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THE HISTORY OF READING GAOL

SPEAKER: TERRY DIXON

There has been much discussion about the fate of Reading's Gaol during the past few years, especially since the involvement of our local MP, Matt Rodda, in pressing the Government to preserve it as an important piece of the town's history rather than allowing it to be auctioned off to the highest bidder for potential housing. As of now, no final decision has been made.

Terry Dixon, a local historian and guided tour leader, talked first about other gaols in the town, such as St Mary's Castle Street, that was used briefly to imprison John Bunyan, author of Pilgrim's Progress, in the late 17th Century. Greyfriars Church was used as a gaol from the late 1640s until 1862 when it was purchased and restored as a church and was re-consecrated in 1863. This prison was for both men and women who were shackled to the pillars and who had to endure no roof in parts of the building. At the time it was regarded as one of the most inhumane prisons in the country.

Reading's growth in the 19th Century, largely because of the expansion of the railways and businesses such as Huntley and Palmers and Suttons Seeds, meant that the need for more prison space also grew. The town's population in 1801 was 10,000. By 1901 it had reached 50,000. It is currently 250,000 and by the middle of this century it is expected to reach 500,000. It is already the largest town, as opposed to a city, in the UK.

In the USA the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia opened in 1829, designed like a wheel with a hub and spokes/corridors off. This became the model for over 300 prisons around the world, including the Berkshire County Gaol that was designed by George Gilbert Scott and was opened in 1844. It had a forecourt used for hangings, the first being in 1845. The hangman, William Calcroft, is supposed to have executed 450 prisoners in this way.

The youngest prisoner was only 7 years old. His crime was arson. There were 250 cells and prisoners were in cells with others who had committed similar crimes. Reading was also unique in so far as there was a plumbing system installed - until one Governor decided that this was too luxurious, so slopping out was introduced. This lasted until the 1980s.

The status of Reading Gaol was changed in 1973 to be a holding place for young offenders and illegal immigrants. It was during the 1970s that the prison was largely rebuilt. The chapel is one of the few parts that has hardly changed and where many inmates have made professions of faith and had their lives turned around.

Perhaps the most famous prisoner was Oscar Wilde. He was imprisoned from 1892 to 1897. On his release he moved to France, got married and had two children. He wrote his famous "Ballad of Reading Gaol" in 1898, while in France.

During 2016, Reading's Year of Culture, over 50,000 visitors saw the inside of the gaol. Its future is still to be determined as competing ideas are being weighed up. The hope is that it will be preserved in some form as a lasting part of Reading's history.

