

THE KING'S MEADOW, READING

HERITAGE NOTE

02 SEPTEMBER 2025



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1.0 SUMMARY HISTORY

- 1.1 The King's Meadow – historically part of an extensive area of flood meadows along the south bank of the River Thames, here between it and the River Kennet - was a possession of Reading Abbey, passing into the Crown's hands after the abbey's dissolution in 1538. Reading's riverside meadows were long used for a variety of public events such as Reading market, a racecourse, shows, and fairs. In 1869 the town of Reading purchased 12 acres (4.9 ha) of the meadow as a recreation ground. The King's Meadow remains an informal open space today. The captions to the maps tell the story of its evolution.

2.0 MAP REGRESSION WITH COMMENTARY

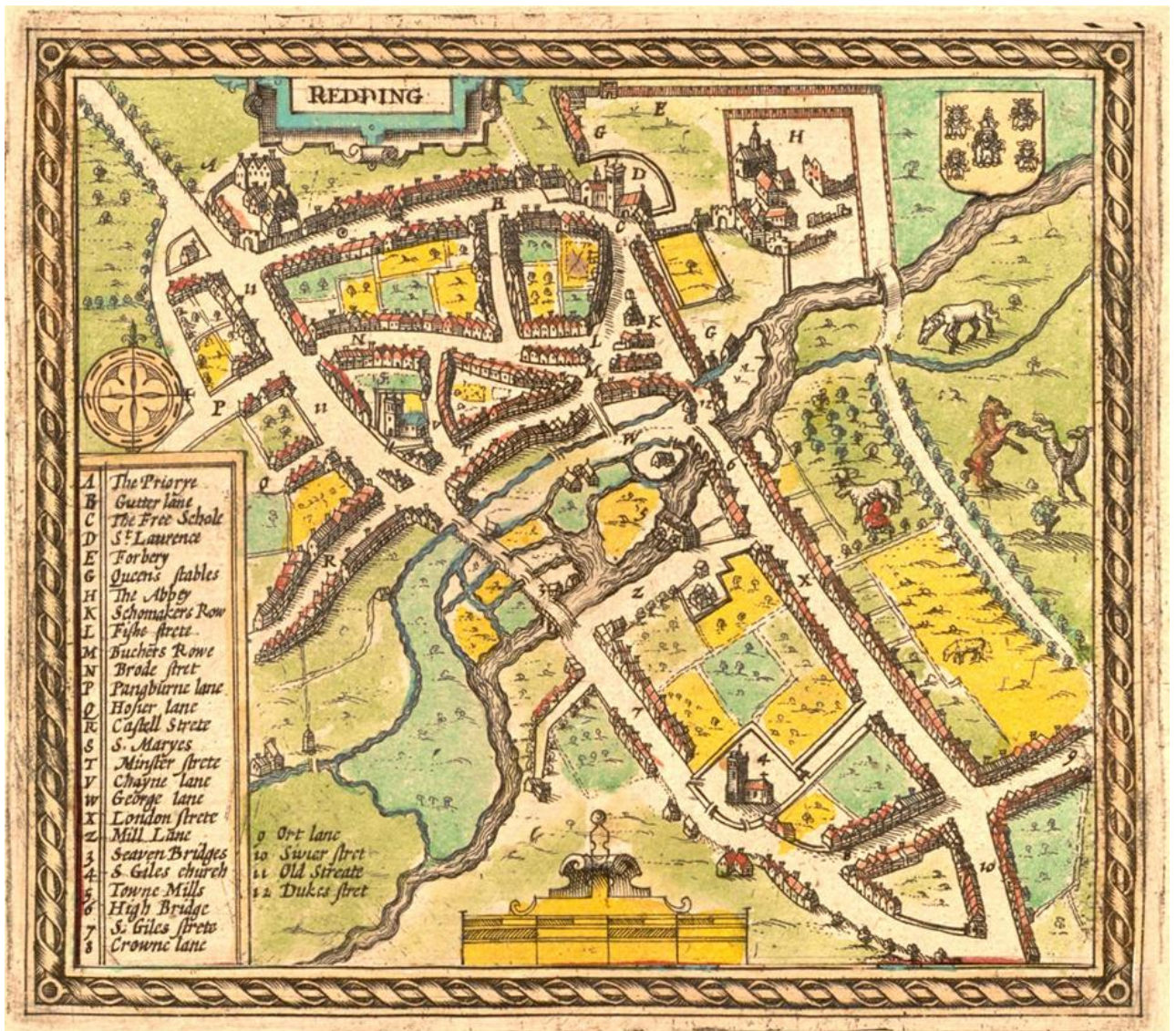


Figure 2.1 John Speed's map of reading (1610). Part of The King's Meadow appears top right corner to the east of the site of Reading Abbey, with the shield superimposed. To the south The King's Meadow was bounded by the River Kennet, which crosses the map diagonally.

