



READING CIVIC SOCIETY

Update to Members by email 13 September
2020

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1. Heritage Open Days

10-20 September

This year of course there are fewer physical events and digital events are offered for the first time.

Launch event.

The Mayor of Reading, Cllr David Stevens, and Heritage Champion, Cllr Karen Rowland, launched Heritage Open Days in a video taken from Watlington House and its hidden garden: <https://www.readingculturelive.co.uk/events/heritage-open-days/>

There are some 26 events (15 digital and 11 physical) in Reading. Having searched for HODs events being held in other towns and cities Reading is doing well. Cheltenham has 25 (13 physical events and 12 Digital), Durham (County) has a total of 15, Birmingham 18 (9 physical and 9 virtual). York 9 (1 on Line was also counted in Durham) and Bristol has 5 Open Doors events and 6 HODs events.

It's not a competition of course, but.

All events in Reading may be seen by going to <https://whatsonreading.com/heritage-open-days-2020>

The events include for example:-

- A virtual tour of Watlington House and Garden (you do have to suffer me a couple of times)
<https://www.readingculturelive.co.uk/events/grade-ii-watlington-house-a-hidden-gem-of-a-house-and-garden-in-the-centre-of-reading/>
- A walk and a video of the area to the west of Caversham Road
<https://www.readingculturelive.co.uk/event/s/caversham-road-history-architecture/>
- Reading Old Cemetery
<https://www.readingculturelive.co.uk/event/s/reading-cemetery-jaha-heritage-open-day/>
- Hidden Nature with your local wildlife trust <https://whatsonreading.com/heritage-open-days-2020>
- Coley Meadows
<https://www.readingculturelive.co.uk/event/s/coley-meadows/>
- a video of Caversham Court Gardens
<https://www.readingculturelive.co.uk/event/s/welcome-to-caversham-court-gardens/>
- Terry Dixon's Influential Women walkabouts.

Across the country there are many events which you can enjoy from your computer. To search for events go to <https://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/visiting>

2. Berkshire Family History Talks

An on line talk on the British Army 1939-45 will be held on 24 September, see flyer attached. To see more details & to book go to <https://berksfhs.org/events/the-changing-army-the-british-army-1939-45-online-talk>

3. New books

We do like to share information about books written by members of the Civic Society, or which have subjects of particular interest.

We recently came across a slim paperback book by Civic Society member Martin Richards

entitled “**Alfred Waterhouse Architect The life and works of a Victorian Goth**”, which has been privately published.

We were very impressed, it is well laid out and illustrated and over 90 pages deals very comprehensively with Waterhouse’s life and works. If you would like to know more please contact the author, Civic Society member Martin Richards, on newleafdesign@waitrose.com .

The books are printed as one offs so it may take 3 weeks to get them to you. The price is £10 per copy inclusive of post + packaging.

Two Rivers Press have recently published, or will publish shortly:

- The Art and History of Whiteknights with contributions from RCS member Evelyn Williams <https://tworiverspress.com/shop/the-art-history-of-whiteknights/>

- Reading’s Influential Women by RCS member Terry Dixon (Terry’s Reading Walkabouts) <https://tworiverspress.com/shop/readings-influential-women/>

- Bricks and Brickwork in Reading, Patterns and Polychromy by Adam Sowan. Publication date 21 November <https://tworiverspress.com/shop/bricks-and-brickwork-in-reading/>

Further information will be provided in the forthcoming newsletter.

4. Reading Abbey Quarter has recently won an award for the best use of heritage in place making

Reading Abbey Revealed, supported by the



National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England and Reading Borough Council, has transformed 13 hectares of central Reading into a new historic quarter. The Grade I listed Abbey ruins and gateway, which closed to the public in 2009 when they became too unsafe, have been conserved

and reopened alongside a new gallery at Reading Museum.

The public can learn about the heritage project through a new website and interactive map. The area is now used for cultural events and community activities.

The judges were impressed with the community participation in consultations to ensure a broad spectrum of people could participate and enjoy a new “sense of place.”

5. Reading Civic Society AGM

It was decided to hold the AGM this year via email. Thank you to the some 50 members who voted in favour of the motions. We posted the documents to 17 members who are not on email, we said that we would assume they were content unless they came back to me, which none did, so that makes 67 in favour.

The minutes of the 2019 AGM are therefore approved, the Chairman’s and Hon Treasurer’s report were agreed as were the accounts for the year to 31 December 2019. The appointment 3 new committee members; Richard Stainthorp, Stephen Snook and Terry Dixon was agreed as was the appointment of our Accounts Examiner Paul Welch.

The committee for 2020 is therefore:

Chair: Richard Bennett

Treasurer: Penny Kemp

Secretary: Fiona Rycraft

Membership: Alison Bennett

Committee members;

Lynette Edwell, Amanda Martin, Clare Platts, Adam Sowan, Richard Stainthorp, Stephen Snook and Terry Dixon.

6. Newsletters .

In 2019 we decided we could no longer continue to produce printed newsletters.

Since then I have provided occasional email updates, such as this, to members.

I am however in the course of preparing a newsletter update to catch several issues, other things however keep taking higher priority, which was the reason we stopped in the first place! However we will get there. It will be emailed to members on our list and posted to other members.

7. Talks.

I was booked to give talks to two groups this year which were of course cancelled. They may happen next year.

8. Reading Civic Society Events.

Sadly they have had to be ceased. It seems unlikely that we will be able to restart these until the New Year.

I thought members would be interested to know that we have recently been given some interesting material by the families of two late, and long standing, members of the society, Paddi Lilley and Jean Rose.

