

# THE HISTORY OF READING

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## Part 1

Good morning, everyone. I am going to be telling you something about the history of Reading and I imagine that you actually don't know very much about the history of Reading. It's probably not something you will have ever studied at school but I will be making references to some parts of history that you might have studied when you heard about the history of the British Isles.

I am going to divide my talk into six parts. I will start off by saying something about the geography of the area because if you understand something of the geography it helps you to understand how developments occurred, why they occurred and why Reading has developed in the way that it has. I will then go back in history to early times and say a little bit about the first recorded notes about Reading, and then move on to medieval times, another word for medieval is 'middle ages' the times of the middle ages. Then move on to talk about Reading under the Tudors and Stuarts. The Tudors and Stuarts are royal families, so that the most famous Tudors would be Elizabeth I and Henry VIII. I think you all know something about Henry VIII - what's he famous for? *Six* wives, he had six wives. And the Stuarts who are probably less famous but the famous kings there are Charles I, Charles II and the Stuarts were actually forced out of power for a short time.

I will then go on to talk about the Victorian era which is the period of Queen Victoria, before moving on to talk about Reading in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which brings us up to the present day.

So first of all something about the geography of the area. It's a bit difficult to find a helpful map of this, but what I wanted to show you here is the movement of the rivers. We've got three rivers here, the upper one is the Thames which as you know goes from near Oxford all the way down to London and to the sea. There is another river below the Thames called the Kennet and these two rivers join at the spot where Reading was built. So Reading developed because it was where two rivers met. And of course water is incredibly important. People need water for a variety of reasons - for drinking, also for their animals to drink, also for the crops in order that you can grow plants. And also of course you need rivers because you can put boats on rivers and transport goods from one place to another. Now meeting places of rivers are incredibly important for the development of villages into towns and then later into larger groupings which we might call cities.

Reading by the way is not a city, Reading is still a town, not a city. There is one other river there, coming up, called the Loddon. The Loddon is not so important in our story, it's more the Thames and the Kennet. Looked at on a larger scale we've got over on the East side, London, with the Thames coming all the way up to Reading. Reading, if I can do this without pulling off my microphone, is here

where the rivers are joining, and on the west side of the country we've got the city of Bristol. Bristol was a very important port because ships went from there around to France, Spain and further afield. It was an incredibly important port up until the discovery of North America when Liverpool became more important than Bristol. But up until about the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Bristol was the major port. Now I'm pointing this out because at a later stage in our story, the river Kennet was joined to the river Avon. The river Avon is not indicated there, but the river Avon is that river at Bristol. When these two rivers, the Kennet and the Avon, were joined it was possible to take ships, or small boats all the way from Bristol to London, because the two rivers were joined. But they were joined artificially not by a natural river but by a canal. That canal, - the name for an artificial waterway - is the Kennet and Avon Canal. We'll come back to that when I'm talking about the Victorian era. For the moment though, let's put the rivers aside and go back to the origin of Reading.

## Part 2

Sorry, before that - a little bit of historical setting. The original people in Britain were Picts or Celts. They inhabited most of the major island which is called Great Britain, because it's the biggest island, Great Britain. But the Angles and Saxons later came across the sea and started to settle in England. The first movement was of the Angles, Saxons, Friesians and Jutes which were all different peoples from north Europe, who came by ship gradually moved in to the area. The name 'England' of course comes from 'Angle' the land of Angles - Angleland - England. Or in French of course *Angleterre* which makes it very clear that we are talking about 'anglo' or the Angles.

At a later stage 'though, the Vikings came from Scandinavia in their big long ships and they tended to come to the north of England, and then they would go round destroying villages, taking all the metals, the valuable gold and silver, and killing lots of people. That was their enjoyment. And they often came from the north down towards the south. This is relevant because we find the earliest mention of Reading in roughly 672 AD I believe, the first mention of Reading in the year 672 with a reference to 'Readdingus'.

