

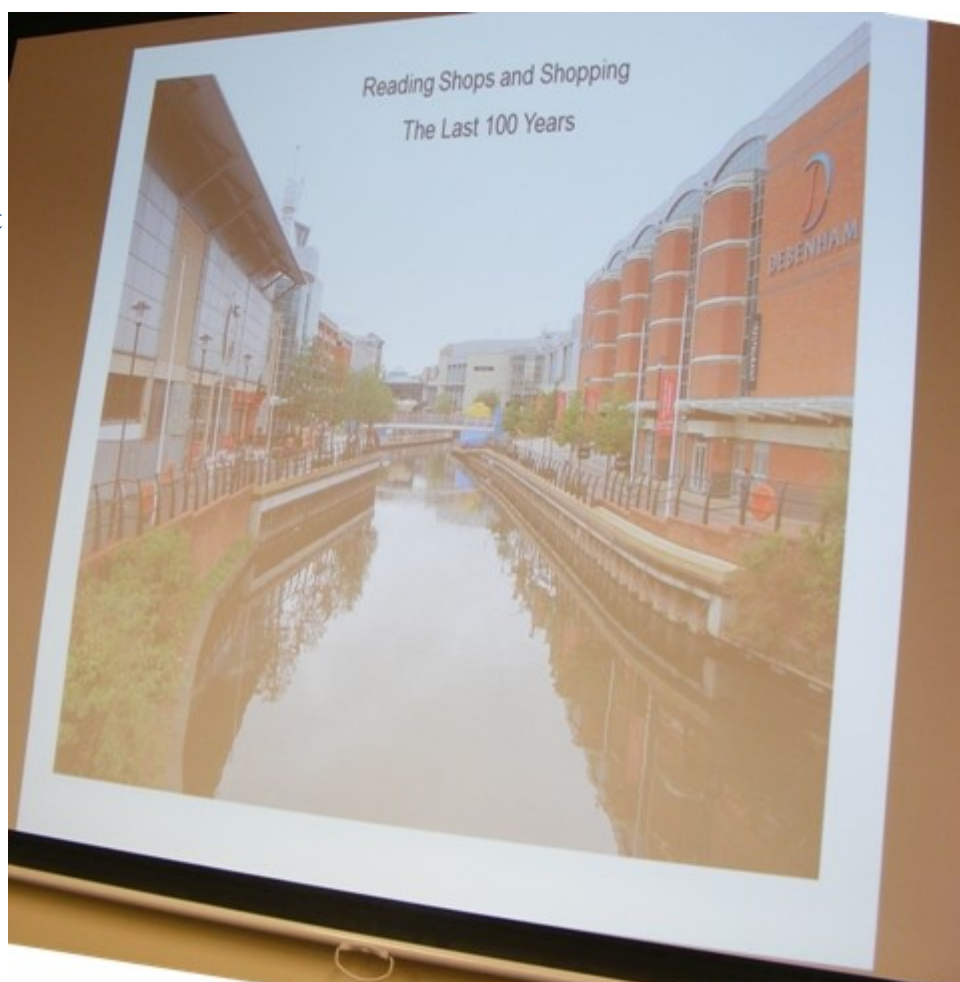
# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2016

## Reading Shops and Shopping - the Last 100 Years

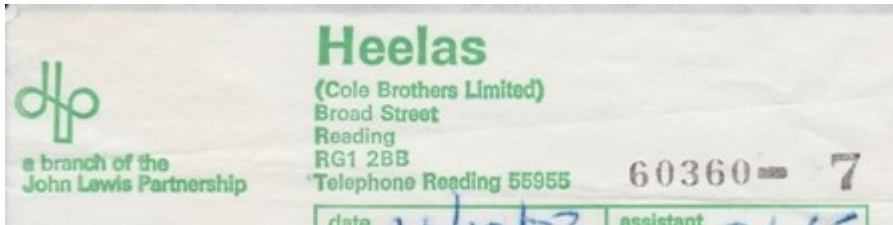
Wargrave Local History Society's April meeting was an illustrated talk by Ann Smith. Ann, a librarian at Reading Central Library, explained that the library had received a grant to digitise many images in their collection, and these formed the basis of her presentation.

To many people who have only known Reading in the 21st century, the Oracle is the main shopping area. When it was built, it transformed Reading's shops, adding about 1/3 to the retail space in the town, and putting Reading into the top 10 shopping destinations. Otherwise, there now seemed to be many mobile phone shops and places to eat in the town centre - but in time past there was a great variety of types of shop available in the town centre.



The corner of Minster Street and Broad Street, for example was the Speedwell Motor Co, (now Patisserie Valerie) with Wellsteeds department store alongside (its façade is now an entrance to the Oracle). Nearby in the Market Place was a wide range of shops - Salmons Tea Warehouse, and Suttons Seeds amongst them, whilst other traders - such as Wilder's the agricultural engineers, would display their wares on the open area by the statue. Powells, agricultural chemists, had premises in St Mary's Butts, whilst there was even a blacksmith in the town centre, in Merchants Place (which survived into the 1970s). Ann said that, apart from photographs, trade cards were a useful source of information, and an early 20th century one for A H East, a boat builder 'near Kennet mouth' somewhat quaintly proclaimed that their telephone was "in communication with London".

