THE CORN EXCHANGE, READING!

Edwin Trout

Not many years ago the classical portico that somewhat incongruously fronted a nightclub on Reading’s Caversham Road was demolished and the site cleared for redevelopment. That the nightclub proprietors had applied a garish paint to the classical stonework suggested a relatively recent change of use and indeed that impression would be correct. The building’s original function was, in fact, that of a corn exchange, as carved into the façade and visible until its final incarnation.

Reading Corporation commissioned a new corn exchange in the mid-1930s, to replace earlier premises in the Market Place, and the site chosen was that other seat of commerce, the Cattle Market. Charles Smith & Son of Reading were the architects, the consulting engineers Messrs L. G. Mouchel & Partners, Ltd and the contractors W.T. Nicholls, Ltd. The new building was intended not just as an exchange, but as an extension of the existing town hall and as a cinema.

Work started in March 1935 and was complete by the end of the year. The building comprised a large hall (131 ft long by 50 ft wide) with a balcony at one end and a single storey entrance block on the Caversham Road that contained cloakrooms and a kitchen. The entrance was finished in Clipsham stone, with reconstructed stone dressings to the windows. Joints in the brickwork were raked out and the walls rendered in a metallic cement. A stepped roof was supported on concrete arches giving the hall a profile very much of its period. Traders’ rooms were accommodated at the back of the balcony, and a doorway led out to the cattle market.

Having outgrown its original purpose, it survived into the twenty first century by adapting to a new role – much like the adjacent cattle market – though sadly it succumbed to the property boom just a few years into the Noughties. There is little left now to mark the passing of this distinctive contribution to Reading’s commercial architecture.

Above: Elevation from the Duke of Edinburgh
Overleaf top: Section
Bottom: Rear elevation from the cattle market
**Editor’s Note:** Peter found a copy of the Programme booklet for this Savings Week which contains advertisements for various Reading companies who were participating together with write-ups on their activities. It gives a fascinating glimpse of industrial activities in Reading in 1948 but is quite a thick booklet so this is the second excerpt following the one in BIAG News 38 covering various other Reading companies. More to come over the next few issues!
STAND 17
THE THAMES VALLEY TRACTION CO. LTD.

The Thames Valley Traction Co. Ltd., with Head Offices in Reading, is a member of the Tilling Group of Road Passenger Transport Undertakings.

The Company can look back over 33 years of service in Reading, and her satellite towns and villages.

To-day these direct services bring passengers not only from these places but also from districts between Reading and Wantage, Oxford, Basingstoke, Hartley Row, Oldham, Camberley, Windsor, Nestleford, Bucklebury, Woodley, High Wycombe and Tadley, and there are two direct routes to London, from where coach services can be taken to all parts of Britain. At Windsor, Maidenhead and High Wycombe these direct routes from Reading link up with other Thames Valley services from Aylesbury, Stokenchurch Great Missenden, Slough, etc.

The growth of these services is evidence of the growing importance of Reading as a shopping, industrial, market and residential area. The five buses of 1915 have become 225, running ten million miles and carrying forty million passengers annually.

In addition there are 15 coaches catering for private parties and for excursions to the seaside and country beauty spots during the summer. This fleet, housed in four large central Depots and seven small outer garages, is operated by a staff of 1,450 compared with the 1915 staff of 40.

Some milestones in this progress were the introduction of double-deck "buses in 1920, pneumatic tyres in 1925, and the fast "low bridge" covered-top double-deck "bus in 1927. Others were the "fuel-oil" engine and the luxurious, smooth running long distance coach, revolutionising the lives of Reading and country dwellers alike, giving them new interests and markets, and providing a new link with London.

As for the war years—the old remark, "A book could be written," has been anticipated by the Tilling Group. A book has been written. Under the title "The War on Wheels," it deals with the part Road Passenger Transport played in the Second World War. Copies of this book can be obtained on the "Thames Valley" Stand in the Exhibition, price 1/- each, but as usual supplies are limited.

STAND 21
WELLSTEEDS LTD.

Nearly 100 years ago the firm of Wellsteeds came into being when Mr. W. H. Wellsteed opened a drapery shop in Broad Street, Reading. Wellsteeds soon attracted custom and gained a large proportion of trade.

