



PRUDENTIAL INSURANCE COMPANY, KINGS ROAD



RUPERT SQUARE



KENNETSIDE

Pen & ink drawings of local landmarks by Kate Lockhart, commissioned as part of the Happy Museum project and added to Reading Museum's permanent art collection in 2013

**Visit Reading Museum at the Town Hall on Blagrove Street**  
(behind Marks & Spencers)

**Admission is FREE!**

Opening hours:

Tuesday to Saturday - 10am to 4pm

Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays - 11am to 4pm

*(Closed on Mondays except on Bank Holidays and during school half-terms)*

[www.readingmuseum.org.uk](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk)



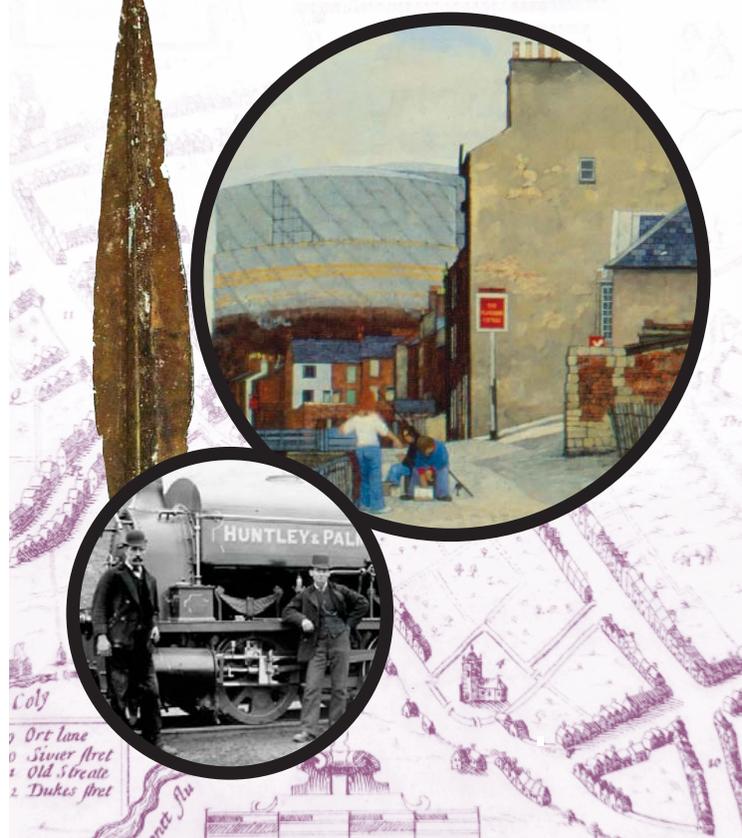
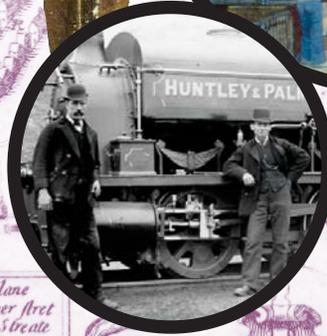
'Revealing Our Hidden History' is supported by Reading Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs).  
Funded by the Happy Museum project. Researched and compiled with the assistance of local residents.

This leaflet is printed onto FSC Paper. The demanding standards of the FSC (Forestry Stewardship Council) mean that every sheet of paper can be traced back to its source ensuring the responsible husbandry of forests.

# Revealing Reading's Hidden History

Take a closer look at **YOUR** local heritage...

## Orts Road & Newtown



## The Early History of the Orts Road and Newtown area:

The fast flowing waters of the rivers Thames and Kennet meet at the eastern end of Reading, shaping natural gravel terraces upon which early nomadic people found dry land and established primitive dwellings.

Archaeological excavations in the area have unearthed evidence of human activity dating back to this Mesolithic period, over 7000 years ago. For instance a flint axe-head dredged at Kennetmouth, possibly used as a tool for making shelters or canoes.

