

THE MAN AND THE TOWN.

MR. GEORGE PALMER, J.P., AND READING.

IT is doubtless an excellent sentiment which has caused the people of Reading to raise a statue of Mr. George Palmer while he is still living in their midst. But even when Mr. Palmer is no more, they will surely never need a statue to remind them of what he was, for the town—as it is to-day—is his best memorial. The pioneer of its most important industry, a leader in its local government, its representative in the House of Commons, Mr. Palmer has for fifty years occupied a position in Reading such as has scarcely a parallel in any other town. Almost every citizen of Reading must feel that his career has had its influence upon his own, and there are few passengers by the Great Western Railway who do not think of his name as the tall, smokeless factories of the biscuit-town come in view.

Mr. Palmer first set foot in Reading in 1841. It was then a town of some 16,000 inhabitants, having many trades and pre-eminence in none. Its ancient fame for woollen manufacture had long since departed, and in place thereof it had to obtain its livelihood by means of a congeries of small industries, such as sail-cloth, shoe-strings, hat-bands, and pins. The late Mr. Thomas Huntley had recently added to the number the making of biscuits, and it was to take a partnership in this business that Mr. Palmer left his native village of Long Sutton, in Somersetshire, where his highly respected Quaker family had long resided. There was only one biscuit then made on a wholesale scale for general consumption, and it was to this that the old proverb "As hard as a captain's biscuit" referred. The young man—Mr. Palmer was only twenty-three when his name was linked with that of Mr. Huntley—went to Reading imbued with the idea that the commercial possibilities of the biscuit did not begin and end with the hard and unpalatable kind which was then produced there. In the course of a short time he introduced half-a-dozen other varieties, all of which were eagerly purchased by a surprised public. With the introduction of free

trade in wheat in 1846 a new era for Messrs. Huntley and Palmer began, and with the many different kinds of biscuits that could then be produced much more cheaply than the old "captain's biscuit"—which was always sold at a penny—the business of the firm underwent an expansion such as neither partner could have anticipated five years before. In order to cope with the enormous demand which had sprung up, new machinery had to be invented, regarding which Mr. Palmer had many a long consultation with engineers, whom he got to carry out in steel and iron the ingenious ideas he had formed for himself. It is to the use of this machinery that the Reading biscuit business owes much of its success, and to-day there are many people who would be only too glad to learn some of its secrets. In 1857 Mr. Huntley died, and the rapidly developing business was left entirely in the hands of his junior partner. But under Mr. Palmer's vigorous direction, assisted by two brothers, whom at this juncture he took into partnership, it flourished and prospered even more exceedingly, and with it the fortunes of the Berkshire capital.

In 1891 Mr. George Palmer celebrated his business jubilee. In the census of that year Reading was returned as a town of 60,000 inhabitants, more than a tenth of this number being employed in the biscuit-factories. And on that jubilee day, three years ago last November, Mr. Palmer could congratulate himself upon the fact that in the creation of the new Reading, of which these figures spoke, the best features of the old had been conserved. The growth of a great industry has involved at Reading none of those sacrifices of pleasantness and cleanliness by which it has been too often accompanied. Messrs. Huntley and Palmer's works give forth no soot-carrying smoke to blacken bricks and mortar and blight the beauty of leaf and flower. Reading is to-day as pleasant, clean, and picturesque a town as it was when it sheltered not a quarter of the present population.



Photo by Russell, Baker Street.

MR. GEORGE PALMER.

Every visitor, indeed, to these works leaves with the impression that of all industries carried on under the modern factory system that of biscuit-making must be the freest from hygienic and æsthetic objections. During the last twenty years, too, these visitors have been distinguished as well as numerous. On entering, through a broad archway in King Street, the offices of the firm, I am shown several massive volumes of the visitors' book, and turning over its leaves

for a while in the great packing-rooms, where some hundreds of the nimble fingers of young girls are employed simply in sorting and boxing wafers and cracknels, rusks and gingerbreads, or some of the four hundred other dainty shapes and forms into which flour is converted at Reading.

