

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo Issue 53

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From the Editor

These days, 'informal adult learning' is a bit of a buzz phrase. Society has woken up to the possibility of generating community and self-improvements through self-directed curiosity and discovery. And it works: county archives like BRO have always welcomed local people wanting to learn, whether it is about their family, street or some topic of historical interest.

We are comparative latecomers to the scene, though, as this edition of the Echo makes clear. The examples we have found of Berkshire lifelong learning illustrate a nineteenth century - particularly Victorian - zeal for betterment. 'Heaven helps those who help themselves', and similar slogans, were calls for everyone to make the most of their own lives. We can find many reflections of these beliefs in the empowerment manuals of today.

When we look back, the Berkshire of a little over one hundred years ago was a thriving centre of informal adult learning. This is a tradition that we are keen to continue, and to encourage everyone to come along and develop their research skills. You would have to search long and hard to find a better place to do so: for the BRO has resources that a Victorian parish reading room could only dream about.

You cannot help but discover something when you begin to look at archives. This could be something factual about the past, or something about how you react to it, or something that makes you change the way you think and act. You do not need to be taught to acquire knowledge, and this Echo celebrates both that fact and those trailblazers who understood it, over one hundred years ago.



Mark Stevens
Senior Archivist

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

DAY SCHOOLS

27 November:

Day school at the Record Office led by the County Archivist, Dr Peter Durrant, for the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education on Churchwardens: Their Records and their Role, c.1660-c.1800. Places are limited to 20. To book a place, please telephone: 01865 270360 or enrol online at https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/apply/apply_online.php?id=E10P117LHJ

4 December:

Day school on Researching the history of Reading, held at the Museum for English Rural Life. Telephone: 0118 378 8660 or e-mail: merlevents@reading.ac.uk to book a place. <http://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/whatson/merl-dayschools.aspx>

LECTURES

4 November:

Senior Archivist Mark Stevens will be giving a free talk on the Broadmoor archives, at 2 p.m. at the National Archives in Kew - no need to book. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk



Reading's first book group?

On 1 February 1892 a group of men from Reading met at Kendrick View, London Road, for the first meeting of the Trinity Dodeka Book Club. The founder of the club was Hutton Gibbons who, along with Vernon Knowles, invited ten of their friends and fellow members of Trinity Congregational Church to join them on the first Friday of every month.

The rules of the club stated that only men could join and that there would be a limit of twelve members. They met at members' houses to choose and circulate books and to have discussions about topics of general interest. The host for the evening would prepare a talk to present to the meeting and his wife would provide a meal for the members. They regularly had club outings to the theatre in London and celebratory meals in local hotels.

A complete set of minutes for the club was deposited when the Dodeka club disbanded in December 2009, and provides a fascinating insight into the activities of the club. Every book read by the club is listed, and every topic discussed noted, often in detail. Topics ranged from 'Is Reading Abreast of the Times?' in 1897 to 'Meals on Wheels' in 2002. Over the years several of the members were prominent members of the Reading community and included the artist Henry Dawson Barkas, the solicitors John Brain and Ernest Brain, the District Scout Commissioner Eric Hatch, and Frank Lewis, who was Mayor of Reading, 1952-1954.

An exhibition exploring the club's history can be seen in the Wroughton Room at the Record Office from September to December 2010.

Literary and Scientific endeavours in Newbury

You can discover the range of learning interests of middle class residents of Victorian Newbury by consulting a volume of programmes for Newbury Literary & Scientific Institution (D/EX1167/1). It was founded in c. 1843, 'to promote the cultivation of Literature, Science and the Arts'. It had an extensive library (3000+ books) at its premises in Northbrook Street, and a museum with a collection of geological and archaeological interest. Most importantly, there was an ambitious programme of lectures. In the 1860s subjects included science, history, current affairs, and illustrated travel reports. Particularly entertaining-sounding evenings were the 'Grandeur, Guilt, and Wrongs of Richard III'; Lord William Lennox giving his personal reminiscences of the Duke of Wellington; and the writer George Grossmith on drama, entitled 'The World Behind The Footlights'.