Now you might be wondering why you have come to the University of Reading when it would be much more sensible to come to the university of 'reading' because that is what most people do at university. Well, it's pronounced differently from 'reading' because the name of Reading originally comes from 'Readda Ingus'. The name 'Readda' is the name of the chief of the first people who settled and created the village in this area. 'Ingus' in Saxon means people, the people of Readda. What does 'Readda' mean? Well nobody's quite sure, but one theory is that Readda actually is cognate with red, and that the chief was red-haired - so these were the people of the red-haired chief.

The next mention of Reading in history, is the year 871-872 when the village of Reading was overrun by the Vikings who came, took control, destroyed everything, stole everything, killed a few people, stayed for a year and went away again. They then come again in the year 1006, take control of Reading, steal everything, kill a few people and move away again after three years. The next mention after that is at the time of the Battle of Hastings, 1066, which probably

you know as an important date in English history. It's when William I defeated the king of England and he became king of England – 1066 the Battle of Hastings.

There is a place near Hastings called Battle and there is a church there called Battle Abbey. A partner or extension of Battle Abbey was built in Reading and if you go to the west of Reading you can still find Battle Abbey. The building doesn't exist any longer but there is a hospital called Battle Hospital, and that is a reference to the time of 1066.

An interesting point when William became King of England, he didn't speak English, he spoke French. And for about two hundred years the Kings of England spoke French, and the people around them, the Court spoke French. It was a long time before the Ruler of England, or the King of England could actually speak English.

### **Part 3**

Moving ahead to 1121, we need to bear in mind that at this time, the church was very important in politics, in government, and that it's very different from nowadays where the church has a much lower role compared to the King. Well, actually nowadays both the King and the church have very little power. But at this time, the church was very important and a major development for Reading was that the King decided to build a major church called an Abbey, in Reading, and this was Reading Abbey. Henry I started this project, and this is a picture of what the Abbey used to look like. Nowadays it doesn't look like this. Nowadays it's just ruins, just few walls remain. But in the old days, it would have looked like this. And the Abbey would have been important because it would mean that many people would come to Reading in order to pray but also next to the Abbey you would have large markets where people would come to sell their produce, the cloth that they make, the sheep that they produced, and so on.

So, medieval Reading, we can develop a picture of people coming to Reading in order to trade, but also as Pilgrims in order to visit the Abbey, to pray and to follow religious practice. In the local area, we would find a number of people making leather, and the job of making leather is called leather tanning, ok? It's to take the skin off the animal and to work it into leather. Also, cloth making was major in the area.

As I said, we've got rivers, and rivers must be in valleys. But around the area of Reading, we have a lot of farm land, so there were many people with sheep and cows, and they would come into Reading in order to change the animals into cloth or leather, and also to trade what they had produced. Goods would be carried on the rivers. The King in those days used to meet with the Royal Court. Nowadays we talk about parliament, about government, but in those days the ruling group was the Royal Court, the people that the King invited to join with him in order to decide policy. And they met several times in Reading at the Abbey. So, Reading was quite a major place at that time. We also have market fairs.

Moving on to the third part, the fourth part, sorry, we are now moving onto the time of the Tudors and Stuarts, and this famous Tudor, Henry VIII. His first wife

was Spanish. She didn't have any children. Henry VIII desperately wanted have a son to become the next King. And he also wanted money because one of Henry VIII's favourite past times was fighting wars, especially against the French, but also Spanish would do as well. But what he wanted to do was to get as much money as possible to build ships, so that he could conduct his wars. So, he wanted to divorce his wife and at that time the Church of England was Catholic and so divorce was impossible. The Pope would not allow Henry VIII to divorce his wife. So, his options were,

- 1) don't divorce her,
- 2) kill her, 3
- 3) get out of the Catholic church, and there was a extra appeal to getting away from the Catholic church. At that time, the King had to pay money to the Pope to the Catholic church. This was what was known as Peter's pence, Peter's pence was the name of the tax that the King would have to pay. And Henry VIII thought that this was a waste of his money, giving money to the Pope when he could much easily spend the money on building new ships. So, there was an extra attraction to him in breaking away from the Catholic church because he felt he could save money that way. This period is called the Reformation. The Reformation basically means that the country changed from being Catholic to Protestant.

