

# Chapter 4 Documentary Evidence

by Joan Dils

## SYNOPSIS

This chapter will describe chronologically the documentary evidence relating to the whole area, dealing in turn with each of the major sites: the Old Yield Hall, Minster and St Giles Mills, and Minster Street with the Oracle Workhouse. It will attempt to ascertain the most significant economic and social developments specific to the area and, where possible, to relate them to relevant aspects of Reading's history. References to 'the area' are to the whole Oracle Site; references to individual sites within the area will be so designated. A list of abbreviations, and of primary sources consulted, is given at the end of the chapter; printed primary and secondary sources are listed in the bibliography at the end of the volume.

## THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE AREA

The emergence of the area as a potential urban settlement pre-dates the documentary sources. Astill (1978, 75) has suggested that it formed the major part of the Anglo-Saxon settlement of *Readingas* which was centred on, and possibly grew up round, the royal minster church of St Mary, recorded in Domesday Book as belonging to the Abbot of Battle. The name of the street running through the area, Minster Street, first recorded in 1250-75 (Slade 1969a, 5) is additional evidence for the theory. It was presumably this settlement, called a royal vill, which was attacked by the Danes in 870 when they fortified an area between the rivers Kennet and Thames; in 1006 they returned and burned the place (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser's *Life of Alfred* quoted in Slade 1969a, 2). This is the first surviving documentary evidence for the town.

By the time Reading was recorded in Domesday Book (1086) it was a royal borough with urban characteristics although, unlike Wallingford, no market or craftsmen were mentioned. The foundation of Reading Abbey in 1121 had little effect on the area except to make the Abbey the Lord of the town to whom all rents were paid.

## THE AREA BEFORE 1700

### The Yield Hall and its surroundings

By the 13th century and possibly earlier Reading had a Merchant Guild composed of the leading craftsmen and merchants. A complaint by the Gildsmen c1500 claimed they had owned a 'Gildhalle with Stablys, Gardeyns and other edificacions' to the value of £4 19s 6d before the abbey was

founded (Slade 1963-4, pp). Their Gildhall certainly existed when between 1204 and 1220 John son of John gave two islands in Reading, a large one nearest the Gildhall and a little one next to the island where the tenter-yard was, as well as a lane to give access to the large island (Kemp 1987, 147).

The Gildhall was 'the most important non-religious building in Reading'. This was where the Gild met and where the abbot's representative held the borough courts (Slade 2002, I, lxxv). New work and some rebuilding took place on at least three occasions: 1356-7, the 1440s and 1495-8 as well as frequent running repairs, an indication of the importance and heavy use of the building. Slade shows there was a major rebuilding in the 1440s including underpinning a wall and re-tiling the roof, the cost being partly met by contributions from 80 donors and the sale in 1445 of some old timber to David Gower for twenty shillings (Guiling 1892-96, I, 89). The 1490s work included inserting a brick chimney, a 'little chamber', a buttery and a new storehouse. It was probably for this work that Henry Kelsall in his will of 1493 left forty shillings towards the cost when it [the Gildhall] 'shall be new bilded' (Kerry 1883, 172). The Gildhall and its adjoining buildings were timber-framed but the Hall may have acquired a tiled floor in the 1490s when several thousand tiles were also used for roofs on the site (Slade 2002, I, lxxv-lxxix). More work may have taken place in 1520 when John Russell agreed 'to make up a draught [plan] at the Gilde Hall . . . having the fundacion thereof made unto the groundsilles'. He took away the timber from the 'old hous' and some tiles (Guiling 1892-96, I, 140). Sadly the gild accounts for this period do not survive.

Some early deeds give additional details of the topography of the rest of the Gildhall site. There was a tenter-yard (for stretching cloth after fulling) in the early 13th century (see above) and various buildings and gardens plus one or more streets are recorded from time to time. In 1355 William le Catour held from the Mayor and Burgesses a lease for three lives of a house, and a vineyard on the west side of the Gildhall together with a road leading to it (Kemp and Slade, *Calendar of Medieval Deeds of Reading*/48; hereafter Kemp and Slade, *Calendar*, see Primary Sources, below). In 1363 a garden and a vinery backing onto the river Kennet and enclosed by a fence extended from the door of the Hall to a curtilage also held by William le Catour (Kemp and Slade, *Calendar*/50). By 1400 a messuage belonging to John Hunte in the street leading to the Hall on the east; between a tavern called le Vont on the north and a shop on the south

was given to the maintenance of the Gildhall (Kemp and Slade/88). William le Catour's house (now called a cottage), barns, stables and the gardens were leased throughout the 15th century, the gardens described as on the east and west side of the Gildhall.

