The History of St. Andrew's Hall
a scrapbook

Produced by The Museum of English Rural Life
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At the heart of the new Museum of English Rural Life is a building of considerable historic interest – *St Andrew’s Hall*.

St Andrew’s Hall was originally designed by the Victorian architect Alfred Waterhouse as a private home for local man Alfred Palmer in 1880. The house was then known as *East Thorpe*.

Alfred Palmer gave the house to the University to become the first women-only hall of residence in Reading.

This scrapbook outlines the history of the building that is now proudly reincarnated as the Museum of English Rural Life.

Photographs of St. Andrew’s Hall shortly after it closed to students in 2001.
Who was Alfred Palmer?

Alfred Palmer was a member of Reading’s famous Palmer family, held the position of High Sheriff of Berkshire and was deeply involved in the University.

Born in 1852 and educated in Tottenham, Alfred spent over fifty years working for the Huntley & Palmers biscuit company, chiefly as the head of the engineering department where he was responsible for the building and maintenance of the biscuit machinery.

It is believed that Alfred Palmer was responsible for the variety of biscuits the company produced.

“Had it not been for Alfred Palmer’s mechanical inventiveness, the firm would have been quite unable to turn out so many different kinds of biscuits of such varying shapes and textures.”


Alfred married Alice Maria Exall, the youngest daughter of William Exall who was a partner in the local Barrett, Exall and Andrewes iron foundry, in 1877. The marriage was a major event and a full description of the wedding was published in the Reading Observer newspaper.

George Palmer, Alfred’s father, bought The Acacias on London Road in 1865. This was his modest family home just a short walk away from the Huntley and Palmers factory on Kings Road. On George’s death none of the children chose to live at The Acacias and it was given, by Alfred, to the University College as part of their new London Road site.

Alfred’s own home, East Thorpe, was given to the University to become St. Andrew’s Hall in 1911.
University College, Reading

ST. ANDREW'S HALL

St. Andrew's Hall was opened by Mrs. Alfred Palmer on Saturday, June 10, 1911. There were present at the opening ceremony:

[Names listed]

STUDENTS IN RESIDENCE AT THE HALL

[Names listed]

NOTE

In October, 1901, a Hostel for Women Students at University College was established under the Wardenship of Miss Bolam at "The Beeches", 109 London Road. The Hostel steadily grew; and after numerous enlargements it became necessary to face the problem of migration to larger quarters elsewhere. This problem was solved solely by the kindness of Mr. Alfred Palmer, who prepared and greatly enlarged his house, "East Thorpe," Redlands Road, in order to provide the Hostel with a new home. Mr. Palmer also arranged that henceforth the Hostel should be placed under the official control of the Council of University College; and at the same time it was decided to change the name from St. Andrew's Hostel to St. Andrew's Hall.
East Thorpe and Alfred Waterhouse

After his marriage, Alfred Palmer commissioned the fashionable Victorian architect Alfred Waterhouse to design and build an ‘up-market’ house.

The new house, known as East Thorpe, was designed and built between 1880 – 1882 and consisted of a house and stable block on Redlands Road, just off London Road.

In addition to East Thorpe, Alfred Palmer was also the owner of Wokefield Park – a country estate in Mortimer, approximately 5 miles south-west from here, that employed seventeen staff. The Wokefield Park mansion house is now part of a hotel and conference centre.

Waterhouse was responsible for the design of a number of grand buildings around the country, including the Natural History Museum, London, Manchester Town Hall, the Liverpool Infirmary and Liverpool University College.

Just after Waterhouse moved to London in 1865 he bought a plot of land in Whiteknights Park, Reading where he built his out-of-town family home, Foxhill.

Waterhouse’s parents already lived in Reading in Whiteknights House on the Whiteknights Park estate; this move was a chance to bring the family back together.

The Whiteknights Park estate was acquired by the University in 1947 and is now the University’s main Whiteknights campus.

