

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

As usual, before gathering my thoughts, I looked back to see what I wrote about last time, so that I don't repeat myself. To my surprise, I found it was in January, and a lot of things seem to have happened since then.

For a start, we actually managed to have Paul Joyce with us to talk about *The Black Arts in Reading* in May – the history of the printing industry. Our previous two attempts had been thwarted. It was well worth the wait, the only problem now being that Paul was so enthusiastic and had so much to tell us about, and we were supposed to be out of the room by 9 o'clock. I wish he'd write a book on the subject – I'd willingly buy a copy.

If you were at the AGM in March, you'll know, if you didn't already, that our Society is in good shape, with a reasonable number of members and a good number of visitors at meetings, and a committee who gladly take tasks on and complete them. This is at a time when many voluntary societies are having difficulty finding capable people to run them.

We should also be grateful to the late Sidney Gold. In his lifetime he did so much for the Society, and now he has left us with his collection of local history books. There will be book sales at our meetings in the Abbey Baptist Church in September, October and November, and probably also next year, when face-to-face meetings resume. It's all good stuff, there's a lot of it, and I hope you'll find something you like among it.

Last week (early July) we had a committee meeting to discuss next year's programme of talks and visits. I can assure you that there is no shortage of subjects, speakers, and interesting places for 2025.

In May, out of the blue, I learned that I'd been given an award by the British Association for Local History for my 'outstanding individual contribution' to promoting the history of Reading. Unfortunately, it didn't mention my contribution to promoting the history of Macclesfield, the town where I was born and grew up, and towards which I've worked equally hard. Never mind – the Macclesfield Civic Society also gave me an award! I expect I know who put the BALH up to it, mentioning no names here! Of course, it's always encouraging to get this kind of recognition, and I am well pleased. The British Association is an organisation to which, like most local history societies, the HoRS is affiliated.

I have various interesting things coming up in the autumn, and the one I can now tell you about is an evening of old movie films, shot in Berkshire, between the 1920s and the 1960s. It's being organised by the Wessex Film and Sound Archive and the Royal Berkshire Archives, with me as the commentator. You may remember that I organised a similar programme of films about Reading, back in 2012. Some of the Reading classics will be included in this programme, too – the health visitors setting off on their rounds on bicycles in the 1950s, the Huntley and Palmers publicity film from 1937 with the hilarious 'politically incorrect' commentary, and the sight of electric trams going through the streets of Reading in 1938 – the only bit of film I know that shows this. The show will be open to the public, at the Biscuit Factory Cinema in the town centre, on Thursday October 3rd, 7.30 p.m. I hope to have copies of my latest book about Reading for sale in September, and there are a couple more autumn events which I hope to be able to tell you about in the near future.

David Cliffe, Chairman

Congratulations to our Chairman who, as noted above, was the recipient of one of the **British Association for Local History's** 2024 Awards for outstanding individual contribution to local history. The citation states: '**David Cliffe**: for his skills in promoting the history of Reading through his work in the Local Studies Library, his support of others in the field of local history, and his walking tours of the area.' A number of members took the opportunity to view the award-giving at the Association's AGM on Zoom.

TWENTY YEARS AGO:

From the Spring 2004 edition of the Newsletter – THE SOUTHERTON COLLECTION

In April, Bent Weber's second pot-pourri from the Peter Southerton Slide Collection contained the following tribute to Peter's part in the history of our society: 'Peter Southerton was one of the founding members – with his wife, Mary – of the Society in the 1970s and was the first Chair from 1977 (then members of the Committee were constrained to a 3-year term of office). He then served in various capacities until he and Mary left in 1991 for Cheltenham.

'To me – equally one of the early members of the Society - Peter was a most unassuming person but steeped in the history of this town. I recall him on several conducted walkabouts round the town in then much quieter streets often at weekends or on summer evenings avidly making verbal notes into a small Dictaphone to write up later. He was the author of several books on Reading, particularly two of Reading in Old Photographs. He also had considerable professional interest in one aspect of the town's history. He worked in The Probation Service and thus had first-hand knowledge of its past and current penal establishments. He delved deeply into the history of the succession of jails that Reading has had and their whereabouts.'