In January 1879 members had the benefit of 'An Experimental and Practical Lecture on The Telephone, And its Ally, The Microphone'. A connection was set up specially for the occasion between the lecture hall and houses in the area. The lecturer was authorised by the telephone company to take orders for telephones by those impressed by the new invention.

The following month, a member of the Science and Art Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum came to give an experimental cookery lecture, followed by a course of cooking lessons for members. Of rather more dubious value was Miss Maud Lancaster's demonstration of telepathy in 1897 (pictured).



Miss Maud Lancaster's demonstration of telepathy

Instructing the artisan: Reading Mechanics' Institution

Lifelong learning for the masses is represented by the archive of Reading Mechanics Institution (D/EX1431), which was formed in c.1825 "to open to the view of the Artisan the truths of Natural Philosophy and Science". This was also done by providing lectures on subjects including electricity, chemistry, geology, astronomy, practical mechanics and history, holding classes on specific subjects (the first being astronomy), and by providing a library for the use of members, with a paid librarian and printed catalogues. By October 1827, when surviving records begin, there were a hundred members. Expenditure unfortunately exceeded income and the institution was dissolved in 1830, with the library being sold.

Popular demand led to the Institution's re-formation in November 1840, with the object "to instruct the Working Classes in the principles of the Arts they practice, and in other branches of useful knowledge, excluding party politics and controversial theology". Lectures and classes were run, and there was a library and a museum. It even got the royal seal of approval when Prince Albert became its patron. However, it did not really fulfil its founders' noble intentions. By 1843, only three genuine mechanics had joined, the majority of the members being respectable tradesmen. The building, in London Street, later became a Primitive Methodist Church, and is now the Great Expectations pub.



Parish reading rooms: the case of Wargrave

In the rural parts of the county, the churches took a central part in educational initiatives in the later 19th century. Their work setting up primary schools is well known, and of course many church schools still exist. Less well remembered are the many parishes which set up reading rooms where working people with little money to spare could get access to newspapers, periodicals, and books, usually of an educational nature. We are lucky enough to have some records of these, and their activities are often mentioned in parish magazines.

Various references in the Wargrave parish magazines (D/P145/28A) record the activities of a typical Victorian parish, particularly those aimed at improving parishioners' lives. A free night school was established in the new Piggott school building in 1862 to allow working men and older boys to get some education three evenings a week. There was a free parish lending library for servants, labourers, and their families. In the winter of 1864 a Reading, Music & Chess Society was set up to 'promote the mental and moral welfare' of the young men of the village; they met in the Reading Room at the vicarage every evening except Sundays and had the use of a small library. A special Mutual Improvement Society was set up for labourers in the small village of Hare Hatch, in a remote part of the parish, in 1864.

The January 1865 issue of the magazine reports the vicar's words at the opening meeting, which tell us a lot about contemporary attitudes:

"They all knew that the present age was an age of great activity, wherever he went he found some efforts being made to improve the condition of the labouring men; the wide gulf that separates the different classes of society was gradually being bridged over, and the gentry and the clergy went hand in hand in their efforts to extend the blessings of education; and when he spoke of education he did not mean a mere knowledge of reading and writing, but some information concerning the things they saw around them during their daily work. As an example of what he meant, he mentioned that he once had the pleasure of hearing Mr Kingsley [a Hampshire clergyman and author of *The Water Babies*] speak for an hour and a half about an old gravel pit, concerning which they might certainly have thought there was nothing to be said. If everyone would look his brethren in the face sometimes and tell them some of the things he had learned, how much happier the world would become."

Parish magazines themselves were a source of information for many people. As well as containing local news, in the 19th century they usually included an insert from one of a number of national magazines (including the Church Monthly, Home Words, and the original The Parish Magazine). Typically these included contents for adults and children which provided both entertainment, education, and a moral message.

