

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2009

Bats, Balls and Biscuits

The September meeting was an illustrated presentation by Martin Bishop on Bats Balls and Biscuits - the social life of Huntley and Palmers.

Martin began by explaining why Reading became a centre for the "3B's" bulbs, beer and biscuit making. Until the early 1800s, the town was based mainly around agriculture. The Royal Berkshire Seed Establishment - later to become Suttons Seeds, the breweries - of which there were 44 in Reading at that time - later to become Courage, and the biscuit making all were able to take advantage of the town's location at the junction of the Kennet and Avon canal with the River Thames, and as a major stop on the Great Western Railway to provide transport links for their produce. The town was also able to supply labour and raw materials to support all 3 industries.

Joseph Huntley, a Quaker, started a bakery shop in 1822 at 72 London Street, Reading. He was one of 3 (out of about 33 in total) bakers who specialised in making biscuits in the town. His shop being close to the main London - Bath road, they soon became popular with the travelling public as well as local people. One of his sons (Thomas) helped him in the business, but another (Joseph) worked at the ironmongery shop opposite. This firm began to make tins for transporting the biscuits - the start of Huntley, Boorne and Stephens, who produced biscuit tins for many years.

By 1826, the bakery, with 16 staff, concentrated on biscuit production. In 1841, Huntley was joined in the business by another Quaker, George Palmer, who was interested in mechanising the production. By 1846, the firm had outgrown the London Street site, and so moved to a 24 acre site on Kings Road - known as the Reading Biscuit Factory. By 1850, the workforce had grown to 300. From around 1860, unlike other firms at the time, Huntley and Palmer set about actively marketing their biscuits. They advertised heavily, attended international exhibitions, and employed overseas representatives. The result was that by 1889 the factory filled the site, and by 1898 over 5000 people worked there. This growth was such that Reading was known across the country as Biscuit Town by the 1870s - and when Reading Football Club started in 1871, they were known as 'the biscuit men' - a name they kept until the 1970s.

In the early days, working conditions were hard by today's standards. Pay was 1 per week, plus a pound of broken biscuits, for a 6 day week, 12 hours a day (just 7½ hours on a Saturday), although this dropped to a 54 hour week in 1874, and to 48 hours after World War 1. It was, however, a place known for long serving staff - by 1898, 10% had been there over 20 years, and this rose to 33% in 1913 - and in 1914 it was reported that 50 staff had worked over 50 years for the company. The firm had introduced a sick fund for the staff in 1848, into which the men paid 6d weekly. The fund was added to by the fines for staff who broke the strict rules in the factory.

In the 1860s, a religious movement, "Athletic Christianity" developed in the country. It was supported by the Quakers, and Huntley and Palmers became subscribers. The aim was to keep the workers out of public houses. Social events were arranged and in 1854 a Mutual Improvement Society was set up. The following year, the first of the Factory Excursions was run. These became very popular - by 1900, 7000 people would leave the town on two special trains, the firm granting a day off in June, to take advantage of the longer days.

From 1850 - 1870, sporting activity became more popular across the country, and the rules of many - football, hockey, rugby, bowls - were formalised at this time. The first local mention of cricket seems to have been on a factory excursion to Park Place, Henley, in 1855, when the 'married men' played the 'single

men'. This was the catalyst for many internal cricket matches, and by the 1880s the Reading Biscuit Factory Cricket Club had an extensive fixture list. There was no 'class distinction' - W H Palmer would play alongside the factory workers - the 'qualification' was an ability to play cricket! A score book surviving from 1883 shows that most matches were played on Saturdays, with some on a Wednesday as well. The home ground was the firm's recreation ground at Kings Meadow. This was liable to flood, however, and in due course W H Palmer acquired the lease of the Reading & District Amateur Sports Club ground in Kensington Road (west Reading), and in 1919 Huntley and Palmers employees had exclusive use of the ground - considered one of the best in the south of England. The factory team would play against the MCC here annually during the 1920s. It was about this time that ladies' cricket teams were begun (the majority of employees were male pre 1914, but after World War 1, females were in the majority).

Due to increasing mechanisation, the number of employees dropped - and hence the interest in cricket. The factory team merged with that of Huntley Boorne and Stephens (and was renamed) in 1974, and survived beyond the end of biscuit production in Reading in 1976, joining the Berkshire Cricket League 2 years later. 5 years later, the club was evicted from Kensington Road. Renamed 'Purley Associates', the club played on the Purley Cricket Club ground on Saturdays in 1984, before the two clubs merged formally the next year, bringing to an end 130 years of the biscuit maker's cricket team.

A more detailed account of the Reading Biscuit Factory Cricket Club is given in Martin's book, also called *Bats Balls and Biscuits*.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday October 13th, when Sarah Charlton tells us about Berkshire Manorial Records, and on Tuesday November 10th, Bill Bookless will talk about aspects of the history of Wargrave Scouts, this year celebrating its centenary, then on Tuesday, December 8th the Society will have its Christmas Party.