



THE KEEP



BRIDGE HALL



THE WORKHOUSE COFFEE SHOP

Some of the pen & ink drawings of local landmarks by Kate Lockhart, commissioned as part of the Happy Museum project and added to Reading Museum's permanent art collection in 2013

Visit Reading Museum at the Town Hall on Blagrave Street
(behind Marks & Spencers)

Admission is FREE!

Opening hours:

Tuesday to Saturday - 10am to 4pm

Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays - 11am to 4pm

(Closed on Mondays except on Bank Holidays and during school half-terms)

www.readingmuseum.org.uk



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Revealing Reading's Hidden History

Take a closer look at **YOUR** local heritage...

Oxford Road



A World in One Place:

In July 2012 Oxford Road residents and community leaders gathered at Battle Library to agree upon a future vision for the neighbourhood.



It is home to families and individuals who can trace their ethnic roots to all corners of the globe.

Oxford Road's tradition for accommodating diversity might be traced back to the 1950s. A time when Reading's stable economy provided employment opportunities for Irish, Eastern European and Caribbean men and women who found affordable homes in the area. By the early 1970s the children of this generation were growing up side-by-side with a multi-cultural perspective, now reflected in the notion of the Oxford Road being 'A World in One Place'.



Prehistoric Discoveries:

If we peel back the layers of time we discover that the south western bank of the Thames at Reading has been attracting enterprising new-comers since prehistoric times. We can show much of this thanks to an Edwardian bank manager called George W. Smith. He became well known for spending his lunch breaks racing across town in search of gravel pits and building sites where he might find signs of previous civilisation.

In 1905 he unearthed three Palaeolithic stone tools, close to where Reading Community Church now stands, at the bottom of Wilson Road. These were used by people hunting in the vicinity during the late Ice Age, over 10,000 years ago. Many of Smith's specimens are of international significance and quality, representing evidence of the earliest known human occupation of the British Isles.



The most prolific archaeological site in the area was located at Elm Park, on land which later became home



to Reading Football Club. Besides many Stone Age implements, excavations here from 1879 threw up animal remains including a mammoth's tusk and a rhinoceros bone! Middle and Late Bronze Age deposits were also found here by another keen antiquarian of the time, the retired doctor, Joseph Stevens, who became Reading Museum's first honorary curator in 1884.



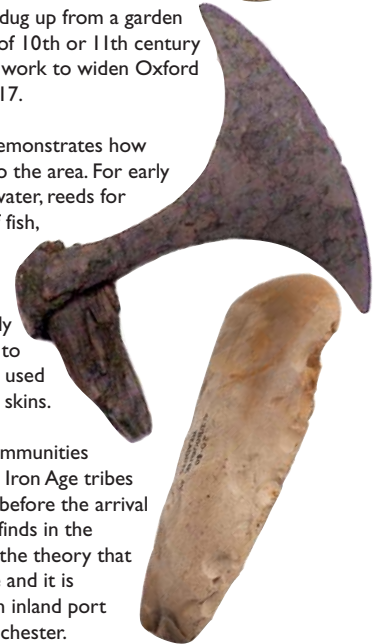
Later excavations at nearby Prospect Park in the 1930s have revealed fragments of Roman pottery and a 3rd century coin from the reign of Emperor Carausius (286 AD to 293 AD). Elsewhere a Roman coin from the time of Tetricus (271 AD to 274 AD) was found at Scours Lane.



Other spot finds from the neighbourhood include an Iron Age brooch, found on the former site of Battle Hospital, a late Saxon spearhead, dug up from a garden in Kent Road and a Viking sword of 10th or 11th century origin, discovered during building work to widen Oxford Road near Tilehurst Station in 1917.

This abundance of archaeology demonstrates how people have always been drawn to the area. For early people, the river provided fresh water, reeds for thatching and a plentiful supply of fish, while the surrounding meadows and woodland contained building material, wild animals and food plants. By the more technologically advanced Neolithic period (4000 to 2000 BC) stone tools were being used to clear trees and prepare animal skins.

These later Stone Age farming communities were followed by the Bronze and Iron Age tribes who would dispute the territory before the arrival of Romans in 43 AD. The Roman finds in the Oxford Road area add weight to the theory that trading along the river took place and it is thought that Reading served as an inland port for the nearby Roman town at Silchester.