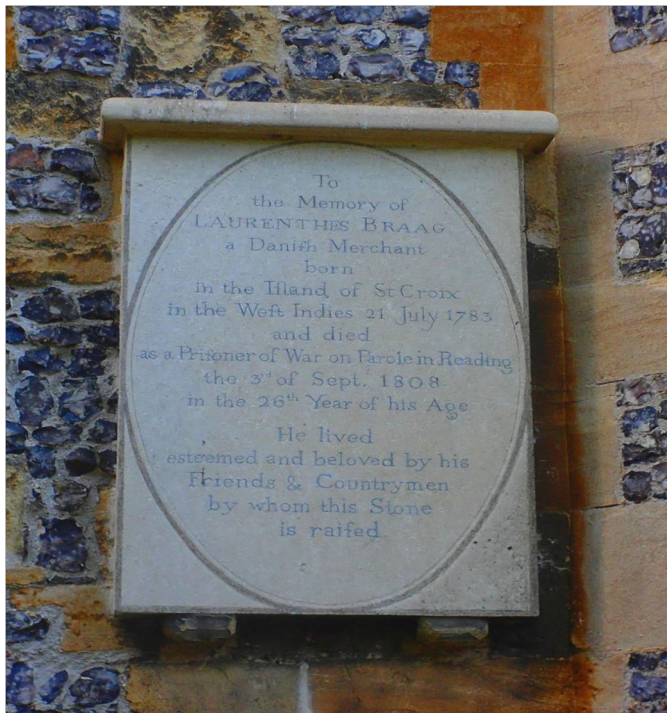
Bent also recorded the Society's gratitude to Mary Southerton for presenting the collection to the Society and those who saw this selection and its predecessor will be pleased to know that there is at least one more selection to come.

[Note (2024): Peter Southerton published several volumes devoted to Reading history including *Reading Gaol by Reading Town* and *Reading in Old Photographs*.]

DANELORE

Our June visit featured a walk round sites in Reading associated with the gentleman Danes who were detained on parole in the town during the Napoleonic Wars, led of course by their redoubtable historian, Mr John Nixon. We started at the memorial on the south wall of St Mary's Minster church to one of the Danes, a merchant named Laurentes Braag:

Photo by J B Dearing



The subsequent tour took in St Laurence's churchyard where the tombstone of another of the Danes has recently been discovered and finished up in the Forbury Gardens where John hopes to get a memorial to the Danes erected.

SUMMER VISIT TO COOKHAM, 17TH JULY 2024

River Thames at Cookham – photo by Sam Breakwell

On a pleasantly warm summer's day 17 members of the History of Reading Society travelled to Cookham to enjoy the delights of the village. We had unfortunately missed the celebrated swan-upping ceremony by a couple of days, but Cookham still provided us with much of interest. We sub-divided into 2 groups, one of which set off on a guided tour of the village with Sheila Heath whilst the other was conducted around the Stanley Spencer gallery by Keith Le Page. Sheila took us first to see Fernlea, the house built by Spencer's grandfather, where Stanley lived with his parents and his eight siblings. The building was



built as two semi-detached houses, shared by Stanley's family in the house on the right and his aunt and uncle and their children on the left. The Neighbours from 1936 and Cutting the Hedge from a 1927 Almanack recall their happy and idyllic time before The Great War. Stanley (born 1891) was the eighth of nine children, with his next brother, Gilbert born a year later. The two were very close and were home educated by their sisters. All the family had strong creative leanings. The two boys had a strong artistic streak and had drawing lessons before being sent to Maidenhead Technical Institute to study art, from where they both later went to The Slade School of Fine Art in London. Both boys eventually were recognised as distinguished artists, and both became members of the Royal Academy. Stanley's attachment to Cookham was such that he was nicknamed 'Cookham' in his youth by other artists.

Although not physically strong, Stanley enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1915 and after a spell in Bristol was posted to the front line, serving with the 68th Field Ambulance unit, then transferring to an infantry unit, the 7th Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment, in Macedonia. After frequent bouts of malaria, he was invalided out in 1918. His beloved brother Sidney died weeks before the end of the war and his name was pointed out to us on the War Memorial. We then walked to the Church, which Stanley later used as the setting for *The Resurrection: Cookham* (1924-27), his first work to receive widespread recognition.



War Memorial, Cookham – photo by Sam Breakwell

Naturally Stanley's wartime experiences influenced his work enormously, and the Sandham Memorial Chapel in Burghclere was conceived from them and financed by Louis and Mary Behrend, in memory of her brother who had died in the war. From 1927-1932 Stanley worked on the chapel, supported by the very generous Behrend couple.