By 1478 other buildings on the island owned by the Merchant Gild included the common latrine next to the Hall, separated from Minster Mill by a plot of land, and a stable. (Kemp and Slade/168). The stable and a garden were leased by Richard Cleche in 1483-4 at five shillings a year rent. In 1513 he renewed the lease for life with an additional property, probably the dyehouse on the south side of the hall, the combined rent being eight shillings. (Slade 2002, I, xxxvii). A deed of 1515 shows how the topography of the Gildhall site had developed. In that year William Wattis leased from the Gild a barn, garden, piggery and a vacant plot. The boundaries of the plot, possibly the same as described in 1478, were a stable of the Hall on the west, the Kennet on the south and the Millbrook on the north and east, the bounds extending up to the dyehouse. Cart horses entered the property by the road and gate next to the Hall (*ibid.*, I, xxxviii). Slade suggests that Wattis possibly converted the barn or built a dyehouse since in the rent roll of 1515-16 he is recorded as renting a dyehouse at 23/4d per annum (*ibid.*, II, 181).

The Gildhall ceased to be the meeting place of the Gild soon after the Franciscan Priory of Greyfriars was dissolved. Since Reading became an incorporated borough soon afterwards, such a move would add to the status of the town. In 1538 Dr London petitioned Thomas Cromwell for the building to be sold to the town because 'ther town-hall ys a very small house and stonidith upon the ryver wher ys the comon wassching place of the most part of the town' (Coates 1802, 305). In 1552 the 'newe Guilde Hall formerly called le ffriars' was located in New Street and the building called the 'Olde Yeld Hall' consisting of a tenement and several adjacent houses was standing by itself on an island surrounded by the Kennet (Amyce ff 321). In 1560 the Charter of Elizabeth I included a grant to the Borough of a large number of properties, among them 'a tenement and several houses inclosed by a rivulet called the Kennett called the olde Guildhall of the aforesaid Mayor and Burgesses'. The grant also included a 'corner tenement and Garden opposite the new Newyeldhall' which, from the adjoining properties, appears to have been the former Greyfriars (Pritchard 1913, 39, 41). North of the Gildhall and separated from it by a branch of the river were several properties including one formerly called The Angel and now a brew house, perhaps the Le Vont mentioned in 1400 (Amyce ff321 and 327).

From this time on, the Old Yield Hall and the other buildings were leased by townsmen. There are references to a stone house in 1616 and 1638, brick chimneys in 1628 and tiles on the houses in 1629 and a chandling house (candle making) in 1608 (Guilding 1892-96, II, 72, 400, 421, 21).

### **Minster Street and the Oracle**

Only the south side of Minster Street is included in the area. With the exception of the 1552 survey, it is impossible to locate any properties in the records to a specific side of the street so all references have been included unless the source definitely places them on the north side. The street was separated from the Gildhall by the Holy Brook but it is not possible to be sure if the Gildhall Bridge spanned the stream (Slade 2002, I, lxxxii). The first documentary evidence of the name and economy of Minster Street is in c 1240 when a grant was made by Walter de la Wyle to Richard Cardun of a plot of land in Minster St between land of Walter and that of John Remb, stretching from Walter's brewhouse to his tannery measuring 24ft long and 10 ft wide (Kemp and Slade, Calendar/2). Tanning and brewing, as well as clothmaking, required access to water and all produced noxious smells and effluent, hence the south side of Minster Street would have been a convenient location. It is possible that some of the three tanners named in a tax roll of 1297, each with 'goods in the tannery' (Dodwell 1962, 101-113) and the four listed in the 1377 Poll Tax worked here (Fenwick 1998, 39-41). Clothworkers, including dyers, are also named in these tax lists, though without addresses. There may also have been a smithy in Minster Street in the later 13th century (Kemp 1987, 140).