The biscuit-works, with such accessories as carpenters' shops and engineers' foundries, occupy more space than the eye can take in from any available point

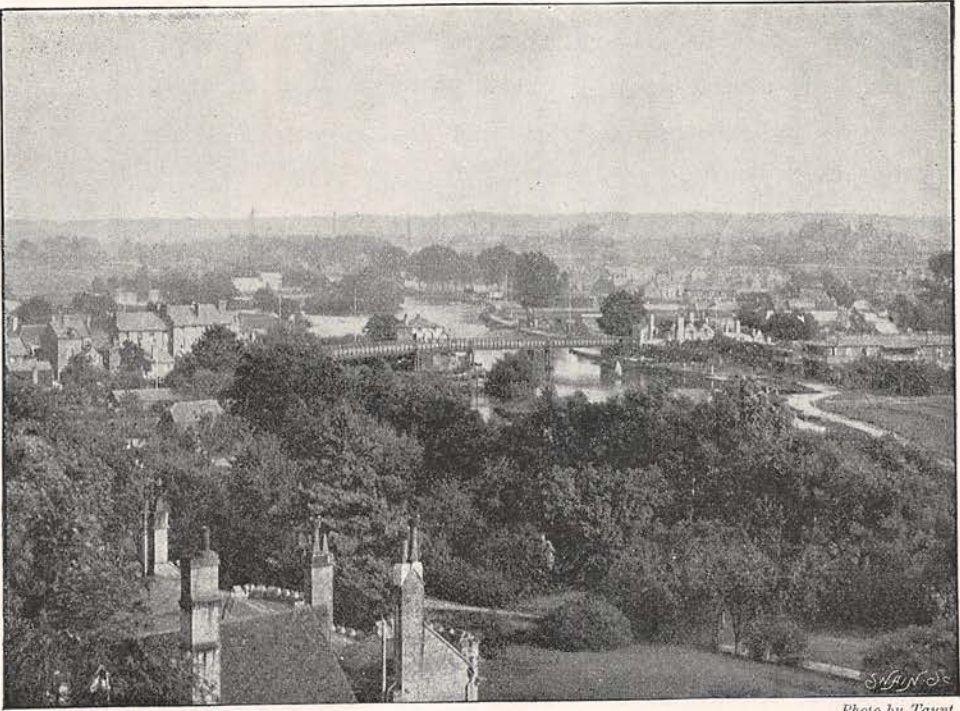


Photo by Taunt.

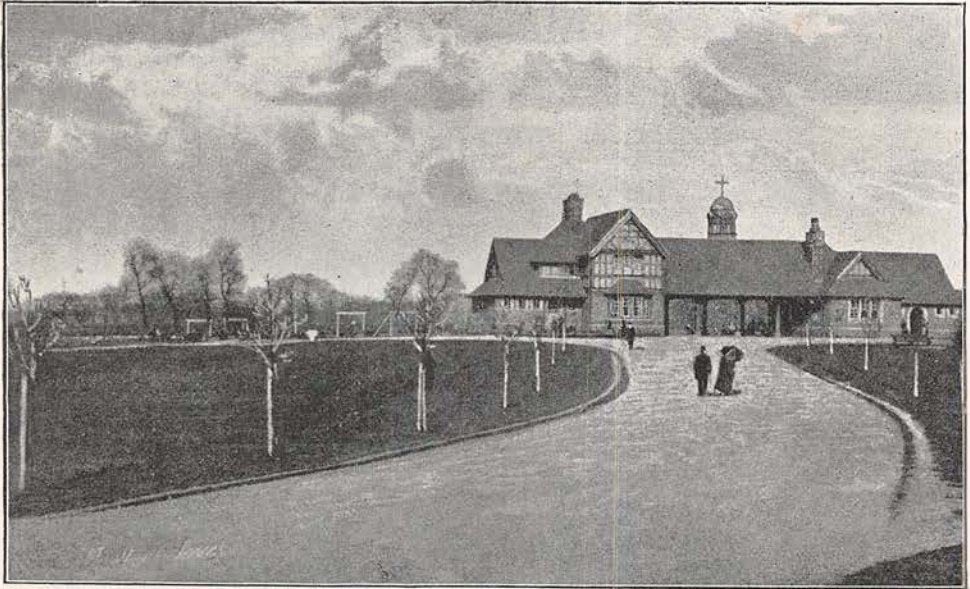
BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF READING.