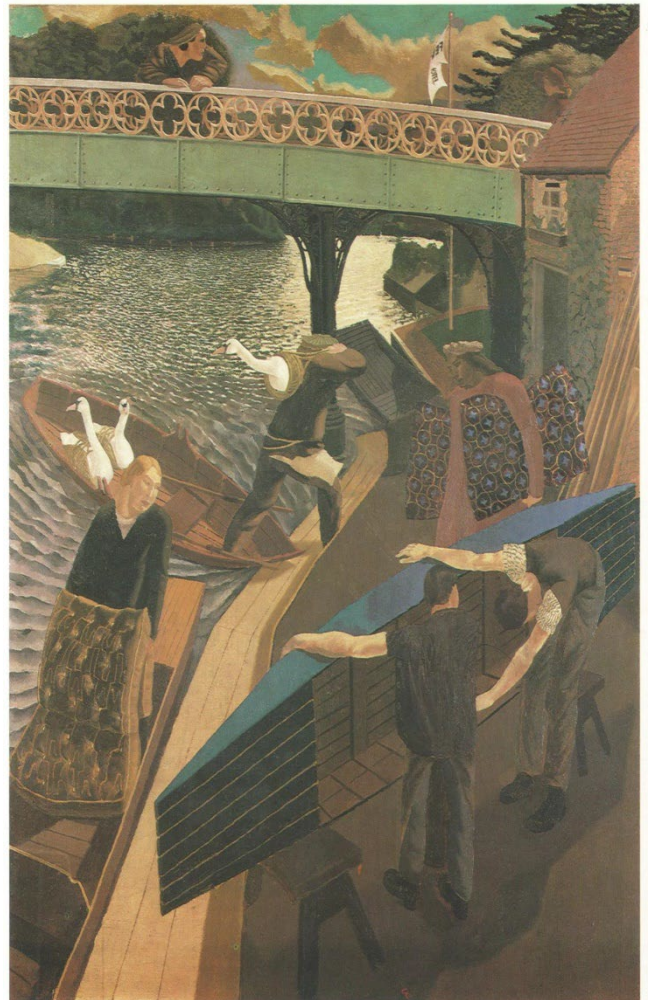
Sheila explained that Stanley's love life was complicated. He married Hilda Carline in 1925, and they had two daughters, the second born during his time in Burghclere, and Hilda suffered badly from post-natal depression. During this period Stanley met and became infatuated with Patricia Preece. He later divorced Hilda and married Patricia, separating just days afterwards, but Patricia refused to divorce him and stayed on in the Cookham family home he had previously shared with Hilda but which he had signed over to Patricia, ensuring that he had no home in Cookham, a profound blow for him. Nevertheless, he supported Hilda through bouts of depression and physical illness until her death. In the churchyard we looked at Stanley's gravestone engraved with his details but also with the name of Hilda, who had pre-deceased him and who had been buried in Cookham Cemetery.

Swan Upping at Cookham by Stanley Spencer, 1919

In close proximity to the church, as our guide pointed out to us, was the site of Reading University's dig, held since 2021 and due to be re-instated in August. In the three previous digs archaeology students have discovered the remains of a large wooden communal building, a well and a cemetery containing the remains of many bodies. Finally we came to the river, setting for several of the artist's major works, before turning back towards the Stanley Spencer Gallery, formerly the Methodist chapel, where he had worshipped with his family as a child.

For Stanley, throughout his life, Cookham was an inspiration, 'a village in heaven' where he set many of his paintings, blending together the biblical and the mundane. Sheila gave us a very interesting summary of his life and inspiration while we walked around the village and in the Gallery alerted us to many things we might have missed otherwise in the exhibition. I feel unable to do justice to his artistry and creativity, so will end by suggesting that if you did not see the exhibition in the early 2000s (when it was relocated to The Madejski Gallery while the Gallery in Cookham was undergoing renovation and conservation work), you might want to try to visit, in person or virtually, Stanley's 'heavenly village'.

Joy Pibworth



JOHN LEWIS HERITAGE CENTRE (JLHC)

In the afternoon we were welcomed at the JLHC. This consisted of a beautiful old brick building with a modern extension. Phaedra Casey told us about her academic background (starting with a French degree at Reading University), before taking up the position as a chief archivist for the centre. She described her varied roles at the Centre, including taking queries from all levels of staff from the CEO down to all forms of shop floor workers, also from outside designers and retail specialists. The JLHC holds a unique archive of patterns and wall papers from the mid- 1800s. Phaedra emphasised the importance of the strong John Lewis company beliefs and their systems of democracy, where all partners are equal.

