

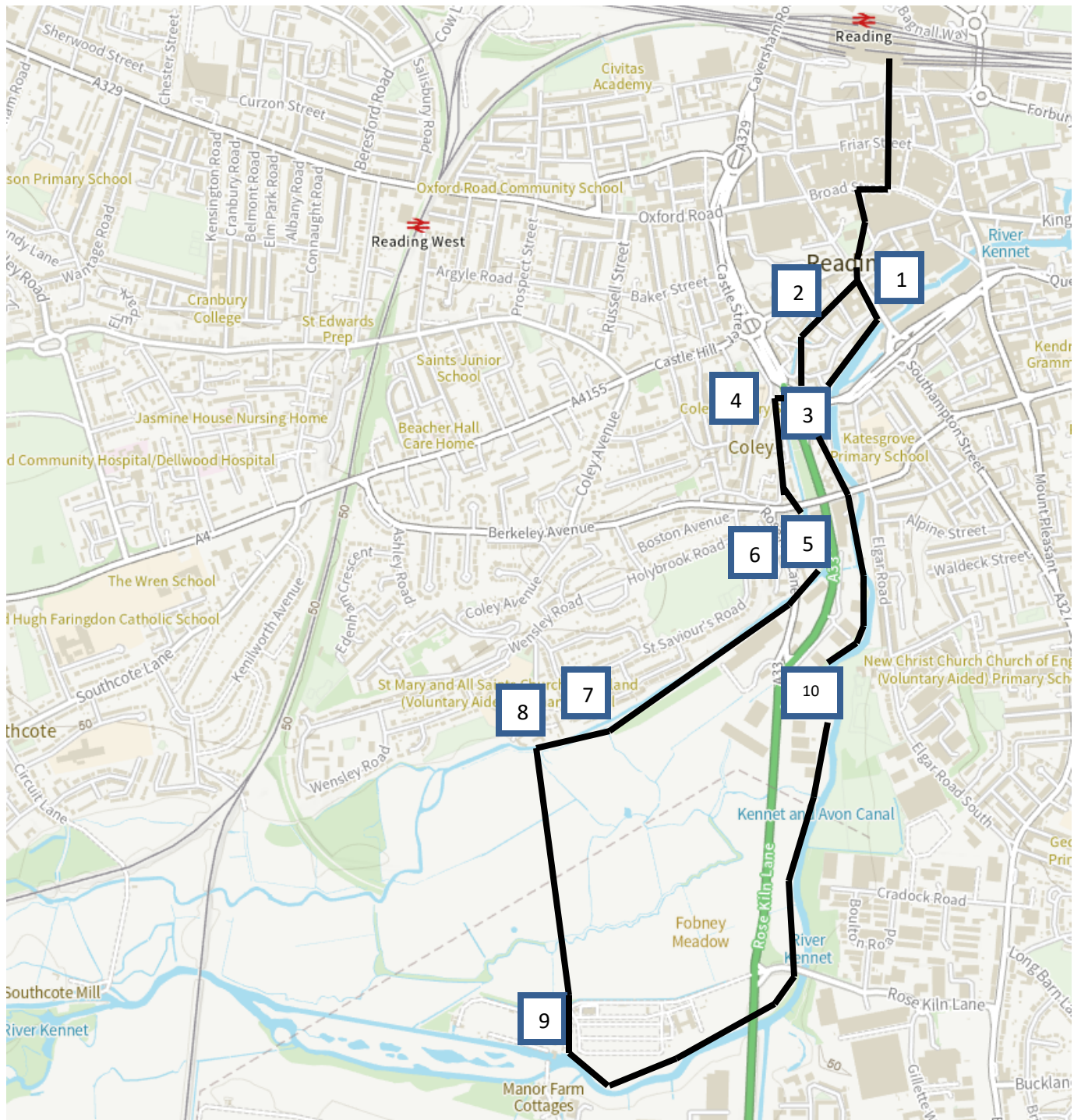


# **Exploring Coley and its history**

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May, 2024, 14:00, from Reading Station**

**Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2024, 14:00, from Reading Station**

**Leader: Steve Vale**



## 1. Simonds (Courage) Brewery



This photo shows a trolley bus on Bridge Street, and so must have been taken in the mid-60s. The Seven Bridges Brewery opened in 1791. It became Courage, Barclay, Simonds & Co Ltd in 1960, until simplified to Courage Ltd in 1970. Courage remained in Bridge Street until 1978, when operations were transferred to the new Berkshire Brewery, alongside the M4 motorway on the borders of Reading and Shinfield (also now closed). The brewery buildings were demolished shortly afterwards and the site is now occupied by the western half of the Oracle Shopping Centre.

## 2. Vachel Almshouses



In 1634 almshouses were built in St Mary's Butts, which were called 'St Mary's Almshouses'. The almshouses were built by Thomas Vachel. They were demolished in 1867 and replaced with new buildings at a new location in Castle Hill, with money coming from the sale of the land. The new almshouses were renamed *Vachel Almshouses* after Thomas Vachel. They were designed by architect William Henry Woodman. The Almshouses were modernised in 1960–62.

### 3. Reading Central Goods Depot, Coley



Coley branch line, also known as the Coley goods branch, was a single-track branch railway running 1 mile 61 chains (1.76 miles, 2.84 km) from the Reading to Basingstoke line at Southcote Junction to Reading Central goods depot, roughly on the site now occupied by the A33/IDR junction.

