

**READING CIVIC SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER**

Our AGM

15 March at Garden Hall, Watlington House from 14.00



We will be holding our Annual General Meeting in Watlington House on the afternoon of Saturday 15 March where the elected committee will update you on the activities of the Society over the past year and those planned for 2025. Updates will be given on projects including LOOK DRAW BUILD 2025, the Heritage Plaques Database and the plans for a new stone plaque to Jane Austen plaque on the Abbey Gateway. The new committee for 2025-26 will also be elected. The AGM is an important day for the Reading Civic Society where our members can formally express their views on what the Society is doing.

It had been planned that Tony Page, Reading's former longstanding Councillor and Mayor, would give us a talk about his experiences in Reading's planning and developments over the years. Unfortunately, due to an illness in his family, this has to be postponed. Terry Dixon will step into the breach with his new talk about his, and Linda Saul's book, **Influential Women of Reading** during the Pandemic.

LOOK DRAW BUILD @Reading & Bristol Stations 2025



Our LOOK DRAW BUILD Programme, which inspires Reading's young children to learn about engineering and architecture, through designing a railway station, is running for its fourth year. In conjunction with ARCHI-adventure and our sponsors and delivery partners, we are working with 11 local primary schools, 18 classes, this March to deliver the 2025 programme. In May we deliver to 10 schools in Bristol.

On 27 March do join us at Haslams Estate Agents, Friar Street, for a reception and the announcement of the results of the station build competition. Arrive from 17.45; The Mayor of Reading, Cllr Glenn Dennis, will be the principal guest.

On 29 March in the Oracle, Gunn Street entrance. we will have a stand about the project and show the top 3 models. This will be advertised on the Big screen on Reading Station concourse.

Civic Society Activities 2024

Here's a summary of what was a busy year of activities and events for the Society.

Station Hill Visit



In April thirty-four members and some friends visited the new Station Hill site in the centre of town, including the Ebb and Flow rental accommodation and the new, unfinished, office block fronting Reading station. The visit was hosted by Lee Fearnhead, Director of Construction UK/Europe for the developers [Lincoln](#).



We saw the shared facilities being provided in these rental-only properties and the inside of some of the flat designs plus being taken to the top of the new office development in construction workers outside lift. Lee was open about the design challenges they had faced, and seemed genuinely to want the site in

Reading to work for the town. On-the-day donations allowed over £200 to be donated to Reading's New Beginnings charity, one of the two that the site's developers are supporting.

LOOK DRAW BUILD 2024

In May we took the programme to 10 primary schools, 15 classes of years 5/6 children. This engaged 420 children in building 150 model stations.

The Mayor of Reading was principal guest at Reception in Haslams. Other guests included, Ahamed Ibrahim (Royal Academy of Engineering), Stefan Fafinski DL and Dan Pearce from GWR.



At Waterfest on 8 June we hosted a stand about the competition. Many of the young participants and their parents came along. We provided badges and quizzes about safety on the railway to help publicise the programme. We made contacts in new schools which are involved in 2025.



Talk to History Of Reading Society

March also saw Richard Bennett, our Chair, give a talk on the history and activities of our Society to around forty attendees, as ever, spreading the word about who we are and what we do for our town.

The Civic Society AGM 16 March 2024



As well as the necessary business of the Society, the AGM had a really interesting talk by Alastair Dick-Cleland, Project Development Manager of the Landmark Trust and a Reading resident. He spoke on the history of the Trust and its remit as a building preservation charity that restores, mainly smaller historic buildings, to their former glory and opens them for self-catering breaks. Members' donations on the day enabled us donate £225 to Landmark.

Walksfest in May

Two successful walks were run by our Committee member Terry Dixon; one around Katesgrove and one around the Victoria Park area.

Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC)

In June members of the IHBC held their summer school in Reading and attendees were treated to walks from our member, Terry Dixon. Prior to the visit Richard Bennett and Evelyn Williams, Chair of the Reading Conservation Area Advisory Committee, had given a webinar about Reading and its building heritage and its conservation challenges.