Jean's husband Grahame in the late 1950s and 1960s took slide photos of Georgian Reading before, and during, its demolition. Most are along Castle Street, a few along Oxford Rd and London Street and out at Coley. Some of the views of now lost buildings are new to us. In late September we plan to hold a traditional slide show for the committee and also David Cliffe (Reading Central Studies Library) to test if they are unusual and if so what should happen to them. We will hold sessions for 6 people one after the other! If they are unusual the plan is to organise an event for Civic Society members when this CV19 nightmare allows.

9. Planning

CV19 may make the proposals for the mass of flats on Brownfield sites in the centre of Reading look to be very different propositions. Recently the height of the proposed development on the former Royal Mail site was reduced, but along with that all the Affordable Housing proposed was removed.

Arthur Hill Baths near Cemetery Junction

RBC has a planning application for affordable houses on this site.

An enthusiastic campaign to save the baths was started in 2016 and whilst it raised a lot of noise did not convince RBC to re-open the pool (RBC sited cost of refurbishing and operating). RBC strategy on swimming is in difficulty. The closure of the Arthur Hill and Central Pools (2018) was based on cost and poor value for money of keeping them going. The council has to assess VFM on all its proposals. A temporary 5 lane pool at the Rivermead to fill the gap opened in early 2018, but there is still a significant deficit, including the loss of the diving pit. It seems unlikely that the planned new pools at the Rivermead and Palmer Park will open before 2024.

The opposition and frustration is therefore understandable. However RBC is determinedly sticking to its strategy.

To succeed the campaign team will need a plan B which did not involve the council, they would need HLF funding and a major donor. After 4 years that is not on the horizon. I am only too aware of the difficulty the Kings Meadow Pool team experienced when they were trying to take that on themselves. After years of work by the campaign team RBC pulled the plug and thankfully we have Thames Lido.

I have discussed the Arthur Hill possibilities with the team behind Thames Lido. Their view is that the AH Baths are not a practical proposition, they would not take it on as swimming alone does not pay (one of the reason RBC closed the Arthur Hill).

It is depressing to see on FB the negative views being taken about the provision of Affordable Housing by RBC on this site.

This building is on the local list but that does not give statutory protection. From a RCS point of view the front of the old pool will be retained / refurbished as part of the project and significant housing will be provided.

Reading Golf Club

+240 houses / flats/ Medical centre.

Another contentious project with a vigorous opposition campaign mounted on Facebook by Keep Emmer Green, concerns of course about transport / traffic and schooling.

Richard Stainthorp and I met with the Golf Club and the developer a week or so ago. Compared to the proposals put forward at the public exhibition earlier in the year the site the layout has been improved along with a better position for the Medical centre. 30% of the housing provision will be affordable (Govt definition rather than reality), mainly houses but some flats will be provided. Significant % of the club site will be opened up for public use (it is all private now), ideas are being developed for continued sports use on the part which is opened up. It is also very clear that the club will move to Caversham Heath in early 2021 and that the RGC site will be closed and access boarded up.

A concerns of KEG is that one development will lead to another on the site and that inevitably the whole site will be turned over to housing. It seems likely that this would be the case but the geography of the site and the protected woodland in the centre of the site would mean it would be restricted to a very tight area and be a marginal change.

To quote the White Paper on “Planning the Future” **“Getting homes built is always controversial”**.

Whilst the concerns behind the Keep Emmer Green protests are perhaps understandable I have highlighted on their FB page that they don't have a Plan B.

We discussed with the RGC what Plan B might be, could the objectors raise the funds to buy the land? If so it would have to be managed / maintained which would require a number of businesses to generate the cash and inevitably it would be enabling development (housing).

So proposing a Plan B seems to get you to the same place that RGC find themselves in.

Matt Rodda MP issued a survey to gather the views of the members of the public (I circulated this to members in a previous email), the majority of responders are anti. Matt summarises that Reading is meeting its housing requirement on Brownfield sites. This opinion fails to take on board that the vast majority of provision is FLATS, FLATS, and some housing provision on industrial estates (oh joy who would want to live there). The Flat strategy was excessive before CV19 and is now even less acceptable.

Perhaps plan B would be for RBC to buy the RGC site and use it all for Affordable Housing! It certainly would not be able to buy it and maintain it as green space.

10. **The White Paper**

“Planning for the Future”.

This is out for public consultation with views sought by 29 October. Very radical. The Conservation Area Advisory Committee started to look at the implications with a view to making a submission.

I sat in on a discussion with Civic Voice about it. The CV Chair, Joan Humble, has an hour with the Secretary of State and the Minister of Housing on 10th October to discuss the implications of the White Paper and the CV view.

Societies have been asked to provide 3 points which can be raised. I had the opportunity to discuss it very briefly with Cllr Page late last week, “disaster” was the word he used. Last week he had been in a meeting with Leaders of Councils across the South East, the majority view (mainly Tory Shires) was hugely negative. Tony said “all I had to do was sit and listen and watch as it erupted around me”. We will consider.

11. **High Street Heritage Action Zone**

The council continues to work on the project plan for this project, supported by Historic England.

It will cover the High Streets of Oxford Road, Market Place / London Street.

CV19 means that the engagement plan needs to be very different to that which was originally envisaged.

RBC is currently recruiting two part time members of staff to work on the project, one of which will be a Community Engagement Officer and the other a Conservation Officer.

In addition a full time Conservation and Urban Design Officer (CUDO) , Bruce Edgar, has been appointed and started in mid-September, we understand he lives in Tilehurst. This is a significant improvement in resourcing as for many years Reading has hired in a Heritage Consultant for one day a week (aka Mr Wednesday).