

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - January 2000

At the Heart of an Empire

Peter Halman, a member of the Society's Committee, spoke about the changing scene in the Thames Valley during Queen Victoria's reign.

The Thames Valley has an important place in our national history, from the time when William the Conqueror built a castle at Windsor, or King John had that meeting in 1215 with the Barons at Runnymede, or Henry I founded Reading Abbey - which lasted until Henry VIII did away with it.

The Thames Valley was a microcosm of Britain in Victorian times, even though major industries such as shipbuilding, coal, iron and textiles were not based here. The agricultural and industrial revolutions had begun before Victoria came to the throne, whilst in Europe there was revolution in many places, and some feared that it might happen here as well. By the end of her reign, the Empire was a dominant force in the world, with railways, telephones, and electricity all newly available, and pioneer aircraft about to appear.

The main aspects of this change were communications, industry and commerce, public services, the town and country, and the effect on the wider world. Reading had long been an important place for communications, with the rivers Kennet and Thames, with the Bath Road - increasingly busy in the early 1800s, and the Kennet and Avon canal which opened in 1810. The development of railways had begun in the north east in 1825, and in 1835 the Great Western Railway was begun, work taking place from both Bristol and London. Twyford was reached in 1839, Reading in 1840, and the line open throughout in 1841. Brunel, the engineer responsible, had two major engineering obstacles to overcome locally - crossing the Thames at Maidenhead and digging through Sonning Cutting. This, 2 miles long and 60ft deep, took 1220 men 3 years to excavate. The railways also brought a need for a standard time across the country - Reading being 4 minutes behind London by 'natural' time, and enabled ordinary people to move around more easily and have access to a wider range of goods. They also led to a decline in river and canal traffic, and killed off coaching - the last London - Bristol coach running in 1843.

Britain's industry and commerce was centred on finance, textiles and manufacturing. In the Victorian period developments included Factories Acts, and the treatment of child labour. Locally, industry was based on biscuit manufacture, engineering, seeds, brick and tile making and brewing. The major biscuit company, Huntley and Palmers, had also developed a biscuit tin making concern. They were generous benefactors to the town, and cared for their workforce. Engineering included an ironworks at Katesgrove, and when they secured an export order for boilers, it was arranged that H & P biscuits being exported at the same time be sent inside the boilers! Also in Katesgrove was a large sailmaking business. For local customers, John Heelas opened his store in Minster Street in 1845.

The population grew from about 27 million to 42 million during Victoria's reign. More rural areas, such as Wargrave or Twyford, grew at a slower rate, but in Reading it jumped from 17000 in 1835 to 72000 in 1901. In part, this drift to the towns came from increasing mechanisation on the farms, although it was still mainly a rural country.

To provide police, water, hospitals and public health services was a challenge that the Victorians faced, cholera being a particularly serious public health problem. Education became available and compulsory to all up to 13 with the passing of the 1870 Education Act. But, for those who were less fortunate, the fear of the workhouse was still very real.

Peter closed by looking forward, to the continuing change for the 21st Century that will build on the inheritance from our Victorian forebears.