I come across such names as Lord Tennyson and Thomas Carlyle, the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Cambridge. One of the most recent volumes has a particularly brilliant group of signatures, including that of George Meredith, who in the column headed "Profession or Occupation," wrote "literature"; and Henry Irving, who neglected to describe himself. Both gentlemen, I learned, went over the works during the time they were on a visit to Mr. Palmer at Reading. I doubt not they spent an interesting hour or so wandering through the "mills" and the bakeries, inspecting the great ovens and cauldrons, and stopping

of view. You pass from one building to another across bridges which have been placed over various branches of the river Kennet. Built thus, the factories gain much in picturesque appearance and—what is much more to the utilitarian purpose—exceptional convenience as regards the conveyance of goods by water, but they have consequently suffered a good deal on several occasions from floods. But in choosing the site of a factory which was to accommodate only fifty workpeople, Mr. Thomas Huntley, in 1837, could never have imagined in his wildest dreams the huge buildings that now occupy the greater part of the dry

ground between the railway and King Street. With the former they have, of course, long been placed in direct communication, and biscuits now begin their journeys to all parts of the world in

inquiry at Reading. Nor has Mr. Palmer been less energetic in advancing similar objects throughout the town generally. From the first year of his coming to it he was one of its most active and public-



PALMER PARK, READING.

Photo by Poulton and Sons, Lee.

railway-trucks that are brought right into the packing-rooms.

Extensive as the works are, the processes to be seen in them are much the same throughout—the mixing by mechanical power of the various ingredients contained in biscuits, the cutting them and stamping them with the name of the firm and the name which has been given to them, the baking by gradually passing them through long stone ovens, then the sorting and packing. One or two departments, however, have their distinctive features. That devoted to the wedding-cake, for example, where the design and its execution is a work of art in which several men of exceptional skill are engaged. In another room a number of girls with an artistic eye are employed in decorating cakes and biscuits by means of long tubes filled with icing or sugar.

To anyone acquainted with Mr. George Palmer it goes without saying that the reading-rooms and dining-rooms, social, athletic, and benefit clubs, and other things designed to promote the comfort and happiness of the biscuit-workers form one of the most interesting subjects of

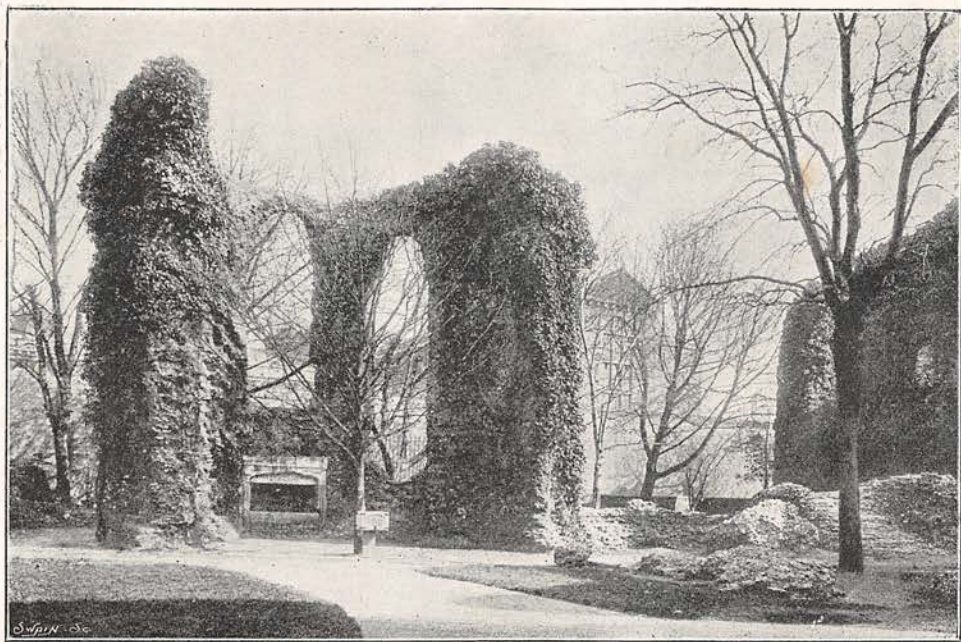
spirited citizens, and business never claimed—or, at any rate, never obtained—the whole of his time. One of the first things he did in the town of his adoption was to join the Mechanics' Literary and Scientific Institute—one of a number which came into existence early in the century under the inspiration of Lord Brougham's movement—where he was soon regarded as an enthusiast in the cause of education. His attention was next directed to the elementary schools of the town, which, with the help of several others, he was able both to increase and improve. Nor did the claims of a rapidly growing business prevent him offering his services to his fellow-citizens of the Town Council, which so promptly appreciated them that in 1857 he was elected Mayor. In later years Mr. Palmer was able to give an even larger portion of his time to public work, because of the relief afforded to him in the cares of business by three sons and three nephews, all of whom were carefully trained with this purpose in view. He was Vice-Chairman of Reading's first School Board, and in 1878 was elected as

