

# David Sutton

## A city and its centre: the recent transformation of Reading

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### *Introduction: from “Britain’s average town” to modern European city*

Reading in 2005 is seen and sees itself as a modern European city with a thriving city centre. It is also clearly the capital of the Thames Valley sub-region, arguably the most dynamic sub-region in the UK outside of London.

Reading is now ranked as the **11th top shopping centre** in the UK outside London, and aspires to enter the Top Ten. (Ten years ago it ranked 26th.) Each of the ten cities which currently rank ahead of Reading has a significantly larger population, and several cities of larger population rank well below Reading. All commentators agree that (in the current jargon) Reading “punches above its weight”. At the turn of the millennium, Reading was ranked the **best place in the UK to work** in a survey of major cities undertaken by Healey & Baker.

The Reading city centre has become recognised as one of the most attractive and enjoyable destinations in the country. At its heart, astride the River Kennet, sits the **Oracle Centre** (opened in September 1999) which now attracts some 20 million visitors a year. The Oracle markets itself as “an aspirational, regional shopping destination offering high quality fashion brands and a café culture leisure experience in the heart of Reading”.

In February 2002, a remarkable set of articles appeared in Britain’s most famous newspaper, *The Times*, under the headline “**Reading remodels itself on Barcelona**”. The articles discussed the recent transformation of Reading, its growing ambition, and (as the dramatic headline emphasises) its European and international approach to urban regeneration and urban redesign. One of the photograph captions in this *Times* issue refers to the “neo-Venetian vista” along the Oracle, while the sub-headlines talk about Reading’s changing image and new confidence in itself.

Reading in the 1960s and 1970s, by contrast, seemed almost to revel in its dullness, its ordinariness, its status as a middle-England market-town. The town was known for its three traditional industries, the “three Bs” of beer, bulbs and biscuits, and the mundane nickname of the local football team was the

Biscuitmen. Revealing a truly bathetic self-image, in the 1970s Reading attempted to sell itself as **Britain's average town**. This was intended as an appeal to people in marketing and retailing who wanted a reliable sounding-board for new products, but the notion of being average, in the sense of being unremarkable and uninteresting, attached itself to Reading for many years.

The idea of comparing 1970s Reading with Barcelona or Venice would have provoked either derision or disbelief. 1970s Reading looked like a very English market-town which was struggling to come to terms with the new brutalism of modern concrete buildings. The principal network of streets had changed very little since mediaeval times, and the main street (Broad Street) was often almost impossible for pedestrians to cross, being clogged with traffic and especially double-decker buses. The demolitions which had taken place in the 1960s and 1970s were often unsympathetically done, and the very little attempt was made to integrate the new concrete structures with the older red-brick buildings which they now tended to overbear.

Many of the new 1970s buildings looked like ugly concrete car-parks; some of them were car-parks and some of them weren't.

The town centre was ringed and dominated by a concrete-clad road, known prosaically as the Inner Distribution Road or IDR. The IDR had been planned as long ago as 1953; approved by government in 1957; half-finished in 1971; but then, because of problems following local government reorganisation, not completed until 1989. By the time it opened, the road looked like an ugly relic from another era. From 1971 to 1989, the half-finished road terminated in mid-air, in a comical flying cut-off known locally as **the ski-jump**.

The IDR operated as a **concrete collar** which cut off the historical centre of the town from the surrounding neighbourhoods, and provided an apparently permanent limit to future expansion of the town centre.

From the late 1980s Reading Borough Council took the lead in trying to counter the negative self-image of Reading and in trying to engender civic pride through a sustained programme of urban regeneration, rebuilding, reshaping and rethinking. It has been a long struggle. The main themes of the struggle have been a commitment to the city centre; developing a pride in Reading; and making the most of Reading's parks and waterways.

