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The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo

Issue 67

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From the Editor

Welcome to Shakespeare's Berkshire! Well, perhaps that is a tourist information claim too far: welcome rather to Berkshire in the time of the Bard.

This edition of the Echo seeks to give you a flavour of the county during the late Tudor/early Stuart period; the period when Shakespeare was at work. It was a time when social intercourse was just as complex as today's, but also a time when things were noticeably different to our modern world.

The stories we've highlighted for you – from religious observance to bawdy indulgence – reflect the English shires that Shakespeare knew. Like many places, Berkshire was full of people trying to make their way as best they could, with little guaranteed support but also with little restriction on what they did: provided they weren't caught.

It was an era of significant freedom when compared to what had come immediately before it. There is a definite fin de siècle feel to ordinary people enjoying themselves, perhaps not quite fearing the consequences as they had recently done. Elements of the Reformation's religious division remained, but the sense is largely of a country and county at ease with itself and enjoying a period of relative peace.

This peace seems to have opened up opportunities for culture in much the same way that we have experienced in our own Elizabethan age. The spread of the English, printed word of which Shakespeare's First Folio was part feels similar to the recent spread of online information. Both are an opening up of ideas to a much wider range of people than was previously possible, and both are a celebration of content created by those interested in a subject, rather than those simply appointed to write about it. Both made history a little more democratic.

That is not to say that either is a panacea. The internet is accused of spreading as many ills as was the printed word; similarly, online resources are as guilty as print of occasionally replacing fact with fiction, either by accident or design. There are plenty of myths that have ended up as true stories.

Shakespeare's own story remains somewhat opaque. There are gaps in the accepted version of his life, and little is known of the private world of this most public person. But we can understand him better by appreciating the England that he knew; and reckoning that Berkshire is a reflection of it.

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 9 June and 6 October, at 2 pm. To book your place, telephone: 0118 9375132 or email: arch@reading.gov.uk.

Small Objects of Power

If you visit the Record Office over the spring and summer, pop into the Wroughton Room to see our exhibition of decorative medieval seals. Seals were used in a society which was only partially literate to validate legal documents such as property deeds. Every institution and wealthy individual would have had its, his or her own unique metal seal matrix, which was applied to soft wax and the result attached to the document.

Mark Stevens
Senior Archivist



Shakespeare's Windsor



Windsor in the age of Elizabeth: Windsor Castle, Park and town in Shakespeare's day, taken from Tighe & Davis, Annals of Windsor

One of Shakespeare's best loved comedies is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. A sequel by popular demand, it revived the character of Falstaff from the history plays *Henry IV Part I* and *Part II*. It is believed that it was written in the 1590s, and first performed at Windsor for Queen Elizabeth I. Many of Shakespeare's plays were set in exotic locales with aristocratic characters, so *The Merry Wives* is unique in its depiction of contemporary domestic life.

Shakespeare must have visited Windsor when his company of players performed at court. He uses the real-life Garter Inn as a principal setting, and there are other references to places such as Frogmore, Datchet, and Herne's Oak in the Home Park, a tree historic even in Shakespeare's day, and which survived until 1863. He may, however, have invented the associated legend of Herne the Hunter, as the play is believed to be the first time it appeared in writing.

Unfortunately not much survives in the Windsor archives for Shakespeare's time, but the parish churchwardens' accounts (D/XP149/1/1) give some clues as to the life of the locals Shakespeare may have met. The church was a more austere place than before the Reformation. Statues and adornments had been removed. But the parish still had a bell to be run, and the table setting out the legal degrees of marriage was still visible in the church itself. During services pews were reserved for women, while men mostly stood at the back or took unreserved seats. A sexton dug the graves in the churchyard, while it was still possible to be buried beneath the stone floor inside.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

The early twentieth century: Conflict and change

On Saturday 18 October, Berkshire Family History Society is holding a one-day conference for family and local historians at Theale Green School in Theale. There will be well-known speakers on a variety of social history topics. It costs £37.50 per person including lunch. You can pick up a booking form at the Record Office. For more details, see www.berksfhs.org.uk/conference.

Who was William Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare was probably born in April 1564, and baptised on 26 April at Stratford-upon-Avon parish church. He died on 23 April 1616.



The Morality of Tudor Berkshire

Shakespeare wrote at a time when the church still held enormous sway over the interpretation of moral norms. Its reach into people's daily lives can be glimpsed through the visitation book of the Archdeacon of Berkshire (D/A2/e.1).