Saxon Tribes:

Little is known about the life of the Germanic Saxon clans which occupied the region after the Roman withdrawal from Britain in the early 5th century but by the early 6th century we know that the followers of a man called Reada (The Red) lived here, relatively peacefully until the Viking raids of the 9th and 10th century.



Reading's first mention by name in Asser's Life of King Alfred describes a Viking army camp near to where Forbury Gardens is now situated. Alfred the Great and his brother, King Ethelred, attacked the Vikings there in 871 AD. Frequent Viking raids continued to occur however, the last known one being in 1006 when a Saxon nunnery, thought to have been sited at St Mary's Butts, was burned to the ground. Legend has it that Ethelred's mother Queen Elfrida had established this nunnery as a penance for murdering her stepson.

The Normans:

By the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 the part of the Reading now taken up by the Oxford Road was farmland owned by an Abbess called Elveva. It is therefore quite possible that it had previously been used by earlier members of her religious community, as a means of endowing the ill-fated nunnery.



By 1071 the new Norman king, William the Conqueror, had taken the land and given it to his newly founded Abbey at Hastings, which he had built to commemorate his victorious battle there. This connection with Battle Abbey is still remembered in the local place names. Battle School, Library, and the former Hospital on the Oxford Road all recall that the area once belonged to the Abbey in Hastings.



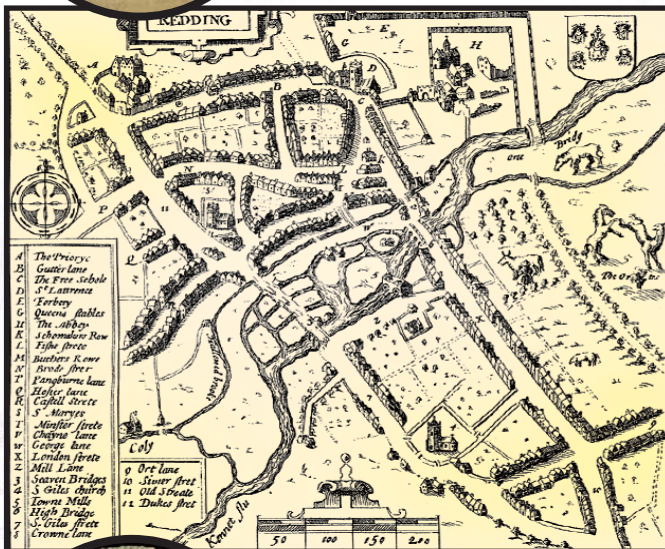
The Abbey:

In 1121 William's youngest son, King Henry I founded Reading Abbey and the estates attached to Battle Abbey were soon recovered and given over as an endowment to his new Abbey.

In size and wealth Reading Abbey ranked amongst the greatest in Medieval England. During its lifetime, Reading became an important centre for pilgrimage to



venerate the Abbey's precious collection of relics. The many fairs that took place on feast days and royal occasions boosted the town's economy, in a manner not dissimilar to the Reading Festival of our own times. By the 14th century Reading's commercial centre had shifted east, away from St Mary's to the area in front of the Abbey's main gate and Market Place.

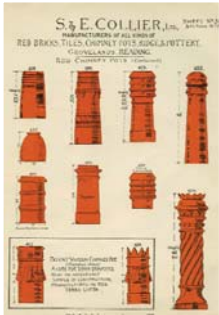


The layout of the town was now firmly established and for hundreds of years its western boundary lay at 'Towns End' in the area now taken up by Chatham Street roundabout. The earliest map of Reading from 1610 shows little sign of development in the area and throughout the medieval period Battle Manor was used for farming, particularly sheep grazing to supply wool for the town's important cloth trade.



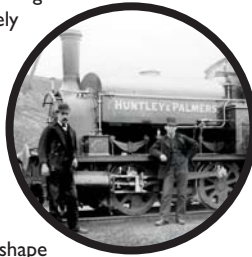
Henry VIII's infamous dissolution of the monasteries would end the Abbey's life along with that of its Abbot, Hugh Farringdon who was executed in 1539 for opposing Henry's reforms. The King seized the Abbey's land and for most of the Tudor period, Battle Manor was owned by the descendants of Queen Elizabeth I's courtier, Sir Francis Knollys; from whom Great Knollys Street takes its name.