Little is known about the street from the late 14th century until the Amyce Survey of 1552. On the south side from the Old Yield Hall to Seven Bridges were a barn, a dyehouse and thirteen tenements, some with gardens. Two properties owned by townsmen had previously belonged to Colney's Chantry and two more to the Chantry of the Divine Mass, both of which had been dissolved by the Crown a few years before, and five had been bought by William Grey as part of his purchase of Reading Abbey's possessions (Amyce ff 321-322). Two of these may have been owned by the Abbey's Almoner who had used the income to provide for the poor (Kemp, Almoner's Cartulary, f 47a and 48a).

The economy and society of St Mary's parish in general in the Tudor and Stuart period are revealed by considerable numbers of probate records (wills and inventories) though it is not possible to locate many to Minster Street with any certainty. The industries were the same as in the middle ages. Most of the town's tanners lived and worked in the parish. Tanners were very wealthy and influential in the borough; one, William Brackstone owned eight houses in Reading besides a large house and farm at Sulhamstead Bannister. He served as Cofferer (Treasurer) of the borough and as an overseer of the poor for St Mary's parish. The parish register records his burial as Mr William Brackstone, a magistrate buried 4th Nov 1634 (Crawford 1913). However, effluent from the vats where the leather was tanned with oak bark polluted the streams; in Oct 1582 and again in 1584 Gilbert Aldworth was fined 3s 4d for

allowing his tan vats to run into the Holy Brook (Court Leet Books). A few other leather workers, glovers and saddlers lived in the parish but shoemakers lived and worked in Shoemaker Row in the Market Place. Leather trades played an important role in Reading's economy at this period, second only to cloth production.

Cloth, particularly high quality broadcloth was, however, responsible for Reading's wealth, particularly in the early 16th century when the town ranked tenth richest in England (Dyer 1995, 70). Weavers and other cloth workers who did not require access to water were most probably living in the area but their wills give no addresses other than a parish. Cloth certainly was produced in Minster Street; in the 1552 Survey a dye house owned by William Bye was located near the future site of the Oracle. At the junction of Minster Street and Southampton Street in 1552 was a tenement 'formerly a dye house'. Unfortunately, dyeing, like tanning, polluted the rivers; in 1571 John Brown, a dyer, was fined for allowing effluent from his woad vats to run into the Minster Stream (Court Leet). It was in an attempt to prevent this that a Commission of Sewers was appointed in 1575 'for improving and preventing nuisances on the River Kennet and Hallowed Brook'. One of its terms prohibited the setting up of tan vats by the Brook and another imposed a fine of five shillings a day on anyone allowing effluent from privies, tan vats or pigsties to flow into it. The frequent fines for breaking these rules are an indication both of the importance of industry near the stream and also of the poor quality of the water in it.

The topography of Minster Street was dramatically changed in 1628 with the construction of the Kendrick Cloth Workhouse, later called The Oracle. It was funded by a huge bequest from John Kendrick, a merchant belonging to a family of Reading clothiers but based in London, and was intended to provide work for the poor. The Workhouse which extended from Minster Street southwards beyond the Holy Brook included a house and land owned by William, John's brother, and purchased by the Corporation from the bequest (Phillips 1980, 54). Built of brick and tile, 19th-century plans show the Oracle as a series of rooms around a courtyard through which the Brook ran (see Plate 3.1); its imposing main entrance was in Gun Street (see Plates 3.2 and 3.4). Rooms with equipment were leased to various clothiers who employed poor, skilled craftsmen to produce broadcloths and Spanish cloths but within a few years it was proving difficult to make a profit. Following complaints of misuse of the Kendrick bequest in 1637, an investigation by Archbishop Laud, a native of Reading, proposed the building should be used to teach orphan children a trade, one of which seems to have been pinmaking (Jackson 1993, 218-9; Guilding 1892-96, III, 508, 510). During the Civil War it is said to have been used as a barracks (Hinton 1954, 91).