Some Reading businesses had been trading for many years, with Kelly's and similar directories giving evidence of their early establishment. C & G Ayres, for example had been listed in 1867 as coal and salt merchants, and later provided a furniture removal service, whilst Jacksons dated from 1875. Like many stores, a conspicuous feature to be seen in pictures of Jacksons were the shop awnings, which would shade the shop window displays from sunlight - something rarely seen now. In its heyday, the firm had several branches in the Reading area. It still retained the many of the old style shop fittings and cash payment system when it closed in 2013.



The two Heelas brothers founded their drapery store in Minster Street in 1854, but gradually expanded, to become a department store by the end of the 19th century, occupying land right through to Broad Street.

The business was taken over by John Lewis in 1953, but continued to trade using its original name. They were able to rebuild and expand in the 1980s, and changed the name to John Lewis soon after the Oracle shopping centre opened.

Some other shops were hemmed in, and so could not expand in a similar way, so would find a new site to continue trading - Woolworths, Timothy Whites and Taylors (chemists) and Boots are all examples of this. Reading's other department stores included Wellsteeds, which suffered bomb damage in WW2, A H Bull in Broad Street, Tutty's in London Street (known as 'Tutty's for tick') (ie credit) and McIlroys. The latter was purpose built in 1903 in the Oxford Road, and popularly known as the 'crystal palace', on account of its large windows.

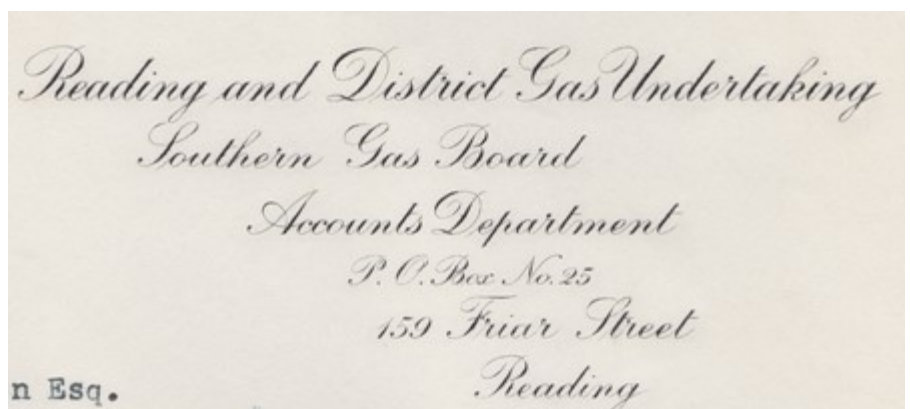
There was also a wide range of specialist shops. Dudman's greengrocery business had begun in Rupert Street in 1886, and continues in Union Street ("smelly alley") and as a market stall in St Mary's Butts. Hickies music shop in Friar Street was founded in 1864 - there had been several shops selling pianos in time gone by. The leather goods firm of Aldridges had started in the Oxford Road, being noted in the 1870s, and in more recent times traded from Friar Street, but closed a couple of years ago, whilst also in Friar Street had been Newberry's shop, dealing in new or antique furniture. Another store making and selling a 'particular product' was Rain Bros in Broad Street, who rather appropriately dealt in umbrellas!



The Co-op had a large department store in West Street, but also had a number of grocery branches across the town - one at Cemetery Junction remains in its original building, and there are two in Tilehurst. Almost every street

would have had its 'corner shop' - selling a variety of food products, but these began to disappear with the coming of supermarkets.. The first of those arrived in Reading in the late 1950s, and Sainsbury's opened one in Friar Street in 1963, whilst Tesco's, Ann mentioned, now have over a dozen branches in the town.

There were other showrooms or facilities available in the town centre. The Reading Savings Bank had been established in 1817, and the Reading Gas Company had showrooms where cookers etc could be bought, or bills paid, in Friar Street. Two major car dealers were in the town centre, near the station - Great Western Motors and Vincents - the latter had begun by taking over a carriage builders business in Castle Street in 1899 before diversifying into motor cars.



Change came with the opening of Reading's first shopping mall in 1972 - then called the Butts Centre, and now the Broad Street Mall, which swept away many smaller businesses in the St Mary's Butts / Oxford Road area, and even more so the opening of the Oracle. The result had been that many of the individual local shops were replaced by branches of large multiple chains.

One major change to be seen in many of the photographs of Broad Street was that cars could be parked alongside the kerb, outside the shops. The style of these, and the presence of trams (which ran in Reading until 1939) or trolleybuses (which provided a service until 1968) helped to date many of the images.

Ann mentioned many other retail outlets, illustrated not only with photographs but period adverts. Reading Libraries' picture collection can be seen on their website, <http://readingimages.epixtech.co.uk/extra/test3.html>

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The next meeting will be on Tuesday, May 10th, when Valerie Alasia, will give a talk on Henley's Workhouse and then on Tuesday, June 14th, David Williams, the Finds Liaison Officer for east Berkshire and Surrey, will tell us about some of the archaeological objects found in the area, and how these are recorded.