There are no less than 20 buildings in the Reading area with Waterhouse influence, including the Municipal Buildings, Reading School plus his own Foxhill home.
The Origins of St. Andrew’s and Student Life

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The University’s Wantage Hall is believed to be the first English purpose-built student hall of residence since the Oxford and Cambridge colleges.

However, it is also believed that St. Andrews was the first hall of residence outside of London to provide female-only accommodation.

St. Andrew's Hall began as a private venture by Miss Mary Bolam, a campaigner for women’s halls. She opened her first accommodation for nine female students in London Road in January 1901. The following year these students, plus fifteen others, moved in to “The Beeches”, London Road and transformed it into “St. Andrew’s Hostel”.

The Hostel stayed in London Road until Alfred Palmer provided use of his family home, East Thorpe, to the University. It was this building, opened by Mrs Alfred Palmer on 10th June 1911, that provided the basis for St. Andrew's Hall that remained until 2001.

Expansion of St. Andrew’s Hall was made by the acquisition of houses in Redlands Road and Morgan Road.

Despite her rules of being back in Hall by 6pm (except by permission for lectures or other “approved functions”) and her obsession with cleanliness and order, Mary Bolam was adored by the students staying at St. Andrews.

“She very quickly knew all her students and she had such as pigeon-hole type of memory that she soon knew each student’s table napkin ring as well.”

Recalled by a St. Andrew's student of 1913.
Hall wardens were very determined people who knew they were in a great position of responsibility and influence. Mary Bolam was always willing to show it.

On the proposals to do away with the open fires in the Hall, she fought back with the argument:

“What woman ever told her secrets to a radiator?”

When Evelyn Wiseman took charge of Cintra Lodge (another female Hall of Residence accommodating 31 students) in 1926, Bolam’s advice to her was:

“Do not let the Committee [for the Management of Women’s Halls of Residence] know what you are doing, my dear, the Hall is yours.”

Mary Bolam retired in 1927 with many calling it an end of an era.

The Hall continued expanding with two further extensions taking place (in 1962/3 and 1973/4). In October 1969, the controversial move was made to make St Andrew’s the first of Reading’s mixed Halls of Residence. By 1977 all but two of the University Halls were mixed.
Looking east across the tennis courts towards the Hall.
The Minute Books and Reports

The Minute Books of the St Andrew’s Hall Common Room Committee and various reports produced by the University reveal some very interesting points in the environment and operation of the Hall.

The collection for the bicycle pump amounted to 4/- and Miss Short, seconded by Miss Lewis, proposed that a pump of about this value should be bought. Carried.

1 May 1917

It was decided that 2/- of the C. R. funds this term should be devoted to the purchase of dance music.

6 October 1926

Owing to the fact that another bill of 30/- has to be met for painting the Hall oars it was impossible to purchase the Ping-Pong Table this session.

15 March 1933

JCR was unanimously in favour of having a band for the hop instead of records. It was agreed to have “The Clubmen” again, price 6 guineas.

9 October 1960

Men [visitors] will be allowed in the J.C.R. but must leave by 10.30 p.m. A request was made that men be allowed in to all meals (except breakfast) as women visitors are.

30 October 1967

Shaving sockets were requested for the male sections of the hall.

5 October 1969 (the first meeting after the Hall became ‘mixed’).
Proposer Skip Hook, seconder Nick Munro, that “the singing of the national anthem before C. R. meetings should henceforth be abandoned.” … the vote was 50 for and 34 against therefore the motion was carried.

20 March 1978

Proposer D. Spencer, seconded R. Hancock, that “out of Common Room Funds should be provided adequate money for the purchase of six garden gnomes and a plastic squirrel for the embellishment of the Hall lawns.” … The voting results were 43 in favour of the motion and 46 against therefore it was defeated.

20 March 1978

The Hall's Dining Room is now the Museum's Reading Room. (P DX322 PH1/DL/761)
Rules for Women’s Halls of Residence, 1932
reproduced from The University of Reading: the first fifty years by J. C. Holt

1. Students must observe the silence hours in Hall. The Hall is closed normally at 10.30 pm. All lights must be extinguished by 11.0 pm, unless extension of time has been specially granted.