### ***Reading's commitment to a vibrant city centre***

By the 1980s it was obvious to urban designers that Reading had become a victim of very bad planning. Its image was appalling; its traffic was chaotic; there was no strategy for taking the town forward. There were, however, a number of positive factors on which to build. First, the town had an excellent bus company, owned by the Council. Second, there had been very few moves as yet towards the sort of car-borne out-of-town shopping which was blighting other centres. Third,

there was a good level of economic prosperity and potential. And fourth, there were a number of prospective development sites in the centre of the town (especially following the closure of the town centre brewery in 1980). In the late 1980s, the Council undertook a wide-ranging consultation about the future of the town centre, which culminated in the publication in 1989 of an action plan called *Centre Plan*. At the heart of *Centre Plan* was a commitment to maintaining Reading as a town with a real thriving centre, and the key change envisaged at that time was a new approach to **pedestrianisation**. Within the local Labour Party (which had taken political control of the council in May 1986) there was a vigorous debate about the balance between the pedestrianisation of Broad Street and its surrounding area, on the one hand, and the need for good access for the buses to the centre of the town, on the other. The advocates of the pressing need for pedestrianisation ultimately won every argument, with a new **bus loop** around the pedestrianised zone showing a continuing commitment to public transport in the centre.

In 1989, Reading became one of the first towns in the UK to appoint its own **town centre manager**, and cooperation between the Council and the town centre business community became an early characteristic of the way the new Reading would work.

Through the 1990s, the heart of the old centre of Reading was imaginatively pedestrianised. Trees now grow tall in the middle of Broad Street, which has become a chosen location for “hanging out” for young and old alike. A public competition for a “work of art fit to sit on” led to the construction in 1997 of a focal and stylish seating area designed and created by blacksmith-artist Matthew Fedden.

The pedestrianisation of the centre of Reading was achieved in phases. The two main phases were the pedestrianisation of Broad Street West (completed in 1994) and of Broad Street East (completed in 2000), but a number of side streets were also pedestrianised in a complementary way, as was a section of street which became Town Hall Square. Along with this went an (initially controversial) commitment to a new style of **café culture**; it is truly strange to recall now that less than ten years ago there was serious opposition to the idea of chairs and tables spilling out onto the pavements and the pedestrianised areas.

All the work which was being done in Reading on developing and enhancing the town centre, accompanied by an **intolerance of car-borne out-of-town shopping** was increasingly in line with central government thinking. In 1996, the government had considerably strengthened the document called Planning Policy Guidance 6 (always known as PPG6) on town centres and retail developments. The new PPG6 laid a strong emphasis on pre-planning, as opposed to reactive planning, and above all promoted the retention of key town centre uses through mixed-use developments, supported by good urban design and by active town centre management. Many of the ideas within the new PPG6 had been prefigured

in Reading by *Centre Plan*, and all of them fitted with the way the new Reading was developing.

[Citations from **PPG6** to be inserted here in the speech - if time permits]

A new factor arrived in the late 1990s when it became clear that there would be opportunities to bid for **city status** in 2000 and in 2002 (for the Millennium and then for the Queen's golden jubilee). Obtaining city status in the UK is a bizarre and arcane process dependent upon a decision of the Queen's advisers. In Reading, whilst the bids for city status were conducted in full seriousness, they became much less important than the debate which they started on the subject of what sort of city Reading wanted to be. This process, which began politically within the Council but spread to involve the whole community, led to the publication in 1998 of a document called **City 2020: a vision of the future** (often known as Reading City 2020).

**Reading City 2020** is the key document for the whole of my presentation here today. It is a **visioning** and visionary view of the way that Reading's political leaders and its citizens believed that the town should change. Much of the attention received by Reading City 2020 was initially focused on its proposals for new high-rise buildings and dramatic urban architecture, but in fact it was primarily a **social** document, with a strong emphasis on the way that people live in Reading, on quality of life and on a new word which was coming into vogue: **liveability**.

Reading City 2020 started from the basic premise that its citizens wanted to create a city that was clean, safe and easy to move around, and moved on to stress the importance of high quality urban design, of attractive open spaces (squares and walkways as well as parks and gardens), of artistic content, of the public realm and connectivity, and of major new developments in city centre housing and in town-wide public transport.