### Minster Mill and St Giles' Mill

Domesday Book records six mills in Reading but does not place any within the borough. Slade suggests that 'one or two of them' were possibly within the town but cannot be certain since its boundaries are not known (Petyt 1993, 29). St Giles' may have been the mill mentioned in a lease by the Abbey between 1173-86 (Kemp 1987, 115). Minster Mill, connected to Minster Street by a lane called Mill Lane in 1552 (Amyce ff 321), was certainly in operation in 1250 when a grant was made to the Merchant Guild of an island between the Gildhall and Minster Mill (Kemp and Slade, Calendar/2). In the latter half of the 13th century St Giles' Mill was being used to full broadcloths, one of Reading's major products (Kemp 1987, 135, 178).

The mills were given to Reading Abbey as part of its endowment, and remained Abbey property until the Dissolution. In 1545 they were purchased by William Grey along with many other properties in the town (Dormer 1923, 143-4) for £2133 3s 0d of which the mills cost a huge £720. Both mills were described as two corn mills and a fulling mill while St Giles' also had a stable and a barn. Stephen Cawood was already renting both mills and later paid Grey £36 a year rent; Grey had made a good investment. He had been in the household of Thomas Cromwell and after his master's fall he became an official in the Court of General Surveyors. In 1545 he bought Bulmershe Manor which had belonged to Reading Abbey as well as the property referred to above which made him the largest property owner in the borough. He became MP for Reading in 1547 and died in 1551. He had married Agnes Blagrave, widow of Robert, who had a son, John, by her first marriage. Grey and Agnes had no children, hence all his possessions were inherited by John and through him Blagrave descendants (Dormer 1923, *passim*). The mills were let by the Blagraves as they had been by the Abbey and continued to be used for fulling cloth. Both were usually leased to the same person, a custom which continued for some time: in 1578 John and Anthony leased both mills to Thomas Umpton (Calendar Patent Rolls Elizabeth I 1575-78 number 66/1171). In 1583 John Hooker, millwright of St Giles' Parish, had leases valued at £101 of Caversham Mill and two fulling mills, one of which may have been for St Giles' Mill. He owned tools, iron and timber as well as fulling earth and his house contained a brewhouse (D/A1/G/401).

At Minster Mill in 1604-10 there was a dyehouse and garden (Taxation Roll for Minster Ward, Reading 1604-10 (BRO R/FT HMC XLI b)) and the mill itself was used by Reading clothiers for fulling in the early 17th century (Jackson 1993, 62). The house on the site was probably small and not very comfortable; Richard Milson had only one fireplace in 1662-3 but at St Giles' Mill which he also leased he had seven (Powell 1913). Two more millers appear in probate documents, William Ricketts, 1689 and Peter



Smith, 1693 but in neither case is the parish or mill named, nor what was produced (D/A1/211/81; D/A1/122/46). By this date it is unlikely that either was involved in cloth production which was no longer important in Reading's economy.

A good supply of water, however, was needed for the growing community. An 'engine' to pump water from the Kennet up to the town was built by a group of four entrepreneurs who in 1697 took out a 1000 year lease on part of the orchard next to St Giles' Mill. It was not very successful and eventually fell into disuse.

## 1700 TO THE 20TH CENTURY

### The Yield Hall and its surroundings

A statement in *The Universal Directory* c 1795-6 could refer to the site. It reads: 'Mr. Bagnall has a sail-cloth manufactory in the Island and employs upward of forty men. Mr Wallis of London employs upward of thirty men in the like manufactory' (p. 303).

In the 19th century the Yield Hall was called Hill Hall. In 1807 it was called 'possibly the most ancient' of Reading Corporation's properties and was leased to various tradesmen. James Hayes, floorcloth manufacturer, had six houses with warehouses or workshops bordering the Back Brook; Charles Benwell, cabinet maker and upholsterer four workshops, a warehouse and a sawpit. Two other tenements and a coach house in the centre of the site were also let, as was a large dwelling house, workshops, offices and stables. On the north side next to a passage through the estate was part of Talfourd's brewhouse (Terrier).

