

Nathaniel Cracknell Reading

Nathaniel Cracknell Reading was an excellent example of the Birmingham manufacturers who moved out of the crowded city to healthy Moseley in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

His great-grandfather Samuel was in business in Edmund Street in the late eighteenth century. His grandfather John opened a workshop for the production of jewellery chains in Spencer Street in 1847. His father Walter, described as a “very good patternner” in a family letter of 1855 and as a “gilt jeweller” on his death certificate of 1886, lived in New John Street West, but opened a new workshop at 186/7 Warstone Lane.

Reading was born in July 1849 to Walter and his wife Sarah Ann Griffin, who also had two daughters. He was educated privately in Harborne and began work at 16 in the family's Warstone Lane premises. He married Emma Hannah Barnes in October 1873. He and his surviving sister Agnes took over the management of the firm, but she retired when she married Althans Blackwell who became a partner.

The business flourished and became well known for the production of “watch alberts, necklets, pendants and guards in rolled gold, best gilt and white metal”. The staff were mostly female and numbered between two and three hundred according to the demands of the trade. Examples of their craftsmanship are displayed in the British Museum and the firm's extensive records are in the care of the Birmingham Central Library.

By 1900 the Warstone Lane building had been outgrown and new premises were built in Hall Street. This was one of the earliest Birmingham factories to be powered and lit by electricity and the first to install ball bearing shafting. The old blow pipe was replaced by a compressed air blower.

The firm, which was to become a limited company in 1923, remained in Hall Street until 1982 when it amalgamated with a similar manufacturing company but retained the name of N.C. Reading and Co. Subsequently, the firm moved out of the Jewellery Quarter to Ward Street, Newtown.

As a prominent member of Birmingham's jewellery trade, Reading was a founder member and later both Honorary Treasurer and Vice-President of the Birmingham Jewellers' and Silversmiths' Association.

Reading and Althans Blackwell both moved to Moseley. The Reading home was Inglewood on Wake Green Road where Lench's Trust now stands. It was a handsome brick building with a fine garden where Nathaniel lived until his death in 1924. The Blackwells built Brackley Dene, 30 Chantry Road, an outstanding house of its period which Althans' daughter Agnes left to the Baptist Church in 1991. The subsequent sale attracted national attention because the building and its contents were original and so reflected the life style of a lost era.

Reading took an active part in the pleasant Moseley social life which lasted until the First World War. He was a founder member of the Moseley Baptist Church in Oxford Road which was a centre for various activities such as a literary society, as well as for

worship. He was a founder of the Moseley and Balsall Heath Institute and “helped materially in the erection of the fine building”, so his name is inscribed on the foundation stone. He was a member and ultimately President of the Moseley Rugby Football Club, and Honorary Secretary of the Moseley Quoit and Bowling Club in Church Road.

One of his greatest contributions to local life was in the development of political representation. He was the first Honorary Secretary of the Moseley Liberal Unionist Association and acted as honorary secretary also to Austen Chamberlain, then Member of Parliament for East Worcestershire. He was an original member of the Kings Norton Parish Council which was created in 1894, and was its Vice-Chairman for 1896 to 1899. In 1899 Balsall Heath became part of the City of Birmingham and he was elected as a councillor for that ward. Its boundary with Moseley lay along Edgbaston Road and Brighton Road but the parish of Kings Norton, which included Moseley, remained in Worcestershire until 1911.

He was particularly interested in the Baths and Parks committee of the City and its successor the Parks Committee, chairing the former in 1910 and the latter from 1910 to 1912. He represented Birmingham City Council on the Board of the Proof House and on the Board of Guardians, which supervised the care of the poor. From 1914 until he retired from the Council in 1921 he was an Alderman of the City. As a prominent and highly respected local figure, he was a Birmingham magistrate from 1904 onwards, specialising in Children's Court work, and was a Trustee of Fentham's Trust.

Moseley and Birmingham were well served by this hard-working, responsible citizen of many skills and interests. Perhaps his name will be commemorated appropriately in some future local development.

Alison Fairn (from Some Moseley Personalities Volume II 1994)

Sources:

- Reading family papers, including:
 - 1847-1947, The Centenary of NC Reading & Co. Ltd.
 - More History of the Reading Family, 1700s-1990, compiled by Lois J Burfield
- At Birmingham Central Library:
 - The Birmingham Mail for 31st March, 1924
 - Cornish's Birmingham Year Book, 1912
 - The Birmingham Evening Despatch, Vol. I