Even earlier implements and animal remains have been excavated in the wider area, including the fossil of a jaw bone of a young mammoth. These date from the Ice Age, over 10,000 years ago.

The two river courses, forged by the Ice Age, provided fresh water, reeds for thatching and an abundance of fish for later Stone Age settlers. Building materials, wild animals and food plants could also be found in the surrounding meadows and woodland.

A polished stone axe-head of about 4,000 years old, found near to the site of the present day gasworks, derives from the more technologically advanced Neolithic period. By this time stone tools were being used to clear trees, process food and prepare animal skins.

In the Bronze Age, farming communities were settling in the area. People deliberately placed bronze axes and spears into the rivers at Kennetmouth, perhaps as offerings to water gods. By the Iron Age, the territory was disputed between two tribes, the Atrebates and the Catuvellauni. Iron Age coins of both have been found in Reading. The Atrebates' stronghold at Silchester, about 10 miles South West of Reading, was taken over by Roman forces soon after the invasion of 43 AD.



## Roman:

Reading's proximity to the land-locked town of Silchester has led to the conclusion that Reading served as an inland port for the Romans. The Rivers Thames and Kennet must have been a trade route for the imported goods excavated there.

During dredging and bridging work to the Kennet in 1880 a regular layer of Roman pottery was located adjacent to the gasworks. Other evidence to suggest that the Romans were trading along the rivers at Reading includes a 2nd century AD coin and a small greyware jar, both found on the site of the Dreadnought Inn at Kennetmouth.

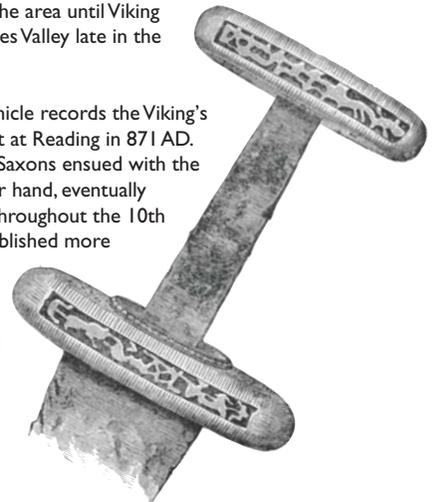


## Saxon Tribes:

Little is known about the life of Germanic Saxon clans which occupied the region after Roman withdrawal from Britain in the early 5th century. By the beginning of the 6th century, the followers of a man called Reada (the Red) had settled. They were known as the Readingas and this is how Reading gets its name.

Some 6th century cremation urns buried in an early Saxon cemetery site overlooking Kennetmouth, have been found. As well as human remains these contain rings, pendants, belt fittings and buckles. These are the remnants of the small community which lived relatively peacefully in the area until Viking raids reached the Thames Valley late in the 9th century.

The Anglo Saxon Chronicle records the Viking's arrival and encampment at Reading in 871 AD. Fierce battles with the Saxons ensued with the Danes gaining the upper hand, eventually reaching Wallingford. Throughout the 10th century the Danes established more permanent footholds and by 1017 Reading was in the possession of the Danish chief, Tovi the Proud.



## The Normans:

The Domesday Book shows that there were four mills working on the Kennet in 1086. Coins minted in Reading during the reign of Edward the Confessor also give an indication that during the Saxon period Reading had grown as a trading centre. There was a market and a church, both on the site of the present day St Marys Butts.



## The Abbey:

Soon a new and infinitely greater place of worship was to rise up, changing the town's fortunes for the next four centuries. Henry I, the youngest son of William the Conqueror, founded Reading Abbey in 1121. He chose a spot between the two rivers "calculated for the reception of almost all who might have occasion to travel to the more populous cities of England".



The rivers provided convenient transport links and soon wharves were established on the River Kennet to supply the Abbey and export goods from its vast estate. The king endowed his Abbey with precious relics, including the supposed hand of Saint James. This would attract pilgrims to the town, boosting to the town's economy in a manner not dissimilar to that generated during the annual Reading Festival of our own times.

