

A Village Reading Room Sixty Years Ago

The minor public chores of village life can have their compensations. The writer recently undertook the duties of secretary to the Trustees of the Reading Room. Among the material handed over by his predecessor in office was a bulky parcel containing an accumulation of papers of various kinds covering the Trustees activities since their first meeting in October 1890. Included was the original conveyance dated February 24 1889 of the premises according to the inscription over the door of the building had been erected in 1878. This formidable parchment, with seven wax seals duly appended, recorded the sale of the property by the Most Noble Augustus Charles Lennox, Duke of Grafton, K.G., and Reverend Augustus Frederick Phipps, clerk in Holy Orders and Honorary Canon of Ely, and Sir William James Farrer, Knight, to the Reverend Edward James Howland of Chinnor Rectory, Clerk in Holy Orders, Robert White of Chinnor, farmer, John Folley of Hempton, farmer, for the sum of £225. (As an indication of the changing value of money the same building is now covered for insurance purposes for over ten times this sum).

The property adjoining the Chairmakers Arms, now the home of a well known broadcaster, appears to have formed part of what must have been a very considerable estate upon which a certain Thomas Taylor had advanced to no less than £87,000 to the Duke of Grafton and his associates against a mortgage on the property. The sale was declared to have been made 'Upon trust to permit the said hereditaments to be used for the general object of promoting the moral, social and intellectual welfare and the rational recreation of the Inhabitants and Visitors to Chinnor and their friends.

How, this object was implemented is illustrated in a printed copy of the 'Rules of the Chinnor Reading Room and Working Men's Club' : this is undated but appears to have been produced about 1903. Rule XIII laid down: 'No drink whatever to be brought into the room from outside. The Committee to decide what shall be sold in the room and to fix the price. No credit to be allowed. Smoking to be allowed in the larger room but not in the smaller.' At the end of the list of the rules there is a rather plaintive pencil note, 'The Committee request that Members will not spit on the premises.'

The room was to be open from 10 am to 10 pm and the subscription for ordinary members was fixed at 1/6d. a quarter, payable in advance. Honorary members (sic), however, were required to pay at least on guinea per annum. At this period agricultural wages were around 14/6d. a week, which makes the letting of the room sound strangely expensive. Under Rule XII the Committee were empowered to let the room ; 'for Music, Lecturers, Readings or Entertainments, not earlier than 6 pm. For 15/- if for Tea Parties or Entertainments earlier than 6pm., 25/-. These sums incidentally are considerably in excess of the charges for similar lettings at present.

Included in the printed pamphlet is a catalogue of the books belonging to the club. Some of the titles (authors are not given) have a distinctly period ring: 'Early years of the Prince Consort', Readings for Winter Gatherings', 'The Haven of Rest', 'Plucky Fellows', 'Daring and Doing', Life's Battle Lost and Won', Doing His Best', 'A Noble Purpose Nobly Won', and, last of all, (no. 360), 'In Darkest England and the Way Out'.

But the item which most intrigued the writer was an account dated July 1900, from W.B. Darvill of Chinnor, house and insurance agent, oil, colour and paper merchant, whose letter heading advertised window glass cut from 2d. a foot and wallpapers from 2d. a role of 12 yards:

	s.	d.
4 rolls of Paper at 6d.	2	0
6 ^{1/2} lbs Paints at 6d.	3	3
Oil and Turps.		3
Black Paint		6

	6	0

J.D.A.