

THE GREAT HALL

The University of Reading is most fortunate to have the Great Hall, a handsome assembly room that is used for formal events and social occasions. It was opened in 1906 and listed Grade II in 1987. The hall is part of a range of new buildings on a site on London Road to which University College Reading (UCR) moved from Valpy Street, its original location in the town. The move to this more extensive site was made possible by a generous gift from Alfred Palmer. The premises had been his family home but following the death of his father, George (co-founder of the famous biscuit firm Huntley & Palmers), Alfred had no personal use for it and gifted it to UCR (see Heritage Leaflet 2). Today the principal uses of the Great Hall are for degree congregations, examinations, concerts and special events (examples elsewhere in this leaflet). The facility is also available for external events such as concerts, schools examinations, exhibitions and presentations; recent uses include COVID19 vaccinations and BBC TV's *Any Questions*.

Laying the foundation stone, 7 June 1905.

Once UCR had gained the new London Road site there was much competition for the limited development funds available. Some staff pressed for improvements to the cramped conditions in the existing buildings. Others argued that as an aim of the expanding College was "to be a real society" (as W. M. Childs, the Principal, put it), a new assembly hall where all members could meet should be included in development plans from the start. Alfred Palmer summarised the argument thus: "We must have a heart and home" - and that was the wisdom that prevailed.

The complex of new buildings was designed by local architects W. Ravenscroft and C. S. Smith and funded from reserves and generous contributions from local benefactors. In addition to the assembly hall, a series of seven laboratories and studios was designed for sciences, agriculture, fine art, craft and commerce, each separated by a garden and linked by an open cloister. The foundation stone of the hall was laid on 7 June 1905 by Viscount Goschen, Chancellor of the University of Oxford. The event was marked by a grand ceremony that began with luncheon in the Town Hall followed by the transport of guests by 'electric vehicles' (trams) to the London Road premises for the stone laying and a garden party.

The building operation proceeded quickly (see image overleaf). The oak floor of the assembly hall was 100 feet x 48 feet, large enough for up to 1,000 persons. The interior wall facings were of bare brick and stone with oak panels. Lighting by day was by sash windows to the side and dormers in a plastered semi-circular barrelled ceiling. Artificial lighting was by electricity through bronze electroliers and matching wall brackets. At the south end was a raised wooden stage in front of a semi-circular apse with space for an organ. An entrance vestibule at the south-east corner had retiring rooms beneath which were kitchen facilities and heating and ventilation units. The organ was installed in 1910 towards which £585 was raised by the Old Students Association (see overleaf).

The new buildings were formally opened on 27 October 1906 by Lord Haldane, Secretary for War, who prophesied that, on the basis of progress achieved by the College in the first fourteen years since 1892, it would soon become a university. Another encouraging announcement made during the ceremony was the gift of funds by Lady Wantage for a hall of residence for male students. A notable feature of proceedings was the exclusion of female members of staff and students for fear of interruption by suffragettes. True to Haldane's prophecy, on 30 May 1925, Childs triumphantly informed an assembly for the award of College licentiateships that during the next year a Royal Charter would announce the foundation of the University of Reading. On this glad news, he was carried shoulder-high from the hall by jubilant students (see image). Reading remains the only college to have been accorded university status between the two World Wars.

The hall became known as the Great Hall and quickly came into use for formal occasions such as examinations, degree congregations and musical performances and for student social events. A particularly popular annual feature in the student calendar was *Jantaculum*, a performance of plays, poetry and music presented by 'The Gild of the Red Rose', a staff/student association founded by Childs in 1897 based on customs and titles associated with 'The Merchant of Reading' in the 16th century. It continued for the next 90 years.

The hall was refurbished in 1979. It was redecorated, the badly worn oak floor was replaced and an extension added to the outside of the apse (see overleaf). Despite the expectations of the original architects, the acoustics of the hall were less than ideal because of the highly reflective nature of the bare brick, plasterwork and wood panelling. Several attempts at improvement have been made including for many years a separation of the barrel ceiling with a blanket suspended by wires. In 2015 the quality of speech transmission was improved by installing an audio system that digitally directs sound to the audience.



Childs carried by students celebrating the award of the Royal Charter.

THE FRIENDS OF THE UNIVERSITY

The Friends of the University of Reading is an association founded in 1927 to foster contact between the University and those interested in its educational goals, history, current activities and future development.

The aim of The Friends is to raise funds through subscriptions and contributions in order to enable the University to undertake initiatives outside its core activities of teaching and research. The University is grateful for the energetic involvement of the members of this association and their financial support.

On the broader front, periodically, the association organises special heritage events which allow the public to see parts of the University that are not generally accessible. Sometimes such events are linked to special anniversaries or to particular national commemorations.

For further details of The Friends, including the annual programme of events, a full list of completed projects and a printable online membership form please visit: <http://thefriends.org.uk>.

COVER

The Great Hall – a congregation for the award of degrees presided over by the Chancellor of the University *Congregations for the award of degrees by the Chancellor assisted by the Vice-Chancellor, other senior Officers and members of Academic Staff take place in the Great Hall in July and December attended by the graduands and their guests.*

The Friends of the University of Reading provided grants for the provision of items of ceremonial use including chairs for the Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor, the table, lecterns, steps to the stage and a clock. In addition, a substantial grant was made towards refurbishment of the organ.

IMAGES

Kindly supplied from collections of *The Friends*, *The Museum of English Rural Life*, *the University of Reading Special Collections* and *Paul Derrett (organ keyboard)*.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Childs, W. M., *Making a University* (1933) Dent.