Throughout the century trade directories give the occupiers of properties on the site, in 1821 James Wilder, Iron Founder and William Tiley, junior, brewer and James Hay, floor-cloth manufacturer (*Piggott's Directory of Berkshire*, 1821). Wilder's foundry continued for over a century on land leased from the Corporation (Statutory declaration 1997). By 1867 James [Wilder] and his son John, born in 1825, had expanded their product range and were described as engineers, brass and iron founders, smiths and agricultural implement makers (*Macauley's Directory*). John had taken over by 1891 and was living in a substantial house, Erleigh Grange in the wealthy middle-class road of the same name. *The Reading Mercury* reported his funeral on 23 March 1903. It was attended by the Mayor and other leading townsmen and a hundred employees of the Foundry preceded the cortege to Reading Cemetery. The firm was still in existence on the site in 1932 but there was also a branch at Cattle Market on Caversham Road to which the business was transferred by 1938, probably on the expiry of the latest lease of their premises in September 1934 (Letter 14 May 1992). Other enterprises at Hill Hall in the late 19th century were carpenters, a coal merchant and an ironmonger's workshop (Kelly's Directories).

### Minster Street and the Oracle

Cloth production in Reading was already in difficulties when the Oracle was built, and declined after the Civil War. By the early 18th century it was effectively dead (Defoe 1724-6). The Oracle, partly restored in 1720, was then occupied by various poor craftsmen producing pins, silk and sailcloth (Phillips 1980, 84). A failed attempt to turn it into a workhouse for all three Reading parishes in 1726, allowed manufacturing to continue. In 1795/6 Thomas Bartlett and James Bestridge, sack-makers, and John, Thomas and Robert Henry Deane, pin-makers were said to employ large numbers of men, women and children (*The Universal British Directory*). Coates, writing in 1802, described it as a range of workshops with gardens, although many rooms were shut up with old looms and broken machinery. In 1807 the ground floor consisted of nineteen rooms occupied by six tradesmen, some of whom can be traced in later records, plus five houses 'inhabited by poor people' (Terrier).

19th-century directories confirm that the Oracle continued to house sacking manufacturers including William and Thomas Bartlett sacking, rope and sailcloth manufacturers, (*Piggott's Directory of Berkshire*, 1821); other sources add the making of pins, sails, rope, and light fabrics such as satin and silk (Childs 1910, 22). William Darter (born 1803) claimed Mrs Stokes kept a parish school in the building and that the long rope walk continued in use until about 1850 (Phillips 1985, 40). In 1849 Christ's Hospital won a suit against the Borough for misuse of Kendrick's bequest and a year later the Oracle was pulled down to be replaced by a number of small shops. Minster Street in the 19th century contained a varied collection of small retail establishments, shoes and clothing being prominent among them (Directories).

### Minster Mill and St Giles Mill

In 1724 the Kennet was canalised from the High Bridge to Newbury; in 1788 Reading Corporation replaced the old Duke Street bridge with an elegant stone structure and in 1810 the Kennet and Avon Canal created a waterway between London and Bristol via Reading. An estimate of the water-borne trade of the Borough in 1835 was 50,000 tons; just 100 tons went by road (Alexander 1985, 9). Reading, at the confluence of Thames and Kennet and on a major east-west road, had always been an important commercial centre; in the 18th and early 19th centuries, this aspect of its economy became increasingly significant.

The mills continued to operate although Minster Mill would be first to stop working. No leases survive for the 18th century but the Blagraves still owned them and it is likely they were still occupied throughout. There was a millwright, Samuel Dagnall, at St Giles Mill in 1707. His house was small, just a bedchamber and a kitchen but there are

no details of the mill (Archdeaconry of Berkshire wills BRO D/A2/187/95). In 1790 Martha Blaggrave leased St Giles Mill and its appurtenances to William May (Deeds 3670 packet 9); in 1799 both mills were leased by Thomas May of Brimpton, gentleman, and occupied by Thomas Collis who is also listed as a miller in *The Universal Directory* of c 1795-6. Minster Mill was valued for the Land Tax 1799 at a mere £4 5s 5d compared to £15 10s 0d for St Giles' (St Giles' leases).