The business was built up on a secure foundation and was later transferred to the founder's son, Mr. William Wellsteed, who carried on and developed it until about 1879, when, still maintaining the name and traditions, the business was taken over by Mr. Reginald J. Tyrell.

Wellsteeds went forward under the guidance of Mr. Tyrell for over 30 years until taken over as a subsidiary to Messrs. Bobby & Co., Ltd., an associate company of Messrs. Debenhams Limited.

Immediate success was achieved under the new management, with an increase in the volume of trade extensive enlargements and alterations were made to the premises, turning it into a modern store in a most convenient place for a shopping expedition.

The premises extended to three floors with a basement; the floor space being approximately ¾ acres. To the benefit of the public there is a departmental organisation with a well-equipped Restaurant.

The 1939 War left its scars, when on the afternoon of Wednesday, 10th February, 1943, with an air-raid on Reading, Wellsteeds temporarily put out of action, necessitating the removal of most departments to the premises of Messrs. Holme Ltd. in St. Mary's Butts. There the business continued until 28th April, 1947, which date marked the re-occupation and return of most of the departments to their rightful homes in Broad Street.
THE PULSOMETER ENGINEERING COMPANY LIMITED
ITS ORIGIN AND WORK

In 1875, the late John Eliot Hodgkin, F.S.A., began to manufacture, in a Battersea factory, the "Pulsometer" Steam Pump. Two years later this business was registered as "The Pulsometer Engineering Co. Ltd."

The "Pulsometer" Steam Pump, which could pump almost anything, soon became world famous. The firm’s activities increased so quickly that within three years a move to larger premises became necessary. This was made to Nine Elms in London. By 1901 another move became inevitable and new premises were built on the outskirts of Reading, perpetuating past associations by being named "Nine Elms Ironworks."

Meanwhile, electric current at an economic price and the change from reciprocating to rotating machinery had given an impetus to the centrifugal pump, which this firm has developed to a high degree.
BOOK REVIEW

Bob Haskins

The Closed Railway Lines of Britain Volume 11: Berkshire by Kevin Robertson

(£12.95 from Crecy Publications.) http://www.crecy.co.uk/impermanant-ways-volume-11

This is the eleventh in the Impermanent Ways series originally published by Kevin Robertson under his Noodle Books imprint. With a total of 104 pages (210mm x 215mm), of mostly colour plus just a few black & white images of former stations, track and railway infrastructure, this softback book is good value for money. Each image has a detailed and informative caption. However, because of the age of some of the colour prints and I suspect the quality of the original film at the time they were taken it has meant that some of the reproduced images are muddy and some have a washed-out look but this does not distract the reader from the value of the selected photographs. After a very brief half page introduction we’re on our way. We visit the Lambourn to Newbury, the Didcot to Newbury, the Radley to Abingdon and the Wallingford to Moulsford lines with a spotlight on Newbury, followed by a brief look at Reading before finishing with a glimpse at some industrial lines. This is a light read with an opportunity for the railway and industrial historian to wallow in nostalgia.

EXTENSION TO HUNTLEY, BOORNE & STEVENS

Edwin Trout

A 1935 extension to the biscuit tin factory of Huntley, Boorne & Stevens might in many ways be regarded as a purely functional item of industrial architecture, but it did have one distinction - it was the first building in Reading to employ the reinforced concrete ‘flat-slab’ method of construction.

The original factory was of beam-and-slab construction, but the two-storey extension was built with two-way flat slab floors and roof. At 114 ft long, divided into two parts of 60 ft and 84 ft respectively, the additional floor space amounted to 905 sq yds.
Like the contemporary Corn Exchange, the factory extension was designed by the architects Charles Smith & Son of Reading, though the reinforcement was detailed by the Indented Bar & Concrete Engineering Co., Ltd. Messrs Collier & Catley of Reading were the contractors.

Above: cross section
Below: floor plan
LOOKING FOR EARLY RAILWAYS
Brian Boulter

Local History News reports that Historic England has commissioned research into the early wagon ways, tramways etc. which preceded the railways proper. They were used in coal mines as early as 1604 and later served to transport heavy materials to canals. I don't think there were any such tramways in Berkshire, but if any member knows of one, Historic England would like to know. Anything prior to 1840 is of interest.