Because of its royal patronage, the abbey became one of the richest and most important religious houses in Medieval England. But not all Reading townfolk prospered. The earliest maps of Reading show an area to the south east of the Abbey called Orts Field. It is believed that this was let by the Abbey with proceeds dedicated to feeding the poor. 'Orts' derives its meaning from an ancient term for 'left over food'. This is how Orts Road got its unique name.



There is other evidence of the great Abbey in the vicinity of Orts Road. Opposite the cemetery gates is the Abbot Cooke pub. In 1890 medieval burials were uncovered in the pub grounds. It is thought this was part of Reading Abbey's leper hospital.

In 1539 the Abbey was dissolved and its property including the Orts land was confiscated by the king. The town was slow to recover from the economic and cultural devastation brought about by the Abbey's closure. It was to its natural resources; its rivers and farmland that the townspeople looked for renewed prosperity. The area that makes up the Orts Road and Newtown area was turned over to agriculture, particularly sheep grazing for cloth making and malt for brewing.

In 1560 Elizabeth I confirmed her royal charter bestowing greater powers of self-government to the town. A coat of arms, seen on Gasworks Road Bridge was granted. To mark Queen Elizabeth II's ascent to the throne in 1953, a depiction of a ram was added, representing the 17th century woollen cloth trade.



## Roads and Canals:

The Great West Road (Bath Road) through Reading to London was greatly improved at the beginning of the 18th century. Strategically placed turnpikes extracted tolls from the stage coaches bringing wealthy travellers through Reading towards the fashionable healing spa at Bath. This presented great business opportunities for the town's inn keepers.



Likewise, the opening of the Kennet navigation in 1723 increased trading possibilities. Despite the fierce, sometimes violent resistance of wharf owners opposed to it, the new canal allowed larger vessels to pass through the town and opened up new trading links to the West Country, Wales and the Midlands.



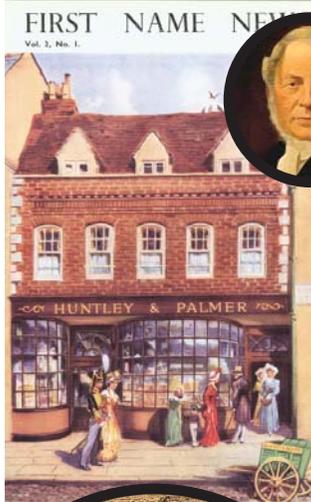
Further improvements to the canal in 1802 promoted trade in a variety of goods. Iron, coal, pottery, Bath Stone and groceries could be imported cheaply while the town's merchants were able to find good prices for the town's produce including flour, malt,

timber, cheese and wool. By 1835 almost 50,000 tons of goods were being shipped through the town annually.

One early entrepreneur to benefit from the expansion of trade was the Quaker granary owner, Binfield Willis. His vast wealth was bequeathed to his grand-daughter, Mary. When she married the penniless Joseph Huntley in 1801, an alliance was formed that led to a new enterprise which would change the face of East Reading beyond all recognition.

## Huntley & Palmers:

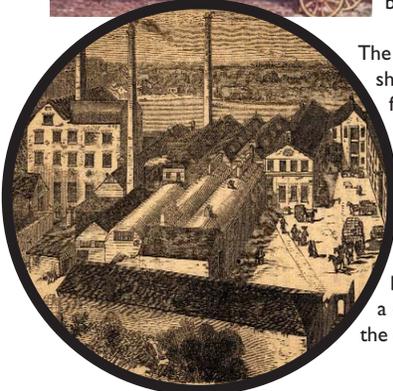
By 1822 Joseph Huntley was a widower and following a series of misfortunes, on the verge of bankruptcy. So it was perhaps with one last throw of the dice that he used



what was left of Mary's inheritance to open a small biscuit bakery and confectioner's shop at 72 London Street.