We learned how John Spedan Lewis joined his father's shop in Oxford Street in London in 1904 when he was only 19. He then took over another of his father's acquisitions, Peter Jones, which was failing. He went from strength to strength, while making plans to modernise it. In 1928 he took over the whole empire after his father died, then in 1929 brought all the stores together into a partnership scheme. Ahead of their time in caring for staff, there was a medical service and a nurse at each branch; leisure facilities were provided along with canteens for meals. In 1940 the Oxford Street store was destroyed in a bombing raid, but the business recovered rapidly with tables on the street selling goods. Also, in the same year John Lewis started acquiring out of London stores such as AH Bull and Heelas in Reading. Heelas' department store in Minster Street was opened in 1854 by John and Daniel Heelas, selling linen, silk carpets and furnishing. It retained its original name until 2001.

**'Steam Radio' from the John Lewis Range –
photo by Sam Breakwell**



In 1904 a Scottish company owned by three men, Mr Waite, Mr Rose and Mr Taylor sold Coopers marmalade. In 1937 run by the Waite

family, their store now called Waitrose, was taken over by John Lewis. Peter Lewis remained chair of the JL company until 1993 and died in 2024.

Caroline Piller

[**Note by the Editor:** *For three years from 1947-50 Heelas was owned by the well-known retailer and financier, Charles Clore. A late friend of mine, who worked in the store at that time, told me that Clore used to drop into the store unannounced and say, rubbing his hands with glee, 'Hello, boys, 'ow's the money rollin' in, then?']*

SOUTH STREET SWIMMING BATHS

Firstly, apologies to anyone who is also in the Reading Civic Society as this article first appeared in their newsletter earlier this year. However, it got a good reception, so I thought it was worth circulating it to a wider audience.

It all started with a casual conversation outside of Watlington House. Richard Bennett mentioned that there had once been a swimming pool in South Street which had been used by the schoolgirls when Kendrick Girls School had been housed in Watlington House, but exactly where it was cited was a mystery. Mystery, eh? Let's find out some more, especially with the heritage powerhouses of Evelyn Williams and Ann Green Jessel joining us in the hunt. Here are our findings.

We know from the memories of Mrs Agnes Bridge, who was at the Kendrick School between 1887 and 1893, that the girls went to South Street Baths in the summer. Also, that the Kendrick school was located in South Street from 1877 to 1927, so we had a date range for the hunt. Unfortunately, the relevant Ordinance Survey maps showed no obvious building likely to be a pool.