THE NEW MERL
Brian Boulter

I see that MERL will re-open on 19th October. There will apparently be “interactive immersive galleries” which will change our perceptions about rural England and show the contemporary relevance of country life.

During my Welsh holiday I visited Usk Rural Life Museum. This reminded me of MERL when it was at Whiteknights. There were two halls with displays of hand tools and machinery, including a “Fergie”. There were also displays featuring a farm cottage, a hardware shop and a cobbler's. Run by volunteers, the displays were of a high standard and the captions were informative. The museum is in the centre of the town with a car park, community room, cafe and visitor centre. It is well worth a visit if you are in the area.

HARVEST MEMORIES
Brian Boulter

As a wartime schoolboy, I went on summer harvest camps organised by the school. It was exciting to be away from home and to sleep under canvas for the first time. It was also the first time I experienced the sheer hard physical labour which then typified farm life. I remember stooping sheaves of barley which contained a fair amount of thistles. By the end of the day, the insides of my arms were red raw and bleeding. The only relief was when the reaper/binder got towards the centre of the field and the farmer took aim at the rabbits which then came out. Another time I was part of a threshing team. My job was to clear the straw which came from the end of the threshing drum and pitch it onto a cart. By the end of the week I had a painful sprained wrist from using the pitchfork and was on kitchen duties.

In the autumn we went potato picking. A bus picked us up early from school and took us to a cold muddy field. We had to pick up all the potatoes from our allocated stretches of ground before the spinner came round again and threw another couple of rows at us. We emptied our baskets into a horse-drawn tip cart which took them to a corner of the field, where a clamp was being made. At midday the farmer's wife came in a pony and trap with an urn of tea and Spam sandwiches. I even went “hopping” on a youth scheme. This was not particularly hard work but you were paid by the weight of hops in the team's "bin", a canvas container on a wooden frame. You also got filthy from the oils in in the hops.

Now on “Country File” I watch as huge GPS-controlled “Pieces of Kit” move across the fields. But there are also programmes showing migrant workers cutting vegetables behind a massive mobile washing and packing machine, or picking fruit or flowers from a moving platform in a vast controlled atmosphere glass house. It can still be a hard life in the country.

BIAG VISIT TO SHARPNESS
John Coulson

On Saturday 6th August fourteen BIAG members and partners met outside the Dockers Club at Sharpness at 1015 in the morning. However, we were far outnumbered by those attending a separate annual reunion of the “Vindicatrix” Merchant Navy training ship which was moored for many years in the dockyard. From there our group walked to the Vale of Berkeley railway facilities and workshops and were given an interesting talk on their future development plans. This was followed by a tour of their yard and workshops to view current work on the rolling stock and locos.

We then moved to the dock area where we were met by a Canal and River Trust (CRT) representative and given a guided tour of the entrance lock area followed by the dry dock. There, we had a good view of the SS “Freshspring”
which was being renovated. She was built in 1946 by Lytham Shipbuilding & Engineering and is listed in the National Register of Historic Vessels. She is the last of 14 Fresh Class water carriers whose duty was to replenish Naval ships with fresh water for use in their boilers. She was first stationed in Malta and then returned to Greenock on the Clyde until 1979 when she was sold out of service and towed to Bristol for preservation.

After lunch, we walked down to the old lock entrance from the Severn to the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal (now a marina) and then along the Canal to see the remaining pier and swing bridge tower which is almost all that remains of the old railway bridge across the Severn to Lydney. This was built in the 1870’s mainly to carry coal from the Forest of Dean to Sharpness docks. It was demolished after an accident in 1960 when two barges collided with the bridge in fog and brought down two of the bridge spans.

We then left Sharpness and drove to Saul Junction where the Stroudwater Canal met (and originally crossed) the Gloucester and Sharpness Canal. We walked to the junction and took the opportunity for a cup of tea before driving to Cirencester via the Stroud Valley and meeting up at The Fleece in the market place for an evening meal and social.

