**Reading**

Reading (/ˈrɛdɪŋ/ (About this sound listen) RED-ing) is a large, historically important minster town in Berkshire, England, of which it is now the county town. It is in the Thames Valley at the confluence of the River Thames and River Kennet, and on both the Great Western Main Line railway and the M4 motorway. Reading is 70 miles (110 km) east of Bristol, 24 miles (39 km) south of Oxford, 40 miles (64 km) west of London, 14 miles (23 km) north of Basingstoke, 12 miles (19 km) south-west of Maidenhead and 15 miles (24 km) east of Newbury as the crow flies.

The first evidence for Reading as a settlement dates from the 8th century. It was an important trading and ecclesiastical centre in the medieval period, as the site of Reading Abbey, one of the richest monasteries of medieval England with strong royal connections, of which the 12th century abbey gateway and significant ruins remain. By 1525, Reading was the largest town in Berkshire, and tax returns show that Reading was the 10th largest town in England when measured by taxable wealth. The town was seriously affected by the English Civil War, with a major siege and loss of trade, and played a pivotal role in the Revolution of 1688, with that revolution's only significant military action fought on the streets of the town. The 18th century saw the beginning of a major iron works in the town and the growth of the brewing trade for which Reading was to become famous. The 19th century saw the coming of the Great Western Railway and the development of the town's brewing, baking and seed growing businesses. During that period, the town grew rapidly as a manufacturing centre.

Today, Reading is a major commercial centre, with involvement in information technology and insurance, and, despite its proximity to London, has a net inward commuter flow. It is ranked the UK's top economic area for economic success and wellbeing, according to factors such as employment, health, income and skills.[5] Reading is also a major regional retail centre serving a large area of the Thames Valley, and is home to the University of Reading. Every year it hosts the Reading Festival, one of England's biggest music festivals. Sporting teams based in Reading include Reading Football Club and the London Irish rugby union team, and over 15,000 runners annually compete in the Reading Half Marathon.

In the 2011 census, the urban area around Reading had an estimated population of 318,014, making it one of the largest towns in the UK without city status. The Borough of Reading has a population of 163,100 (mid-2017 est.). It is represented in Parliament by two members, and has been continuously represented there since 1295. For ceremonial purposes the town is in the county of Berkshire and has served as its county town since 1867, previously sharing this status with Abingdon-on-Thames.

**History**

Reading may date back to the Roman occupation of Britain, possibly as a trading port for Calleva Atrebatum.[6] However, the first clear evidence for Reading as a settlement dates from the 8th century, when the town came to be known as Readingum. The name probably comes from the Readingas, an Anglo-Saxon tribe whose name means Reada's People in Old English,[7] or less probably the Celtic Rhydd-Inge, meaning Ford over the River.[8] In late 870, an army of Danes invaded the kingdom of Wessex and set up camp at Reading. On 4 January 871, in the first Battle of Reading, King Ethelred and his brother Alfred the Great attempted unsuccessfully to breach the Danes' defences. The battle is described in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and that account provides the earliest known written record of the existence of Reading. The Danes remained in Reading until late in 871, when they retreated to their winter quarters in London.

After the Battle of Hastings and the Norman conquest of England, William the Conqueror gave land in and around Reading to his foundation of Battle Abbey. In its 1086 Domesday Book listing, the town was explicitly described as a borough. The presence of six mills is recorded: four on land belonging to the king and two on the land given to Battle Abbey.[10] Reading Abbey was founded in 1121 by Henry I, who is buried within the Abbey grounds. As part of his endowments, he gave the abbey his lands in Reading, along with land at Cholsey.[10][11] It is not known how badly Reading was affected by the Black Death that swept through England in the 14th century, but it is known that the abbot of Reading Abbey, Henry of Appleford, was one of its victims in 1361, and that nearby Henley lost 60% of its population.[12] The Abbey was largely destroyed in 1538 during Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. The last abbot, Hugh Cook Faringdon, was subsequently tried and convicted of high treason and hanged, drawn and quartered in front of the Abbey Church.

The earliest map of Reading, published in 1611 by John Speed

By 1525, Reading was the largest town in Berkshire, and tax returns show that Reading was the 10th largest town in England when measured by taxable wealth. By 1611, it had a population of over 5000 and had grown rich on its trade in cloth, as instanced by the fortune made by local merchant John Kendrick.[12] [15] Reading played an important role during the English Civil War. Despite its fortifications, it had a Royalist garrison imposed on it in 1642. The subsequent Siege of Reading by Parliamentary forces succeeded in April 1643.[16] The town's cloth trade was especially badly damaged, and the town's economy did not fully recover until the 20th century.[10][17] Reading played a significant role during the Revolution of 1688: the second Battle of Reading was the only substantial military action of the campaign.

View of Reading from Caversham by Joseph Farington in 1793

The 18th century saw the beginning of a major iron works in the town and the growth of the brewing trade for which Reading was to become famous.[19] Reading's trade benefited from better designed turnpike roads which helped it establish its location on the major coaching routes from London to Oxford and the West Country. In 1723, despite considerable local opposition, the Kennet Navigation opened the River Kennet to boats as far as Newbury. Opposition stopped when it became apparent that the new route benefited the town. After the opening of the Kennet and Avon Canal in 1810, one could go by barge from Reading to the Bristol Channel. From 1714, and probably earlier, the role of county town of Berkshire was shared between Reading and Abingdon.

During the 19th century, the town grew rapidly as a manufacturing centre. The Great Western Railway arrived in 1841,[23] followed by the South Eastern Railway in 1849 and the London and South Western Railway in 1856. The Summer Assizes were moved from Abingdon to Reading in 1867, effectively making Reading the sole county town of Berkshire, a decision that was officially approved by the privy council in 1869. The town became a county borough under the Local Government Act 1888. The town has been famous for the Three Bs of beer (1785–2010, Simonds Brewery), bulbs (1837–1974, Suttons Seeds),[28 and biscuits (1822–1976, Huntley and Palmers).

The town continued to expand in the 20th century, annexing Caversham across the River Thames in Oxfordshire in 1911. Compared to many other English towns and cities, Reading suffered little physical damage during either of the two world wars that afflicted the 20th century, although many citizens were killed or injured in the conflicts. One significant air raid occurred on 10 February 1943, when a single Luftwaffe plane machine-gunned and bombed the town centre, resulting in 41 deaths and over 100 injuries.