#### **Part 4**

In 1535 the Anglican Church was established, and England moved to Protestantism. 1539 because of this Reading Abbey was closed. Well, you might think 'why close the Abbey? Because the Abbey is just a church, and the Abbey could be Protestant or Catholic, it doesn't matter. Well of course the point was that Henry VIII wanted money. The church was very rich, the church had a lot of money but it also had a lot of wealth inside the churches. The roof was made of lead, lead could be sold for a lot of money. The windows were stained glass windows, you could sell them to make money. Inside the church was lots of gold, lots of jewels so Henry VIII sent his soldiers to the churches, they took everything, sold it and then he was able to build more ships. But as a result, during this period of history many churches were destroyed, and one of them was Reading Abbey. The abbot, the head of the Abbey opposed Henry VIII, said what he was doing was wrong and as a result he was put into prison and in 1539 he was executed because he challenged the king. This is the stone relief, it's very difficult to see anything, but very much in the middle is Hugh Farringdon before he was executed. They had a very nasty way of executing people. They would drag them through the streets of the town so everybody could throw things at them, they would whip them and then pull them, pull the body until the bones started to break, hang them until they were nearly dead, and then very kindly cut them into four pieces. The English people were very nice in those days. The expression is 'hung, drawn and quartered' - hung for the hanging, drawn for the pulling out and then quartered, cutting the body into four parts, isn't that nice?

Moving ahead, after Henry VIII we move into Elizabeth I. Elizabeth I seemed to like Reading, I think we can say that Henry VIII didn't particularly like Reading, but Elizabeth I did. She visited Reading several times and in 1560 a very important new law was introduced. What we call a Charter, which is a kind of law. She decreed that Reading was to be governed by its mayor, not by the

church. The church was not the governor of Reading, but the mayor, nothing to do with the church, a civil person was to become the governor of Reading. As a result Reading was going to keep the income from the market. It wouldn't go to the church, but it would stay within the town. So this is an important change in the way that the town was governed.

It remains at this time a wool and leather town – it's close to farms, close to water but in the middle of Elizabeth I reign of England there was a decline in the cloth trade, the cloth made from wool. This was mainly because the trade in the Netherlands and Belgium, what we could call the 'low lands' became much stronger and the English trade went down. And as a result, at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Reading there was a lot of poverty. People who were working in the wool trade lost their jobs, and many people became poor, there weren't enough jobs to be had.

Now, I don't know – have you been to the Oracle? Yes, OK, so you have heard the name 'The Oracle'. You might be wondering why it is called 'The Oracle'. I mean the word oracle nowadays means somebody who can predict the future, a special person with the ability to predict the future. But the origin of the word 'oracle' in Reading, goes back to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. John Kendrick was a businessman, he was the owner of a cloth trade, a cloth business. He became very rich through the cloth trade. When he was getting old he was upset to see many of his workers becoming poor and so he decided that when he died, half of his money would go to the poor, to help the poor. He died, for a while his brother resisted the idea that the money should go to the poor, but then after about 10 years the money was put into building a workhouse. A workhouse is a large set of buildings in the centre of town, where the Oracle is now. That was originally a large set of buildings with shelter for poor people and work places where they could work for a very small amount of money but they would get food and shelter.

## Part 5

Now, why is it called The Oracle – we don't know. Nobody's quite sure what the origin of the word 'oracle' is. It may come from Italian, but that's not certain, so I think we have to say that the meaning of the name is not clear. But the origin, the beginning of the idea of the oracle comes in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Again, some of you may have seen Kendrick. There is a Kendrick Road near the university – a long slope – well look out for it. There is also a school in Reading, a quite famous school in Reading called Kendrick School and that's referring to John Kendrick.

Moving ahead now to the Stuarts in 1642 a Civil War began in England. This was parliament fighting against the king. Parliament felt that the king was wasting too much money on unnecessary things, and they wanted to challenge his power and a Civil War began. Charles I against parliament. Parliament was led by a man called Oliver Cromwell. During the Civil War, which was 7 years in total, there was fighting in and near Reading. A lot of Reading was destroyed at that time, the king's soldiers were inside Reading with parliament troops outside, attacking Reading. After the war was finished Reading was in a very poor state for quite a long time. There was actually fighting in Reading and I think you can still see bullet marks near the central Post Office, there maybe, well they say there are

bullet marks, I've never really seen them. But they say there was bullet marks there from the Civil War time.