2. No student may be absent from Hall after dinner without the Warden’s permission. Senior students are allowed certain privileges with regard to leave until 10.30 pm on a limited number of nights each term.

3. Visitors must leave the Hall by 6.0 pm. Men visitors may not be received in students’ rooms without the permission of the Warden.

4. Students may not go on the river unless the Warden has the written permission of their parents or guardians.

5. Any case of illness must be reported to the Warden immediately. Unless a student's parent or guardian has nominated a doctor, the Warden will select one to attend the student when necessary. No student may consult a doctor without the Warden’s knowledge.

6. Any student wishing to leave Reading during term must apply to the Warden for the application form at least five days before the period of leave desired. Attention is drawn to the University Regulations upon this subject.

7. Musical instruments, gramophones, etc., may not be played on Hall premises except at times and in places authorised by the Warden.

The Committee for the Management of Women’s Halls of Residence reserves the right to the use of students’ rooms during vacations or in the absence of students through illness or other cause.

Students will be held responsible for any damage done to rooms or furniture.

Students are warned against leaving money or valuables in their rooms or in cloakrooms. The University cannot accept responsibility for any losses that may be incurred.
Closure of St. Andrew’s Hall
When it was announced that St. Andrew’s Hall was to close, it sparked a bitter reaction from its residents and the Students’ Union.

Demonstrations were organised, with the ‘coffin of St. Andrew’s Hall’ being marched from the Hall to the Vice Chancellor’s office.

However, with inadequate funding, rising crime around the Hall and fears over student safety, St. Andrew’s Hall said goodbye to its last student resident in the Summer of 2001.

Examples of the reactions from residents and the student newspaper Spark.

St Andrew's controversy takes new twist with the removal of fire exits

STUDENTS of St Andrew's have once again become angered over changes made to the hall without their knowledge. The incident is, according to Hall President Mike Sharman, the latest attempt to "strangle the final breath out of St Andrew's".

At the end of April the first floor fire escapes were removed in the interests of fire safety. The escape routes consisted of vertical ladders, deemed as being unsafe because they could become hazardous in winter weather.

Mr Sharman argued, however, that it would be more suitable to have a hazardous escape than none at all. He said: "It would be better to break an arm and live than to be trapped in a fire and die."

The fact that residents were not informed about the changes disturbed Mr Sharman almost as much as the work itself. He commented: “There seems to be a distinct lack of understanding that students live...”
The Museum of English Rural Life

The Museum of English Rural Life was founded by the University of Reading in 1951 to reflect and record the changing face of farming and the countryside. From the later-1940s, and in a very small way to begin with, University staff started to collect together items and equipment, now redundant, that reflected the more traditional ways of life that were fading fast. In 1951 the University established the Museum of English Rural Life. The Museum was opened to the public in 1955 in Whiteknights House – the Museum’s first home.

As the collections grew and space became limited, the Museum moved in to ‘temporary’ accommodation in 1964. It stayed there for the next 40 years.

Within it’s first 50 years, MERL had become a pioneering organisation. During the 1960s, the staff conducted special recording projects – such as the documentation of over 600 surviving farm wagons across the country and the photography of traditional rural craftsmen and their work. Sadly, many of these craftsmen turned out to be the last in their line.

The building of our collections has continued to become the most extensive of their type in England containing artefacts, books, archives, photographs, film and sound recordings. All collections are related to the history of food, farming and country life.

All of the collections are registered by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and are Designated as being of national importance.

The Museum is proud of its history and is proud that it can finally do its collections justice by providing them with a building that offers facilities for everyone with an interest in the countryside.
Above: the last staff photo outside the Museum's building on Whiteknights Campus, June 2004.

Right: the Museum's website provides access to the collections to visitors of all ages.

Below: the new Museum and Reading Room

Visit us online at [www.merl.org.uk](http://www.merl.org.uk)

The Museum of English Rural Life
Dedicated to the spirit of the English countryside and its people