

THE BERKSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY, 1871-1971

SUMMARY OF A TALK GIVEN AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE SOCIETY, 24th APRIL, 1971

F. M. UNDERHILL

The Society commenced as 'The Reading Architectural Association'; membership was limited to 20 practising architects who held their first meeting on 4th August, 1871 at 12 Duke Street, Reading. Mr H. A. Woodman was elected President and Mr E. J. Shrewsbury Hon. Secretary. For some reason Mr Woodman never assumed office and Mr Charles Smith was elected in his place.

A Committee was formed to draw up a set of rules and it was arranged that meetings should be held once a fortnight. On 18th October, 1871 Mr F. W. Albury delivered the first lecture, his subject: 'The principles of architecture.' For some time after this meetings were held in the Atheneum, Friar Street. At the 9th general meeting on 21st February, 1872 the Society's name was changed to 'The Reading Architectural and Archaeological Society', a further change came on 9th December, 1873 when we became 'The Berkshire Archaeological and Architectural Society.'

The first excursion took place on 8th May, 1872 when some 20 or 30 members visited Sonning Church. At the end of the first year 15 meetings had been held, the total expenditure for the period was £11 10s. 6d. and there was a balance in hand of £2 10s. 6d. In February 1873 the subscription was fixed at 7s. 6d. and lady members were admitted at a reduced rate.

By 1879 Sir John Conroy had become President, membership totalled 143 and meetings were held in St. Lawrence's Church Institute. In the Report for that year the first article on a Berkshire church was published, an account of East Hagbourne by Mr James

Parker. Dr Joseph Stevens, curator of Reading Museum undertook the first recorded excavation, investigating a discovery of pottery and animal remains at the Reading Gas Works.

Mr James Rutland of Taplow, Secretary in 1883, gave an account of the opening of the Saxon tumulus in Taplow churchyard, and Mr Parker told of the discovery of a Roman building at Frilford. Dr Stevens and Mr Rutland together dug into a mound at Battlemead, Cookham which appeared to cover the remains of a 14th century house.

On the 19th May, 1884 the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield, then a curate at Christchurch, Reading was elected to the Society and 5 years later he accepted the position of Hon. Secretary in place of Mr Slingsby Stallwood. A survey of the county's church plate was proposed and the Rev. E. R. Gardiner collected notes from parishes in the west and Mr A. Dasent from the east. Mr Gardiner died before his task was completed although some of his material was published in the Journal, Mr Dasent unfortunately lost his records in a fire. It was left to Mr J. W. Walker of East Hagbourne to publish in 1927 a complete work *de novo*.

1889 brought an offer from Mr G. F. Palmer, that year Mayor of Reading, to defray the cost of publishing the early volumes of Reading's Corporation Diary. These were edited by our Hon. Treasurer the Rev. J. M. Guilding and four volumes were produced. The Society acquired the tenancy of rooms over the Abbey Gate, thus obtaining more permanent headquarters. This brought about the collection of many architectural fragments

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from the Abbey ruins which had long been neglected.

The Society suggested to the Berkshire County Council that a Record Office be set up at their newly completed offices in the Forbury. Nothing came of this at the time but 40 years later the project was pursued again. In December 1933 a committee from the Society was formed under the chairmanship of Mr P. S. Spokes 'to report on the present position regarding the collection and safe-keeping of Berkshire County Records.' When war broke out in 1939 the scheme was almost at the point of fruition, and the County had spent £1,000 to improve the strong room accommodation. The proposal was not allowed to lapse however, and the Record Office was opened, with Dr Felix Hull as the first County Archivist, in 1948.

During a Congress of Archaeological Societies at Burlington House in 1894, one of the subjects discussed was a photographic survey of English antiquities. Our Society took this up and enlisted the help of the Reading Camera Club. There were many years when little happened but 1939 saw the revival of this scheme on a National scale and Mr C. B. Willcocks undertook the mammoth task of forming a Berkshire collection. Today the photographs are part of the National Monuments Record at 23 Savile Row, London. Mr Willcocks was also responsible for the inauguration of the Local History Recording Scheme in 1922.

In 1895 a proposal came before the Society to put up a memorial in a Berkshire church to the County's most famous antiquary Thomas Hearne. The suggestion remained in abeyance until 1935 when the Society sponsored the erection of a tablet at White Waltham from Mr Willcocks' design, carved in Hopton Wood stone by Mr Langford Jones of Blewbury. A driving force behind this scheme was the late Miss Annie Baily, one of our Vice-Presidents. 1895 also saw the name of Mr Charles E. Keyser of Aldermaston Court in our list of members. In 1898 the then President, Sir George Russell died suddenly; at the A.G.M. following, Mr Keyser was elected President. He

produced illustrated monographs on Berkshire churches in our Journal as well as articles in the Victoria County History.

