

The History of Reading through its Buildings

A Presentation on Wednesday June 18th 2017 in Wokingham Town Hall by Joan Dils, President of the History of Reading Society

On a very hot June evening in the Town Hall, Society members and guests enjoyed an original and copiously illustrated presentation by Joan Dils, in which she drew a fascinating and thorough portrait of Reading, drawing on her extensive knowledge and research into its important and significant buildings and their impact on the community through the ages.

Referring to the *Historical Atlas of Berkshire* Mrs Dils started her talk by pointing out the importance of the Battle of Englefield against the Danes in the small Saxon Settlement of Reading on the River Kennet. The focal point in Reading from the earliest days of the settlement was St Mary's church, now the Minster, in the Butts, which was the location of the market for centuries. In the *Domesday Book* Reading was described as a Borough with a Mayor as its leading citizen. Between the 12th and 13th centuries the town extended to the South and St Giles church was founded. Before that, however, in 1121 Reading Abbey, the most significant building in the Borough's history was founded.

At considerable cost Reading Abbey was built for Henry I and used by Henry III as a resting place when he was on his way to hunt in Woodstock. It became the sixth richest monastery in the country and at the time of its dissolution its income was over £2000 a year. Reading's main market moved to the doors of the abbey, which was so large its church alone was bigger than Winchester Cathedral. A new Borough boundary was created and the Church of St Laurence was built in the surrounding area. A new road to London was made, and by the late 15c Reading had become extremely wealthy, mainly because of the production of English broadcloth and in the early 16c Reading was the 6th richest town in England.

The fate of the abbey was sealed, however, during the Reformation with the dissolution of the Monasteries, and in 1539 the Abbey was dissolved. The presence of St Mary's as a mother church, and the proximity of St Laurence church, meant that the Abbey church was not required and the building was destroyed and all its contents and land became the property of the Crown, which might have included the hand of St James the Apostle. It is, of course, generally believed that the grave of Henry I lies in an unknown spot in the ruins and Mrs Dils hopes that the current restoration project might discover the truth. In 1549 Lord Seymour took all the lead from the roofs of the Abbey complex with the inevitable collapse of the structures. Facings lining the inside walls were also removed and the Abbey became a decaying shell.

By 1611 Reading had become an independent incorporated Borough, but the cloth trade was no longer as successful and there were many poor and destitute people living in slums in the town. John Kendrick, a wealthy cloth merchant and philanthropist, who died in 1624, left in his will a large sum of money to support poor clothworkers. The trustees built a large house in Minster Street called *The Oracle* to house the poor, but over the years the trust was mishandled and in 1824 the money was claimed by Christ's Hospital and *The Oracle* was pulled down. Eventually two schools were built in his name. Kendrick Girls' School still

retains its original name, but the boys' school was taken over by Reading Boys' School in 1915. Reading School, founded in 1125 on the site of the Abbey, had undergone many changes on different sites in the town and it had faced financial ruin, but after its acquisition of the relatively affluent Kendrick Boys' School, its future was secure. In 1660 another educational establishment for poor children, The Blue Coat School, was founded in an inn, The Talbot, in Silver Street. Based on the principles of Christ's Hospital Schools it eventually moved from Brunswick House in London Road to its present site in Sonning in 1947.

Gradually throughout the 18c Reading began to prosper again, having changed hands four times in the Civil War, and in 1723 the Borough's first newspaper, the *Reading Mercury* was founded. In 1789 a new Town Hall was built and in 1787 a High Bridge was built over the Kennet and Avon Canal, which was deemed to be the primary waterway in the town. Thence Reading became a transport road and canal hub. A new place of worship, St Mary's Chapel was built in Castle Street in 1798 on the site of the former county jail after many in the congregation of the nearby St Giles, Southampton Street, had fallen out with their Bishop.

As its importance and prosperity grew the gentrification of the Borough began. Between 1825 and 1835 Albion Terrace was built for the newly affluent and growing middle classes. The coming of the railway in 1840 had further increased the importance of Reading as a major commercial and distribution centre and as the main produce and livestock market in the area. In 1837 the Royal Berkshire Hospital was founded by local subscription and the dilapidated Greyfriars Church was almost totally rebuilt on its original site, the old friary. In 1844 Reading Prison was built next to the Abbey site and was described by Mrs Dils as being '*part Bridewell and part a penal institute*'.

One of the most important commercial developments in the 19c was the expansion in 1846 of the biscuit making company of Huntley and Palmer into a purpose-built factory on King's Road near the Great Western Railway. The factory became a great success and by 1900 over 5,000 people were employed there. It was so famous that Reading became known as '*the biscuit town*'. Another new building of note in Victorian Reading was the Corn Exchange built in 1854 and throughout the century the Town Hall underwent many transitions and in 1897 the final extension was built, including an Art Gallery and Concert Room. The Victorian Town Hall is now Reading's very successful Museum, having survived damage on the southern end of the building in an air raid in 1943. Much of Reading's Victorian heritage is still readily on display in the town, not least the huge statue of the Maiwan lion in Forbury Gardens commemorating the dead in the Afghan wars, and the statue of Queen Victoria at the western end of Friar Street outside the Museum.

In the 20c Reading has undergone major changes. The University was given full University status in 1926 and the Whiteknights campus alone occupies 321 acres. Gradually and predominantly from the 1970s Reading has modernised, restored and renovated many of its finest buildings, and it hosts many fine examples of modern architecture, notably the Prudential building and, above all the new *Oracle* complex built on the site of the building of the same name founded by John Kendrick 400 years earlier.

Joan Dils provided so much fascinating detail about Reading's history in her presentation, she challenged the audience to view the town in a new light, no longer the depressing *Aldbrickham* depicted in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* with its slums and oppressive red brick factories, nor the notorious site of the travellers' nightmare traffic jam at Cemetery Junction on the journey from London to the southwest. As Mrs Dils demonstrated, neither of these images does justice to Reading and its history, and the vibrant and successfully redeveloped modern town of 155,000 citizens offers so much to resident and visitor alike.

The audience responded enthusiastically to the presentation and many questions were asked, the response to which provided further proof of Mrs Dils' detailed knowledge of and enthusiasm for her subject, qualities Peter Must, the Wokingham Society Chairman, acknowledged when thanking her for her presentation.