Moving ahead now to after the Civil War, a long time after, about 150 years later, 1790. When Queen Anne was on the throne. Queen Anne was quite, quite weak physically, and she needed to go for medical treatment several times from London (which is off that way) to Bath, to a city called Bath., where there are special waters. So she could go to the waters and relax in the spas in Bath. Reading was on the road between London and Bath and because the Queen was going along the road it became fashionable for everybody to go along that road, to travel between London and Bath. The sort of purple/blue lines are roads and the red lines are the rivers. What you can see here is that there are more and more roads, with Reading as the meeting point. And because you've got lots of people travelling from London to Bath you've got a lots of people who want to stop in Reading to get food, to get shelter and so on. Reading becomes quite famous as a place for people to stop, to rest on their way in between other places. I think Reading is still very much like that. A lot of people go through Reading on their way somewhere else. In those days people didn't have cars so they wouldn't be looking for petrol stations they would be looking for what you could call a 'watering hole', a place where you can get water for your horses.

That brings us on to later developments. First of all as I mentioned earlier we've got the joining of the river from Bristol to the river from London, through the building of a canal. Again, I'm afraid the picture is too dark but actually in the bottom left corner there is a horse. The horse is pulling the boat, what we call a barge, a flat boat in which you carry goods. These would be special, powerful horses that were able to pull weights for a long period of time. This was completed in 1810, which again made Reading important because you could carry goods all the way from Bristol to London or London to Bristol on water.

## Part 6

A lot of money and a lot of hard work was put into this job. However technology was developing very quickly and 30 years later the canal became almost useless because trains developed, and instead of carrying things on rivers it became much easier to carry things by train. You could carry much larger quantities, much heavier loads by train. This helped with the increase in the development of factories where you could produce large quantities in one place and move them large distances. So the canal, in a sense, was a short-lived and a not particularly useful venture.

1840 Reading station was opened. I think the first trains started to roll in 1836 so Reading was one of the first stations of development. What we can see is that we have many railway lines going through Reading. They go from north to south, east to west, but also in different directions. From Reading it's very easy to go to all parts of England.

With trains we get an increase in industry. So we're moving away, well away from cloth and leather. In the Victorian era we're moving towards the building of factories, production. Reading is famous for - three B's. Biscuits, beer and bulbs. The first of these - biscuits, with a company called Huntley and Palmers. Now I

was telling you that there would be horses going between London and Bath and many other places. When they stopped in Reading people would want to eat, they would want to get water and food for their horses, but they might also want to buy presents for their family or for friends. So, Mr Huntley had a good idea. Mr Huntley made biscuits, but at that time people would buy the biscuits and put them into a little paper box and when they got back to London the biscuits wouldn't taste so good, because they got a little bit soft, the flavour was not so strong. His nephew was a man called Palmer who was a metal worker, and Huntley said 'why don't we make a box out of metal because then we can keep the freshness of the biscuits' and Palmer decided 'yes, let's try that' and he used a metal which is called tin - t-i-n. The metal is quite heavy but it's also strong, and he made boxes out of tin, put the biscuits inside then covered it and Mr Huntley started selling his biscuits, in the tins. And they travelled to London. But then people in London said 'This is fantastic' and they would take the tins to other countries and they would give the tins of biscuits to people in France, Germany, Italy. Even India. The first Englishman to go to Tibet got to Tibet and he was greeted. The Lord offered him tea and offered him a box, a tin of Huntley and Palmers biscuits. No Englishman had been there before but Huntley and Palmers biscuits had gone to Tibet before any English person did. Huntley and Palmers is now closed.

Beer - there was a brewery called Simmons Brewery, and lastly bulbs. Bulb here is like an onion, or garlic. So we talk about an onion bulb, also used for growing flowers from bulbs. There was, as I said, these have all closed now. Simmons was bought by a larger brewery and was closed down. Huntley and Palmers moved out, Suttons also moved out.

