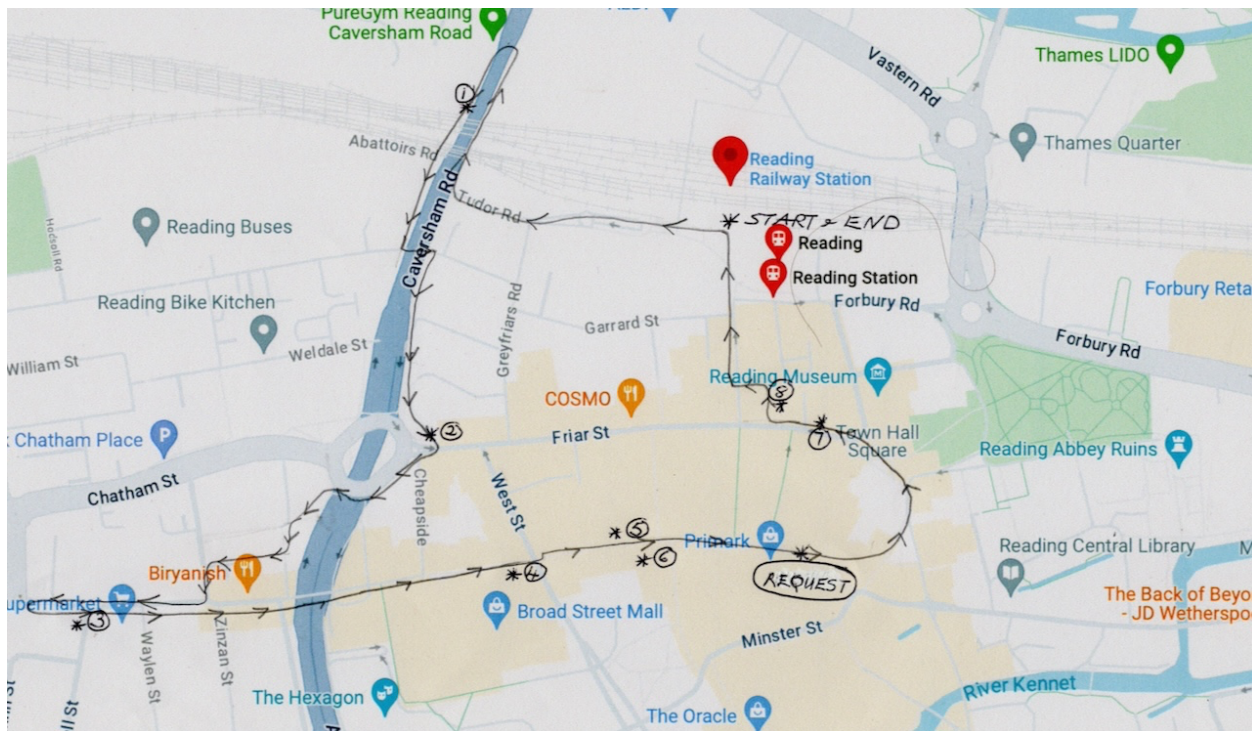


READING TOWN CENTRE ARCHITECTURE OF THE 1920S & 30s 2024 WALKS FESTIVAL 13 MAY

START IN FRONT OF THE THREE GUINEAS AT READING STATION



1920s and 1930s Reading context

Reading town centre in the 1920s and 30s was a very busy place and George Palmer's statue on Broad Street had to be moved to Palmer Park because of the volume of traffic.

The population of Reading in 1921 was 92,278 compared with 174,200 in 2021, an increase of 89%. Although Reading's economy was not as badly affected by the depression as that of some parts of the country there was, as today, poverty and unemployment.

In this period better road connections between Reading and Caversham were constructed across the Thames, Reading Bridge (1923) and Caversham Bridge (1926). New housing estates and suburbs spread south to Whitley, along Shinfield Road and west into Tilehurst and slums were cleared in Coley. In 1926 Reading University became a separate institution from Oxford University when it was granted its own charter.

Walk down Tudor Road to Caversham Road, turn right and stop opposite the fire station, then continue to the crossing and cross to see the fire station close up.

STOP 1 Caversham Road Fire Station

This was the culmination of a project that had commenced in 1935. The borough surveyor A. S. Parsons and chief architectural assistant Mr C H A Willett were responsible for the design. The design was selected after a number of modern stations were visited by the Borough Surveyor and Chief Architectural Assistant.

It is similar in style to the Harrow Fire Station and Cottages on Pinner Road (within the Pinner Road Conservation Area).

At the official opening in November 1939 - Cllr McIlroy commented *"The houses, to his mind, created a little garden village and were admirable in every way."*

The original teak doors were made by local firm Elliots of Caversham and stonemasons were Messrs A H Jones.

Walk back towards the town centre along Caversham Road to the crossing and on to Greyfriars.

STOP 2 Co-op

Official opening by Councillor H Wooldridge, president of the Reading Co-operative Society on 1 September 1928. The chief speaker was A V Alexander MP (Co-operative party, Sheffield Hillsborough) and in the speeches it was recognised that this venture was the biggest that the local society had undertaken.

Architects were Bethell & Swannell responsible for other Co-op stores of this time including Brighton in this style referred to as 'classical'. The motifs on the capitals of the pilasters are typical of Art Deco and Egyptian and Greek revival designs. The windows are also typical of the period.