Conveniently situated opposite the Crown Hotel, a posting inn on the Great West Road, the new shop attracted travellers seeking refreshment for their journey. Legend has it that amongst these, a certain George Palmer visited the shop. He soon learnt that with Joseph's imminent retirement from the business, his son Thomas was looking for a new business partner.

The story that Palmer entered the shop already armed with designs for machinery to revolutionise the mass production of biscuit may be far-fetched but what is certain is that the new partnership would soon exploit new steam powered technology. By 1843 the business expanded, taking over a disused silk factory situated on the canal's north bank.

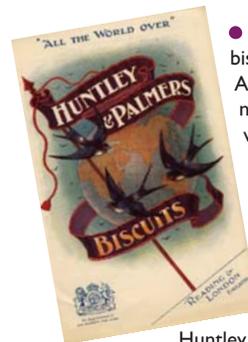


The impact that biscuit manufacturing had on Reading is profound. Here are some fascinating facts that demonstrate its global influence:

- When the factory opened in 1846 it brought with it just 30 employees. By 1901 its workforce numbered 6000. Between this time, Reading's overall population had trebled to number 72,000. The factory itself took up 24 acres of land.



- The factory visitor's book records many famous people including Oscar Wilde, who visited on 22 September 1892. Only three years later he returned to Reading as a prisoner at the gaol. Being only yards from the factory inmates nicknamed it 'The Biscuit Factory'.



- By 1900 Huntley & Palmers were the largest biscuit manufacturer in the world, exporting to Africa, the Americas and the Far East. The firm's name even travelled along trade routes ahead of western expeditions. In 1904, Sir Francis Younghusband became the first European to reach the forbidden Kingdom of Tibet. To his astonishment a selection of Huntley & Palmers biscuits were offered as a welcoming gift!

- With such enormous output

Huntley & Palmers even had their own railway system within the factory. This gave them direct access to the Great Western Railway which reached Reading in 1840. In an early example of direct marketing, First-Class travellers from Paddington were given complimentary biscuits and told to look out for the famous biscuit factory as they passed through.



- During both the World Wars, Huntley & Palmers was turned over for the production of munitions and Army 'hard tack' biscuits. By the end of the First World War, the company had packaged 250,000 tons of basic rations.



## Victorian Expansion:

The abandoned silk factory, upon which the biscuit factory arose, was one of a number of small businesses; including a tobacco factory, brewery and gasworks which sprang up in the area from 1830. This followed the sale of the land which had been owned by the Crown since the time of the Abbey.

The sale of Crown land also led to the construction of the Kings Road in 1834. This eased traffic congestion on the old turnpike road, providing a direct route to the town centre which, in turn, opened the area up for industrial use and habitation. This was seized upon by property developers keen to profit by building accommodation for the rapidly increasing workforce and a growing middle class including doctors employed at the newly opened Royal Berkshire Hospital.



It was at this time that Orts Road came into being. Only a few of the original buildings remain, most notably the grand Bath Stone villas facing onto Kings Road. It was at one of these, number 165, that the French poet Arthur Rimbaud was employed as a French tutor during the summer of 1874. While there he wrote most of 'Illuminations', generally considered his greatest work.

The late Georgian villas on the Kings Road and Eldon Square area were all built from Bath Stone imported via the Kennet and Avon canal. Most of the land was owned by William Blandy, a mayor of Reading who envisaged Reading becoming a prosperous suburb of London. His plan did not come to fruition however and by the early 1950s his exclusive Victoria Square estate was left unoccupied, and soon swept aside by Reading Technical College. All that remains today is the cedar tree in the forecourt of the college.



The gardens of the villas still back onto the Orts Road, which originally served as a service road for the professional classes. The small haphazardly arranged terraced houses opposite accommodated the domestic servants, factory hands and labourers. This working class community grew up in an area extending east as far as Cumberland Road, beyond which another of Reading's great Victorian enterprises, that of Sutton Seeds, had established its nursery grounds from the early 1870s.



