

TWENTIETH CENTURY CONNECTIONS

In this century Reading has been the home of a wide range of literary figures. The feminist novelist **Elizabeth Taylor** (1912 - 1975) was born in Reading and attended the Abbey School. She set several of her novels in Reading, including her best known work *Angel* (1957). There are many clearly identifiable descriptions of the town in the novel:

"At the back of the Prison were a little park and some public gardens. Children were bowling hoops around the boarded-up bandstand where the Temperance Brass Band played on summer Sunday evenings. A few people were walking briskly along the gravel paths, between wind-raked evergreens. These paths wound up towards a shrubbery on a small hill where there was a cast iron statue of a lion, a landmark for miles."

Many literary figures have been associated with Reading University, which was founded in 1892. Among writers who have taught at the University are **Robert Gibbings, John Wain, Iain Fletcher and Michael Hamburger**. Former students include the novelists **Elspeth Huxley and Gillian Freeman**, as well as **Kathleen Hale** (the creator of *Orlando the Marmalade Cat*) and, most famously, **Wilfred Owen** (1893 - 1918), the best known of the First World War poets.

In 1912 Owen was working as Lay Assistant to the vicar in the nearby village of Dunsden when he decided to register at Reading University to read Botany and Latin. While at the University he also took a keen interest in English and often attended Professor Edith Morley's English lectures. He later promised Professor Morley and Miss Rayner, his Botany lecturer, that he would give them copies of his poems once they were published. He was killed in action just one week before the Armistice and was never able to carry out his promise. He left behind some of the most savage condemnations of war in the literature of any language:

*"If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori."*

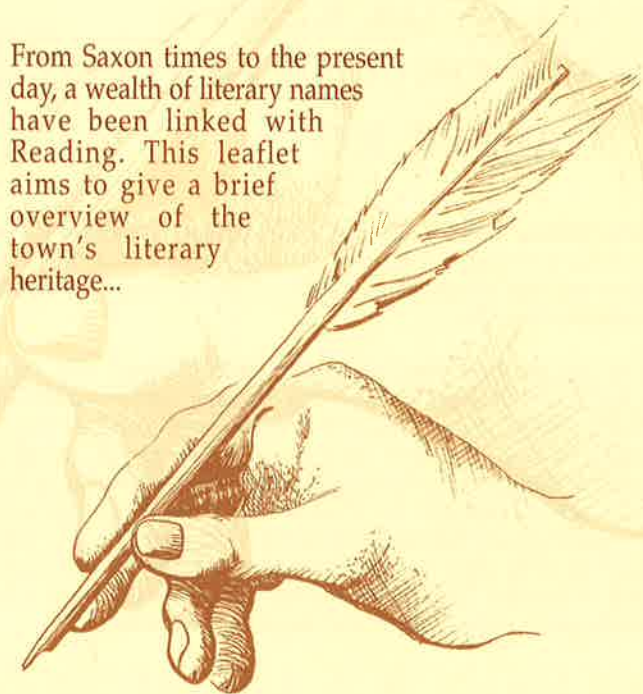
Museum of Reading
The Town Hall,
Blagrove Street,
Reading RG1 1QH
☎ 399800



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READING'S LITERARY *heritage*

From Saxon times to the present day, a wealth of literary names have been linked with Reading. This leaflet aims to give a brief overview of the town's literary heritage...



THOMAS HARDY'S ALDBRICKHAM

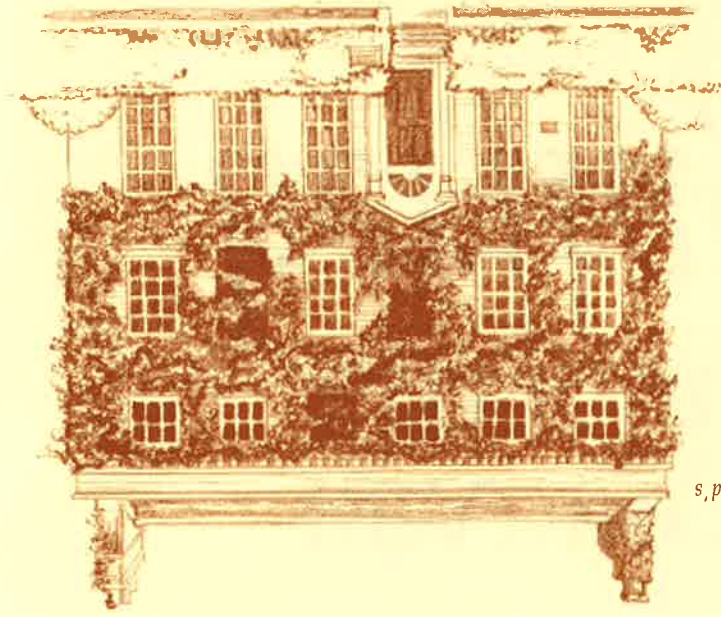
Throughout **Thomas Hardy's** Wessex novels Reading is referred to as Aldbrickham. At the time Hardy was writing, the clay pits in the town were thriving and providing most of the bricks which give Reading its characteristic Victorian architecture. A section of *Jude the Obscure* (1896) is set in Aldbrickham, where Jude and Sue are living in Spring Street - "a most out in the country". Hardy was probably basing the address on Spring Gardens, which ran from Whitley Street and was, at that time, right on the edge of town.

