

23 3B's and Allotments

Reading had three industries for which it was famous: the 3B's of Beer, Bulbs and Biscuits. H&G Simonds (later Courage) Brewery (beer), Suttons Seeds (bulbs) and Huntley & Palmers (biscuits) were major employers and major influences on town life in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The last to leave Reading was the Courage Brewery that closed at the beginning of 2010.

The story of Reading's allotments would not be complete without a consideration of the part these particular enterprises played in local allotment history (1).

H&G Simonds

Originally in the centre of Reading at Bridge Street, the brewery moved out to a site on the M4 in 1980 (2). Courage Park in Coley Park, was once the brewery sports ground.

In 1947, The Hop Leaf Gazette, Simonds in house magazine, carried an item "Allotments for Employees". It was proposed to let out a piece of land on the sports ground for allotments (3). By December they were able to report, "It was indeed a happy suggestion to hand over about two acres of the Sports Ground to be converted to allotments. This portion of the Sports Ground had laid unused for a considerable time, but it is now turned to a very useful purpose." Some of the 19, 10 pole plots were already being worked on (4). Maps of the area show the allotments in 1960, but by 1972 they had been built on.

Suttons Seeds

Suttons had an influence on Reading allotments in more ways than one. It was a supplier of seeds and plants, garden equipment and growing advice as well as providing allotments for employees.

Suttons had premises in the centre of Reading which grew to cover six acres stretching from The Forbury to Abbey Square with a shop on Market Place. In 1962 everything except the shop moved to the trial grounds at Earley. In 1976 the company moved to Torquay, where it continues. Sentimental and nostalgic Reading allotment holders can still buy Suttons seeds and plants.

Land at Cintra for the Suttons Recreation Club was made available by Leonard Goodhart Sutton in 1906. In 1917 land in Northumberland Avenue, was also made available to staff for allotments. Cintra was the venue for the 8th Reading Horticultural Show in 1948 and for several years thereafter. In 1957, according to L.G.Sutton's will the land was given to Reading Borough Council and became Cintra Park (5).

Huntley & Palmers

Huntley & Palmers biscuit production at the factory in the centre of Reading ceased in 1976; Huntley & Palmers Horticultural Association however continues.

Frederick Yates, a manager at Huntley & Palmers was a member of the Horticultural Association and chairman for many years retiring in 1989. Huntley and Palmers Social Club were founder members of the Federation of Horticultural and Allotment Associations of Reading when it was formed in 1940 (6). The organisation was part of the Dig for Victory Campaign of World War II, staging the Victory Garden Show (later Reading Show) from 1941. Frederick Yates was chairman of the Reading Show committee from 1943 until 1968 (7).

Culver Lane allotments are the last vestige of Huntley and Palmer's allotments that once covered a larger area, they are now managed by Earley Town Council. The Huntley & Palmers Horticultural Association has a trading shed on the site where I met the current Chairman and Treasurer (8).

Huntley and Palmers also had allotments on Northumberland Avenue. The Northumberland Avenue allotments were still in existence in 1954, but it was soon expected to be required for housing. The September 1954 issue of Garden Topics, under the heading "RUMOURS" reproduces a letter from the Town Clerk to Huntley & Palmers, saying that land owned by them and used as allotments is not likely to be required before 1960. The piece concludes, "Now we have this assurance we hope that it will be possible to let many of the vacant plots on this site." (9).

Garden Topics reported in December 1960, that the Huntley & Palmers Horticultural Annual Show that year had been, "...undoubtedly the most successful show to date...". Show entries were 50% higher than the previous year and 33% above the previous record (10).

References

- (1) This chapter does little more than scratch the surface of what could be a very fertile theme for research into the business and industrial history of Reading.
- (2) H & G Simonds Ltd. The Story of the Bridge Street Brewery, 1785-1980. This is an updated version of "The Road to Worton Grange", by T.A.B. Corley. It was written by Tony Corley and Raymond Simonds to commemorate the H&G Simonds Kennet Riverside Information Board on 26 February 2009. www.simondsfamily.me.uk. accessed 13 October 2012.
- (3) The Hop Leaf Gazette, September 1947.
- (4) The Hop Leaf Gazette, December 1947.
- (5) The main source for the history of Suttons is Suttons Seeds, A History 1806 - 2006, Earley Local History Group. So far it has not been possible to ascertain exactly where the allotments were, but they may have been contiguous with the Recreation Ground.
- (6) The history of the Federation of Horticultural and Allotment Associations of Reading now the Berkshire Horticulture Federation. Notes by Bert Cowland. BRO library.
- (7) Administrative History covering records of Reading Show D/EX/1613. (BRO). This includes a memoir written by Frederick Yates daughter.
- (8) I am very grateful to Mr John Snow and Mr Tony Mattingley for sharing their memories with me.
- (9) Garden Topics, September 1954. Reading Library.
- (10) Garden Topics, December 1960. Reading Library.
- (11) D/EX1615/8/1 (BRO). With thanks to the Berkshire Record Office.