Further building took place between the 1870s and 1890s, including the many beer houses and taverns for which the area became renowned. St Stephens Church (1865) and New Town School (1874) also became centres for community life. Factory hands found relief from long working hours in recreational activity organised by the factories, pubs and churches. This is when many of Reading's sports clubs and musical societies were first founded.



By this time, the public health act of 1875 had passed into law. As a result the houses in Newtown, from Cumberland Road to the railway line, were built with better materials and more concern for sanitation. Prior to this, and throughout the 1850s, the townsfolk were constantly being taken ill as a result of waterborne disease, including frequent outbreaks of cholera. The situation was greatly improved by the opening of the sewage pumping station at Blake's Lock in 1865.

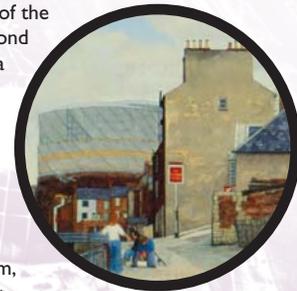


## Orts Road after the Second World War:

As the original housing on Orts Road pre-dated the housing regulations and sanitation byelaws of the 1860s, it is small wonder that after the Second World War the town's corporation began a process of re-housing the population into the new estates in Whitley and Southcote. By the late 1960s a compulsory purchase program of all the pre-Victorian properties on Orts Road was underway, so that plans to re-develop the area along more modern lines could be realised.



In the interim, development corporations let the housing out as low cost accommodation, often to members of new communities emigrating from commonwealth countries in order to find work in the town's factories, hospitals and transport companies. Much like the original population which had been drawn into the expanding town from the countryside, during the industrial revolution.





Alas, from the early 1960s any employment in biscuit production would only be relatively short lived and in 1976 it was announced that Huntley & Palmers would be transferring operations to new purpose built factories in Liverpool and Bermondsey. And so for a time, at the beginning of Margaret Thatcher's term as Prime Minister, the Orts Road area was left derelict, littered with condemned houses and abandoned factory buildings.



The area recovered of course and by 1990, light industrial and retail units had opened where once stood the great warren of red brick baking houses and store rooms. The opening of Prudential Insurance headquarters on the site of Huntley & Palmers offices can be seen as emblematic of the economic shift that took place

in Reading during the 1980s. Moving from a manufacturing base characteristic of the once sleepy Victorian market town, to its new incarnation as a European centre for global service and high-tech industries.

The building of the new housing estate along the Orts Road and Kennetside may have eradicated the environmental problems associated with the slum dwellings it replaced, however the post-modern architectural design used for its construction has been identified as a contributing factor to the acute social problems which blighted life on the estate, almost from the start.



The hidden corners and alcoves used in the estate's design offered safe haven for criminal gangs so that by the turn of the millennium the name

Mandela Court in Reading became synonymous, not with the giant hero of Black history it was named after; but instead; with a reputation for dealing in illegal drugs, particularly cannabis.

By 2009 the problem with drug dealing on the estate had reached what Thames Valley Police described as an 'industrial scale'. The solution was to launch a complex intelligence operation, code named 'Endurance'. This was concluded in May 2011, resulting in the arrest and eventual conviction of a gang of eighteen, only 4 of whom actually lived on the estate.



Today there is a strong sense of optimism amongst a community looking towards the future with a drug free environment.



Recent capital investment to renovate properties, the erection of security fencing to close off alcoves and the new railings on the Kennetside has gone some way to regenerate living conditions of the area.



Efforts to strengthen community resilience are also being spearheaded at community centres such as that at St John's & St Stephen's Church, Sun Street and the East Reading Children's centre in Rupert Square. As always, primary schools in the area act as a hub where those growing up together are able to forge lasting friendships and networks of support.

If successful, a campaign led by local people to encourage more residents to make use of the two remaining pubs in the area might also help community life to flourish. Let's raise a glass to that!

Reading Museum's collaboration with the Happy Museum project in 2013 provided an opportunity for local residents to discover more about their heritage and look towards the future with a past to feel truly proud of.