Donnington Hospital Almshouse



Twenty-one members were hosted by Willie Hartley Russell MVO DL in June when visiting the Donnington Hospital Almshouse, near Newbury.

This site is part of a group of Almshouses that have been under the patronage of the Hartley Russell family since 1632. The £20 per head charge enabled a donation of £525 to be made to the Newbury Soup Kitchen.

Building Berkshire Together (BBT)

In July Richard Bennett and Stephen Snook met with Lynn Bushell, Communications and Engagement Lead for Building Berkshire Together, to discuss the upgrading or replacement of the Royal Berkshire Hospital. The conversation covered the challenges of the current site and the potential new sites being considered. As we know Plans for the RBH are now significantly delayed.

Waltham Place, White Waltham



In August we had a society visit to the 220 acre organic farm and garden at Waltham Palace, with an accompanying tea.

Heritage Open Days

September saw Lloyd Turner, a local developer, open the lovely gardens at Hillside House, having been encouraged to do so by the Society's committee. Three talks and tours took place with fifty-two people in attendance.



Talk to Rotary Club of Reading Abbey

In August Richard Bennett relieved his talk on the history and activities of our Society to another local group.

Reading Civic Society Annual Luncheon



Twenty-Eight members enjoyed a lunch in October at the Rising Sun public house in Castle Street. It was three-course affair in what is one of the newest venues in our town.



Planning Activities

Throughout the year the Society's committee members work tirelessly to champion the view of our membership to the Council, Developers and local groups. Without listing all of the meetings attended here is just a flavour of the work being done on our members' behalf:

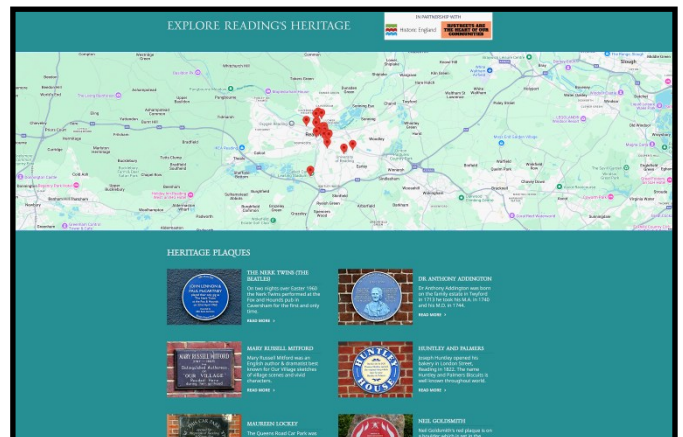
- John Lewis Warehouse Site, Mill Lane
- Sapphire Plaza, Watlington Street
- Station Hill
- Broad Street Mall

- Butler Pub, Chatham Street, successfully nominating it to be designated 'Asset of Community Value'
- Reading Gaol
- Building Berkshire Together
- Media Advertising Screens in town centre
- Mott MacDonald Civil Engineering team
- Reading Borough Council
- Gentleman Danes 'celebratory' stone, supporting the work of John Nixon
- Engaging with Civic Voice, the umbrella organisation for Civic Societies, on wider issues

Reading Civic Society Website

2024 has seen a complete review and redesign of our website, assisted by our new hosting company, Headwall. The site has a new design that focusses on both the future and the heritage of our town, featuring sections on planning, Society activities and projects. There is still a way to go with providing content and any ideas are always welcomed by the committee.

As part of the work significant effort has been put in to building and displaying a section on Heritage Plaques located in Reading. This is the first time all of our towns plaques have been collated and displayed.



The work on the Heritage Plaque site's design and build has been funded by Reading High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) with the research and content coming from members of our Society.

