

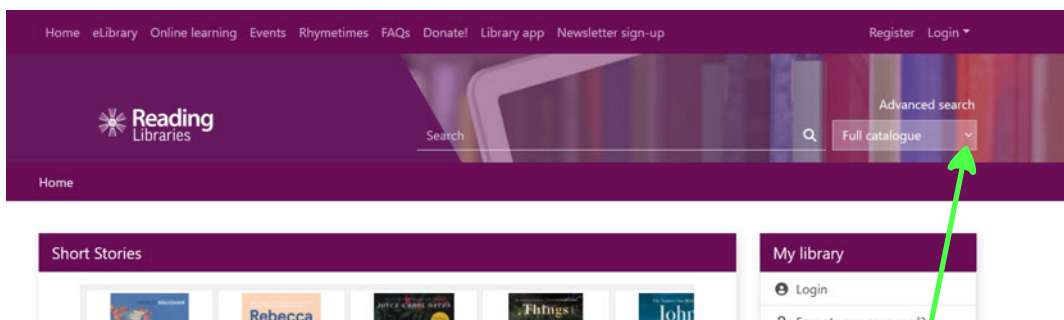
Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2025

Reading Library photograph collection - Katie Amos

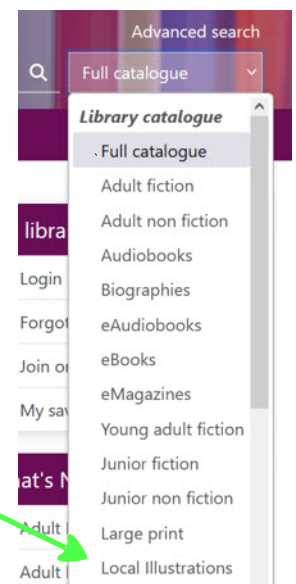
Reading Library's local history studies specialist, Katie Amos, made a return visit to Wargrave Local History Society for the May meeting. On this occasion, she showed a selection of pictures from the library's collection of over 20,000 photographs and other illustrations from across Berkshire.

Katie began by showing how anyone who is interested can find out about the collection, by using the Reading Library website. <https://reading.spydus.co.uk/cgi-bin/spydus.exe/MSGTRN/WPAC/HOME>



- and at the top of the page click on the 'Full catalogue' button -

which will create the drop-down list (right), then select 'Local Illustrations'



and in the search space the subject (in this case Wargrave), when a listing of images will be shown below



- and then by using the View image button, a larger version can be seen. The library can also provide copies of the images.

Katie then delighted the audience with a selection of pictures from both the 'old' and 'new' Berkshire. Many showed aspects of the Reading area no longer to be seen, such

as the many wharves alongside the rivers Thames and Kennet - the waterways being an important way to transport goods before the coming of the railways, or the mass departure of workers from the Huntley & Palmers biscuit factory in 1903 - the men leaving at a different time to the women, or Reading School when it was located in The Forbury, of Battle Hospital in the Oxford Road, which had begun as the workhouse, and during WW1 was known as Reading War Hospital No1 (now the site of the Tesco store on Oxford Road).

Reading's libraries themselves also featured. Two of them, Caversham and Battle, were 'Carnegie Libraries', which were provided by the American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. The interior views of Battle Library included the children's reading room in 1910 and the bindery in 1956 - with a table raised on wooden blocks to a convenient working height (the library no longer has its own bindery). Later views included the archaeology that took place before the present Reading Central Library was built.

Views around the centre of Reading included many businesses that no longer exist - from Philips Ironmongery shop on the north side of Broad Street in the 1870s to C & A Modes in Friar Street in 1978. Wellsteeds department store was also in Broad Street and it had an ornately decorated restaurant - seen in the 1930s and also after the wartime bombing raid of 1943. (the shop was later renamed Debenhams whilst its frontage is now the site of the entrance to The Oracle).

One of the specific topics looked back at the VE Day celebrations of 80 years earlier. As well as pictures of the formal declaration by the Mayor and of street parties in and around Reading (most of the adults being ladies, as the men had not yet returned from active service), there were newspaper extracts - such as a public notice to shopkeepers about extra hours of opening, so that people could buy what they would need for the celebrations, or an advert headed "Victory has come, the Huns are beaten" - advising that people would be able to buy Brooke Bond Dividend tea for their parties.

The other particular theme of Katie's presentation was images related to Wargrave. The library collection includes pictures that pre-date the photographic era, and one of the earliest was the engraving (*right*) of Barrymore's theatre at Wargrave. This had opened in 1791, and could accommodate an audience of 700, and was 'the place to go' out of London for theatrical performances by the leading actors of the day. The theatre, in Wargrave High Street, only lasted for a few years, as Barrymore became bankrupt. Another of the local pictures showed Barrymore's house, which still exists, opposite the theatre site.



Further south along the High Street, the view looking northwards from the crossroads (*left*) dates from a little over a century later. In earlier times, the wall of the Greyhound public house on the right was covered in render, rather than the plain brickwork seen here, whilst on the left the grocer's shop on the corner and the 4 cottages next to it were demolished in 1906, to make way for the row of shops that still stand there. Just visible on the left between the 2 horse-drawn carriages is the Woodclyffe Hall, which opened in December 1900, helping to date the picture.

Another of the early views of Wargrave showed St Mary's church with Mill Green in front of it (*right*). Although the present building is at first sight very similar, apart from the ivy growing up the tower and the east end wall, this postcard picture shows the building before the destructive fire of 1914. In the early years of the 20th century, a large lamp was provided over the main gate into the churchyard, later replaced by the lych gate erected in 1913 in memory of John Rhodes of Hennerton. Neither of those appear in this picture, confirming the dating. Of the walls of the church visible in the picture, only the 1635 tower survives in the present day building.



The 1930s view (*left*) of School Lane shows a long row of cottages on the left, with a row of trees and hedges on the opposite side of the road. The housing was built to house 19th century agricultural workers, and although many have been extended at the rear, the scene is remarkably similar in the 21st century. Other pictures of Wargrave included the view under Conway's Bridge up the Happy Valley, Rebecca's Well, with the picture at the top of the wall created by Gertrude Jekyll, the floods of 1929, and old engravings of both Bear Place and Bear Hill (the latter now known as Linden Hill).

Katie showed many other illustrations, covering events such as Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee celebrations in Wallingford in 1897, children maypole dancing in 1912, the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal to Sgt Ridley in Reading in 1917 and Mayor McIlroy driving the last Reading tramcar on May 20th 1939, or street scenes, there being just one car in Sonning High Street in 1910! or local businesses, such as some of Reading's many brickworks.

For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk
