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The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo Issue 56

- ❖ [Church choir and Sunday school days out](#)
- ❖ [Summer fun in the river turns to drowning danger](#)
- ❖ [Amateur archaeologists' sightseeing summer outings](#)
- ❖ [New to the Archives](#)

From the Editor

In this Echo we are inviting you to take part in a day trip or other summer outing. Long summer days lend themselves to such activity, and for our ancestors may well have been their longest escape from the permanence of labour. Join with us for carriages and outdoor swimming Victorian-style, and you may well see how some ideas of fun have not changed much over the years.

The day trip is a comparatively modern phenomenon in the archives, hence the fact that none of the stories in this Echo are earlier than 1872. It is a symbol of leisure liberation, from a period when life was becoming more compartmentalised, a trend which continued until fairly recently.

These days, the wide variety of electronic messaging equipment that we own mean that work is as omnipresent as it was for those in the pre-Victorian age. We have retained the day trip but become able to combine it with home and work.

Whether such evolution is a benefit or not, the untempered joy of school or work being out is something to which we can certainly relate. The day trip is a venture into the unknown, a place where routine is not master. These stories are at home in that place: they hold a similar position in the world of archives, where many records are created solely from the completion of routine events. Baptisms, marriages, burials: these are the events of life which tend to be recorded. How pleasing, then, to also record the things that happened in-between, on outings such as these.



Mark Stevens
Senior Archivist

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Introductory visits

Just getting started in family or local history? Come along to one of our free introductory visits to see what's available here to help your research. The next dates are: 10 October 2011; 30 January 2012; 16 April 2012; 9 July 2012, all at 2 p.m. To book your place, telephone: 0118 9375132 or email: arch@reading.gov.uk.

Free research evenings

Experts from the Berkshire Family History Society will be on hand to help getting started in family history or with elusive ancestors at special open evenings at the Berkshire Record Office. Taking place from 6-8 pm, the next date is: 11 October. No need to book: just turn up.

Dayschool

County Archivist Peter Durrant and Dr Joan Dils from the Department of Continuing Education at Oxford are leading a dayschool on "The Victorian Village School" at the Record Office on Saturday 12 November (cost £51). Book online at www.conted.ox.ac.uk/V200-24. Places are limited to 20 so early booking is advised.





Cumnor Church and the ruins of Cumnor Place, as visited by the Berkshire Archaeological Society (D/EX1130/3/11)

Church choir and Sunday school days out

19th century church choirs often enjoyed an annual outing as a reward for their contribution to the church's worship over the year. One such choir was that at Christ Church, Reading, and the festivities have been preserved for posterity in reports in the parish magazines.

In 1873, for instance (D/P170/28A/102), they decided on a day out to Windsor. When planning the outing, they considered taking the train, but instead decided to travel by horse and carriage. Almost 40 choir members (all male) were packed into three large open carriages. They set out just after 9 a.m., but by the time they got to Windsor it was lunchtime. A generous picnic had been provided by Mrs Attenborough of Whitley Grove, one of the biggest houses in Christ Church parish. It was tricky finding a suitable picnic spot, but the group settled on an idyllic location in the meadows near Eton and enjoyed their meal. The choirboys then worked off their energy with games of cricket and athletics races in the afternoon. The day finished with something of a busman's holiday, as the Christ Church choir attended the 5 p.m. service at St George's Chapel. One member said that "the beautiful service was the best treat of the day". Then it was time for the long return journey – Reading was finally reached around 10 p.m.

A few years later, in 1876 (D/P170/28A/105), they ventured even further afield – Brighton! It was a smaller group this time, only 28 of them making the trip. The distance involved meant they had to go by rail, starting out before 7a.m. and not getting home until 11 p.m. They visited the same attractions in Brighton that a similar group might choose today: the aquarium, the Pavilion, and the Pier. Poorer members of the choir would have had few other opportunities to visit the seaside.

Sunday School children also expected annual 'treats' as a reward for regular attendance. In 1908 the treat for the Christ Church children was ruined by some typical British summer weather (D/P170/28A/18). A planned open-air picnic had to be jettisoned, and they ended up eating in the schoolroom. They were tempted by the arrival of the sun to head to Whiteknights Field for some fun and games – only to be attacked by a thunderstorm. All and sundry were soaked through, and they report returning to their respective homes, "a sorrowful and bedraggled crowd to put our feet in hot water and sneeze ourselves to sleep".



Need somewhere to hold a meeting?

Why not ask about our Wroughton Room for hire? Reasonable rates, great accommodation. Call on **0118 937 5132** for more information.





Amateur archaeologists' sightseeing summer outings

Berkshire Archaeological Society was another local group whose members enjoyed days out in the countryside. There were regular summer excursions to places of historical, archaeological and architectural interest, the very first being a trip to Sonning Church on 8 May 1872, when the vicar "lucidly explained the various features of interest in and about the sacred edifice". Members then entertained themselves sketching and making brass rubbings.

These Victorian pioneers of local history had an apparently inexhaustible enthusiasm. One typical outing took place in July 1884 (D/EX2039/1/1/1). Starting from Reading by horse and carriage, the party managed to fit in visits to Cumnor Church, the site of Cumnor Hall, Appleton Church and Appleton Manor House, all in the morning before lunch at Fyfield Manor House. In the afternoon, they inspected Fyfield Church before moving on to Abingdon, where they looked round St Helen's, St Nicholas's, Christ's Hospital, the council chamber, the old bridge, and the abbey ruins. They eventually reached home at 9 p.m. They all enjoyed the day, even if their subscriptions ended up not meeting the costs of it.

These trips formed an essential part of the members' annual programme. The following month they ventured to east Berkshire. Meeting up with a Maidenhead group at the Ray Mead Hotel, they had a boat trip to Monkey Island, where they listened to a lecture. They then visited Boveney Church on the other side of the Thames, and toured Eton College, followed by a visit to the Royal Tapestry Works at Windsor. Finally, they went to Magna Carta Island, whose private owner permitted the group to alight and inspect "the objects of interest".

Summer fun in the river turns to drowning danger

Historically the northern boundary of Berkshire was marked by the River Thames, and those fortunate enough to live by the river could enjoy summer days boating and swimming. But this was not without danger: the case files of Berkshire coroners are littered with tragic instances of accidental drownings in the river. In places like Windsor, official open air baths were cut into the river to allow safe swimming fun.

But there could still be danger involved. In June 1901 a local resident wrote to the borough Baths Committee asking that a lifeguard be employed and a boat be kept handy (WI/AC2/3/5A/16). He was spurred to write by witnessing what could have been a fatal accident.

He wrote, "On Wednesday afternoon last during the girls' bathing hours, a girl lost her presence of mind whilst swimming out of her depth, shouted for help and went under water twice". She panicked, grabbed hold of another, younger, girl, and pulled her under. It was only thanks to a third bather that both girls were rescued and brought safely ashore.

While there is no record that the committee took up this helpful suggestion (WI/AC2/3/5), safety in the water was becoming a great concern. Following an earlier letter of complaint, one of the borough councillors had personally bought a life buoy for use along the river.



New to the Archives

Reading borough records: from farming swans to dangerous dogs

The early Reading borough records cataloguing project continues with the completion of a detailed catalogue of the leases of borough property, 1514-1875 (R/AT3). Interesting properties include the Weighing House where local merchants weighed their wool in the 16th century, and the Shambles where local butchers rented stalls and shops, both in Broad Street. A series of leases relate to the town's now lost open space known as the Orts, which consisted of the land between London Road and the river Kennet, now bisected by Queen's Road, South Street and Sidmouth Street. In the 17th century, part of this land was let to the town's Quakers as a burial ground, and there were also gravel pits. The area was developed in the 19th century, and there is a lease to a builder of the site of Albion Terrace in London Road, with drawings showing how it should look when completed.

Also particularly interesting are the leases for the old medieval gildhall site, which as 'Yield Hall' was divided into several small commercial or industrial premises, for which the riverside location (now part of the Oracle site) was useful. There are 17th century leases of the right to set up pens for sheep on market day, and one of a place in St Mary's Butts where an ingenious person had set up 'an Engine for the Weighing of Hay and other Goods and Commodities' in 1760. Perhaps the most unusual "property" comprised the borough's swans, leased for 20 years in 1550; the lessee was expected to increase their number from eight to twelve over that time, and would be paid cash for any surplus swans. Some hitherto unknown medieval deeds have been added to the borough archive (R/AT1), and there are also some miscellaneous later deeds and papers relating to title, 1560-1613 (R/AT4).

We have also now listed a series of petitions to the mayor and burgesses from the first half of the 17th century. They include employees who had not been paid, townspeople with grievances against their neighbours or rivals such as outsiders who had 'crept in' and set up shop illegally, and the desperate poor. One petition reveals to us William Easton, an elderly man who had been knocked over in the street by an uncontrolled mastiff dog – an early example of a 'dangerous dog'. A local 'bonesetter' had kindly set his broken thigh without payment, and William appealed for a gratuity to be paid to his benefactor, and for money for food for himself.

Building works in Windsor

The newly listed records of the Windsor Borough surveyor, 1850-1966 (W1/S), include plans of many important public buildings, including buildings at the cemetery, 1856-1902, alterations to the Guildhall, 1874-1957, the police station,

1903-1908, the Theatre Royal, 1909-1910, Clewer Mead swimming pool, 1951-1962, the modernisation of Combermere Barracks, 1953-1954, and even the sewage works at Old Windsor, 1914-1956. There are also plans for schools, some major housing developments, and road improvement and sewerage schemes.

Engine of prosperity: local business records

Several separate sources have produced the very large and important archives of the engineering firm Plenty's of Newbury, 1746-1997, (D/EX1739, 1771, 2097). The firm was famous for its lifeboats, marine steam engines, and latterly, pumps. The archive is particularly strong for the period from the 1880s to the 1980s. Another business for which we have acquired records is the printing firm of Taylowe's, founded in Slough in the 1930s before moving to Maidenhead in the '50s (D/EX2012). The firm's unusual name is a combination of the names of its founders, Mr Taylor and Mrs Lowe. Their work ranged from toothpaste cartons to Readers' Digest Condensed Books and Enid Blyton book jackets.

Country life

A small collection of papers of the Wentworth family (D/EX2191) includes farming records for Wiltshire in the early 1850s and Uffington in the 1960s and 1970s. An essential part of village life in the 20th century was the Women's Institute, and a fascinating reminder of 1960s fashions and home décor alongside natural history notes can be seen in a scrapbook compiled by Shaw-cum-Donnington WI in 1965 (D/EX2190). The Berkshire branch of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England has deposited its records, 1930-1967 (D/EX2189).

Opening Hours

Tues 9-5, Weds 9-5, Thurs 9-9pm, Fri 9-4.30.
Closed Mondays, Weekends and Bank Holidays.
Please call us for further details.

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Funding Partners

- ❖ Bracknell Forest Council
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- ❖ West Berkshire Council
- ❖ The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
- ❖ Wokingham Borough Council



One of the engines produced by Plenty's (D/EX1739)