The line was built by the Great Western Railway and was authorised for construction by the *Great Western Railway (Additional Powers) Act 1905*, as a means to reduce goods traffic on the main line, and to reduce cartage by providing a goods facility on the opposite side of the town centre to the main railway station. The depot was built by Henry Lovatt of Wolverhampton and was partly on the site of a Masonic Temple. The line and depot opened in 1908.

The line never had a regular passenger service, although occasional railway enthusiast's specials reached the line. After a reduction in demand, the line and depot closed in July 1983



#### 4. Coley Steps



During the nineteenth century, the cheap slum housing at Coley Steps was perhaps the most impoverished area of Reading. The Steps ran down the slope towards the River Kennet between Coley Place and Wolsey Street, with courtyards and communal pumps. Much of central Reading's poorest housing was demolished after the Second World War.

For more detail see *Coley Talking – Realities of life in old Reading* by Margaret Ounsley

## 5. Coley Men's Bathing Place



The concrete pool (of which no trace remains) was open air, with a couple of diving boards, but no cubicles. It was enclosed in dark green fencing but you could look down into it from Berkeley Avenue. Originally, river water was pumped in from the brook. The water flowed through from the deep end to the shallow – a safety measure. The bottom and some of the sides of the bath were covered with slimy river weed, but the water was fairly clear.

Later, it was filled with tap water and chlorinated twice each summer. It was heated only by the sun!

It was normally open only to men and boys, but mixed groups from local schools used it on weekdays.

It was the biggest pool in Reading, being 200 feet in length.

It closed sometime in the 1970s.

## 6. Coley overview (Baynes sawmill incorrectly labeled as Jam Factory)



The large factory in the middle of this shot was Gascoigne's Ltd, who were established in 1927 by George H Gascoigne with premises in Berkeley Avenue, Reading, Berkshire. They made milking machines and undertook galvanising. In the 1970s the company merged with Melotte, a family firm that was established in 1852, to form Gascoigne-Melotte, who specialised in milking machine design and development. The factory closed in the 1970s, and was demolished in 1987.

The building labeled Jam Factory in the bottom left-hand corner of the photo is in fact Baynes' sawmill, which sat alongside the Coley branch tracks, with its own siding for transporting timber. Its site is now occupied by modern flats, alongside the A33.

## 7. Walled garden and cottage

This would have been the walled garden for Vachell House (c. 1555 to 1802), the predecessor to Coley House. Vachel House was adjacent to the brook, but Coley House was built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century some way to the north, where it still stands.

The old cottage has a 19<sup>th</sup> century façade, but is much older.

The wall was restored in the 1990s, and is listed, but there are now modern houses within the wall.



## 8. Dovecot at Coley Park Farm



The dovecote located at Coley Park Farm was built in 1553, by Thomas Vachel, at the same time as Vachel house. A small square stone tablet carved with a cross is built into the brickwork, and is believed to have come from Reading Abbey, following its dissolution in 1539. The building is now protected under the Monuments Protection Programme implemented by English Heritage in 1984.

The dovecote had over a thousand nesting boxes for doves or pigeons, which were bred and kept for their meat and eggs. It also supplied feathers and down for pillows and feather beds.

When Vachel House was relocated some way to the north and re-named Coley House, the dovecote became part of Coley Park Farm, which continued to operate until the 1970s. Other old buildings which have been retained on the farm site are the coach house (1610), the barn (1619) and some cottages.



## 9. Fobney Water Treatment Plant and Pumping Station



Built by the Reading Corporation near an old mill where the Kennet and Avon canal and River Kennet meet, Fobney pumping station officially opened on 11 April 1878.

Producing clean water at Fobney would have been a busy and smoky affair, as the old chimney was located close to the footpath. Inside, two huge steam turbines pumped up to 18 million litres of water a day out of the River Kennet, which was then sent to be cleaned at the works behind. Fuelling these turbines required boatloads of coal, which arrived daily along the Kennet and Avon canal. Around 1896, two triple expansion engines and two Lancashire boilers were installed to help meet demand, supplying an extra 13.5 million litres a day – enough for around 59,000 people.

The works used the 'Reading System' – Fobney's special water treatment process – in which river water was filtered through coke, clinker and gravel to remove impurities. Then it was passed through three tanks of Polarite (a magnetic iron oxide) and sand for a final polish. This system cleaned water six times faster than traditional methods and effectively removed about 98% of microorganisms. Back then, experts considered 80% good enough to drink.

Construction of a new Fobney Water Treatment Works began in 1977, and the pumping station closed in 1985.

## 10. CWS Preserves Factory (The Jam Factory)



The CWS works were built and completed in 1916. However, due to wartime shortages of glass and sugar, production could not start. Prior to the war a small airfield was built beside the Kennet for the Military Aeronautics School of Technical Training, and part of the factory premises were used by Avro to construct aircraft. Eventually in 1919 the factory started to produce preserves. It supplied CWS shops with own brand jam, tinned fruit and pickles. A successful business continued until closure in 1968. Coley residents say that you could tell which fruit was boiling to make jam by the lovely aromas.

There is no trace whatever of the factory today, save for a low concrete wall base along the Kennet, where the very substantial factory backed on to the river. The front of the building was close to the tracks of the Coley branch, as can be seen in the picture above. The factory had its own sidings.