PALMER, BRUNEL, SUTTONS & TWO RIVERS WALK

NOTES LARGELY COURTESY OF EARLEY HISTORY GROUP ESPECIALLY MARY BATHER. PLUS OTHER OPEN SOURCES.

READING'S 3BS – BISCUITS, BULBS & BEER

This walk covers areas associated with two of the three Bs – Biscuits & Bulbs. Brewing is the third. Some say that it should be 4Bs – the fourth being 'bricks'.

This a walk of contrasts: town & country; very old & new; housing & industry; what used to exist & what has replaced it. Open your eyes, look and compare.

PALMER PARK

GEORGE PALMER (1818 -1897). Born in Somerset. His wife was a first cousin of Cyrus Clark and James Clark who founded the shoemakers 'Clarks'. Palmer went into business with a cousin Thomas Huntley in 1841, after Thomas's father Joseph Huntley, the founder of the business in 1822, was forced to retire through ill-health. The firm was renamed Huntley & Palmers. Whilst it was Joseph Huntley's innovation in the introduction of the biscuit tin and in the sale of biscuits to stage coach travellers that created the business, George Palmer is generally credited with making it a major Victorian success through industrial manufacturing techniques, and by using railways for distribution.

Palmer was mayor of Reading 1857 -58. MP for Reading 1878 – 85.

PALMER PARK was part of Mace Field and part of a greater piece of land bought from Francis Cholmely in the 19th century by George Palmer. In 1889 49 acres (20 ha) of land were donated in perpetuity to the people of Reading as Palmer Park, and George Palmer paid for the land to be enclosed with railings and planted with trees. The park opened in 1891. A statue as monument to him was erected in Broad Street and unveiled on 4 November 1891. Later it was placed near the stadium in Palmer Park itself.

"George Palmer's motives were not wholly philanthropic! Huntley and Palmer ruthlessly maintained their monopoly over labour. When the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway planned to construct a railway works on land adjacent to what is now the Reading to Guildford line, Palmer feared competition for labour and pressure on wages. They bought up the proposed site and, with a stroke of genius, donated it in perpetuity to the people of Reading". (Hobson, 1995).

PALMER PARK SPORTS PAVILION. There have long been a velodrome and an athletics track in Palmer Park. It can be seen on the 1898 OS map (pub 1900.) The new sports centre was opened in December 2022. It has a 25m swimming pool and 100-station gym, café and other facilities.

BOUNDARY READING BC & WOKINGHAM BC.

The boundary runs along the west side of the railway embankment. Most of the walk is in Wokingham BC's area. We cross into Earley Town Council's area. Although in 'Wokingham' most Earley residents probably consider that they live in Reading.

LONDON AND SOUTH EAST RAILWAY (LSER)

The Reading, Guildford and Reigate Railway Company (RGR) was incorporated by Act of Parliament in July 1846. The company was authorised to build a line from the GWR at or near Reading Station to join the London, Brighton and South East railway in the parish of Reigate. On 15 October 1849 the double line, nearly 46 miles long, was completed to its junction at Reigate. RGR was taken over by LSER in 1850. The line now links Reading with Reigate, Waterloo and Gatwick Airport. The bridge over Palmer Park Avenue appears to be a 1970s replacement but the abutments and embankments are original. A bridge shows on 1871 OS map. .

HOUSES *Victorian in Palmer Park Avenue (built c1890). Note the distinctive cream or red edging around windows against grey bricks – a common feature around Reading. Post war 1940s, 50s &60s through north Earley. Note the bungalows on Hilltop Road. Contrast 20th century styles with Victorian. in Newtown & Palmer Park Avenue.*

EARLEY POWER STATION

In late 1941, railway sidings (controlled from the nearby Sonning box) were built by GWR on Colebrook Meadows alongside the river, and work started on the construction of a generating plant, to provide power for weapons production and subsequently American air and military bases. The 40MW coal-fired-steam-turbine station was commissioned in 1943. Extended by 40MW in the early 1950s, it was further extended in 1964 by the construction of a 50MW gas turbine. When Didcot Power Station was built Earley became surplus to requirements and was closed in March 1976. It lay derelict for a number of years before being partially demolished in 1983. The whole site was finally cleared in July 1986.

The bus stop on the A4 is still called Earley Power Station.

SUTTON'S SEEDS .