Victorian Expansion:



The area's principle landowners during the 18th century are also recalled in local place names. Blagrave Recreation Ground in Tilehurst is named after John Henry Blagrave while John Liebenrood's name is attached to the road next to Prospect Park, upon which he built the mansion house in 1800. By this time the fields had been enclosed into units of land allowing for crop rotation which greatly boosted farming yields. This ultimately transformed the basis of the town's

economy, from being centred on the trade in agricultural goods to one able to exploit new steam powered technology for industrialised manufacturing.



By the beginning of the 19th century Oxford Road as we know it today had begun to take shape with handsome town houses appearing on Zinzan Street, Waylen Street, Russell Street and Prospect Terrace. Originally built as residences for some of the town's wealthiest inhabitants, recent decades have seen



numbers of these converted into multi occupancy short-let dwellings. The area's main developer, William Pratt Swallow, would no doubt be distressed to see how his grand designs have recently been exploited and given rise to social problems associated

with small pockets of persistent criminal activity. This has tarnished the Oxford Road's reputation in much the same way as 'Groper's Lane' affected the Hosier Street area in Swallow's own times.

Work by Thames Valley Police and the community of Oxford Road has had some success in addressing the problem of kerb crawling in the area. By 2009 a programme of drug rehabilitation courses and accommodation

for young women, drawn into prostitution, had contributed to a considerable reduction of reported crime. A Neighbourhood Action Group (NAG) formed in 2007, continues to spearhead initiatives to tackle this issue which, through the vigilance of local residents has led to a series of crackdowns and arrests.



Along the Oxford Road:

Travelling along the Oxford Road today, perhaps on the top deck of the number 17 bus, allows us to view a huge variety of buildings which reveal much about Reading's heritage. There are over sixty buildings on the route with listed status because of their architectural or historical significance. So as we wait for the bus to depart from the Broad Street Mall lets begin by looking across the road to one of Reading's most iconic buildings, McIlroy's Apartments.



McIlroy's Apartments:

McIlroy's was once the town's largest department store, employing 1000 shop workers. It was nicknamed 'Reading's Crystal Palace' because of its 2000 foot frontage of plate-glass windows. Opened in 1903 by William McIlroy you can still make out the shop's sign in the brickwork on the side of the building. The department store itself closed in 1955 and was divided into individual shop units taken up by smaller retailers, including Whites, one of Reading's first supermarkets. The original staff accommodation built above the shop was recently brought back into use as town centre apartments.

Holy Trinity Church:

Oxford Road in the 1820s was a simple country track, traditionally called Pangbourne Lane. Gravel for its construction came from a pit opposite the newly built Russell Street. In 1826 an enterprising clergyman, Reverend George Hulme, bought the land with a clever plan to construct a chapel and use the ready made hollow left by the gravel pit as burial vaults which could be purchased by the wealthy local residents. These catacombs were sealed in 1858 but later used as an air raid shelter during the Second World War. The shelter regulations posted on the walls can be seen to this day.





Holy Trinity holds the distinction of being the first English parish church to be photographed. The early pioneer of modern photography William Henry Fox

Talbot is one of the more famous citizens to have passed time in the Oxford Road area.

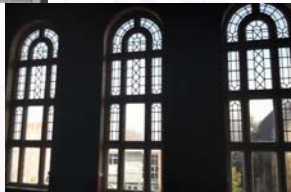
During the mid 1840s he had a studio just off the Oxford Road at 55 Baker Street. Quite a few of his early photographs of Reading survive, including his image of Holy Trinity Church, taken just shortly after the Church's stone façade was added in 1845.

The Pavilion Cinema:

Each building and home along the Oxford Road has a history of its own, none more so than that which occupies the corner of Russell Street. The site was first developed in the mid 19th century as the Clyde House School which from the mid 1800s catered for young ladies of what was then Reading's most affluent neighbourhood. This was demolished and rebuilt as The Pavilion Cinema which opened on 21 September 1929 with a screening of Showboat, starring Laura La Plante.