Mary Head, Hardy's grandmother, had an illegitimate child in Reading in 1796. She is believed to have been the model for Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. It appears that she was also imprisoned in the Reading House of Correction in 1798, charged with stealing a copper kettle. The penalty would have been death by hanging but, perhaps because of the severity of the punishment, her accusers did not appear in court and she was released.

THREE MEN IN A BOAT

Jerome K Jerome set off on his boat trip up the Thames in the spring of 1889. In *Three Men in a Boat* he gives a famously negative view of the river as it runs through Reading - "The river is dismal and dirty here" - but he was much more positive and characteristically jaunty about the town.

"The town itself is a famous old place, dating from the dim days of King Ethelred when the Danes anchored their warships in the Kennet and stirred from Reading to ravage all the land of Wessex; and here Ethelred and his brother Alfred fought and defeated them, Ethelred doing the praying and Alfred the fighting. In later years Reading seems to have been regarded a handy place to run down to when matters were becoming unpleasant in London. Parliament generally rushed off to Reading whenever there was a plague at Westminster, and in 1625 the Law followed suit and all the courts were held at Reading. It must have been worthwhile having a mere ordinary plague now and then in London to get rid of both the lawyers and Parliament."



Mary Russell Mitford's home at 39 London Road

CHARLES DICKENS & SIR THOMAS NOON TALFOURD

Charles Dickens visited Reading on many occasions, sometimes giving readings of his work in the Town Hall. He was elected President of Reading's Literary and Mechanical Institute and, in 1830, he considered standing for parliament in Reading.

One of Dickens' friends was **Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd**, who was born in Reading in 1795. Talfourd was the son of a Reading brewer and was educated at Reading School. He published his first volume of poems when he was 16 and later became a barrister and a judge. In 1835 he was elected Liberal Member of Parliament for Reading. At the victory celebration he drank too much punch and ended the day in a horizontal position. Throughout his legal and political careers Talfourd continued to write literary essays, poetry and plays. Two of his plays, *Ion* (1836) and *Glencoe* (1840) enjoyed considerable success in their day. Talfourd was also the father of the Copyright Act of 1842 which helped to protect authors from illegal copying of their work.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE & THE BEAR INN

The Bear Inn in Bridge Street was a hostelry dating back to 1485. It was in this Inn that the Law Courts were held in 1625 when they were driven out of London by the plague, and Cromwell visited it in 1648. One of Britain's most famous poets, **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** (1772 - 1834), found himself billeted at The Bear having joined the 15th Light Dragoons in an attempt to run away from his creditors. He tried to disguise his identity by calling himself "Silas Tomkins Comberpatch". It was in the tap room at The Bear Inn that Coleridge wrote *Religious Musings*. Not surprisingly, Coleridge's unlikely alias was soon seen through by the authorities and he was returned to his family.

OSCAR WILDE & READING GAOL

*I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky*

Reading's place in English literature is assured by **Oscar Wilde's** *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Wilde was a playwright, poet, novelist and essayist. He was imprisoned from 1895 to 1897 for the "crime" of homosexuality and was transferred from Wandsworth to Reading in 1895 because he was ill and Reading was considered to be a healthier gaol. Wilde clearly saw little improvement:

*Each narrow cell in which we dwell
Is a foul and dark latrine,
And the fetid breath of living Death
Chokes up each grated screen,
And all, but lust, is turned to dust
In humanity's machine.*

Wilde wrote *De Profundis* while he was imprisoned in Reading in 1895. It was not until after his release that he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* in 1898.

High Bridge in Duke Street

MARY RUSSELL MITFORD'S BELFORD REGIS

Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855) wrote more about Reading and its neighbourhood than any other literary figure. *Our Village* gives a detailed account of life at Three Mile Cross and *Belford Regis, or Sketches of a Country Town*, is set in a thinly disguised Reading. Here is Mitford's colourful description of the High Bridge in Duke Street:

"Or for a modern scene, what can surpass the High Bridge on a sunny day? The bright river, crowded with barges and small craft; the streets and wharfs and quays, all alive with the busy and stirring population of the county and the town - a combination of light and motion. In looking at a good view of the High Bridge at noon, you should seem to hear the bustle. I have never seen a more cheerful subject."

When she was ten years old, Mitford drew the winning ticket in a lottery and won £20,000 for her father, making him the equivalent of a modern day millionaire. She chose the ticket number 2224 because it added up to her age. The money was used to buy a splendid family house at 39 London Road which still stands today.