Dr J. B. Hurry joined the Society in 1896, publishing a fresh plan of Reading Abbey where he did much to preserve the ruins; he published several books on the Abbey remains and records. Another new member in 1897 was Mr Llewellyn Treacher of Ruscombe, lecturing on 'Prehistoric remains in the Thames Valley.'

Our Report for 1900-1901 lamented the passing of Queen Victoria who from 1890 had been our Patron. Her letter of acceptance is preserved and usually exhibited at Annual General Meetings. A committee was formed to publish the Victoria County History of Berkshire, Mr Ditchfield was an editor with Mr Wm. Page. Many members of the Society have worked on National enterprises. Sir Frank Stenton's long association with the English Place-Name Society may be recalled and more recently Dr Slade's account of Reading in the Historic Towns series (1970).

In 1902 the Society endeavoured, without any success, to persuade Reading Corporation to retain the fine Elizabethan building, Walsingham House then standing on the corner of Minster Street and Broad Street. We rescued part of the ornamental plaster ceilings from the house and these were stored for a time in the Abbey Gate.

Mr E. W. Dormer made his debut as a writer on local history with an account of Bisham Abbey, Mr Keyser carried out some inconclusive excavations in Reading on the site of St. Edmund's Chapel at the junction of Beresford Road and Oxford Road. In 1912 he was more successful with an extensive dig at the Bishop's Palace, Sonning on which he published a Report.

From 1894 Mr Ditchfield had been the Society's editor, responsible for publication and all financial arrangements. After 1919 he relinquished his copyright which became vested in the Society. The Journal under his direction co-ordinated archaeological record from the three counties of Berks, Bucks and

Oxon. This joint publication ended with Vol. 34 (1930) when the two other counties dropped out and publication continued as *The Berkshire Archaeological Journal*.

The Society's meeting place was moved to Reading University in 1917 but there were problems on housing our growing library. The books had been kept at the Atheneum for many years and a useful reference collection built up. Exchanges of publications had been arranged with other County as well as foreign societies and this still continues. On the appointment of Mr Sacret, a lecturer in the history department as librarian for the Society, the books were kept for a time in the University Library. Eventually they were placed on loan at Reading Central Reference Library which has now become overcrowded with the increasing number of reference works. Our books have had to go in store and they remain unavailable to members although the bulk of recent acquisitions are in our room at Watlington House.

Summer excursions have always been a feature. Before the days of the motor coach, a train was the most comfortable way to travel any distance, shorter journeys being by wagonette. Our last train excursion was in September 1941 when a hired coach coupled to a regular train took us to Abingdon. Two-day journeys with an overnight stop were popular, later to be extended to 3, 4 and 5-day visits arranged by Col. Rivers-Moore. The Colonel was an excellent organiser, his most ambitious venture being a 6-day visit to Brittany in May 1956. Miss Swadling directed Excursions after Col. Rivers-Moore left us and activity continues under Mrs Slade from 1966.

In 1918 Mr G. W. d'Almaine of Abingdon commenced excavating Wayland's Smithy with Mr C. R. Peers, and Mr H. T. Morley first lectured to us on Monumental Brasses. This field of study had been continuing among our members for over 50 years; the Rev. J. E. Field of Benson formed a large collection of rubbings, some of them with his notes came to Mr Morley who published his *Monumental Brasses of Berks* in 1924, dedicated to the President and

Members of the Society. The Oxford Ladies' Brass-rubbing Society was long affiliated to us and their reports are in our Journals.

Another affiliated Society was the Windsor & Eton Scientific and Archaeological who ceased existing during the last war and we have their Minute books from 1900. In more recent years we have established links with the Friends of Abingdon and the Middle Thames Archaeological Society; in addition we have an active corporate membership scheme linking schools, colleges and similar institutions.

In 1921 Mr Morley became Hon. Treasurer, continuing in that office until 1938. When our President Mr C. E. Keyser died in August 1929 we lost a leader who had presided over our destinies for nearly 30 years; his final church monograph on Silchester was read to the Society by Mr Ditchfield using slides which Mr Marcus Adams had prepared. Mr Ditchfield was elected President but died full of years on 23rd September, 1930.

Col. Rivers-Moore who had joined the Society in 1925 began excavations on the site of St. Mary's Priory, Hurley, discovering the lost choir and east end of the church. Mr Wilfred Seaby excavated a Roman farmstead at Canhurst Farm, Knowl Hill in 1932 and Major G. W. Allen commenced taking remarkable air photographs of monuments on the Downs and in the Thames Valley. In 1935 Mr E. T. Long delivered a lecture on Berkshire wall-paintings which was published in the Journal, he followed with a series of articles on Medieval Domestic Architecture. In the same year Miss Margaret Wood (later to become Dr Margaret Kaines Thomas) published a paper on Norman Domestic Architecture, a forerunner for her volume *The English Medieval House* (Phoenix Press, 1965). Mr L. V. Grinsell commenced a survey of Berkshire Barrows.