There is a fourth 'B' bricks, like in this wall. And Reading was famous for the bricks made from local clay and the typical Reading brick is a red brick. There are a couple of buildings around the university which use the red brick but maybe the best example is in the centre of town, at the Town Hall, which is made from Reading brick. This was designed by a famous Victorian architect, Alfred Waterhouse.

## **Part 7**

The University. Well, first of all, we need to go back in time. We'll go back to 1355, Oxford was one of the first universities. And Oxford was set up by a group of monks called the 'Grey Friars'. Now there was always bad feeling between the people of the town and the monks, because they both wanted to control things like money from the market. And in Oxford, there has been always a lot of tensions between what we call 'the town', the town people, and 'gown', gown which is a long piece of cloth worn by academics. Town and gown. So, there's always been tension between town's people and people in the university. In 1355, this led to fighting on the streets. There were big riots and the monks moved away from Oxford, so in effect, Oxford University closed in 1355. These monks ran away from Oxford. Half of them came to Reading and half of them went to Cambridge. The ones who went to Cambridge stayed there and started a new university, Cambridge. The ones who came to Reading tried to start a university in Reading, but failed. Because the people in Reading had no interest at all in universities, in studying. They were interested in money, in trade, but no

interest at all in academic study. So, the Grey Friars went back to Oxford and restarted the University of Oxford. So, that's the first part - failure.

And we should say little bit about the university campus, Whiteknights Park. Whiteknights Park originally was owned by a man called the Marquess of Blandford. Marquess is like a Duke, or a Lord, of Blandford. He owned this whole area between 1798 and 1819. And he spent a lot of money on art and on changing the landscape of this area. So, he paid artists to come here and create the lake and shape the whole of this park area. However, he spent too much money, and at the end, he had to sell it because he had such huge debts.

That's a little bit about the land itself. 1892, a university extension college was started in Reading, as part of the University of Oxford. It was the Agriculture College for Oxford. But in 1926, that college became independent from Oxford, and became the University of Reading, an independent university. It wasn't here, it was down the road at what we call the London Road Campus, that was the original university. In 1947, Whiteknights was given to the university. So, it was given to the university by the Town of Reading.

## **Part 8**

Moving ahead to after the Second World War, I don't know if any of you know areas of Reading, like Earley or Lower Earley? If you go out of the campus on the other side from Reading, that's called Earley. And that was only developed in the 1960's. Huge amount of new housing was put up in Earley, and then Lower Earley from the 1970's onwards. So, these were major development of housing around Reading.

We talked before about the '3 B's' - factories with production. Nowadays, we have new industries in Reading, which are much more to do with service, service industries. Prudential with insurance, Foster Wheeler - they do oil exploration amongst other things. They do a number of petro-chemical production work. HP Invent, I have HP here you might know it from computer printers or other things. Actually HP Invent is going to move away from Reading now, so next year I will take that out. They're leaving because there's too much traffic in Reading, too many cars. So that the movement of traffic is unpredictable, and they want to move to somewhere better for movement. Another major development in Reading is the development of shopping, Reading as a shopping centre for the Thames Valley, and a leisure centre, lots of pubs and clubs. The two central streets in Reading, Friar Street and Broad Street, used to be only shops, but now Friar Street is only pubs and clubs. It's been developed as a centre for people to come to for leisure.

Just to finish off - a little bit about population. We can see how Reading has grown over the years. Early 14<sup>th</sup> century 1,300. By the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century up to 3,000, the doubling though over 200 years. 1801, 9,400. We start to see a really big increase 'though in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 1911-75 2,343. However actually the number can be seen to be much, much bigger. Because 143,000 is Reading Borough. Earley is not included, Lower Earley is not included, Woodley is not included, because these are areas that are in a different borough, a different local government area but actually its all joined together as one big urban spread. So



really it would be better to say that Reading is over 200,000 now, with many people living in Reading and commuting to London, because the house prices are slightly better in Reading than they are in London.

With that I will finish.