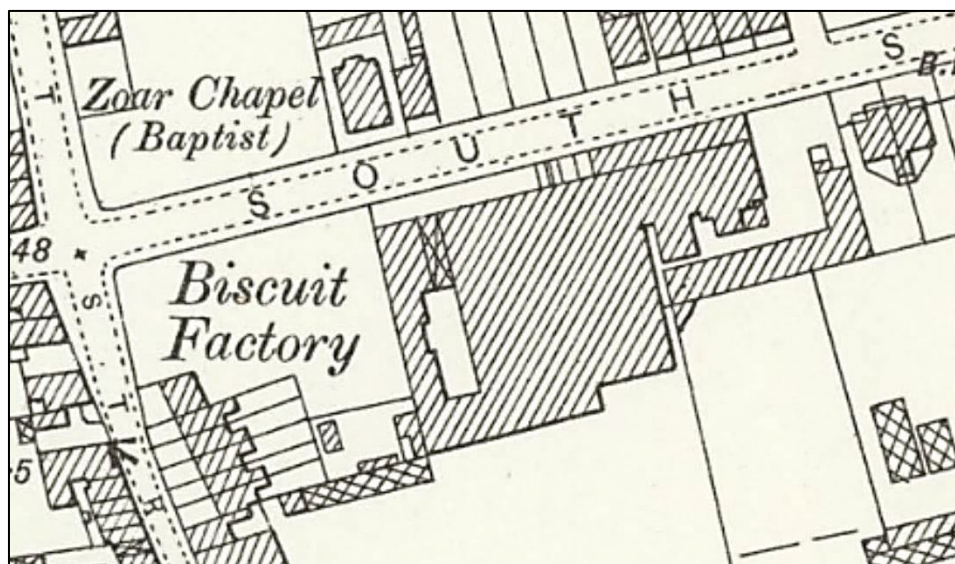
The local newspapers of the time revealed more. The *Berkshire Chronicle* of 26th May 1883 holds a notice for the opening of 'South Street Ladies' and Gentlemen's Swimming Baths' at 10 o'clock on Thursday 31st May placed by the proprietor W H Simonds (William Henry). Further articles from this time give us a feeling for the size of the establishment. The site opens with three swimming baths; a large one of 100 foot by 29 foot with a depth range of 3'6" to 7'6", beside two smaller baths each 46 foot by 27 foot. One of the smaller baths was for the exclusive use of ladies and the other as a first-class bath for gentlemen. Apparently the two smaller baths could be joined by taking out the partition wall, a process described as simple but not explained. The baths were fitted with over eighty dressing boxes, which while not explained are assumed to be similar to those in the old Arthur Hill pool. At the front of the building were forty-eight small baths, some of which had Turkish bath appliances, with the others being described as private baths. The establishment had been built over two years by W H Simonds, who was a builder, rather than repurposed and at the front of the site he built a private house, comprising twelve rooms, for himself. The baths used 'town water' heated by gas-powered steam piping. The largest bath alone held 100,000 gallons. The gentlemen's baths were maintained at 70 degrees while the ladies' bath was at 75 degrees. The *Reading Mercury* noted that there were private hot and cold baths available for ladies and gentlemen at the opening, but that twenty similar baths for the working classes had yet to be built in the basement. Above the baths were a number of rooms suitable for club rooms and on the second floor a suite of rooms for the bath's manager. The baths were to open between 6 am and 9 pm on weekdays and from 6 am to 8 am on Sundays. The pricing varied, but entrance to the large gentlemen's bath would cost five shillings for fifteen tickets and for the ladies' bath fifteen tickets would cost seven shillings (maybe to reflect the extra five degrees of heat). Swimming lessons cost one shilling for men and two shillings for women. The baths proved not be just for individuals in Reading, the Reading Swimming Club can be seen holding races there for several years.

In the 1891 census we see the baths cited after no 5 East Street, putting it at the corner of East and South Street. Also at the bath's address are William Henry's sons, Alfred Simonds (28, builder) and William H J Simonds (34, contractor) and their families, with William Henry himself (58, builder) living at 50 South Street.

In August 1892 Reading's Parks and Pleasure Grounds Committee discuss bathing options in the town and the adoption of the 'Baths and Washhouses Acts'. As part of the discussion the Committee discussed the Corporation purchasing South Street baths as Mr Simonds had notified his willingness for this sale, along with the purchase of adjoining land, for £2,400. Some on the Committee objected to the purchase because of the large amount of corporate debt at the time and preferred the reconstruction of the bathing place in King's Meadow at a cost of £2,000, assuming that it could be opened for two afternoons for ladies only. The outcome was that the King's Meadow work was approved, the South Street baths purchase would not take place and the adoption of the Acts was deferred. The Corporation's discussion follows on from a notice to sell by auction issued earlier in 1892 where auctioneer John Miller, on behalf of W H Simonds, was offering the now-called Imperial Baths as a freehold property comprising a rectangular plot of 62-foot frontage and 160 foot depth. So, we know that the site was substantial, but again the exact location is not specified.

In early 1893 the baths and the surrounding site is bought by the Reading Biscuit Company, previously

Meaby & Co. Ltd and later known as H O Serpell and Co Ltd. The *Reading Mercury* gives the price for the whole site as £3,800. This puts the site on the south-east corner of South and East streets.