Sutton's was established in Reading town centre in 1806. Their long association with Earley began when 60 acres (24ha) of land was bought in the 1870s to be used as trial grounds. Much of this land was purchased from George Palmer and from the Erleigh Court Estate. The site was advantageous. Firstly, it was close to the area of Newtown where Suttons had built four streets of terraced houses and grand villas for its employees; and secondly, it was a great advertisement. When people travelled on either the old Great Western line from Reading to Paddington, or on the Southern line to Waterloo and Guildford, they could see the trial grounds and the areas of sweet peas and other flowers. For many years, the railway bridge by the Suttons industrial estate had a sign on it saying "Suttons seeds from Reading, no agents – best in the world". Under pressure to move from their warehouses in Reading to make way for an inner ring road, Sutton's exchanged the freehold site for a new building at their trial grounds in early 1962. Suttons moved from Earley to Torquay in 1976

GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY

Construction of the Great Western Railway (GWR) from London Paddington to Bristol began in the mid-1830s. The line between Twyford station, which opened in July 1839, and Reading station, runs through the north of Earley and was plagued with delays and disasters mainly due to the construction of the Sonning Cutting, the western end of which is in Earley. The cutting is nearly 2 miles (3km) long and 60 feet (18m) deep in places. It took three years to construct and at one time 1220 men and 196 horses were employed. Many lost their lives during the construction of the line. The route through to Reading station was completed in 1840 and ran through water meadows and farmland close to the Thames in Earley, crossing the River Kennet, via Brunel's brick railway bridge, built in 1839 – widened in 1891, near its junction with the Thames at Kennet Mouth.

ISAMBARD KINGDOM BRUNEL. Brunel was the chief engineer of the GWR. Brunel.is considered one of the most ingenious and prolific figures in engineering history, one of the 19th-century engineering giants, and one of the greatest figures of the Industrial Revolution, who changed the face of the English landscape with his ground-breaking designs and ingenious constructions.

Brunel built dockyards, the Great Western Railway(GWR), a series of steamships including the first propeller-driven transatlantic steamship, and numerous important bridges and tunnels. His designs revolutionised public transport and modern engineering. Brunel's vision was that the GWR with the Great Eastern steamship from Bristol, would be part of a direct route from London to New York!.

Brunel, for all his greatness, was a risk-taker. He was a heavy smoker and died of a stroke aged 53 in 1859.

THAMES VALLEY PARK

Ideal Casements was to the left (west) after the bridge. Great Western Radiators was to the right (east). Thermalite Ytang was further east on, now disappeared, Power Station Road. This company made concrete building blocks using pulverised fuel ash – i.e. waste from the power station.

IDEAL CASEMENTS / IDEAL WINDOWS / MCKECKNIE ENGINEERING. Ideal Casements was started in 1947 by Sidney Cook, who owned J T Cook builders. The aim was to supply steel windows to his various housing schemes. His original works were on Whiteknights Road but in the 1950s he needed to expand so bought Colebrook Farm at the end of Shepherds House Lane and built a factory there. The factory expanded over the years, employing 950 people at its peak. At the end of the 1980s the company was scaled down by the then owners McKecknie Engineering and finally moved to Commercial Road, Reading. The land was sold to Speyhawk, who developed it as part of Thames Valley Business Park.

THAMES VALLEY PARK. In 1987, the land north of the Great Western Railway line covering McKecknie's Engineering Works, Earley Power Station and the floodplain of the Thames was given planning permission for a business park. The former power station and 286,000 m^3 pulverised fuel ash were removed. The offices have been built above the floodplain which has been left as open meadows, a country park and a tow path along the river for cyclists and walkers. The business park covers 31.9 ha and the Country Park 13.8 ha. In the planning permission given in 1987, an Information Age Project, a Watersports Centre (***THE WOKINGHAM WATERSIDE CENTRE)*** and a railway station were to be built. The latter did not materialise.

RIVER THAMES & THAMES PATH

RIVER THAMES. the UK's second longest river. Longest is the Severn.

THAMES PATH. The Thames Path National Trail, the 184-mile (298km) long-distance footpath from the source of the River Thames in Trewsbury Mead, Gloucestershire to the Thames Barrier in Woolwich, London, celebrated its 25th anniversary on 24 July 2021

POWER STATION WATER SUPPLY. The near-straight channel was the water intake for the power station.

DREADNOUGHT. The former Dreadnought public house enjoyed a beautiful setting on the River Thames. Before the two railway embankments were formed, this pub was not as remote or inaccessible as it now seems. It is in parts an old house and is referred to in documents of the 18th century as the Broken Brow, from the place name of a portion of the old Wharf Field adjoining it. It was largely patronised by bargees and fishermen and may have obtained its later name from a strong, closely woven cloth much used in the 18th century by seafaring and riverside men. It now belongs to the University of Reading and is used by its rowing club. The name 'Broken Brow' still appears on OS maps.