In a very short period of time, awareness of the City 2020 vision clearly became extensive, and all prospective developers and investors were shaping their proposals (in all parts of Reading) in the context of Reading City 2020.

Early in 2003 an Urban Renaissance Regional Conference held in Reading included a report on progress in the light of the City 2020 vision. The report was able to reflect on achievements and plans across a very wide range - including major public transport improvements; high-quality new housing in the city centre; further extensions of pedestrianisation; public safety measures including CCTV; confirmed Heritage Lottery funding for the refurbishment of the historic Forbury Gardens (gloriously completed in May 2005); and, for the popular press, the UK's first "rising urinal" (a buried public toilet which arose from beneath the street to accommodate by-products of the new evening economy). The Conference was badged with a compliment from the Deputy Prime Minister: "Reading has made

impressive progress towards an urban renaissance”, and with statements explaining why Reading had been awarded the status of Beacon Council for Urban Regeneration, of which more later.

Two key factors in the success and wide acceptance of Reading City 2020 were the extent of public consultation and the extent of political (especially councillor) buy-in and involvement.

The public consultation on Reading City 2020 was wide-ranging and inclusive. In addition to use of leaflets, a special web-site and a touring exhibition, there were public meetings and discussions all around the town - involving schools, community centres, ethnic minority groups, and many of the existing special-interest forums which characterise community life in Reading. The following list of meetings and meeting-places gives a sense of the breadth of the consultation:

- Woodlands and Waterways Forum
- Public meeting at Ashmead School
- Public meeting at Alfred Sutton School
- Reading Young People’s Forum
- Pakistan Community Centre
- Access & Disabilities Working Group
- Pensioners Working Group
- Reading Arts Forum
- Transport Users Forum
- Early Years Partnership
- Public meeting at St Michael’s School
- Black Communities Forum
- Exhibition in the Civic Centre
- Exhibition at Rivermead Sports Centre
- Reading Lifelong Learning Forum
- Public meeting at Southcote Primary School
- Public meeting at Highdown School
- Children’s Forum
- Hexagon Theatre
- Exhibition at Reading Central Library
- Exhibition in Broad Street Shopping Mall

The public response was variable in terms of turnout (the school meetings tended to attract only a dozen or so participants; the meeting at the Pakistan Community Centre, which I chaired, attracted over 70); but it was overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

Political commitment and involvement in the process was just as important. Councillors and party activists alike found ways to contribute to the discussions, to debate and to make suggestions. The Labour administration of the Council (in power continuously since 1986) has associated itself very closely with the ideas

behind Reading City 2020, and has derived a rich political reward from this association, regularly achieving electoral results better than the national ratings for the Labour Party.

My own involvement over two decades in the evolution of the Oracle scheme may serve to illustrate the influence and the close interest which politicians had in the critical elements of the redevelopment of Reading city centre. As long ago as 1986, before I was a councillor, I attended a public meeting at which a precursor of the Oracle scheme was being discussed. Dismayed by the “retail box” approach of a scheme which proposed to turn its back to the River Kennet, I wrote a letter of protest which was published in the local newspapers, and I very soon found myself a member of the local Labour Party’s Oracle Working Group. This Group in 1987 produced a set of design principles, which still read well today and which could be said to underpin the final Oracle scheme, laying special stress on the public realm, connectivity and open easy access through the scheme. By 1988, I was a councillor, working with colleagues on a revised scheme, successively in my roles as Chair of the Waterways Forum, Vice-Chair of the Planning Committee and Lead Councillor for Arts & Leisure. In 1989 came the vital breakthrough for the Oracle scheme, when councillors agreed that the site on the south side of the River Kennet used for the Council’s bus depot could be incorporated into the scheme. This meant that the scheme would now have a river running through the middle of it, instead of alongside it. From 1995, as Leader of the Council now, I chaired an Oracle Sub-Group of the Council’s Labour Group, which met regularly to discuss matters ranging from details of Compulsory Purchase Orders to imaginative new proposals - some of which (like the artwork bridges) found their way into the final scheme, while others (such as a big film-screen on the buildings along the river) did not. Our political involvement thus included scheme-detail as well as strategy and principle, and local politicians felt a real ownership of the scheme which they had planned, and envisioned and dreamed. When in 1999, I made the speech which preceded Princess Anne’s official opening of the Oracle Centre, I felt entitled to say that for me the Oracle was a **dream come true**.

