have to report the recent death of member, Jeremy Clarke, aged 87, and extend our sympathies to Jean, who remains a member of the society.

AMBERLEY BOOKS

This notable publisher of locally themed books is looking for authors on aspects of Reading's history. Contributions to the following series have been suggested:

Quirky

An entertaining look at unusual aspects of a town's or city's history, including strange and eccentric characters, odd events and traditions, or curious places associated with the town or city.

A Dark History

A look at the darker aspects of a town's or city's history, including crime and punishment, disease and illness, poverty and deprivation, superstition and slavery.

Celebrating

A celebration of the positive and special events of your city or town's past, and what makes it stand out today.

Potted History

An accessible history of your town or city, from its beginnings to the present day.

Secret

These books contain unusual, little-known historical facts about a town or city.

In 25 Streets

An exploration of 25 streets in a large town or city that have an interesting story to tell about the history of the city.

At Work

The story of people at work and the industries, past and present, that characterise the area.

Now That's What I Call...

A nostalgic look at a town or city through photographs from the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

Lost towns or cities

A pictorial record of what has been lost in a town or city in the last 100 or so years, from buildings, streets, parks and natural features to people, events, transport, entertainment etc.

From Old Photographs/The Postcard Collection

Historical photographs and postcards of a town or city.

A member has already expressed an interest in *25 Streets*. If any other of our author-members are attracted by these themes the Editor can put you in touch with the Commissioning Editor.

SUMMER VISITS

These are to Reading Football Club and to Holy Trinity Church.

Here is a surprising fact about Reading Football Club. The Editor has only watched them play three times, twice at Elm Park and once at the then brand new Madjeski Stadium. On all three occasions their opponents were the same – AFC Bournemouth. I am fairly certain that Reading won all three games. Though I remain a Bournemouth fan from childhood habit, it is a shame that Reading cannot get back up into the Premier League and play them once again? Or maybe a cup tie pairing might occur!

For Holy Trinity readers are referred back to Malcolm Summers' article in Newsletter No. 62. Places on these visits were selling like hot cakes at the April meeting, so make haste if you wish to book!

MORE LITERARY CONNECTIONS

A recent enquiry the Society received from Queen Anne's School, Caversham, reminded me of one of the borough's lesser-known literary connections. We are rightly celebrating the 250th birthday of Jane Austen this year but I wonder if readers are aware of a slightly obscure association with the poet, John Betjeman (1906-84). One of his best-known lighter poems is entitled *The Subaltern's Love-Song* and commences:

Miss J. Hunter Dunn, Miss J. Hunter Dunn,
Furnish'd and burnish'd by Aldershot sun,

What strenuous singles we played after tea,
We in the tournament - you against me!

Love-thirty, love-forty, oh! weakness of joy,
The speed of a swallow, the grace of a boy,
With carefulest carelessness, gaily you won,
I am weak from your loveliness, Joan Hunter Dunn.

The Subaltern is evidently an imaginary character (Betjeman had been turned down for military service) and so you might be forgiven for assuming the same of Miss Joan Hunter-Dunn, but no, she was a real person and received her secondary education at the Queen Anne's School Caversham, where she was captain of the lacrosse team and a 'tennis champion.' Betjeman encountered her during WW2 when working at the Ministry of Information where she was pursuing her chosen profession of Catering Management in the canteen. The poem appeared 80 years ago in Betjeman's 1945 collection, *New Bats in Old Belfies*, but was probably written around 1940/1. Joan later married and as a result acquired the rather more prosaic name of Mrs Jackson. Betjeman was unable to attend her wedding but when she was widowed in the 1960s while living in Rhodesia he went to see her sons who were at school in England and was commended by Joan for his kindness to them and to her.

Betjeman has another and perhaps even more tenuous connection with Reading. As a child in Highgate he had a schoolboy crush on a girl called Peggy Purey-Cust, daughter of Admiral Sir Herbert Purey-Cust, and grandson of a former Vicar of St Mary's, Reading, the Minster Church as it is often now called. This was the Very Reverend Arthur Purey-Cust who served St Mary's from 1862 to 1875 and was later Dean of York. There is a memorial tablet to him in York Minster (right):

Like a number of Betjeman's more mature love affairs his romance with Peggy ended in tears as they say – and as described in his verse autobiography, *Summoned by Bells*:

O Peggy Purey-Cust, how pure you were:

My first and purest love, Miss Purey-Cust!

Satchel on back I hurried up West Hill

To catch you on your morning walk to school...

But whenever he calls round Peggy is said to be sick or has gone away and eventually a book he had left for her is unceremoniously returned to him.

Weeks passed and passed... and then it was returned.

Oh gone for ever, Peggy Purey-Cust!

There is a strong implication that the Purey-Custs as gentry looked down upon the Betjemans who were in 'trade' – ah those were the days!

John Dearing