To keep up with news on Reading's civic activities and specifically those of our Society see:

RCS Website - www.readingcivicsociety.org.uk

RCS on [Facebook](#)

RCS on [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#)

RCS on [Instagram](#)

The Lord Mayor's Big Curry Lunch



If you have never queued up with a host of senior military officers for a hearty prawn mango masala, then there is no excuse for not attending the next Lord Mayor's Big Curry Lunch. This is an annual charitable event held at Guildhall the heart of the City of London. The lunch is organised to support members of His Majesty's Armed Forces and veterans. Since its inception in 2008, the event has grown in stature and significance and raised a total of over £3 million for the Army Benevolent Fund, the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity and the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund.

This year's event took place on Thursday 18 April, hosted by the Lord Mayor of the City of London Alderman Professor Michael Mainelli and the Lady Mayoress Mrs Elisabeth Mainelli, and in the presence of Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal. The lunch was sold out; attended by 1,650 guests over three enormous sittings supported by 300 uniformed and civilian volunteers. It raised a magnificent total of £403,000!

As well as curry, a number of the Livery Companies of the City were out in force, selling their wares, including the Bakers, the Gardeners, the Pewterers, the Turners, the Fruiterers, the Fishmongers and the Framework Knitters (think socks!) There is also an auction, in which guests can bid on a variety of unique and exclusive items, experiences, and memorabilia. The funds raised through the auctions significantly boost the overall contributions to the charities involved – this year the auction raised just over £100,000 alone. There was also a raffle for a one-off bespoke handmade Pinchbeck Watch, commemorating the Battle of Waterloo.

In essence, the Lord Mayor's Big Curry Lunch is a fusion of charity, cuisine, and camaraderie. Through this annual event, the City of London reaffirms its commitment to honouring and supporting those who have dedicated their lives to the service of our nation. If you have never been along, you should seriously think about doing so. It is simultaneously one of the most worthwhile and bonkers annual City events you could ever imagine.

Dr Stefan Fajnski - Deputy Lieutenant of Berkshire

If you want to know more about **The Berkshire Lieutenancy**, of which our Chair Richard Bennett is a Deputy Lieutenant, there is a revamped Lieutenancy [website](#). This explains their role, who is in post and the activities they provide to serve our County. Our current Lord-Lieutenant, Andrew Try, is the personal representative of the King in the Royal County of Berkshire. The Lieutenancy chairs the committee selecting magistrates, takes a leading role welcoming new Citizens in Citizenship Ceremonies, promotes and presents the Kings Award for Voluntary Service and has links throughout the counties community, industrial and social life.

A recently published book, **The Lord-Lieutenants of Berkshire, 1545-2023** by Dr Peter Durrant MBE DL, traces the history of the Lieutenancy including history of the 41 men and 1 woman who held the post of Lord Lieutenant. Peter was the County Archivist and is Chairman of the Friend of Reading Abbey, and more.

Hemdean House School

July 2024 saw the closing of one of Reading's long-established schools when Hemdean House in Hemdean Road, Caversham appointed liquidators to wind up the educational concern. The private school has seen a falling school-roll and rising costs which combined to make the school unsustainable. The Reading Civic Society took 'LOOK DRAW BUILD @ Reading Station' there in 2023 and Molly Casey, a former Society committee member, taught at the school. Molly wrote 'The Story of Hemdean House School' in 1984.



In the school's centenary year (1959/60), the then headmistress Miss Alice Olivey told the Reading Standard that the school was founded around May 1859 by the Misses Rosa and Matilda Knighton. The sisters were daughters of Francis Knighton who owned Caversham House Academy in Church Street. In 1861 the sisters purchased land in Hemdean Road and the school, looking like a private house, was built. Miss Olivey went on to say that the school was largely unchanged, and tells us that Rosa Knighton married a Frenchman and retired from teaching while Matilda remained as the matron. Miss Olivey herself had attended the school from five, at 16 became a student teacher and at 28 took over the administration of the school from Miss Knighton.

We learn more of the school's history when Molly Casey wrote in the Reading Evening Post in April 1999. She tells us that before the purchase of the Hemdean Road site the school was located at Veronal Lodge in Caversham, and that the current site was originally known as Emdean Bottoms, a name considered unsuitable for a ladies' school. The school was boarding until the 1970s but has taken day pupils since 1870.