In its heyday the cinema could seat 1300 patrons but it was not known as the town's fanciest cinema. Customers often complained of hearing the traffic outside. Still, with its horror film weeks and double features The Pavilion drew regular crowds who would rise in respect to



"God Save the Queen" at the end of each screening. Re-named The Gaumont in 1958 it struggled to compete with the growing popularity of television and finally closed in 1979. The old cinema was converted to a Top Rank Bingo Club and after this, reflecting the huge popularity of the sport in the 1980s became Riley's Snooker Hall, which operated until 2007. In April of 2012, the Lifespring Church purchased the property and, sensitive to the building's history revived its original name and also restored much of the cinema's original art nouveau styled interior.



Oxford Road Community School:

This was one of the first schools built by the Reading School Board after 1870, when education for all 5 to 11 year olds became compulsory. Local architects Morris and Stallwood designed the school using bricks from nearby S&E Colliers.

The school has a long history of teaching about world cultures as shown by this photograph of children celebrating Empire Day in 1938. This ethos has made the school a welcoming place for children with heritage from all parts of the world. An early expression of this was the formation of the Oxford Road School Steel Band, whose music and costumes have been an annual feature of the West Reading Community Carnival since 1977.



Bridge Hall:

Bridge Hall is still known to locals as 'Judo Hall', after Reading Judo Club was founded there in 1949, remaining until 1989. The hall was originally designed in 1890 as an assembly room for Reading's Open Brethren and therefore represents a long tradition of evangelical worship on Oxford Road.



Reading West Station:

The Reading to Hungerford railway line opened in 1847 but it was not until 1906 that Reading West Station opened. The narrow, low hanging



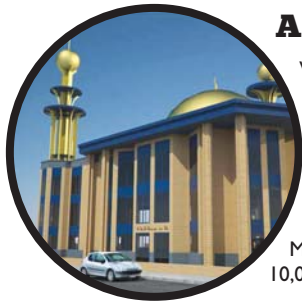
brick bridge that carried the first steam locomotives was replaced with an iron bridge in 1939, in an engineering feat not dissimilar to the recent widening of the Cow Lane Bridge. Previously,



alongside advertisements for local companies, a sign painted on the bridge warned tram passengers to 'Keep Your Seats' to avoid collision. Today the bridge is adorned with doves symbolising peace, the winning design of a competition held between local school children.

Abu Bakr Islamic Centre:

With its distinctive golden domes and minaret, Abu Bakr Islamic Centre is the newest addition to the landmark buildings of Oxford Road. It takes its name from the 7th century companion of Prophet Muhammad. Now nearing completion, it is the first purpose built Mosque for Reading's community of over 10,000 Muslims.



Battle Hospital & The Workhouse:

West Village and the Tesco hypermarket on Oxford Road are built on a site more familiar to older residents as Battle Hospital. What may be less well known is that the hospital that made way for the new development had an earlier use as a workhouse for the town's poor and homeless. Opened in 1867 the workhouse had relieved acute overcrowding in the town's other poor law houses, brought about by the town's rapid population growth during the Victorian era.



The workhouse would remain in use until the outbreak of the First World War when it was converted to receive wounded soldiers. By 1930 responsibility for looking after the poor had passed to the local authority and the buildings were converted to

become the Battle Hospital. This is how it remained until 2005 when all departments were transferred to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. The workhouse entrance gate and committee rooms, along with Battle Terrace still stand as a reminder of the original workhouse and later hospital complex.

Battle Library:

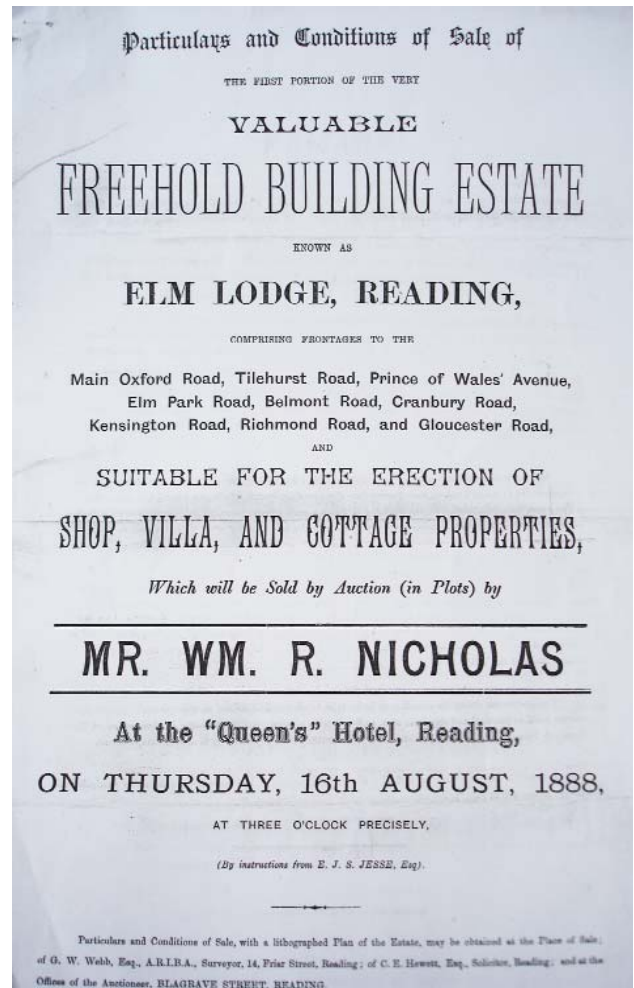
The foundation stone at Battle Library's front entrance was laid in June 1908. It bears the name Jamieson B. Hurry, a local medical practitioner, amateur botanist and author. During his opening speech Hurry said "I believe access to good books will help check crime and add to the