Holt, J. C., *The University of Reading: the first fifty years*; (1977) University of Reading.

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LEAFLETS IN THIS SERIES

- 1 Valpy Street 1882-1906** The College from the foundation in Valpy Street until the move to the London Road campus.

2 London Road 1904-2021 The London Road campus to which the University College moved from Valpy Street in 1904-06.

3 Whiteknights Park 1798-1819 Whiteknights Park during the Marquess of Blandford's era.

4 Whiteknights Park 1849-1947 Whiteknights Park from the Victorian era to the University's acquisition.

5 Whiteknights Park 1947-1967 Whiteknights Park during the first twenty years of University development.

6 Halls of Residence 1894-2022 The genesis and growth of the University halls of residence.
- 7 Foxhill House** Foxhill and its occupants: Alfred Waterhouse, the Marquess of Reading, Baron Hirst and the University.

8 Whiteknights Park 1783-1798 Whiteknights Park during the residence of William Byam Martin.

9 The Great Hall College Hall from its opening in 1906 to the range of functions of the Great Hall.

10 The Palmer Family and the University of Reading The philanthropy of the Palmer family from the 'Schools of Art and Science' to recent times.

11 Making a University The path from University Extension College, Reading to achieving the grant of a royal charter to be an individual university.

THE FRIENDS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF READING

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The Friends of the University of Reading

UNIVERSITY HERITAGE 9

The Great Hall



UNIVERSITY OF READING
Presents
a COMING UP HOP... IN THE GREAT HALL

WITH THE COLOURFUL SOUND OF THE PINK FLOYD
and **THE HIGH TONES**
SAT 14TH JAN.
7pm onwards
Tickets in usual S.U.

SOCIAL EVENTS
The Great Hall was the main focus for social events until a need for a place for entertainment at London Road declined with the opening of a new Students' Union building in Whiteknights in 1974. Until then a regular series of dances, including the Vice-Chancellor's Ball, hops and rock concerts took place. Many famous groups and artists played there including in 1967 an infamous performance by Pink Floyd which was booed by a singularly unappreciative audience! Also *Carouse*, a revue organised by members of St David's Hall (a society formed for students in lodgings in 1920 and closed in 2008) was presented there each year as was *Jantaculum* (see separate entry).



CLASSICAL MUSIC
The School of Music moved from Valpy Street to Greenbank on the London Road site in 1904. The directors and conductors included Sir Hugh Allen (later University of Oxford), Sir Adrian Boult (sometime also timpanist in the orchestra), Gustav Holst (note red plaque outside the Great Hall) and Thornton Lofthouse (the first person to play the harpsichord in the Albert Hall). The Foundation Professor Ronald Woodham was appointed in 1951. He conducted the choir and orchestra in a rich range of works including J. S. Bach's *Passions* for which leading soloists such as Dame Janet Baker and John Carol Case were engaged. Performances became so popular that some took place in the Town Hall to meet the demand. Although the School of Music closed in 2003, several degree courses in Music Education continue to be offered by the University's Institute of Education. In addition, there is a wide variety of extracurricular activities in many forms of music.



JANTACULUM
Jantaculum was a popular entertainment held each December presented by the Gild of the Red Rose (see main text). Each *Gildanus* (audience member) wearing a compulsory red rose was individually welcomed by the red-cloaked Curia (the organising committee) consisting of *Custos*, *Reeve*, *Steward*, *Clerk*, *Cofferer*, *Orator*, *Searcher*, *Gustator* and *Forwardmanus*. After an entertainment of plays, readings and music, *Gildani* walked through the cloisters in procession led by the University Singers singing the Boar's Head carol. On returning to the Hall they received supper accompanied by more carol singing which became increasingly boisterous as the evening wore on.



BUILDING THE GREAT HALL
Little over 18 months elapsed between the laying of the foundation stone on 7 June 1905 and the formal opening of the buildings on 27 October 1906. This was an extraordinarily short time bearing in mind the limited amount of mechanical equipment available at the time. The photograph shows the builders with ropes and pulleys, stepladders, basic scaffolding and planks. Note their attire – bowler hats for supervisors and caps for the workers but no hard hats or hi-vis jackets!



THE ORGAN
The organ was built by J. J. Binns (Leeds) in 1911 to a specification by Sir Hugh Allen, Director of Music. The purpose was to support voices rather than for playing in a solo capacity though over the years substantial improvements have introduced a more robust character. In 1926 additional funds were raised to add a Choir division to the original Great, Swell and Pedal provision in appreciation of Childs' long standing work towards securing the University's Royal Charter. The bespoke organ case is of cedar wood from a tree that stood on the very place that the organ now occupies (see front cover). A recital was given in 2011 by Timothy Byram-Wigfield, St George's Chapel, Windsor, to mark its centenary.



A wood-framed New Buttery replaced the former facility in the Old Red Building in 1922 but was destroyed by fire sixty years later. It was installed alongside a brick building (to its right) which still exists and was then the laundry. The instruments for meteorological measurements (foreground left) were maintained by the Department of Geography which was nearby in the West Cloister.



LATER ALTERATIONS
The most significant alteration to the Great Hall, and the one that has had the most impact on its appearance, is the extension added in 1979 to the south organ bay. This two storey ancillary building houses 'back of stage' facilities for the concert hall. Built in a similar coloured brick and designed to blend in with the original architecture, it provides much needed ancillary accommodation for performers of which the original design had very little. It does however obscure the elegant proportions of the original south elevation – compare the modern image (above) with the earlier view (left).