

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2008

Victorian Earley

Joan Dils, Chairman of the Berkshire Local History Association, gave an enlightening talk about life in Victorian Earley to the February meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society.

Joan began by explaining that Earley as such was not recorded separately in old documents until the 19th century, but with the aid of the tithe and enclosure maps, trade directories and census data it is possible to piece together the history of the area. Earley was only created as a separate parish in 1854, having been part of Sonning until then. It was a large area of over 2000 acres, but sparsely populated, with just 471 people in 1837.

When Queen Victoria came to the throne, there was not even a church in Earley, as that was built in 1844. Until then, the nearest church for the Earley residents was that at Sonning. The Church of England was concerned that it might lose out to the growing non-conformist movement at the time, and so a number of churches were built to make it easier for parishioners to attend services. The church was enlarged to its present size in 1882.

The newly created parish of Earley was a very rural area, with farms, large houses and labourer's cottages - and stretched from the Thames in the north to the Loddon in the south, and from Cemetery Junction in the west to east of the River Loddon. London Road Farm occupied the site that later became Suttons seed grounds, whilst Marsh, Upper Wood, Lower Wood and Elm Farms covered the area now known as Lower Earley.. Most of the 16th century cottages have long since disappeared. One of the largest estates in the area was that at Whiteknights Park, where the large house belonging to the Marquis of Blandford had been pulled down in 1840. Maiden Erleigh House lasted until the 1960s, when it too was demolished. Like a number of larger houses in East Berkshire, its owner, Edward Golding, had made money in the East Indies. Erleigh Court - the 'manor house' of Erleigh St Bartholomew - had stood near the present day roundabout at the top of Shepherds Hill. It had been the home of Henry Addington (later Lord Sidmouth), Prime Minister in the early 19th century. He gave the land on which the Royal Berkshire Hospital was built, and also owned Bulmershe Court (which lies just outside of Earley parish).

Most of the history of Earley has been the result of conditions 'over the border' in Reading. In Victoria's reign, Reading was growing at an alarming rate, pushing its boundaries in all directions - including eastwards to what is now Cemetery Junction. Industry in the town included two railways, Huntley and Palmers biscuits, Huntley Boorne & Stevens ironworks, printing, etc. Housing conditions in the town were appalling. Like many similar towns, it needed a cemetery, as the 3 churchyards were full. A private company was therefore formed in 1843 to provide a cemetery - just outside the borough, in Earley. It became not only a burial ground but a popular place for a pleasant afternoon stroll, being well planted with interesting trees. Although Reading was spending a lot on improving health conditions and sanitation, conditions were not good, and so the 'Lower Earley of the 1870s' was built - the houses known as Newtown, in Earley between the railway bridge and Cemetery Junction. It was a diverse community, with all sorts of tradespeople, and soon had its own school (still in use). In the area towards the 'Three Tuns', in roads off the Wokingham Road, more middle class homes were built for shopkeepers, professional men etc, all making good use of Reading brick and terracotta. A church was added - St Bartholomew's - on land given by the Palmer family, to serve these new housing areas.

In 1887, Reading extended its boundaries to include a large part of the parish of Earley. It provided much for the local people - employment, water supplies, sanitation etc, and wanted to expand so that it could earn the rates from the area. The population had risen to 4463 by 1881, almost all in the newly developed

area, and by 1901 to 10,196, although the area around the Three Tuns had hardly changed. Major changes were to occur on Whiteknights Park, where several large houses were built on the estate, including Foxhill, designed by Alfred Waterhouse (famous as architect for Manchester and Reading Town Halls) to live in himself. Some of these houses, in Reading brick with terracotta decoration, survive as part of Reading University.

Subsequently, Earley has been further urbanised, with a consequential impact on the roads, water supply etc. As in Victorian times, the reasons for this development has come from outside of Earley itself, rather than a need from within the parish.
