

20 years of Radley History Club

Radley History Club is one of the most flourishing of its kind in the area. We currently have 79 members, including a good number from outside the village. Attendance at monthly speaker meetings averages nearly 50. We have researched and published books on a wide range of local historical issues, and built up an extensive written and oral archive. At our meeting on 8 May we will be celebrating our 20th birthday, which is a good opportunity to look back.

LETTERS:

HISTORY CLUB

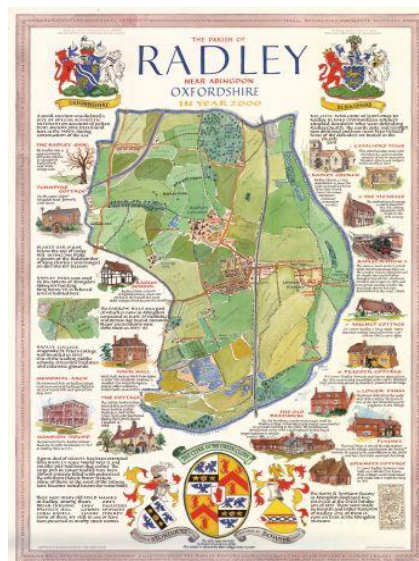
"Do you some-times feel noseey? Do you like to ask why? Would anyone like to join me in forming a History Club for Radley? To look in to the old newspaper archives; in the Berks. and Oxon County Records? In fact anything to learn the History of Radley from the past or long past. If so ring or write to me and I'll tell you more. Joy Aleaxander (Chair, Radley Parish Council, 7, New Road, Radley, OX14-3AP, Tel.Ab.520468)."

In the beginning...in March 1997 a letter to Radley News canvasses potential interest in a history club being formed, and the first meeting following two months later

The first meeting of the Club was held on 14 May 1997, at Wick Hall courtesy of Paddy Drysdale. It was convened by Joy Alexander and nine people attended. Two (Paddy himself and Barbara Wootton) are still RHC members now. Rita Ford was also among the first to become involved, and the minutes of the first Committee meeting, held that September, show that she had become vice-chair.

At that first meeting it was agreed to research and prepare a conservation map of the village, and this project developed into the publication of the Millennium Map, an attractive pictorial representation of the village's history. A thousand copies were printed and it is still to be found on the walls of many Radley homes.

Next, and more ambitious, came the History of Radley, eventually published in 2002. Paddy Drysdale took the overall editorial lead with chapters drafted by Marian Orchard, Patricia Groser, Anne Parkes, Kay Williams and Rita Ford. This covers the full ground from the earliest Neolithic settlements in the village to late twentieth century housing, and it is an essential read for newcomers wanting to know about their village's past. The research for the book has stood the test of time well, and it is an impressive result for what was then such a young club.



Rita Ford recalls that she and Paddy Drysdale had a stall at a Radley College Gaudy to sell the book. They were amongst all the Jaguars, Bentleys, Daimlers etc. with their boots open and tables adorned with silver candlesticks, bone china and cut-glass champagne flutes for their owners' picnics. Rita's little grandson Andrew visited and remarked 'oh good, I like a car boot sale'!

Impressive though the book was, it received a disobliging review in *Oxfordshire Local History News*. This review was pedantic, self-important and not based on a proper reading of the book. Paddy responded very effectively in a letter to the editor, and there can be no doubt who came worse off in this skirmish. It was not the RHC...but we have since become a little wary of reviewers.

By 2002 membership had grown to 39 and by 2010 there were 70. As membership has grown meetings have broadened in their scope, less confined to local research projects. A pattern became established of meetings on the second Monday of the month, with about 10 talks a year (initially in the Church Room, but then in the school hall), one visit in the summer to a place of local historical interest and a Christmas social event.



Visit to Bayworth excavations on a hot August day in 2003 and to Lower Radley in 2013

The Club today stands or falls largely on the quality of its speaker meetings. A speaker who does not know their subject **and** how to engage an audience might not be invited back. Expectations have risen over the years, and we have been fortunate that they have been matched by most of our speakers. For consistent high quality of content and presentation it is difficult to match Liz Woolley, who has given a series of excellent talks about Oxford's non-university history.

There has always been a varied programme, with most talks being of local interest but with one or two wild cards thrown in – such as Mary Russell on travelling in Syria with the help of 'a good thick skirt'. The programme has normally included at least one talk by a RHC member who has researched a subject in some depth: for example, Denis Standen on Radley's railway, Victoria Bentata on medicine in Oxford, Robert Sephton on the Salvation Army in Oxford, and Tony Gillman on the Harwell science campus. We also have had a *Members' Interests* event every two years, which is an opportunity for members to give shorter talks about a piece of local or family interest.

Membership of 70 to 80 has been sustained in recent years, even though similar societies have had falling numbers. Finances have been robust, and it has been possible to keep membership fees down. In the early days the annual subscription was £3.00 plus £1.50 for each meeting attended. In 2007 the annual subscription was raised to £10, but with no attendance fee. The annual subscription is still only £12. Guests are always very welcome and pay £2.50. Keeping the fee reasonable has been helped by the success of the Club's publications,

The Club has published 15 books, with combined sales of about 3,400 copies. Following *The History of Radley* (2002), the main ones have been *The History of Radley Church of England Primary School* (2008), *Radley Farms and Families* (2011), *Radley People and the Railway* (2013) and *The Story of a Village Church* (2016), each taking a different angle on the village's history. While all of these have involved a number of RHC members, the principal author during the Club's second decade has been Christine Wootton, who has also undertaken most of the underlying research. The style of RHC publications has varied, some being more academic than others, but the aim has always been to ensure that the main ones are easily accessible to the village at large as well as being well researched and of potential wider interest.