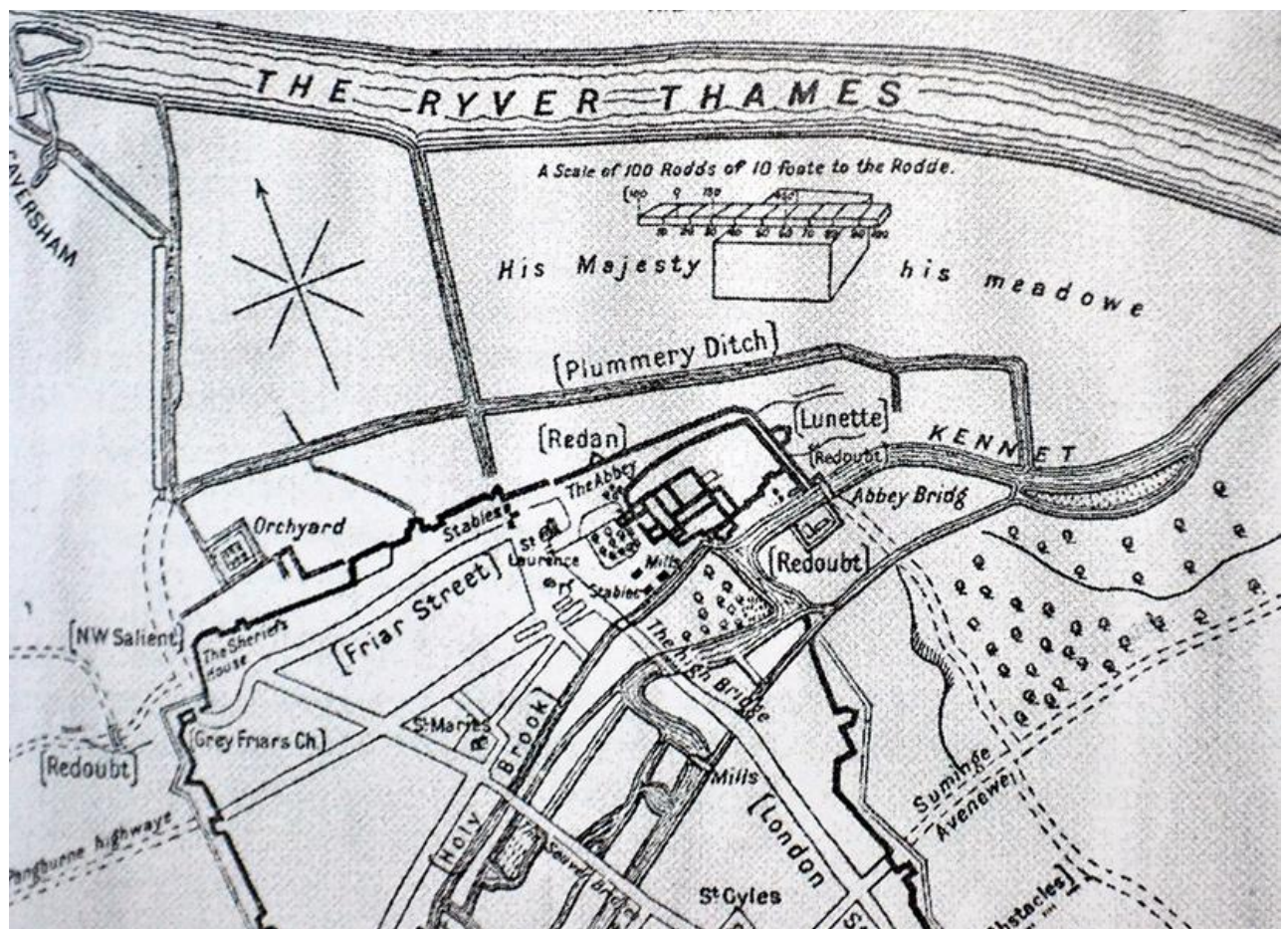


Figure 2.2 Redrawn plan of part of Reading's Civil War defences in the 1640s (narrow black line with bastions) with The King's Meadow ('His Majesty his meadowe') extending a much greater distance to the west than later. The Plummary Ditch was a substantial outer defence. It started in The King's Meadow and flowed eastwards to join the Kennet near Blake's Lock. During the siege of Reading in 1643 the meadowland south of the Thames was flooded to serve as a line of defence for the town's besieged Royalist garrison. Source: A short history of Reading: From market town to Silicon city | Reading Museum. The original plan is reproduced in S. Porter, *Destruction in the English Civil War* (1994), 43.



Figure 2.3 Reading as shown in 1761 on John Rocque's county map of Berkshire. The King's Meadow is marked with a star. Source: [A place strongly fortified: Reading in the English Civil War | Reading Museum](#).



Figure 2.4 Modern interpretative mapping of the landscape c.1800 showing extensive meadowland ('Kings Mead' to the right) with water channels (including the Civil War Plummery Ditch) towards the town. Source: <https://www.historictowntrust.uk/towns/reading>



Figure 2.5 Reading in 1809, with the expansive area of meadow and pasture north of the town between the Thames and Kennet. Source: British Library OSD 126.



Figure 2.6 OS 1 inch mapping of 1833, showing King's Mead. The Plummary Ditch is still marked.