### ***Developing a pride in Reading: art at the centre***

Let me turn now to the question of civic pride, pride taken in Reading by its citizens. In the 1980s, civic pride was at a low ebb, and this was an issue which we as politicians sought very consciously to address. Fortunately, there were starting-points on which we were able to build.

Above all, there was the association of Reading with festivals. Reading had a long-established rock festival, and despite its occasional reputation for bad behaviour this festival was reinstated and fully supported by the new Labour administration from 1986. Thereafter, the Council took every opportunity to encourage new festivals in Reading, until today there is a programme of festivals which no town in the UK of comparable size can match. For me, the Waterfest (a celebration of Reading’s two rivers) was of particular significance, but consider the whole list:

Reading Rock Festival  
World of Music Arts and Dance (WOMAD)  
Reading Children's Festival  
Waterfest  
Real Ale and Jazz Festival  
"Reading Pride" Gay and Lesbian Festival  
West Reading Community Carnival  
East Reading Festival  
Oxford Road Community Festival  
Reading Amateur Regatta  
CAMRA beer festival  
Reading Spanish Festival

The new Reading now regularly describes itself as "a festival city".

Public art and an approach which always seeks to include artistic elements have been fundamental to the style of the new Reading. In recent years, Reading Borough Council has been running **Art at the Centre**, a scheme which was set up in response to Lord Rogers' Urban Renaissance report. Art at the Centre, soon to be relaunched as Artists in the City, is a strategic programme of activity which encourages interventions by artists and which offers artists an opportunity to influence the spirit of the developing city. Key projects have included banners in Broad Street by Marc Chaimowicz; a lighting commission for Friar Street by David Ward; and the integration of artworks by Adam Dant into the new Reading Explorer navigation system. Public art had also played a major part in the atmosphere and style of the Oracle, where even the bridges had attracted Arts Council funding.

**Reading City 2020** embraced the "quality of life" agenda, and set an objective of making the city centre a rewarding and pleasant place to live, work and play. This led to support for increased "leisure and pleasure" venues in the city centre - especially new restaurants and bars, but also new cinema screens and arts venues, and places to sit and watch the world go by. Initiatives such as a visiting "French market" and a huge range of quality street musicians and entertainers were encouraged.

Following up the liveability theme, a new programme called "Your Reading" was launched in 2003. This award-winning scheme was aimed at increasing pride in Reading, but also at encouraging citizens to take more responsibility for the state of their own town. Initially focused on litter and cleaner streets, "Your Reading" has spread out to cover public safety, recycling and environmental protection. The campaign uses slogans such as "Your Reading - Keep It Clean" and "Your Reading - Let's Go Green", and has engaged wide public backing. For 2005-06, the key theme of "Your Reading" will be Reading's parks and waterways.

### ***The vital importance of Reading's parks and waterways***

Historically, Reading has neglected the **two fine rivers** which flow through it - the Thames and the Kennet. In his wonderful book **Three Men in a Boat** (1889) Jerome K. Jerome was famously dismissive of the stretch of Thames which runs through Reading - "The river is dirty and dismal here" - and his insults were still of some validity even 25 years ago. For over a hundred years, up until 1980, the Kennet was an industrial waterway, having no bankside access for the public, with a brewery on one side of the river and a shabby bus depot and other industrial buildings on the south bank.