one of its two members of Parliament. Mr. Palmer would probably have entered the House of Commons at an earlier date were it not for disinclination to spend a considerable part of the year away from home. Mr. Palmer voluntarily ended his Parliamentary life in 1885, when by the Redistribution Act the town was deprived of one of its seats. There can be little doubt that Reading would not have fallen that year to the Conservative party had Mr. Palmer again offered himself for re-election. At any rate, with Mr. Palmer's eldest son as their candidate in 1892, the Liberals had little difficulty in recapturing the seat.

One cannot go far in Reading without hearing of Mr. Palmer's good deeds. The Palmer Park is one of the first things which the stranger is taken to see. It is an open space of about fifty acres on the eastern outskirts of the town, presented to the Corporation by Mr. Palmer in recognition of the fact that it was there that most bricks and mortar had been used as the result of the growth of the biscuit industry.

the honorary freedom of the borough; a great procession passed through the streets to the park in his honour; and the statue in Broad Street was unveiled, which, with that of the Queen in the market-place, is one of the principal features of Reading to-day. It has taken its place in local annals as the George Palmer day. On the following evening Mr. Palmer was entertained at dinner by all the leading men of the town as its first honorary freeman. Some years before this he had more than doubled the size of a recreation ground on the banks of the Thames, which the Corporation, in its enlightenment, purchased about the middle of the century, making it twenty-six acres instead of twelve.

It is on the King's Meadows, as the ground is called, that the cricket and football clubs of Palmer's works play their matches. With other citizens of Reading, Mr. Palmer has shown an equal regard for the recreation of the people in defending against the claims of the Crown and private persons the common rights in what is known far and wide as "The



RUINS OF READING ABBEY.

Photo by Poulton and Sons, Lee.

Furnished with a fine pavilion and tastefully laid out at his expense, the park was opened on the day Mr. Palmer celebrated his business jubilee—Nov. 4, 1891. On the same occasion he was presented with

Forbury." This open space was described in one of the earliest pages of the Corporation records—Reading was incorporated in the reign of Queen Elizabeth—as "The Berie," which is supposed to be

a corruption of "bury" or "burg," *i.e.*, a fortified place, and on this supposition has been founded the thesis that it was the site of early Saxon Reading.

Whatever it was originally, "The Forbury" is now situated right in the centre of the town, an exceedingly convenient and pleasant breathing space for Reading folk. In the middle of the paths and flower-beds has been erected the colossal cast-iron statue of an angry lion, which is the memorial of the people of the county to the 300 officers and men of the Berkshire Regiment who lost their lives at

as the abode of kings, the meeting-place of Parliament, and an interesting theatre in the great rebellious movements of 1642 and 1688.