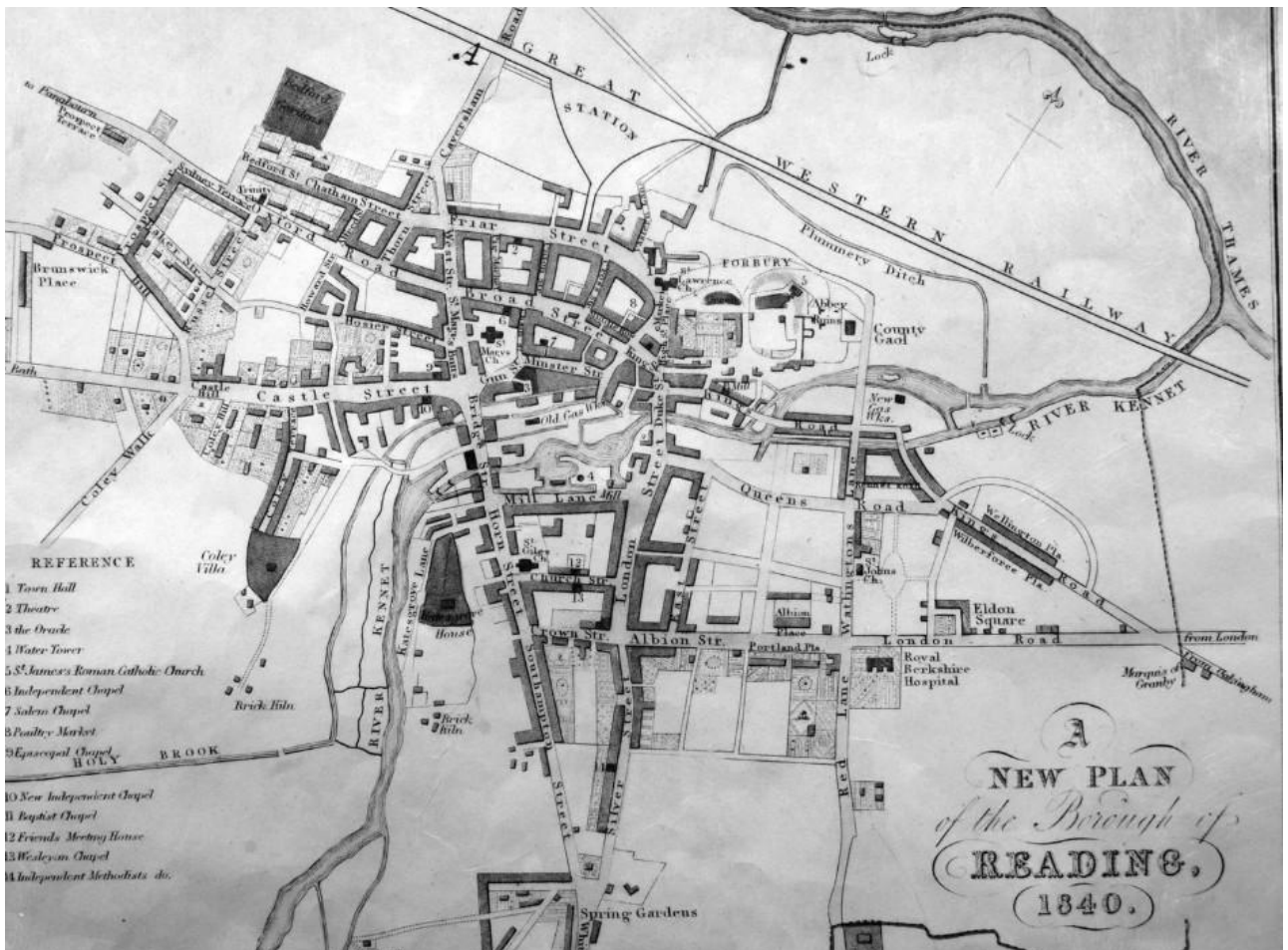


Figure 2.7 Reading in 1840. The southern part of the riverside meadows was crossed by the GWR, constructed between 1835 and 1840. Source: [Old maps of Reading: Exploring how the town used to look - Berkshire Live](http://www.berkshirelive.co.uk/old-maps-of-reading-exploring-how-the-town-used-to-look).



Figure 2.8 Reading's first 25-inch mapping of the mid-1870s with the much-expanded railway zone.

The remaining part of King's Meadow was purchased by the town in 1869. It was subdivided, and the westernmost section lined with trees. Immediately to the west a bathing pool was created, fed from the Thames. It stands alongside the road leading to Caversham Lock, which had been opened 1778. Source: Berks sheet XXXVII.3 (surveyed 1875-7, published 1879). All historic OS mapping courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

Immediately off the centre of the map to the south is Huntley & Palmer's massive biscuit factory, opened in 1846. It closed in 1976 and was subsequently demolished.