The transformation of Reading's two rivers has been at the heart of our urban regeneration, and it has been brought about by good proactive planning. Reading's first Waterways Plan, published in 1979, was an aspirational and idealistic document, full of what seemed like impossible dreams. The second **Reading Waterways Plan** (1992), for which I was responsible, was a more practical document with reach-by-reach proposals for each section of each river. Its aim was to increase public access and public enjoyment, to make the rivers central rather than incidental to the way Reading looked, and to encourage high-quality and appropriate riverside developments.

When the Oracle opened in 1999, one of the most pleasing factors for us as councillors was that we were able to give back to the people of Reading the Kennet towpath and riverside, which our predecessors had sold to the brewery just over a hundred years earlier.

Reading's parks, woodlands and open spaces were equally important to our vision. Many of the younger politicians who began to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s (including myself) had a history of campaigning opposition to inappropriate road schemes. The preservation and enhancement of town centre and riverside parks was central to our thinking.

The final departure from Reading of the Huntley & Palmer biscuit company in 1989 was marked by a planning agreement which made possible the redevelopment of the main biscuit factory site (now a headquarters building for Prudential), but also transferred into public ownership a delightful park beside the River Kennet, a small island in the Kennet Loop known as Chocolate Island because of its former role in the biscuit works, and some substantial football pitches which greatly extended the park beside the River Thames known as King's Meadow.

The transformation of the Thames and the Kennet serves a symbol for the new Reading. I would like nothing more than to escort the ghost of Jerome K. Jerome along the towpaths of our two rivers, to show him the many fine new bridges, the new riverside buildings, the enhanced parks and gardens, all the new restaurants. And to watch the stately swans cruise by in these now-lovely settings.



### ***Conclusion: A sustainable city in the 21st century***

In the new century, Reading has moved forward in ways designed to be in keeping with the City 2020 vision. The new century began with a flurry of awards and testimonials. First, the Oracle won the British Council of Shopping Centres' Best New Centre Award in 2000, and the following year did even better in winning the International Council of Shopping Centres' Best New Large Centre in Europe in 2001. Reading was chosen to be one of the British government's 24 "Partners in Urban Renaissance" in the preparation for the British Urban Summit in 2002; and Reading Borough Council was designated a Beacon Council for Urban Regeneration for 2001-02.

Beacon Council status carried with it a lot of kudos, and it meant that Reading was asked by the government to share its accumulated knowledge and experience of urban regeneration with other British towns and cities which are embarking on a similar route.

The themes which I have outlined today (fitting closely with the central ideas of PPG6) - pre-planning, public consultation, the public realm, high-quality design, mixed-use developments and city centre housing, the importance of public art and of parks and waterways, appropriate hard and soft landscaping, and a sense of adventure and "making it new" - were important messages from our Beacon Council presentations.

Looking to the future, Reading is continuing to plan for change and improvement. Reading aims to be an early player in the BID (Business Improvement District) scheme which is starting to emerge in British city centres.

Plans are underway for a step-change in Reading's public transport provision, via a mass rapid transit system which we hope to see in place within a decade. This will require substantial funding from central government, but there are grounds for optimism, as in 2005 the government has designated Reading as a Centre of Excellence in Local Transport Delivery.

We have (initially startling) plans to make the IDR one-way (perhaps we will replace Barcelona with Vienna and its superb Ring the next time we appear in *The Times*) and also to reduce the IDR to ground level - finally demolishing the flyover containing what used to be the "ski jump".

There are outstanding development opportunities already being planned at Chatham Place (to the west of the city centre, and including putting a "lid" over that part of the IDR), the railway station area, and "Southside", the southern gateway to Reading, which will include a major housing development on the former sewage treatment works - the ultimate brown field site!

In October 2005, the third Reading Business Conference will assemble to discuss these and other future developments. I am confident that this major conference will be able to convey a sense of pride in the way that Reading has changed in the past 15 years, but also to look forward to another 15 years of exciting and progressive change, between now and 2020.

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