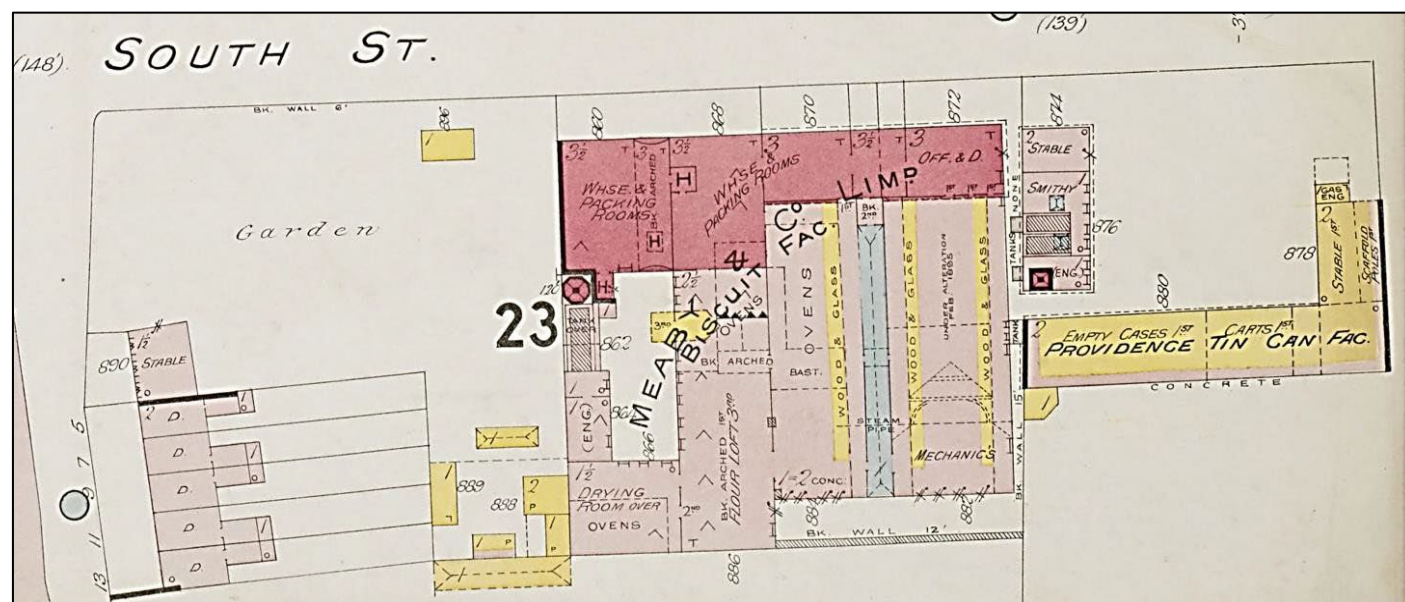


The history of Serpells is a fascinating story for a later newsletter, but what I didn't know until now was the bathing pool aspect. It appears that the baths were incorporated into the biscuit factory that was built on the site. We know this from a report on bathing accommodation in Reading in the *Reading Observer* of 5th August 1893. This report notes that the reconstruction of the King's Meadow Bathing Place had been delayed and that the old reservoir at Spring Gardens in Whitley had been adapted for

bathing purposes. Also, that The Reading Biscuit Company Limited had already generously placed two of their smaller baths in South Street at the discretion of the Corporation for the use of women and girls and had extended the use to men and boys on Tuesdays and Thursdays. There was also some accommodation in place for private swimming at the back of Fry's Island.

To date no later information on the fate of the baths has been found. In Goad's fire insurance map of 1895, the biscuit factory layout is detailed, but there is no mention of any baths nor any areas where they would have sat.

Equally in reports of the fire at the South Street biscuit factor in July 1904 no mention is made of any baths in the list of damaged areas. Maybe at this point the removal of the baths was regretted as a large onsite reservoir of water might have been of use.



It would be lovely to know from anyone who knows more about the baths, or Serpells, which as mentioned is a work in progress.

Jo Alexander-Jones

[Note by the Editor. In the Autumn of 1971, during a period of my life when I was employed as an odd-job man I worked as a packer at a firm on the Slough Trading Estate called Sales Achievement, which was on the process of being closed down, after being taken over by Church and Co (Fittings) Ltd of Reading. The latter seems to have occupied the site previously belonging to Serpells and, as we have read above, was once that of the Swimming Baths. Church's seem to have gone out of business in 1996, though their address is then given as Queens Road. By that time, I am fairly sure that the South Street site was occupied by the modern office accommodation that now faces 22 South Street and the chapel site. In addition, there was a firm called Reading Metal Finishers in the vicinity. Among the product lines acquired by Church's from Sales Achievement were supermarket Rotary Spacemakers, Woolworths Record Browsers and Playtex Self-Selection Centres. If any readers can help to fill in the gaps in the story we should love to hear from you.]