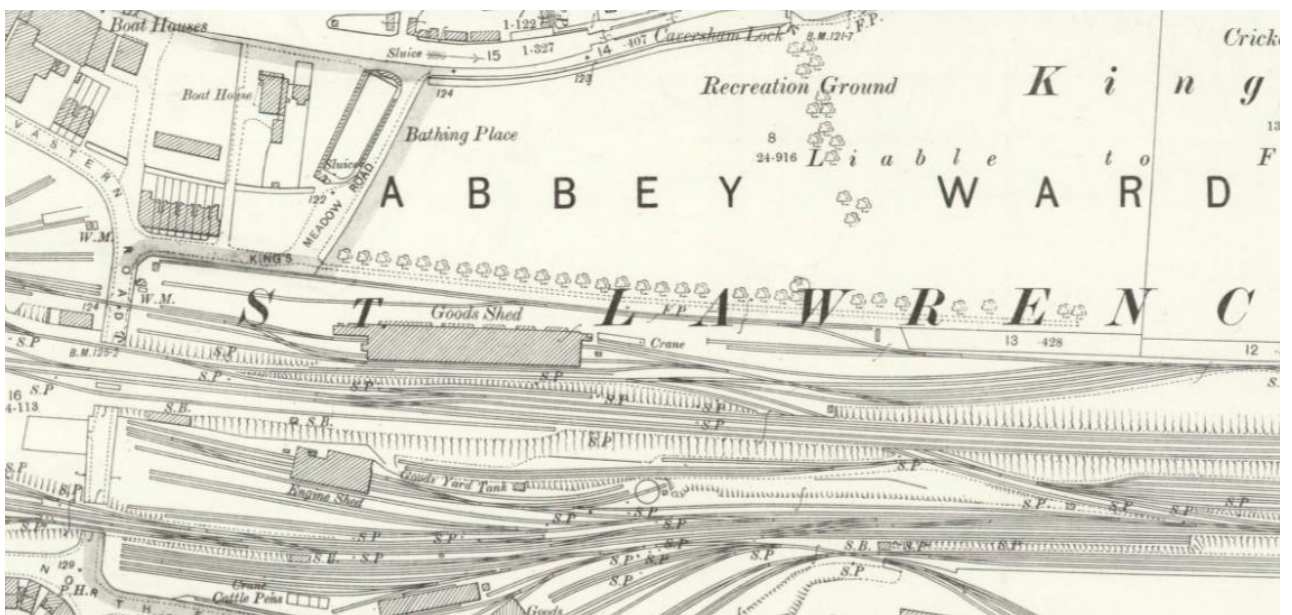


Figure 2.9 1898, other than alongside the railway (where there was now a long goods shed), most of the trees mapped in the mid-1870s had been removed as an expanded recreation ground was created with a cricket ground to its east. Residential and industrial development of the meadowland west of the bathing pool has begun, with boat houses on the riverbank. Source: OS 25 inch mapping, Berks sheet XXXVII.3 (revised 1898, published 1900).



Figure 2.10 OS composite 6 inch mapping of c.1900 showing how the railway was a hard divide between the town and the riverside meadows.

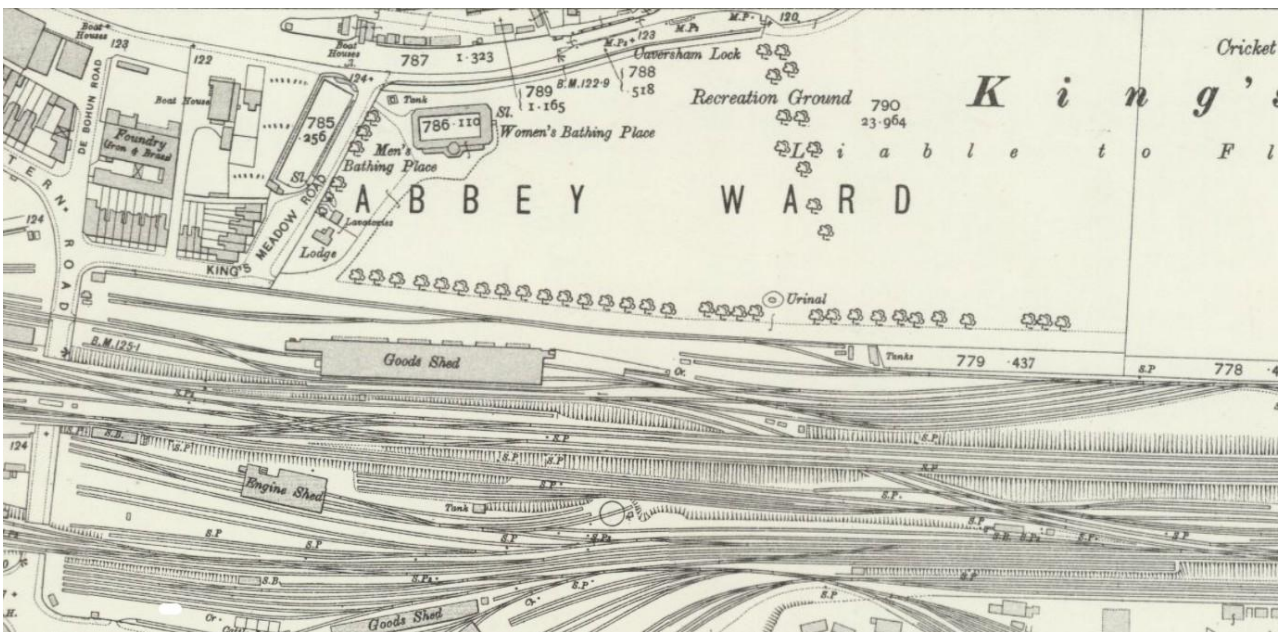


Figure 2.11 Mapping of c.1909 shows the 1902 Ladies Swimming Bath (now the Thames Lido), believed to be England's first indoor municipal pool built expressly for women (and one of only three for women ever¹). With no windows giving onto the pool itself, it was built to allow Edwardian women to bathe in privacy. It is approached by a broad path with a lodge at its end. The older open pool to the west is now identified as 'Men's bathing place.' A urinal has been constructed against the trees midway along the south side of the recreation ground. This map shows a simple landscape boundary treatment of single trees, closely spaced and, it would appear, intended to screen the railway from the open space.

