

Neighbourhood News

from the Bell Tower Community Association

Issue 61 - September 2020



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The slow return to normal

The last edition of *Neighbourhood News* was published right in the middle of lockdown, with everyone asked to stay at home where possible and to limit visits and socialising.

Right now attention is on whether there will be a second wave of the coronavirus and what effect the return to school in September will have. Many emergency measures have been relaxed, but it is still too early to organise any events on a significant scale such as our street party or Big Skip day.

We can still offer our Heritage Open Days walks with small groups. These get booked up very quickly, so please contact us if you are unable to get a place as we hope to run them again.

Our helpline is still open – if you or someone you know needs help please do not hesitate to call us on **07459 013443** and we will put you in touch with one of our team of volunteers.

Stay safe and well, and we hope it will not be too long until normal service can be resumed.

David Neale



BUILDING A LIFE TOGETHER:

Bell Tower members Jake Hanson and Cristina Marin have had to delay their wedding but have entertained us online with their own 'mini-wedding'.

Developments keep on coming

Despite the coronavirus crisis, local developments have been continuing apace.

Demolition of the Cox & Wyman site was completed in July, and the groundwork team has already moved in, starting with the road and the showhome foundations. The Manrose buildings in Meadow Road are also being demolished, although we are not aware of any plans for the site.

Amended plans have been submitted for the large-scale redevelopment of the post office site in Caversham Road. The tallest tower has been reduced in height slightly and more office space and 3-bedroom residential accommodation are included. We are particularly concerned about the extra office space, as this might be converted later to poor-quality flats without the need for planning permission if it is not occupied. Overall we believe the plans still have many of the poor design features of the original and we have objected to them. The planning application number is 182252 – please visit planning.reading.gov.uk to make comments.

Other planning applications to look at include the Aldi/Range site (application number 200328) and the SSE site in Vastern Road (200188) – please visit the council's website to view the plans and make comments.



GOING UP: the groundwork team starts work at the Cox & Wyman site, and a simulated view of the post office development from Caversham Road.

Join us for



heritage open days

11 & 18 September 2020

A guided walk around the Caversham Road area, highlighting its hidden history and architectural features.

Details and booking at
www.heritageopendays.org.uk

Heritage Open Days events are popular and tend to get booked up. If you are unable to get a place and want to join us please email info@bell-tower.org.uk - we may offer a repeat of the event if there is enough demand.

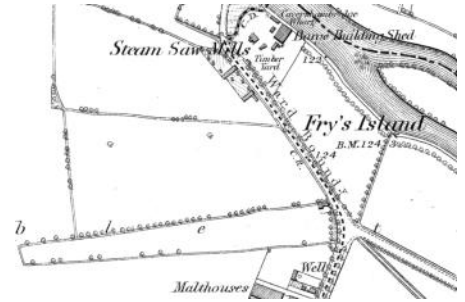
Because of Covid-19 restrictions numbers will be strictly limited for this year's walks.

We're collecting for Readifood again! Please bring donations on Monday 14 September 8.00-9.30am & 5.00-7.30pm outside New Hope.

ReadiFood
Reading's Food Bank



Right under our feet...



GOING UNDERGROUND: Victorian brickwork under Caversham Road; under Newport Road; and an 1880 map showing ditches, including one under where Newport Road now lies (Photos: Callum Cromwell)

Urban explorer and photographer **Callum Cromwell** ventures into the ditches under our area.

Deep below one of Reading's busiest streets lies a network of subterranean culverts going on for miles.

Having already explored the Holy Brook (created by medieval monks) and Old Mill Stream Culvert (under Symonds' and later Courage's brewery), there was another I was keen to explore: Vastern Ditch.

I had heard that the area underneath Vastern Road and Caversham Road was hollow. That was hard to believe until I saw a photo online taken in the 1970s, showing Vastern Road collapsed and the Victorian brickwork of a culvert beneath.

Opposite the fire station in Caversham Road I had spotted an intriguing brick archway, but it was half full of freshly laid cement by the time I went to investigate.

Coates' 1802 map of Reading shows a series of water filled ditches connecting to the Thames on one side, and this was one of them along with Plummary Ditch which seems to connect to Vastern Ditch. It has an ancient past. In 1831 a Viking sword

was found next to it, along with the skeletons of a man and a horse, while workmen were digging a railway ballast pit. It was later covered over and became a culvert.

I climbed down into the darkness, not knowing what I was going into and if it was the right place.

I was amazed. After years of wondering, investigating and research, I had finally found it! Not many people know about this site, and I may even have been the first to get down here and photograph it. Polluted mud, almost waist deep in places, made it a difficult and dirty explore. The most interesting thing down there was the ceilings. These show the different ages of construction, including some beautiful Victorian brickwork.

We did come across a fairly new part, which must be where Vastern Road collapsed into the culvert in the 1970s.

At the nearby roundabout is a junction, where the culvert splits off in various directions. After four hours exploring I decided to call it a night. I was very dirty but very happy that I had finally satisfied my curiosity about this hidden underground space, for now...

Here are the solutions to the puzzles in our last edition:

5	3	2	4	8	9	7	6	1
8	6	1	7	5	2	3	4	9
4	9	7	1	3	6	5	2	8
6	1	5	3	2	7	9	8	4
2	8	3	9	4	5	6	1	7
7	4	9	8	6	1	2	3	5
9	2	6	5	1	8	4	7	3
1	5	4	6	7	3	8	9	2
3	7	8	2	9	4	1	5	6

U	C	V	E	J	F	G	M	C	A	R	E
C	O	L	O	U	R	F	U	L	F	L	G
F	B	E	L	L	O	C	K	D	O	W	N
I	Y	T	I	N	U	M	M	O	C	L	
O	B	I	S	T	A	N	C	I	N	G	P
U	R	S	P	I	R	I	T	R	P	T	P
K	A	P	P	L	A	U	S		D	E	O
I	P	A	R	T	Y	H	W	E	E	H	
S	N	N	E	I	G	H	B	O	U	I	S
H	B	W	S	O	C	I	A	I	N	T	S
H	O	P	E	Z	M	E	J	F	C	S	Q
T	W	I	N	D	O	W	S	N	E	F	O

These local businesses support Bell Tower and are currently open - please give them your support if you can:

0118 375 0767

 THE Moderation
 Pub and Kitchen

STANDARD TANDOORI
 0118 959 0093

 READING DRIVE - IN
 0118 957 3649

Richfields
 DELI & GRILL
 211 Caversham Road
 0118 939 1144