Mr Stuart Piggott in 1928 when on the staff of Reading Museum under Mr W. A. Smallcombe, exhibited to the Society remains of a Bronze Age Urnfield at Yateley. He published some notes on an Iron Age site at Knighton Hill and in 1933 gave a revealing lecture on Neo-

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lithic Berkshire. A Roman pottery kiln was excavated at Woodrow's Farm, Aldworth in 1934 and under the direction of Mr Smallcombe the entire kiln was encased in concrete, lifted from the field and transported to the Children's Gallery at the Science Museum, South Kensington.

Mr A. T. Loyd, Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire became our President in 1936, his energy was soon reflected in our activities and he was a wonderful chairman at meetings. Mr Piggott succeeded Mr Dormer as editor of the Journal, introducing new features including a badge which we still use. The stones from the foundations of the Chapel of St. Anne on old Caversham Bridge were rescued and after a long period in store were used in 1958 by the Catholic Community to build into a shrine.

The Society sponsored a series of Church Guides commencing with Caversham and Finchampstead; Cholsey and Faringdon followed, Faringdon being very successful, running into several editions. The Guides were on a uniform plan, adapted from a scheme in Sussex originated by Mr W. H. Godfrey.

Mr Piggott made plans to excavate on Blewburton Hill but was frustrated by the outbreak of War. In 1947 Reading Museum with Mr A. E. P. Collins and the Society's support, commenced investigating the hill, proving that it had been a hill-fort. Mrs Cotton carried out fresh excavations at Silchester which the Society visited. One excursion immediately before the outbreak of War was to Ockwells Manor, Bray by invitation of our vice-President Sir Edward Barry. Some 40 years previously he had rescued this outstanding late medieval building from certain destruction.

Mr Frederick Sharpe began publishing his survey of Berkshire Church Bells, a lengthy undertaking which took 20 years to complete. Meetings continued regularly throughout the War years but there was little other activity, our President Mr A. T. Loyd died suddenly in 1944 bringing problems in finding a successor during difficult times. Lord Meston stood in for a year, then by a stroke of fortune Sir Frank Stenton vice-Chancellor of Reading

University agreed to take on the direction of our affairs. His term as President lasted until 1961 and each year he gave us an address of great power and scholarship, usually on a Berkshire subject. Dr M. A. Cotton succeeded Sir Frank, she has continued to be active both with the spade and as a writer on archaeological subjects. In Berkshire her investigation of Robin Hood's Arbour on Maidenhead Thicket cleared up more than a century of speculation about the earthwork. With Mrs Crystal Bennett a very thorough rescue dig was undertaken on the Cox Green Roman Villa. Dr Cotton's investigations at Weycock Field, Waltham St. Lawrence were reported in the Journal of 1953, another valuable paper was on Berkshire Hill-forts. To our loss Dr Cotton retired to Italy in 1965 where her studies on the origins of the Roman villa and other researches continue.

Our association with Reading University now has links through Dr Cecil Slade as our President. This revived connection could not have occurred at a better time for many problems have to be faced both in the field as well as in finance and publication. With the advent of the Town & Country Planning Acts a small committee of architectural advisors has been set up, they deal with plans referred to the Society connected with the demolition or alteration of Listed Buildings.

As for the future, we believe that County Societies can make an important contribution to National as well as Local archaeology. Many despair of seeing proper legislation to protect antiquities. Museums are hampered by lack of public funds and shortage of staff and the Ministry can only cope with matters of first priority. The Society can provide a little money and people with energy to investigate and sometimes rescue a piece of history which might otherwise be lost.

Presidents of the Society

1871	Charles Smith
1873	Rev. Lewin Maine
1875	Sir Charles Conroy, Bart.
1890	Sir George Russell, Bart., M.P.
1901	Charles E. Keyser, M.A., F.S.A.

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1930	Rev. P. H. Ditchfield, M.A., F.S.A.	1944-5	Vacancy on the death of Mr Loyd
1931	Rev. Dr B. H. B. Attlee, F.R.Hist.S.	1946	Lord Meston
1935	The Very Rev. Dr W. R. Inge, K.C.V.O.	1947	Sir Frank Stenton, M.A., D.Litt., F.B.A.
1937	A. T. Loyd, O.B.E., J.P. (Lord Lieut. of Berkshire)	1961	Dr M. Aylwin Cotton, O.B.E., F.S.A.
		1966	Dr Cecil F. Slade, F.R.Hist.S., F.S.A.