West of the Men's bathing place a foundry now stands behind the houses fronting on the King's Meadow Road. Source: OS 25 inch mapping, Berks sheet XXXVII.3 (revised 1909-10, published 1912).

¹ I. Gordon and S. Inglis, *Great Lengths: The Historic Indoor Swimming Pools of Britain* (2009), 122.

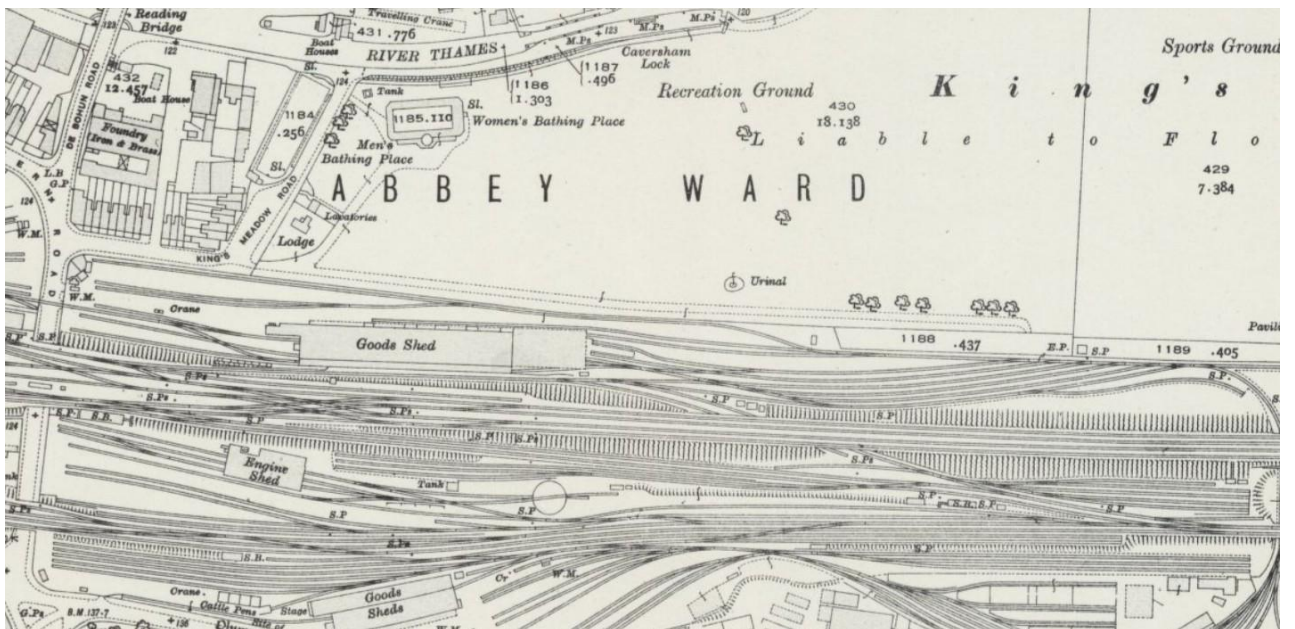


Figure 2.12 By c.1931, and for reasons which are not clear, the trees along the railway side of the recreation ground had been removed along with most of those in the interior, and the cricket ground had become a more general sports ground. To the east (not seen here), the last compartment of the riverside meadows had been taken over by railway sidings. Source: OS 25 inch mapping, Berks sheet XXXVII.3 (revised 1931-2, published 1934).