Many thanks to Bob Haskins for arranging the visits and communing with the Met Office to ensure (just like last year!) that we had a beautiful sunny day for the trip. Thanks also to Chris Boulter for his contacts with CRT that enabled us to visit the dock area.
FORTHCOMING 2016 MEETINGS PROGRAMME
(Note changes in RED)

17/10/16    AGM & MEMBERS’ EVENING

21/11/16    LAWRENCE CAMERON COLLECTION SLIDE SHOW

12/12/16    FILM EVENING & SOCIAL

All meetings are held on Monday evenings at the Church Hall of St Mary’s Church, Castle St, Reading RG1 7RD and start at 7.30pm. Access to the church hall is through the right hand side passage.

Travel Guidance: By bus, St Mary’s Church Hall is within a two minute walk from St Mary’s Butts and a five minute walk from Oxford Road where many Reading Corporation buses stop.

By car, the Church does not have a car park but vehicles may be parked off-road on the market stall hardstanding area in Hosier Street. Alternatively, there is a public car park in the Civic Centre adjacent to the Church. St Mary’s Church has a web site with a map: http://www.cofec.org/stmarys.html

EDITOR’S NOTE:

As you all know I’m always looking for additional content and new fresh ideas for the newsletter and will of course welcome any feedback. So please keep these articles and comments coming in so that we can enjoy another issue later in 2016.

Particular thanks to Edwin Trout and Brian Boulter for their contributions – there would not have been enough material for this issue without these. Also, Peter Pribik’s contribution of the Souvenir Programme for the Silver Lining Savings Week in 1948 continues to provide some interesting articles and there’s more to come (probably for the next two issues!). Again, does anyone else have something like this somewhere in their files?

John Coulson (jcoulson@theiet.org)

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY


Saturday 26th November – From Brunel to Crossrail. A WEA Study Day at Reading Museum. (http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/events/details/679/)
AUTUMN EVENTS

Bob Haskins is arranging the following autumn visit: For further information or to book, please contact Bob (e-mail: contact@biag.org.uk mobile: 07812 045163).

Saturday 15 October – Walk to explore the former Coley Park branch line.

A 15 minute bus ride (route 11) from Reading Town centre to Coley Park with an onward walk down to view two railway junctions followed by a leisurely return amble to look at the remains of the Coley Park Branch Line, the Holy Brook and the Kennet and Avon Canal. We'll then stop for a pub lunch in town before a visit to Reading Museum to view the "Reading Railways – Past, Present and Future" exhibition (followed by a cup of tea in the Museum café).

Meet at the Friar St bus stop FM to catch the 0946 (Route 11) bus to Wensley Rd, Coley Park.

Friday 4 November – Visit to the BMW Mini Plant in Cowley, Oxford

Peter Trout is arranging a day excursion to the BMW Mini plant in Cowley. We’ll visit the exhibition space (approx. 45 mins) and then go on to a guided tour of the Plant (approx. 2½ hours). This will be followed by a traditional BIAG social event at a local restaurant before departing for home. Provisional details & times are as follows:

1045  Depart Reading either individually or in shared cars
1145  Arrive Oxford & take a self-guided tour of their exhibition space.
1250  Pre-tour sign-in & formalities.
1315  BMW staff guided tour of the production plant. Note the following BMW terms & conditions:
  - Maximum number per tour group is 15
  - Individuals & small groups may be merged into one visitor group.
  - Anyone with a heart pacemaker will not be able to join the tour.
  - There are no refreshment facilities at the Plant, but do join us for the social event afterwards.
  - Photography is strictly not permitted in the production areas, but is permitted in the exhibition space.
  - Mobile phones & handbags cannot be taken on the tour
  - Visitors must wear comfortable shoes, no open-toe shoes or high heels are permitted.
1530  Depart for The Longwall Beefeater Restaurant in Cowley (OX4 2JT) for meal & social.
1700  Depart for home.

The charge for the site visit to the exhibition space and Plant is £15 per person (payable to Peter Trout and must be received before Monday 31 October to secure a place).

For further information see:

For general BIAG business, please contact the Secretary: PETER TROUT (Tel: 01491 682002)
7 WEST CHILTERN, WOODCOTE, READING, RG8 0SG

Submissions to BIAG News are welcome in any format. Please send your contributions with an IA theme such as articles, letters, pictures, jokes, cartoons, cuttings from journals etc. to:

JOHN COULSON (Tel: 0118 9402526)
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or e-mail jcoulson@theiet.org

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