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ZOAR STRICT BAPTIST CHAPEL SOUTH STREET, READING



Zoar Strict Baptist Chapel²



'ZOAR CHAPEL 1869'¹

The story of the Particular or Strict Baptists in Reading dates back to the early nineteenth century. In 1802, a group, led by William Weller Jun., split from the Hosier's Lane Baptist Chapel and formed a church in a building in London Street. Twelve years later, another split occurred from the Hosier's Lane fellowship, led by Jeremiah Hooper Yorke, due to a 'difference of doctrinal sentiment between him and the pastor'. This group set up a church initially in Silver Street.³

It is probable that these two groups of secessionists, both of Strict Baptists, joined together. By the 1850s, they were meeting at the New Hall, London Street, having, it is thought, worshiped in a series of different locations before then: Salem Chapel, Minster Street, then in a Chapel in London Street (that became known as St Giles' Hall), in Vastern Lane, and then Caversham Road. In 1859, under the ministry of Rev. Benjamin Wale, the Strict Baptists moved from New Hall, London Street, to the newly built Providence Chapel in Oxford Road, which opened on 16th August 1859.⁴

However, in the following year, 'after an incident in which a visiting preacher 'was so frivolous and nonsensical' that laughter erupted during the service',⁵ a group, led by W. E. Bond, left, and began to worship at the Bonds' house. When their numbers grew, due to more leaving Providence Chapel, they began to meet in rented premises, and on 14th December 1862 'a Gospel Standard church was formally founded'.⁶ From 1866, they met in the rooms of the Black Horse public house, on the corner of Queen's Road and London Street.⁷ Soon they started to raise funds for their own building. A site was secured on South Street by church member W. Watkins, and building began there in 1869. At a cost of between £600 and £700, a chapel was built to accommodate about 300 people, with a large room beneath.

The official opening of Zoar Chapel took place on Friday 22nd October 1869, with two sermons ('by Mr. Taylor of Manchester, and Mr. Warburton') and a 'social tea meeting' in the downstairs room in the interval between. The *Reading Mercury's* report noted that 'all meetings were well attended'.⁸

Various landmarks in the early days were mentioned in the local press. The first baptism by immersion took place on 14th August 1870 'in the presence of a very full congregation'.⁹ The Chapel was registered for the solemnization of marriages on 31 March 1873.¹⁰ Between the two, the church had a notable celebration of its third anniversary on 19 September 1872:

ANNIVERSARY SERMONS AT ZOAR CHAPEL

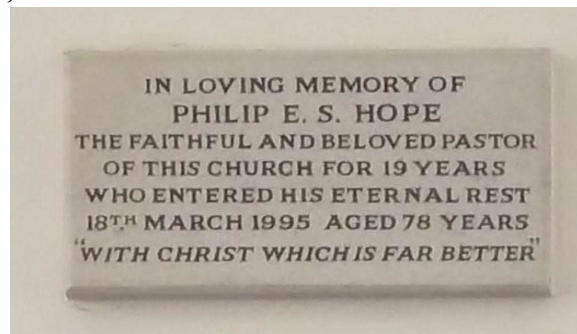
On Thursday last the third anniversary of the above place of worship was held in the chapel, South Street. There were three services at which sermons were preached; in the morning and evening by Mr. Hemington, of Devizes; and in the afternoon by Mr. Hatton, of Red Hill. Collections were made for the Building Fund, amounting to about £27. At five o'clock about 170 persons sat down to tea, which was provided in the vestry.¹¹

Zoar Chapel was next in the news as a result of the disastrous Serpell's Factory fire, which broke out in the early hours of Saturday 23rd July 1904. The Biscuit Factory was directly opposite Zoar Chapel, on the south side of South Street. The firemen ensured that the Chapel was frequently doused with water while the blaze raged, and as a result of their work the only damage sustained by the Chapel was blistered paint on its doors.¹²

In October 1909, there was a break-in at the Chapel. As the local paper noted 'the building contains practically nothing of value apart from the simple furniture used in the services, for the collection boxes are emptied each week'. The thieves had to content themselves with drinking a whole bottle of Communion wine using two of the Communion glasses. The Chapel's caretaker, Mrs Barrett, seems to have disturbed them. As she arrived through the front door, they escaped through the side door.¹³

The Chapel was mostly ministered to by visiting speakers, but two ministers were called to work there over its history: first a Mr Freeman, and then Philip E. S. Hope. This latter man is commemorated in the only memorial in the Chapel. It is affixed immediately behind the central pulpit.¹⁴