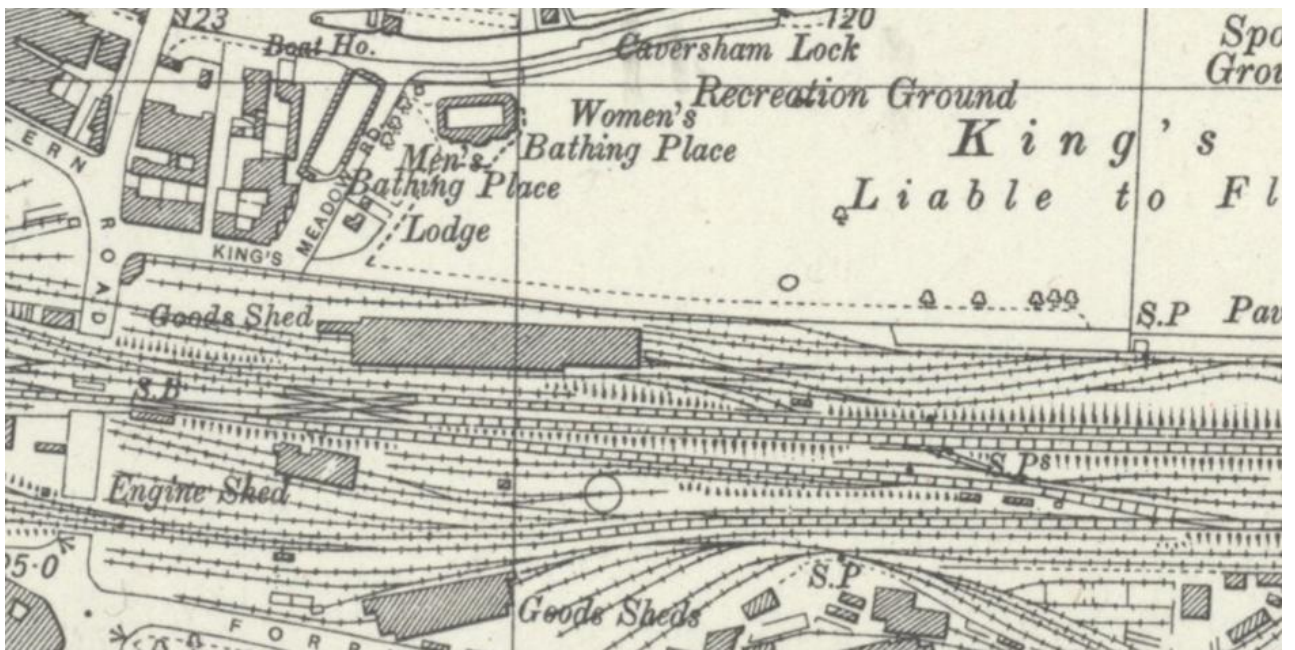


Figure 2.13 Source: 6 inch mapping, Berks XXXVII.NE, (revised 1938, published c.1944).



Figure 2.14 View south-east across the largely featureless King's meadow in 1955. The rectangular 'Men's bathing place' pool is prominent below centre. Source: HE EAW061619.



Figure 2.15 1962 air photo with car park along southern edge of The King's Meadow in front of the goods shed. Reading Bridge House in foreground. Source: Aerofilms EAW098027.



Figure 2.17 2007 view looking west with new blue-roofed development at the east end of The King's Meadow which has replaced the earlier warehouse shown on Figure 15. Source: HE 24624_014 (2007). The present line of trees post-date the 1962 aerial photograph and probably also the 1979 OS survey plan. They may have been planted in association with the construction of the car park, and to provide screening and amenity to users of the open space.