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: 11 October and 14 February. To book your place, telephone: (0118) 937-5132 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 dates are: 12 October and 8 February. No need to book: just turn up.



New to the Archives

Lifelong learning in Reading

The fascinating collection of the Dodeka Book Club (D/EX2160) is described in this issue, inspiring our latest exhibition and the theme of this issue. More formal adult education is represented by a small collection relating to the Reading branch of the Workers' Educational Association, 1934-1955 (D/EX1909). Most interestingly, the historian A J P Taylor lectured during World War II on 'alternatives to Nazi rule' and 'British democracy and the war'.

School records

We were delighted to receive the records of Battle Primary School in Reading, 1893-2000 (SCH20). As well as log books and admission registers, there are stock books listing all the textbooks and other teaching materials, art and handicraft materials, stationery, musical instruments, physical education apparatus, nursery and kindergarten toys, and furniture used in the Infants' School from 1948 to 1974, and in the Junior School from 1955 to 1974. These offer a fascinating glimpse into the education provided there. Another view of school life comes in the magazines produced by Alfred Sutton Central School in Reading, 1925-1926 (D/EX2172). We have also received managers' minutes for Stanford in the Vale School, 1872-1954 (D/P118) alongside other parish records.

Newly deposited parish registers

Longworth: Marriages, 2001-2009

Owlsmoor: Marriages, 1986-1997; banns, 1986-1991

Huntley & Palmer's biscuit factory

Some recently catalogued records relate to the old Huntley & Palmer's biscuit factory building in King's Road, Reading. They include some very detailed plans of the factory site drawn up for fire precautionary purposes, 1929-1941 (D/EX2116). There are also posters of the successful campaign to save part of the building from demolition in 1994 (D/EX2140).

Charities

The records of the Majendie Charity for the Poor of Speen have been augmented by the arrival of the trustees' minutes, 1873-1995 (not open to consultation at present as they contain the names of beneficiaries) (D/QX26). We have also received the minutes for Waltham St Lawrence Charities, 1864-1977 (D/QX40), and records of two charities for village halls: Hinton Waldrist Village Hall Charity, 1956-2003 (D/QX38) and Sunningdale Village Hall Charity, 1944-2009 (D/QX39).

Estate records

We have catalogued additional records of the Buscot Park estate, 1891-1960 (a rental, accounts and wages books) (D/EX2133). Our sale catalogue collection has been supplemented by catalogues for the Sunninghill Estate in 1871 (D/EX2119), New Lodge, Bray, 2004 (D/EX1858), and the



auction of the entire contents of Basildon Park in 1920 (D/EZ166), including hospital beds used during World War I for wounded soldiers.

House history: title deeds

An unusual new arrival is the lease of part of the tithes of the parish of Sotwell, dated 1595 (D/EX2136). The rent (paid to a Southampton charity) comprised not only cash but also 12 bushels of the best wheat, and 12 bushels and two pecks of sweet straw-dried malt, or the monetary value thereof according to prices at Oxford on the market day before it was paid.

We have also catalogued a small collection of deeds relating to Reading, Stratfield Mortimer, Sulhamstead Bannister and Wytham, 1622-1739 (D/EX155). Another small collection relates to property in Caversham, Reading and Wantage, 1694-1950s (D/EZ168), and another to Bourton, Eaton Hastings, East Garston and Wootton, 1790-1888 (D/EZ149). Title deeds have also been deposited for the Priory Estate in Marcham, 1764-1904 (D/EX 178), and for property in Caversham and Earley, 1830s-1876 (D/EX2144), Newbury, 1886-1944 (D/EX1862), Pangbourne, 1918-1964 (D/EX2111), Swallowfield, 1660-1821 (D/EX2152), Waltham St Lawrence, 1830-1929 (D/EX2155), and Wargrave (D/EX2157).

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.

Contact Information:

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- Wokingham Borough Council