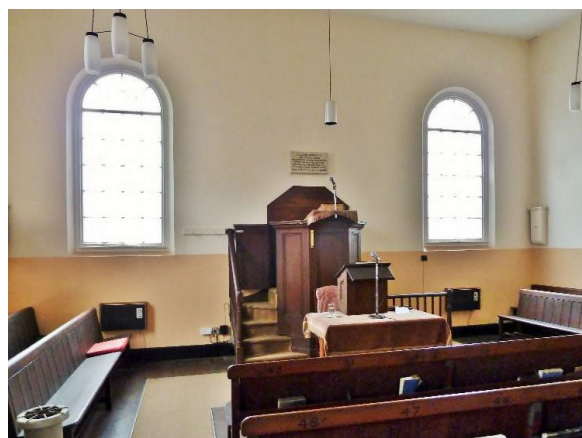
Numbers declined until the only members were Deacon Raymond G. Wiltshire and his wife. When History of Reading Society member Sean Duggan visited the Zoar Chapel in 2012 and 2013, he met them both. Sean wrote of his experiences:

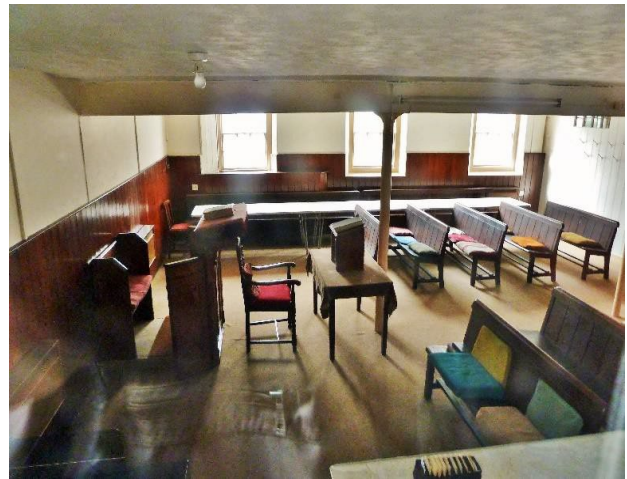


I attended three services there, two with HoRS member Michael Penfold. There were three other people in the congregation. The service began at 11 am when the pastor would suddenly appear, like a jack-in-the-box, from behind the lectern where he was seated. Then he would immediately begin with a hymn accompanied by his wife on a small electric organ. He did not greet the congregation at the start of the service or speak with anyone at the end; everyone departed with great alacrity. The sermon lasted about twenty minutes without pauses and he did not look up from his notes at the congregation during its entirety. The service lasted about an hour. There was no collection during the service; we offered to give something at the end, so he gestured us towards a collection box by the exit.

Zoar Chapel closed on Sunday 25th October 2015, after the death of Deacon Wiltshire. The site was then sold by the Gospel Standard Trust and the money raised was then used to support other chapels. The building was demolished in January 2017.

The interior of Zoar Chapel was very plain and simple, as can be seen from the photographs taken by Sean Duggan below.





Left to right: Mr Wiltshire, Michael Penfold (HoRS member), Mrs Wiltshire.

Room beneath the Chapel

Malcolm Summers *If any reader can add to this account of Zoar Chapel's history, I would be delighted to hear from you (email malsummers@aol.com). With particular thanks to Sean Duggan.*

¹ Photograph by Sean Duggan taken on 3 October 2012.

² Photograph taken in 2010 by Des Blenkinsopp, copyright permission from Creative Commons Attribution Share-alike license 2.0, Wikimedia Commons.

³ C. A. Davis, *History of the Baptist Church, King's Road, Reading, from its commencement in 1640*, Reading 1891, 60.

⁴ *Reading Mercury* 20 August 1859, 5.

⁵ *The Chapels Society Newsletter* 86, 20. This is an article 'Lost Chapels: Zoar Chapel, Reading (1869–2016)' by the Newsletter editor Matt Davis, which acknowledges 'extensive notes on the history of Zoar Chapel' by Gerard Charmley. I am very grateful to John Dearing for providing me with a copy of the article.

⁶ *Ibid.* 21. This is accompanied by an endnote: 'This refers to a Strict Baptist Chapel associated with the *Gospel Standard Magazine*.'

⁷ *Berkshire Chronicle* 21 August 1869, 5.

⁸ *Reading Mercury* 30 October 1869, 5.

⁹ *Berkshire Chronicle* 20 August 1870, 3.

¹⁰ *Berkshire Chronicle* 25 October 1873, 4.

¹¹ *Berkshire Chronicle* 21 September 1872, 5.

¹² *Berkshire Chronicle* 26 July 1904, 2.

¹³ *Berkshire Chronicle* 30 October 1909, 6; *Reading Mercury* 30 October 1909, 2.

¹⁴ Photograph taken by Sean Duggan on 19 May 2013.