The school, farms, railway and church books were all launched at an exhibition, and there was also an exhibition in 2007 to mark the Club's 10-year anniversary.



The village hall all set up for the 2007 tenth anniversary exhibition and members all dressed up for the 2008 exhibition to launch the book about the primary school

These exhibitions have become an important part of the Club's activities and those who have been involved in them will know what a huge amount of detailed work has been involved, overseen by Tony Rogerson and relying much on Brian and Rita Ford's natural flair for events of this kind. The exhibitions have enabled the Club to reach a much wider audience than our own membership, helping to raise awareness of our historical heritage as well as to sell our publications and postcards.

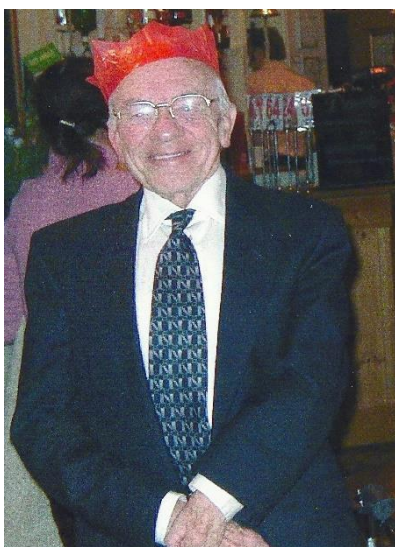
Similar exposure has also been achieved through the stalls the Club have manned at the village fete and Christmas bazaar and other local events such as the Abingdon air show.



RHC stalls at the Village Fetes of 2003 and 2009

Since 2003 the Club has also had an oral history project: interviews have been recorded with some 80 villagers, capturing the everyday as well as the more momentous and providing a first-hand account of change in the village. The initial project, entitled *Radley Remembered*, focused on those who had memories of the village before the 1953 Coronation. The very first was with Dick Frearson, who had a photographic memory of who lived where before World War Two and whose anecdotes included the Royal Train spending an unannounced night on a Radley siding attended by some anxious-looking security people. In more recent years the project, now entitled *Tale to Tell*, has broadened in scope to include those who have had a whole variety of interesting lives before moving to Radley, from code-breaking at Bletchley Park to driving a tank for the Israeli army in the Six Day War.

Two RHC members have won national recognition for their work from the British Association for Local History (BALH). Both sadly died just before the 20th anniversary.



Stanley Baker at the 2004 Christmas dinner

In 2007 Stanley Baker won a BALH award for Personal Achievement. The Club has a very impressive archive of books, documents, maps, photos and CDs, which had been built up and maintained by Stan. He had very rare skills in the transcription of documents that are often written on mouse-eaten parchment in illegible and idiosyncratic Latin. Stan's failing health meant that we recently needed to move the archive, and we are currently revamping the web catalogue so it is easier to find documents according to subject matter. Stan created a very rich resource and it would be good to see it more widely recognised and used.



Robert Sephton helping to man the kitchen at the farm book launch exhibition 2011

In 2017 a BALH award was won by Robert Sephton for an article he had published in the *Oxfordshire Local Historian* about women involved in the 1913-14 strike at Bliss Mill, Chipping Norton. This was one of a large number of articles and booklets, based on his own meticulous research, which he wrote over the last 20 years, typically about the Bagley Wood area. One of these, a history of the Oxford University Golf Club, was published by the RHC in 2009. (The first site for the Golf Club was on the Radley/Kennington border, stretching up to Sugworth Farm.) Robert died in February 2017, just before news of his award.

Behind the scenes, the work of the Club has been overseen by a committee which normally meets every two months. My predecessors as chair were Joy Alexander (1997-1999), Paddy Drysdale (1999-2002), John Homewood (2002-2007) and Christine Wootton (2007-2015). I know that all of us have depended hugely on other committee members who have led on particular aspects, such as finance, membership, minutes and programme preparation, and done so much to share the load between them. Without a broad group of people willing to commit some time and energy, the Club would not have survived, never mind prospered.



The RHC Committee in 2006. Front Row from left: Stan Baker, Rita Ford, John Homewood (then chair), Marian Orchard and Paddy Drysdale (the previous chair). Back row from left: Malcolm Grieve, Christine Wootton (the next chair), Ann Blake, Tony Rogerson and Nick Kennedy

Who will be the RHC's chair in 2027 reflecting on events over the next 10 years? Perhaps someone who comes to live on one of the new housing sites and becomes fascinated by the village's rich history. Let's hope that the Club will have by then an even larger and more flourishing membership.

If you want to know more about the RHC please look at our website at www.radleyhistoryclub.org.uk. New members are very welcome, and you can come to one of our speaker meetings as a visitor. They are held at 7.30pm on the second Monday of the month in Radley Primary School. Copies of our publications are on sale at Radley Village Shop, along with a series of five popular postcards, or can be bought online via the Club's website.

Richard Dudding (current chair)

(with thanks to Les Hemsworth, who took most of the photos)