The future of the site and its buildings is unclear, but in March 2025 we supported a nomination for the building to be added to the local list.

The picture of the school is taken from 'I went to that tiny little place – Hemdean House' on Facebook.

Sidney Gold Bequest

Many of you will have known Sidney Gold, who was a Civic Society member and served on the committee for several years. When he died in 2023, he left a sum of money to Reading Foundation for Art.

He stipulated that the money should be used to buy a work of art connected to Reading and non-Modern. The Museum heard that an oil painting fulfilling these criteria was coming up for auction in Salisbury in September 2013. Reading Foundation for Art successfully bid for this painting, which has now been cleaned and is in the museum store.

The artist is Edmund John Niemann (1815-76) and the painting depicts Sunrise over the Thames at Reading. It is a view looking south and east from just above the Caversham Court Gardens gazebo. St Peter's Church appears on the left of the picture, and the town's church towers and spires are in the background. Across the centre of the painting runs the Great Western Railway, with the steam from two trains. This dates it to after 1840, when the railway opened, but there is no sign of the Reading Gaol building (1842-44), although some lumps of abbey ruins are visible.

It is fascinating identifying the various buildings in Reading at this time, and in September 2024 we had the opportunity to do this, as the painting was on display in Reading Museum's exhibition, Art Stories.

Amanda Martin

Lord Reading's Statue

In our Spring 2024 edition we wrote of Lord Reading's statue in Eldon Square. In the article we noted that it had been some time since the current Lord had visited the town. We are pleased to say that on 2nd March 2025 he attended the Service in Reading Minster to welcome the new Bishop of Reading, The Right Reverend Mary Gregory.

In addition, Cllr Stevens is exploring what can be done to improve the appearance of what is now a rather grubby statue.

Representatives for our 'Little Big Town'

In June 2024 we saw Jason Brock step down as Reading's Council Leader, a post he had held since May 2019 saying "The role of Council Leader afforded me the privilege of meeting and collaborating with the many communities, neighbourhoods, organisations, and individuals who make up the fabric of Reading. Together, they all help maintain a special sense of community, which is rare quality in a town that also wears its status as an economic giant so comfortably. At the risk of repeating myself, Reading remains a 'little big town', which is what truly sets it apart from others."

Jason has been succeeded by Liz Terry who in her first update to our town said "As someone who was born and grew up in Reading, and who has lived here all of my life, it is not a responsibility I take for granted. We have a great deal to be proud of in Reading and I intend to do my very best to ensure it remains a great place to live, work and visit."

Along with our new Council Leader we have a new supporting team. Micky Leng is the Deputy Leader of the Council, another born and bred in the town.

The Lead Councillors and their portfolios are:

- Adult Social Care – Cllr Paul Gittings
- Children – Cllr Wendy Griffith
- Climate Strategy & Transport – Cllr John Ennis
- Corporate Services & Resources – Cllr Ellie Emberson
- Education & Public Health – Cllr Ruth McEwan
- Environmental Services & Community Safety – Cllr Karen Rowland
- Housing – Cllr Matt Yeo
- Leisure & Culture – Cllr Adele Barnett-Ward
- Planning & Assets – Cllr Micky Leng

Cllr Glenn Dennis is the new Mayor of Reading, with Cllr Alice Mpofo-Coles as his Deputy Mayor.

Following the General Election our MPs are:

- Reading Central – Matt Rodda
- Reading West and Mid Berkshire – Joanna Bailey
- Early and Woodley – Yuan Yang

Contributions to the Newsletter

We welcome articles and news on topics of interest to Reading - current and heritage. Please send contributions to the Newsletter Editor - contact details below.

OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE 2024 - 2025

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Newsletter:	Jo Alexander-Jones, email: joalexanderjones@gmail.com
Committee:	Amanda Martin, Clare Platts, Lynette Edwell, Richard Stainthorp, Stephen Snook, Terry Dixon