HORSESHOE BRIDGE. The Horseshoe Bridge at Kennet Mouth is a listed structure dating back to 1891, and is attached to Brunel's brick railway bridge. When Brunel's bridge over the Kennet was widened in 1890, the Horseshoe Bridge was added to allow horses pulling horse-drawn boats along the river Thames to cross the river Kennet/Kennet and Avon Canal. In the 1990s metal supports were added to the original wooden structure. When the bridge was re-built in the 1990s a passenger ferry took people across the river.

RIVER KENNET

The Kennet is one of the main tributaries of the river Thames. It rises at Swallowhead Spring near Silbury Hill in Wiltshire, before passing the prehistoric sites of Avebury Henge, West Kennet Long Barrow and Silbury Hill; the Towns of Marlborough, Hungerford, Newbury and Reading; before joining the Thames at Kennet Mouth. The river's lower reaches were made more navigable as the Kennet Navigation, which combined with the Thames, Kennet and Avon Canal and the Avon Navigation, linked the city ports of London and Bristol- creating a means of transporting goods from London to the Bristol Channel and ultimately, America.
An internationally important chalk river supporting assemblages of rare plants and animals, 275 acres (111 ha) of its upper reaches have been designated as a biological Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). As it heads

east, the river is joined by the Og, the Dun, the Lambourn, the Enborne and Foundry Brook. The water is impounded for its last six miles before Reading to aid navigation and has a semi-natural secondary channel (a long leat or a corollary), the Holy Brook. This arrangement powered the mills of Reading Abbey. Further upstream the Kennet had many more water mills.

Reading Gas Works

The area north west of the Kennet (opposite Newtown School) was the site of Reading Gas Works. The works stretched upstream as far as Huntley & Palmers and across to the railways. Town Gas was produced from coal that was delivered by rail. The site was commissioned in 1888 and shows on 1900 Ordnance Survey maps. With the introduction on natural gas from the North Sea in the 1960s/70s the site was decommissioned. The gas holder, which was a Reading industrial archaeological landmark, was finally demolished in 2022. Up until the mid 1970s the area would have looked very different to the housing seen today and was a sea of industrial works and chimneys.

For more information including old maps and photos see an article by Berkshire Industrial Archaeological Group http://biag.org.uk/gas-in-berkshire

Newtown

Newtown is the area of Reading bounded by the Bath Road in the South East, the Reading to Waterloo line in the North East, and the Kennet. It was developed for housing during the 19th Century to house the Huntley and Palmers workers and Suttons workers on what was Wharf Field, one of the original six open fields. The Eastern part of Newtown was originally in Earley but transferred to Reading in 1887.

Take notice of the attention to detail in the brickwork. Notice the now disused corner shops. Guess which houses were for workers and which for foremen. Houses in Coventry, Norton, Filey & Radstock Roads show on 1871 OS map. Those in Liverpool Rd on the 1900 OS map.

St Bartholomew's Church

The third quarter of the 19th century saw an explosion of housing development spreading eastwards from the Cemetery Junction area due to the increasing need for more employees to work in Huntley and Palmer's biscuit factories and Suttons Seeds. The church began holding services for the people of Newtown, firstly in a nearby meadow and then, in 1887, in a mission room on land in Cumberland Road.
It was clear that a new church was needed. This new church was built on land donated by George Palmer (of Huntley and Palmer) and was endowed by Caroline Palmer of Holme Park, Sonning. Much of the adjoining land later became Palmer Park. The church was dedicated to Saint Bartholomew as it was built near Erleigh Court and the ruins of the chapel of St Bartholomew.

The first vicar of Earley St Bartholomew, the Reverend Charles Honey, was a friend of the famous architect Alfred Waterhouse. Owing to a shortage of funds, Waterhouse designed a simple church that it could be expanded when further finances could be found. The builders, Stephens and Bastow of Bristol, built the church in just 10 months at a cost of £3600. The church was consecrated by the Bishop of Oxford in April 1879. In 1883, a new vicarage was built for the church and, soon afterwards, a nearby quarter-acre plot was purchased as the site of a new church hall. The original church had been simply a nave and in April 1897 a meeting was held to plan for the addition of chancel and chapels. Altogether £4000 was raised, George Bodley was selected as architect and Francis Newberry began work on the improvements in July 1902, with the church consecrated by Francis Paget, Bishop of Oxford, on the 17 March 1905. Between the foundation of the church and its enlargement, boundary changes transferred it from Earley to Reading.

Historic Ordnance Survey Maps 1870s-1960s

Old OS maps of the walk area, in surprising detail, can be viewed, free, online at https://www.oldmapsonline.org/map/nls/1041978791 and see the different maps in the side panel.