Although proud of its ancient history, Reading is by no means wanting in the "modern spirit." Among the smaller municipalities there are few more active and enterprising, and the new Town Hall and the adjacent buildings bear witness to the civic feeling of its inhabitants. In 1875 the sum of £10,000 was spent upon municipal offices, and £60,000 upon a building which serves the varied purposes



MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS, READING.

Photo by Poulton and Sons, Lee.

the disastrous battle of Maiwand during our last Afghan War. It was the work of Mr. George Simonds, the sculptor of the Palmer statue, and a Reading man, from 1884 to 1886. From the hillock near this monument can be enjoyed a good view of the Thames scenery, and walking past a pretty fountain and some rustic seats, one finds the ruins of the famous abbey with the foundation of which by Henry I. began the history of the town. These ivy-grown walls and moss-covered stones still give Reading an old-world air which pleasantly contrasts with its rising commercial importance. It moreover brings to mind the not unimportant part which the town has played in the national annals

of a town hall, public library, and reading-room, museum and schools of science and art. The Corporation contributed £10,000 towards this expenditure, and provided the site; the rest was raised by public subscription, the list being headed by large sums from Mr. George Palmer and his brother, Mr. William Isaac Palmer. This gentleman was the pioneer of the public library movement in Reading, and in recognition of the fact his portrait hangs in the central reading-room. In the Council Chamber, by the way, the portrait of Mr. George Palmer has recently been added to those of other worthies of the town, including Talfourd, the judge, who was its representative

for some years in Parliament; Archbishop Laud and Sir Thomas White, Lord Mayor of London in 1556, who were both educated at Reading Grammar School; and John Kendrick. The last-named, a wealthy clothier, may be described as the George Palmer of Reading in the Elizabethan era. Among other benefactions to the town, he endowed a house, which somehow or other got the name of "The Oracle," for the employment of the poor in woollen manufacture, then the staple industry of the town. The scheme came to grief, as the best-laid schemes of pious founders are apt to do, and some thirty years ago the Governors of Christ's Hospital, to whom old John Kendrick directed they should revert in case of misapplication, made a successful claim to the funds of the charity. The Oracle being pulled down soon afterwards, Reading thus lost not only a valuable charity, but also a very interesting memorial of its mediæval life. Other bequests made by John Kendrick to his native town are now embodied in two higher grade schools for boys and girls, which were opened in 1877 in accordance with a scheme of the Endowed Schools Commission. Speaking of schools, Reading is exceptionally favoured, I believe, in both their number and quality. The historic Grammar School has of late years been both improved and enlarged, partly owing to the efforts of Mr. Palmer, who, while a member of the Town Council, was one of its trustees.

It is characteristic of the man whose career in the Berkshire town I have been describing, that at its zenith he should be content to occupy the same moderate-sized residence, almost in the heart of the town, which he built for himself as a rising man of business. The Acacias is not the palatial country seat in the picturesque neighbourhood of Reading which one in imagination pictures on hearing it spoken of as the dwelling-place of the head of the firm of Huntley and Palmer. It is just an old-fashioned, foliage-surrounded villa in the London Road, one of a number inhabited by professional and other well-to-do citizens. London Road is, however, a very pleasant, broad thoroughfare, with venerable trees on either side; and the garden of The Acacias, as I see it from the drawing-room during a conversation with Mr. Palmer, is all that the heart can desire. Faithful throughout his three-score years and ten to the doctrine of "plain living and high thinking," Mr. Palmer has until recently preserved much of the vigour of his youth, and, even while recovering from a long and severe illness, the *Nineteenth Century* and *Contemporary* by his side bespeak to the observer the keen interest he still takes in public affairs.

FREDERICK DOLMAN.

[By an unfortunate error, we attributed two photographs reproduced in the article "The Man and the Town" in the June number to Messrs. Valentine. The photographer's name should have been Mr. Albert E. Coe, Norwich, to whom our apologies are tendered.]