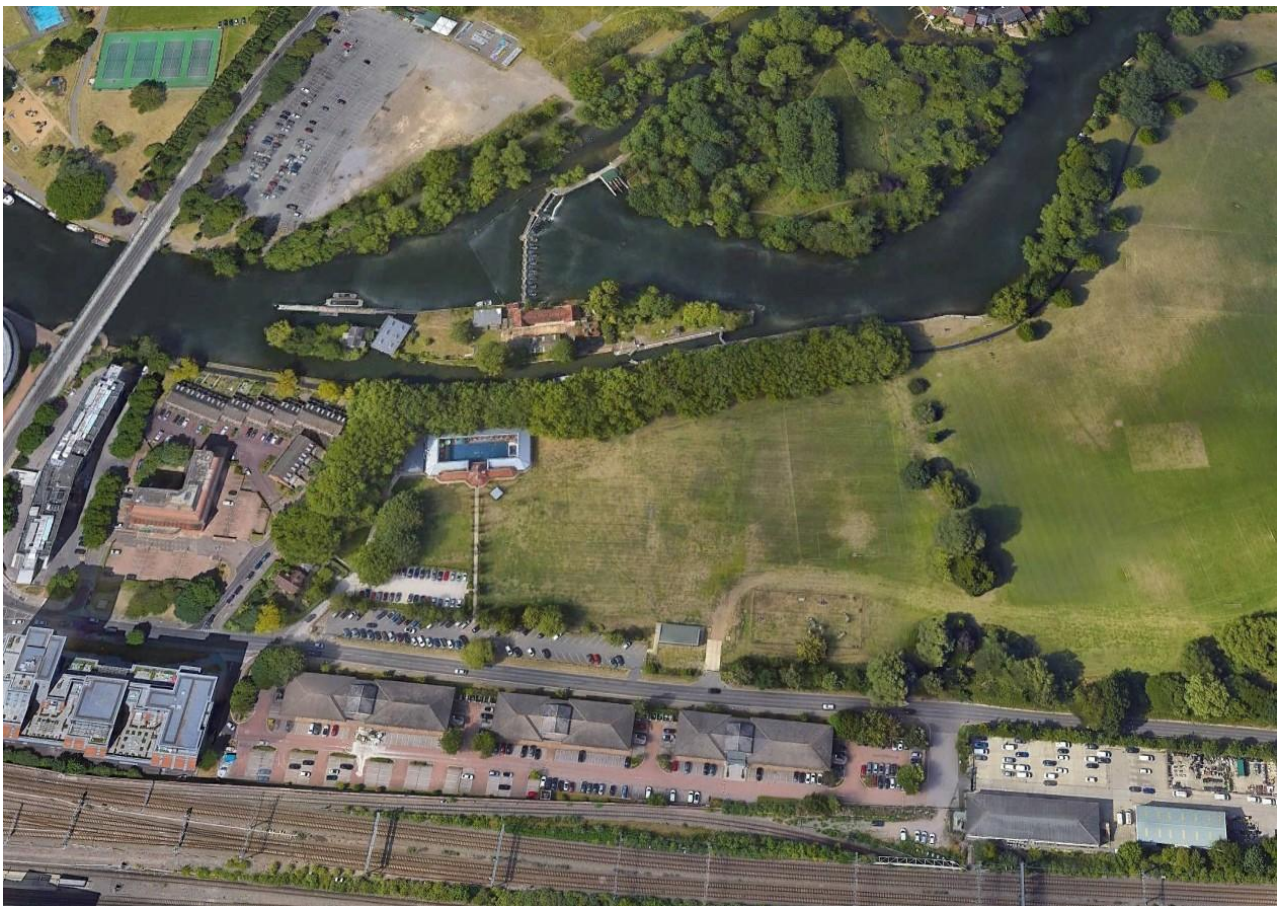


Figure 2.18 Google Earth 2022. The changing rooms and boundary at the eastern end of the car park appear more open than in the 2007 aerial view, see figure 17, and it may be that some of those earlier specimens had not taken or been damaged. As a consequence, the boundary is no more open than intended in the early C20 and since the creation of the car park. It is not clear whether the planting south and east of the listed lido is present in this view (level of detail and size of planting).

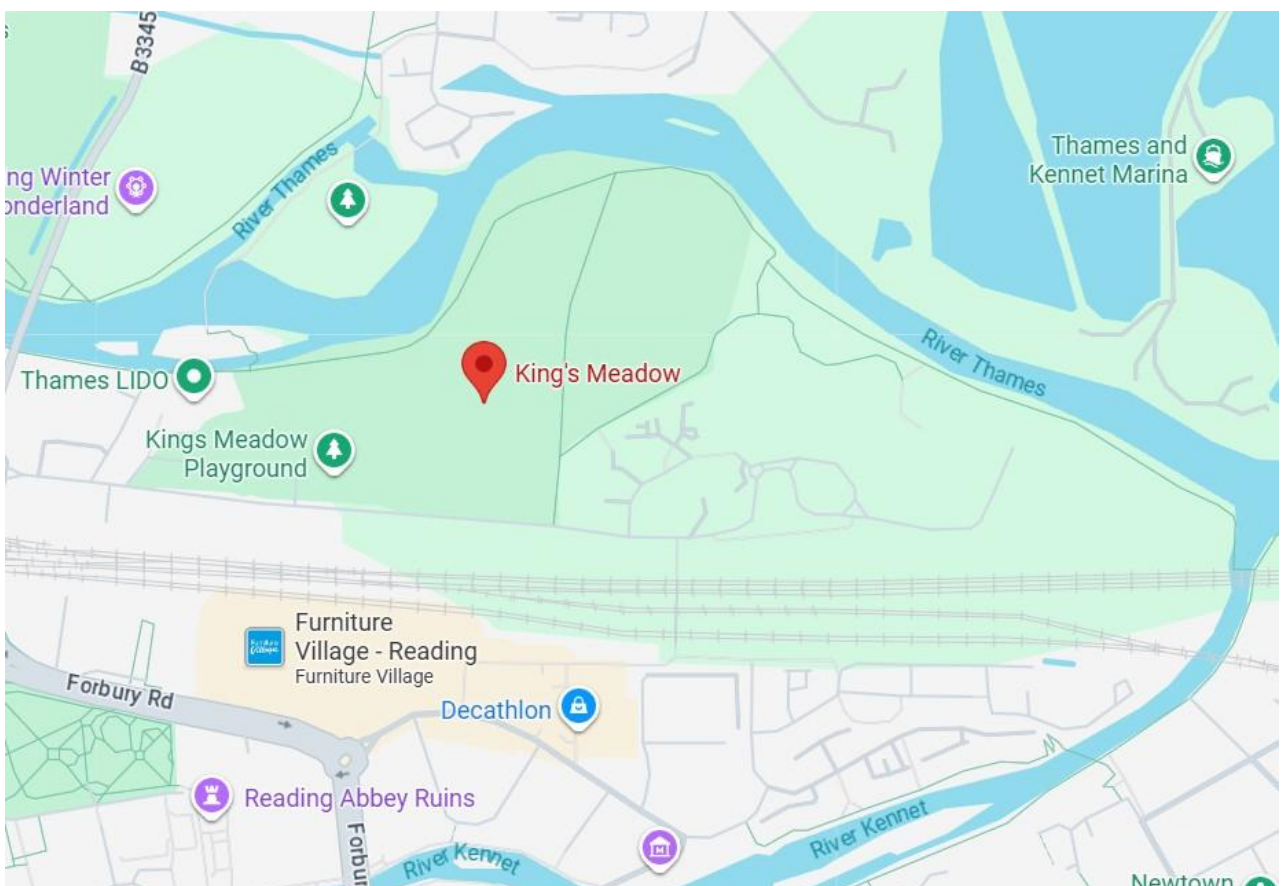


Figure 2.19 The modern extent of The King's Meadow. Source: web.

