

## 7. Nineteenth-century Earley

Earley grew greatly in the course of the nineteenth century, although the period of growth did not begin until the 1850s. The population figures which we have seen for the first part of the century (436 in 1801 and 487 in 1851) were to rise to 6658 by 1891 and 10196 in 1901 (figures for the Liberty of Earley only). Even in the 1890s, however, Earley had not wholly lost its rural social character. The big families and the big houses continued to dominate the life of the Liberty. The big houses were Maiden Erlegh, Whiteknights Park, Bulmershe Court (only partly in Earley), Erleigh Court (which lay along the London Road, with Culver Lane and Pitts Lane as its southern boundary<sup>1</sup>), Earley Manor, Fox Hill and Hungerford Lodge. By the end of the century the long-established big families, like those of Wheble and Blandy (but no longer, as we shall see, Englefield) were sharing the big houses with representatives of new money and Victorian success such as John Heelas (of Earley Manor), Arthur Hill (of Earley Court - leased, however, from Lord Sidmouth), Solly Joel (of Maiden Erlegh), and Julius Friedlander (of Whiteknights Park).

The growth of Earley through the century was driven by the industrial development of Reading. In particular, the laying out of the terraced streets of Newtown towards the end of the century provided homes for the workers in the biscuit factory of Huntley & Palmer (founded 1822) and the seed grounds and works of John Sutton & Son (founded 1837, and better known as Sutton's Seeds).

As the population of Earley grew rapidly, so did the pressure on public services. In particular, the drainage system of Earley by the 1870s was unable to cope with the requirements of its burgeoning population. The houses of Newtown had been provided with drainage paid for by George Palmer of the biscuit company, but the sewage outfall was directly into the River Kennet. The situation in other rapidly developing parts of the Liberty such as Earley Rise (around St Peter's Road) was even more unsatisfactory. What is more, the Public Health Acts of 1872 and 1875 placed legal requirements on local sanitary authorities which were not being met in the Liberty of Earley.

In Reading, meanwhile, the problems of drainage, sewage and removal of cesspools were eventually resolved with the inauguration in the 1870s of a drainage system based on the new sewage works to the south of the town. Manor Farm in Whitley hamlet, then outside Reading's boundaries, was purchased by Reading Corporation in 1867 for this purpose, after more than a decade of disagreement between 'public spenders' and 'economisers'.<sup>2</sup> One result of the establishment of this sewage system was, as predicted by its Conservative opponents, an enormous increase in domestic rates in Reading. "Between 1868 and 1875 the amount collected from the rates rose by 250 per cent, and the rate poundage went up from 5½d to 3s 1½d. The general district rate, levied for public health purposes, rose from 1s 6d to 2s 8d between 1873 and 1875."<sup>3</sup>

Reading's 'economisers' had long argued "that ratepayers' money was not to [be] spent on sanitary reform for the benefit of the unenfranchised and non-ratepaying poor". In 1853 a number of candidates had been elected to Reading Council on an anti-sewage ticket, and through the 1850s and into the 1860s they had combined to vote down any sanitary reform. The anti-sewage voice of the Reading 'economisers' is heard in the words of Alderman Rickford when he declared that he "would not be party to the distressing taxation which would be entailed".<sup>4</sup> The eventual defeat of the Reading economisers was a hard-won triumph for interventionists and public spenders like George Lovejoy and George Palmer.

Wokingham Rural Sanitary Authority, however, remained securely under 'economiser' control. As early as 1876, the Authority's Medical Officer of Health wrote to Reading Corporation asking that the sewers of Earley be connected to Reading's drainage system.<sup>5</sup> Some Reading councillors took the view that they should make the extension of their new drainage system into Earley (and also into Whitley and Southcote) dependent upon those areas being brought within extended borough boundaries; others felt that Reading's own system should be completed before any thought were given to extension. Earley's request lay on the table for some years, but the link with a boundary extension was made from the very start, and the principal reason for the eventual transfer of a large part of the Liberty of Earley (together with a large majority of the liberty's inhabitants) into Reading was undoubtedly sewage.

The transfer followed several stages of complex negotiation and in-fighting between the Poor Law Guardians of Wokingham and the Reading Corporation - coming to some sort of resolution in 1887:

The position of the Wokingham Guardians was complex and perhaps a little confused. They clearly wanted to connect Earley to Reading's sewerage system because they remained, after more than ten years, unable to comply with the regulations of the Thames Conservators. They continually refused to consider the extension of the borough as a means to achieve this object. They resolved in 1886 'to take the opinion of a competent engineer' with a view to producing their own scheme of drainage for Earley, where public meetings of residents had come out in favour of incorporation in Reading. They appeared, at first, to object to any extension of the borough's authority but ended up by conceding the corporation's case for boundary changes in Earley so long as no provision was included in the Extension Bill to alter the Poor Law arrangements as they affected their area. In this way the Earley tax base was retained for Poor Law purposes, but at the price of adding a further confusion of jurisdiction which would eventually have to be resolved by action of the Poor Law authorities at national level.<sup>6</sup>

The absorption of all of the north part of the Liberty of Earley into the municipal borough of Reading was completed twelve years later on 24 March 1899 (Local Government Board Order 23869). The land north of Church Road, by far the most populous part of the Liberty, including Earley Rise, Mockbeggar and Newtown (but not the Earley portion of Whiteknights Park) was transferred and also became part of St Giles' Parish, Reading.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daphne Philips: *The story of Reading*. Newbury: Countryside Books, 1980, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> See Klaus-John Dodds: 'Much ado about nothing?: cholera, local politics and public health in nineteenth-century Reading.' *The Local Historian* (November 1991), pp. 168-176

<sup>3</sup> Alan Alexander: *Borough government and politics: Reading 1835-1985*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1985, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from Klaus-John Dodds: *op. cit.*, pp. 173 & 174.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Alexander: *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92, and see the account on the following pages.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.97.