In 1821 the millers at St Giles' Mill were John and William May (*Piggott's Directory of Berkshire*, 1821) but in 1820 they leased an additional piece of ground to proprietors of Reading Waterworks for the remainder of their 1000 year lease for the erection of a water tower for the 'improvement and more effectual supply of Water to the inhabitants of Reading' who numbered almost 13,000 (St Giles' Mill leases). The pumping machinery was able to raise 250,000 gallons a day into the tower and a reservoir at Whitley. In 1826 the Company was incorporated by Act of Parliament and given powers to compulsorily purchase properties needed to improve the water supply. Ten years later they installed a steam engine but neither water pressure nor quality proved acceptable. Following a highly critical report on the state of public health in the Borough, in 1850 the Corporation became the Local Board of Health whose duties included that of ensuring a pure and constant water supply; in 1868 the Corporation bought the Company (Alexander, 1985, 4, 9, 29-31). A new waterworks was constructed at Fobney, upstream on the Kennet, to supply a large new water tower at Calcot. The steam pump at St Giles continued in use to supply the reservoir at Whitley, but it finally stopped in 1877 (Powell 1913).

Meanwhile the mill continued. In 1860 William May conveyed St Giles' Mill, a granary, an orchard and Tan Lock to Rowland Charles Hurley for £2050. Included in the sale was Minster Mill, but as part of the agreement it was not to be operated as a water mill (Reading Borough Deeds 3670 packet 9). Over the next forty years, Hurleys appear as living in the next door to Minster Mill at Willow Cottage or at the Mill House and working the flour mill; in 1890 the mill is called a steam mill (Macauley, Smith and Kelly Directories). There was also a group of six houses on the site called Mill Court (Macauley, Smith and Kelly Directories). In 1897 Reading Board of Health acquired the site, compensating Hurley for the machinery, and three years later the mill and the tower were demolished, the bricks being used to raise the level of Mill Lane (Reading Borough Deeds 3670 packet 9; card index at Reading Local Studies Library). Reading Corporation Tramways began constructing the new Mill Lane Electric Tramway Depot in 1901, the first electric tram running on 22 July 1903 and last one in 1939. In 1939 trolley buses replaced trams, to be replaced in turn by motor buses (Phillips 1980, 143-4). All operated from the Mill Lane Depot.

## SOURCES

### Abbreviations

BAJ	Berkshire Archaeological Journal
BRO	Berkshire Record Office
HMC	Historic Manuscripts Commission
BRS	Berkshire Record Society
NA	National Archives, formerly the Public Record Office

### Primary Sources – National Archives and British Library

- Kemp, Almoner's Cartulary: Almoner's Cartulary (British Library. Cott. Vesp. EV f 47a and 48a) – transcript by B.Kemp.  
 Amyce: Survey of properties formerly belonging to Reading Abbey, made by Roger Amyce 1552 (NA Misc. Bks. Land Rev vol 187).

### Primary Sources – Berkshire Record Office, Reading Local Studies Library and Reading Borough Council

- Archdeaconry of Berkshire wills, inventories and administration bonds (BRO D/A2/..)  
 Blaggrave Papers, Title Deeds to Reading Property, (BRO D/EBG)  
 Directories: *Piggott's Directory of Berkshire*, 1821; *The Universal British Directory of Trade, Manufacture and Commerce* c.1795-6 (Reading Local Studies Library); *Macauley's Directory*; *Kelly's Directories*  
 Indexes of Fire Insurance Policies of the Sun Fire Office and Royal Exchange Insurance 1775-1787 (BRO T/A86)  
 Kemp and Slade, Calendar: Calendar of Medieval Deeds of Reading (BRO R/AT1) transcript by B Kemp & C Slade  
 St Giles Mill Leases 1697-1832 (BRO RLBH/TD/B4 Acc72)  
 Orders, Acts and Decrees of the Commission of Sewers 1575 (BRO Reading Borough Records HMC Report LVII)  
 Proceedings at the Court Leet of the Borough of Reading, Elizabeth I -1830 (BRO R/MJ)  
 Reading Borough Terrier 1807 BRO R/578  
*Reading Mercury* (Reading Local Studies Library)  
 Roll of Admissions to the Freedom of the Borough (BRO Reading Borough Records HMC XLVII)  
 Reading Borough Deeds retained by Reading Borough (referred to by 4-figure number)  
 Statutory Declarations by Head of Reading Borough Legal Services 1992 and 1997

Printed primary and secondary sources referenced in the text of this chapter are in the general bibliography at the end of the volume.