happiness and welfare of the people". These sentiments, shared by the library's benefactor Andrew Carnegie, still hold true and the library has been a centre for community life ever since. A little known story about its history is the role it played during the Spanish Influenza epidemic which raged across Europe in 1918. Having served as a reception centre for wounded soldiers during the First World War, the library is said to have been commandeered again to act as a mortuary for the many victims of the flu in Reading.

Development:

In the 1830s very few buildings existed this far along the road. The old turnpike house, now occupied by McCarthy's Letting Agency was built in the 1790s to extract tolls from passing stage coaches. The first major building to appear was Elm Lodge which still stands on Wilton Road. It has been used for a variety of purposes, most notably a home for





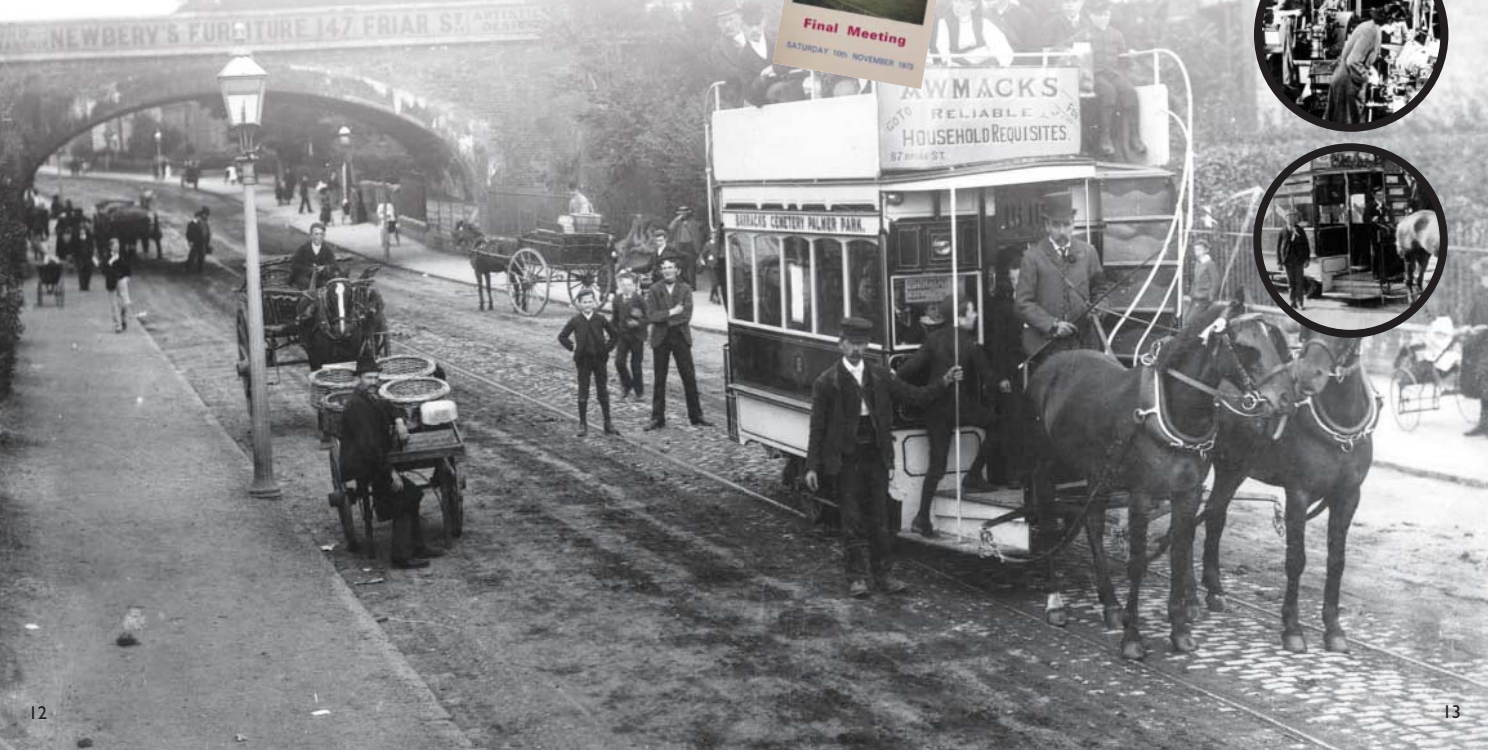
orphaned boys. By 1962 James Butcher Housing Association owned the property and built Marsh Court, the block of flats at the back of the house.