In 1955 McIlroys on Oxford Road closed and the Co-op had taken over part of building by 1959 and the premises also expanded across to West Street. It rebranded in the 1980s as Living and closed in 1998. The building was taken over by Primark who still have their offices there.

Cross the road to the Job Centre to see the Cheapside façade of the building. Cross the IDR using the crossings to Chatham Place.

As you cross Chatham Place Look at 'Walking Words' an artwork by Sally Castle. One of the panels talks about the demolition of 56 back to back houses just south of Chatham Street in 1922 and uses Erbar-Grotesk a 1920s font.

Turn next right past Rise bakery to Eldon Place. Walk along the north side of Oxford Road and cross to the other side at the Bedford Road crossing.

STOP 3 The Pavilion

Built by Pavilion (Reading) Ltd and opened 21 Sept 1929, the architect Harold S Scott of Birmingham who designed other cinemas in the area including the Regal in Farnham and Newbury and Wallingford.

Art Deco features derived from Ancient Egyptian influences can be seen on the façade of the cinema. The overall design is typical for the use of the building as a cinema at this time but not as ornate as some.

Walk along the south side of Oxford Road and note the Art Deco style shopfronts and glazing at 127 Oxford Road (Change, Grow, Live) and 111 Oxford Road (Lainstons estate agents). Walk to the corner of the street with St Mary's Butts.

STOP 4 Davinas/KFC

This building was originally a Burton's store. Burton's were a chain of men's tailors that aimed to sell reasonably priced suits and other men's clothing. It was founded in Chesterfield in 1903.

The site became available when The Vine public house was demolished for road widening. This shop opened on Friday 6 November 1936 and the press report of the opening describes the materials as emerald pearl polished granite with bronze pilasters and the original had concealed neon lighting and a neon sign at the top. On the far right and left of the building are the foundation stones.

The architect was probably Harry Wilson the in house architect who also designed the Hull store which is very similar although larger and was Listed Grade II in 1994.

Cross to Broad Street.

Look at the two foundation stones on either side of the building.

Continue east along Broad Street.

STOP 5 Card Factory (formerly the Oatsheaf), 46 Broad Street

In 1932 H & G Simonds demolished the old pub and rebuilt it as a modern pub designed by local architect F G Sainsbury. The Reading Standard report said 'the new public house emerges like a butterfly from a chrysalis with all the dignity, comfort and solid beauty of modern architecture.'

The design of the facade was influenced by the architecture of the house in which Archbishop Laud was born which was very close to this site but had been demolished around 1831. On the drainpipe you can see the date 1932 and also the hop leaf logo.

STOP 6 Lakeland, 97-98 Broad Street

Burtons purchased the site which had been Reading's main post office in 1924 and it opened later that year. It is possible that old building was refaced with a new shopfront. There are other similar Burtons facades.

Continue along Broad Street to the entrance to the Oracle.

[REQUEST STOP FORMER FAÇADE OF WELLSTEEDS DEPARTMENT STORE LATER DEBENHAMS

When we arrived at this stop walkers queried why it wasn't included in the tour. My response was the I had researched it and thought, although the style was of the inter-war period, that it was post war as the building had been damaged in the February 1943 bombing raid on Reading. I said I would check when it had been built.

I was wrong.

The façade to Wellsteeds Department Store dates from 1928 when the shop was completely refashioned. There had been bomb damage but mainly to the rear of the shop and the façade survived in reasonable condition.

With thanks to my group, I have added this stop to the tour.

Continue along Broad Street and turn left into the Butter Market at Costas.

Before turning in to Town Hall Square look right towards the war memorial on the edge of the Forbury Gardens which was unveiled in 1932 and was designed by Leslie Gunston.

Walk past Queen Victoria and into Friar Street and cross the road when safe to do so.

STOP 7 Slug & Lettuce, former Post Office Sorting Office

The post office moved here in 1923 from Broad Street. The press was quite rude about it at the time The Reading Observer described it as 'Reading's Super-Barn'. The date of the building can be seen on the rain hopper and there is a winged head of Mercury in the keystone over the doors.

The architect was Albert Robert Myers and it on opened 10 Sept 1923.

Continue west along Friar Street to Harris Arcade

STOP 8 Harris Arcade

The whole arcade was Grade II listed in 2022. The outside and inside of the arcade is probably the most Art Deco of all the buildings on the route.

Many original features remain intact or have been restored and maintained in the original architectural style e.g. curved shop windows at the entrance, skylights in the roof, wooden doors and windows, the flooring and coloured glass.

Harris Arcade was, as far as can be reasonably established, named after John Harris. He ran a motor dealership and garage on Station Road between 1928 and 1931 when the arcade was built. John Harris (Reading) Ltd took over the premises for this short period from Great Western Motors and after he left it returned to them. The directors of Great Western Motors were also directors of John Harris (Reading) Ltd.

Exit the arcade onto Station Road, cross the road and return to the station.

Evelyn Williams May 2024, with thanks to the walkers on 13 May 2024 for your observations on the buildings and style of architecture and the Request Stop addition to this walk.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

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WELLSTEEDS/DEBENHAMS

There are images in Mike Cooper, Early Closing Day – Air Raids on Reading 1939-1945 (2016). Scallop Shell Press.

General resources include local newspapers, image collections of Reading Library local studies collection and Reading Museum online collection.