In 1820 the Mitford family moved to Three Mile Cross, just outside Reading. They travelled into town regularly and on occasion, the journeys were hazardous. In her letters to the poet **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**, Mitford describes an attack by a highwayman in 1842 "at the pitch of a hill" coming out of town. The attack failed when the horse bolted and ran over the highwayman. This event must have taken place at what is now the junction of Basingstoke Road and Christchurch Gardens. Seven years later, at the bottom of Southampton Street, Mitford records that her horse went berserk; "it kicked the carriage to pieces with me in it" she wrote.

EARLY READING & THE ABBEY

Reading's first literary appearance is in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. An entry in the Chronicle written about AD900 refers to the arrival of the Danish army at Reading in Wessex in the year 870:

"Her cuom se here to Readingum on Westseaxe"

Two and a half centuries later, the founding of Reading Abbey by Henry I in 1121 ensured that Reading would be a centre of government, religious and literary life throughout the Medieval period. Medieval kings often stayed at the Abbey and parliament met here on many occasions. As with all great abbeys, learning and scholarship were considered important and the monks of Reading produced many beautiful and scholarly manuscripts. The best known manuscript from this period is the famous Medieval song **Sumer is icumen in**, which was written in Reading Abbey in the thirteenth century. It is one of the earliest known examples of English secular music.

A VERY LARGE & WEALTHY TOWN

After the dissolution of the Abbey by Henry VIII in 1539 Reading grew and evolved as a wealthy manufacturing town. **Daniel Defoe**, the author of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, visited Reading in 1724 and described it as:

"...a very large and wealthy town, handsomely built, the inhabitants rich, and driving a very great trade."

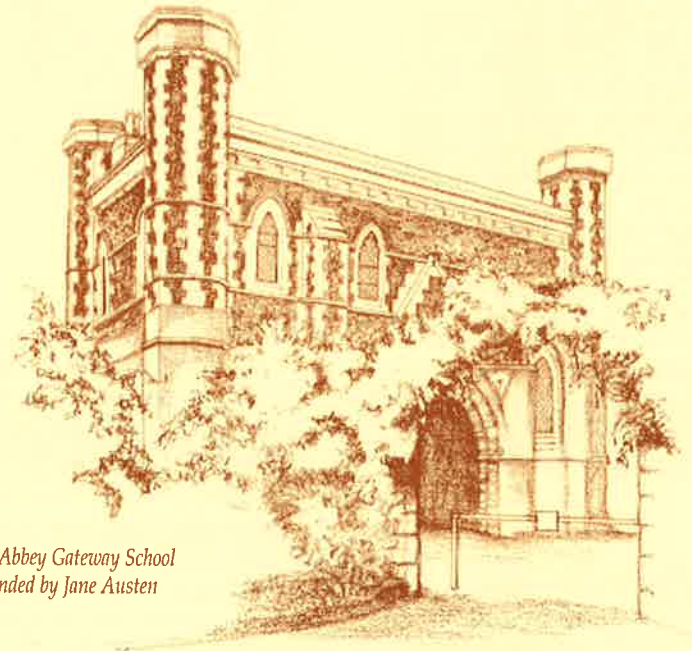
In 1822 the radical writer **William Cobbett** visited Reading in the course of his famous *Rural Rides*. He toured England noting down the social conditions of the time. He clearly enjoyed his stay in Reading:

"I am delighted with the people that I have seen at Reading. Their kindness to me is nothing in my estimation compared with the sense and spirit which they appear to possess."

Not all writers had such a good time in Reading. The much mocked Wiltshire poet **Stephen Duck** is said to have drowned himself in 1756 *"In a fit of dejection in a trout stream behind the Black Lion Inn at Reading"*. People have tried to locate the site of the Black Lion Inn but no-one has yet succeeded

JANE AUSTEN & THE ABBEY SCHOOL

Long after the dissolution of the Abbey, the Abbey Gateway became the Abbey School. The gateway still stands today in the Forbury. Its most famous pupil was **Jane Austen**, who was educated here with her sister Cassandra from 1785 to 1787. The headmistress at that time was an eccentric woman known as Mrs La Tournelle, although her original name was Sarah Hackitt. She was said to be *"very active, although she had a cork leg"*.



*The Abbey Gateway School
attended by Jane Austen*

Little is known about the Austen girls' time at the Abbey School, although there is an anecdote about their escaping to a local inn - thought to be The Crown in Crown Street or The Bear in Bridge Street - when their brother Edward visited the town.

Almost a contemporary of Jane Austen at the Abbey School was the prolific novelist and short story writer **Mary Martha Sherwood** (1775 - 1851). She wrote one of the key texts of the Victorian age, with the cumbersome title of *The History of the Fairchild Family or The Child's Manual, being a collection of stories calculated to show the importance and effects of religious education* - the title says it all!