The estate attached to Elm Lodge accounted for 58 acres of land stretching back as far as the Tilehurst Road. This was purchased by property tycoon Edwin Jesse in 1867 and would soon be developed to meet the huge demand for worker's housing. By 1888 Jesse's architect George Webb had created a scheme dividing the land into separate lots with streets named after prominent figures, including Queen Victoria's four sons, The Prince of Wales and the Dukes of Albany and Connaught. In August that year the lots were auctioned off at the Queens Hotel and before long the terraces and semi-detached houses we recognise today were under construction.



Transport:

By the 1890s a regular tram service, first by horse and later electrified, allowed far greater movement around the town. The census records show that home owners were employed not only in the local industries; the brickworks, Pulsometer Pumps and the Berkshire Printing Company, they also took advantage of transport to work in Huntley & Palmers, Simonds Brewery and Sutton Seeds. The trolley bus system which operated along the Oxford Road between 1939 and 1968 also brought trade to the shops and small businesses which sprang up. Of these, Dixons Furniture Store and the 555 Fish and Chip Shop are the longest serving, having remained in business since the mid-1950s. The buses also brought legions of football fans to Reading FC's Elm Park stadium, which served as home to the football club for over a century.





Brock Barracks:

Brock Barracks got its name in 1934, before then it was just known as the Barrack Reading. General Isaac Brock was an officer of the Berkshire Regiment remembered for overcoming the US invasion of Canada in 1812. The barracks were built in 1877 to drive up recruitment of local men and remained the Royal Berkshire Regiment's headquarters until 1959.



During the Second World War the barracks became a base for the American 401st Airborne Division. A glider infantry regiment who were amongst the first to land behind enemy lines on D-Day, they received a Presidential citation for their conduct during the War. The fictional television series 'Band of Brothers' is based upon their experience. A tree planted by Colonel Harper still grows in the shadow of the Regimental Cenotaph, as a tribute to their time in the barracks.



Today, the barracks is home to the 7th Battalion of the Rifles Regiment who were involved in combat operations during the later stages of the Iraq War and currently in Afghanistan. The depot also serves as the County Headquarters for the Berkshire Army Cadet Force.



The Keep:

Besides being one of Reading's best known local landmarks, The Keep originally functioned as gatehouses, armouries and regimental stores. Now owned by the council it has since 1980 provided artist's studios and

exhibition space. A mural by the Turner Prize winner Douglas Gordon can be seen on the wall around the car park.

Pond House:

Our journey ends at the Pond House, close to the historic boundary of the ancient Parish of St Mary's, where the story of Reading has its Saxon origin. It is here that, until the construction of the Norcot Estate, the trolley buses and trams of yesteryear terminated. A convenient spot therefore to raise a glass to the history of the Oxford Road.



Reading Museum's collaboration with the Happy Museum project in 2013 provided an opportunity for local residents to discover more about their heritage. By touching upon just a few episodes of Oxford Road's story we hope the wider community can look to the future with a past to feel truly proud of.