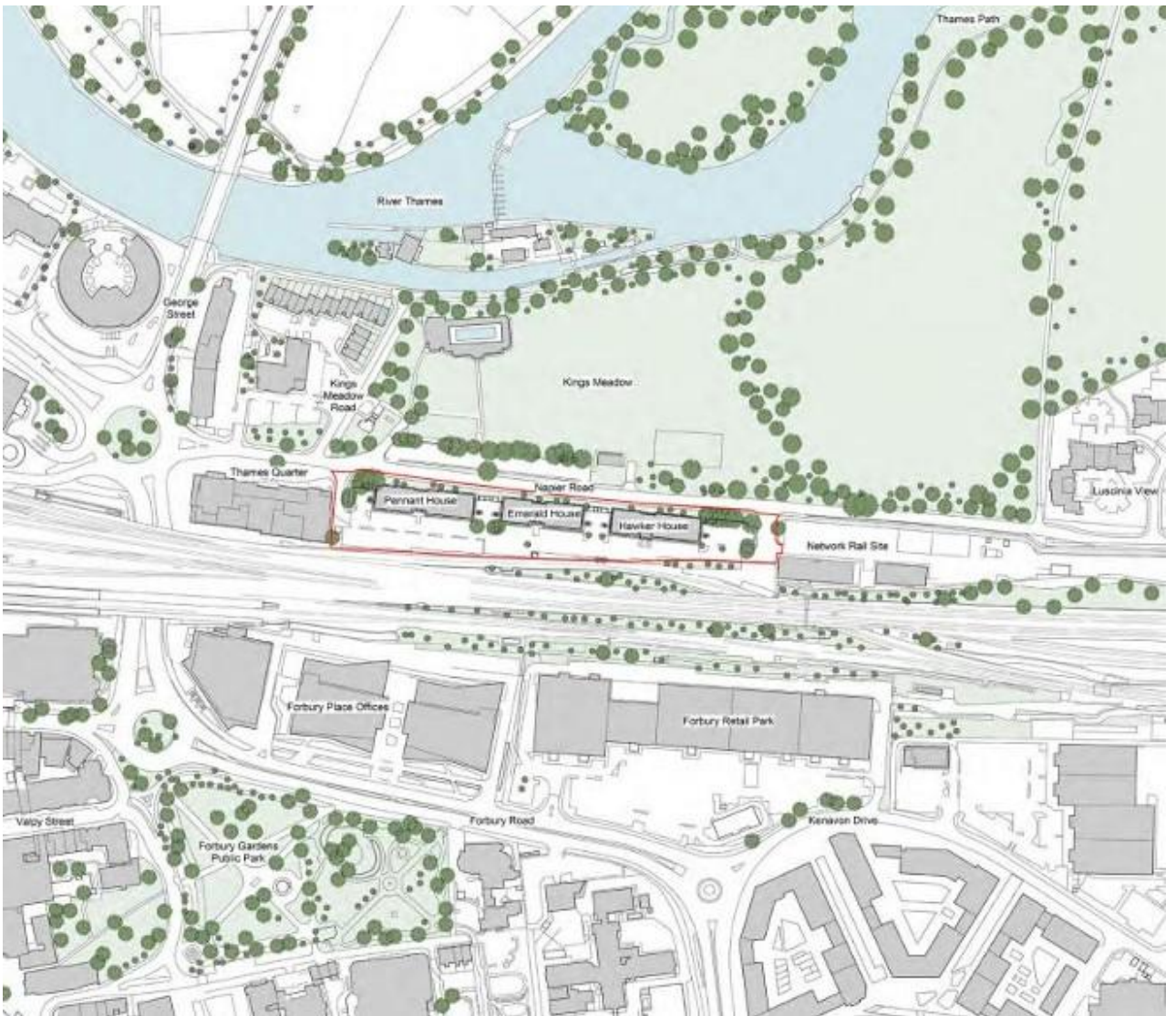


Figure 2.20 Red line map.

3.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 The King's Meadow was historically riverside hay meadows providing hay and grazing land, both an extremely valuable resource. At least in the post-medieval period it also served as public open space for markets, fairs and social activities and it continues to provide the latter purpose today. While its southern part was lost to the GWR in the late 1830s, the remaining meadow remained open ground until acquired by the town in 1869 as a public amenity – part of the national movement at that time to provide public parks and open spaces, not least for the urban poor.
- 3.2 As set out above, since then the character and facilities of The King's Meadow have seen fairly frequent change. As far as can be seen, with the exception of the Lido there are no other heritage assets on this, the north side of the application site. There is no evidence either of any scheme of landscape demonstrating a deliberate design intent. Rather, the landscape that is documented was intended for screening and to provide amenity more generally for the leisure/recreational use of the site. The planting along the southern edge of the King's Meadow, opposite the Napier Road application site, appears to be fairly recent, and judging from historic aerial views there has been specimen loss. We have no details on that scheme but surmise that the planting may have been done in association with the car park. There is scope, then, to reinforce that boundary by infilling specimens which would reinstate the early C20 intention for the open space, which is identified as a valued landscape in the local plan. That would be desirable. I have not visited the site but understand that the boundary to Napier Road is capable of improvement. The research I have done has not identified evidence of a boundary treatment, but in all likelihood such a boundary would have been simple and municipal in character.

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