Persons who had failed to attend communion at least once a year were suspected of being secret Catholics or extreme Protestants. Historians have found that Shakespeare's father John was just such a 'recusant', still holding to his Catholic beliefs. These people were 'presented' at the archdeacon's visitation.

Robert and Anne Eyston of Shinfield were suspected of being such secret Catholics. William Freeman, Ralph Stowkes and William Hewe of Binfield claimed they could not attend church because they 'were not in perfect love and charity' with their fellow men. Two Mortimer men were presented for spending their Sundays in the local alehouse.

Nor did the clergy escape censure. The parishioners of Binfield scorned their elderly parson for being 'utterly unlearned', while Robert Wilsby, parson of East Lockinge, was on such bad terms with his flock that many of them firmly refused to deal with him. He stood accused of paying for his position, of letting his pigs run free in the churchyard, and of employing two 'lewd fellows', who were constantly fighting. Worst of all, his maidservant Mary Barnes alleged he had slept with her.

Anyone found guilty of such a moral crime was forced to perform a humiliating public penance for their sins. They would enter the church during the Sunday service with a white sheet around their shoulders, stand before the congregation and state their errant deeds, requesting forgiveness. Such a fate befell the Reading carpenter Ralph Wood, who had sex with his stepdaughter, and James Glover of Windsor who had spent time with 'a whore'. Perhaps Shakespeare's wives were not very merry after all.



(left) Progress Shakespeare: Poster for a performance of poetry and extracts from Shakespeare which featured the teenage Kenneth Branagh (D/EX1151/5/2)



(above) Photographs of an open-air performance of *Much Ado About Nothing* at Caversham Court Gardens, by the Berkshire Shakespeare Players in June 1956 (D/EX1151/17/1)

Shakespeare's Audience: rowdy and riotous in Reading

The theatre crowds who watched Shakespeares' actors at work were notoriously rowdy and drunken. It was an area of life largely unregulated.

The worst offenders would end up in Houses of Correction, like that in Reading. The old lock-up – in what is now Greyfriars church – was home to petty criminals and 'rogues and beggars' from across the county. A list compiled in 1620 (R/JL), shortly after Shakespeare's death, details those inside the walls: reputed fathers of bastards; habitual drunks; those

drinking in alehouses or gambling at church time; poachers; swearers and blasphemers; servants and apprentices guilty of stealing from or assaulting their masters; and those beating or assaulting constables on duty. The ages of the inmates ranged from 12 to 60. Pregnant women were exempt from being locked up, as were those who were disabled, because prisoners were given jobs to do. They had to earn the money for their food, drink and clothing.



New to the Archives

Estate records

The catalogue of the Bisham Abbey estate archive has now been completed (D/EX73). The majority of the archive relates to the Vansittart (later Vansittart Neale) family who purchased the estate in 1780 with the proceeds of George Vansittart's career as a merchant in India, some of it, shockingly, in the opium trade. Aspects of their family life were highlighted in last autumn's exhibition and Echo, and the archive is full of other interesting items, including fabric from the wedding dresses of two royal princesses in the 1760s; a petition to General George Henry Vansittart in 1802 from the sugar planters on St Lucia requesting that a ship be permitted to unload wine, which, 'being French', the planters regarded as an essential of life; and the papers of Edward Vansittart Neale, 19th century founder of the Co-operative movement.

Charities

We have catalogued the extensive archive of Wantage Town Lands Charity, 1598-2012 (D/QW). This charity had several almshouses and contributed to the town's grammar school (similar to that attended by Shakespeare in his home town) among its various beneficiaries. We have also added a memorandum book relating to disputed elections of children from Reading to Christ's Hospital under John West's Charity, 1738-1818, to the Reading Municipal Charities archive (D/QR35/9).

The Church of England

Recently deposited material from Caversham St Andrew (D/P162C) reveals two fractious relationships between the churchwardens and the priest in charge. Just before the First World War the problem related to perceived Catholic tendencies; then in the 1940s there was a very bad-tempered exchange over some items a departing clergyman had removed. Only a few of the West Hanney parish magazines have survived for the period 1878-1893, but they do provide a colourful picture of village life (D/P63).

New registers

Farley Hill (Swallowfield): marriages, 1898-2007 (D/P129)

West Hanney: marriages, 1935-2002 (D/P63)

East Hanney: marriages, 1888-1975 (D/P63B)

Berkshire at leisure

We have acquired the records of several Kintbury societies, showing the range of local people's interests in the earlier 20th century (D/EX2349). They include records of Kintbury Cottage Garden Show and the Kintbury and Inkpen branch of the League of Nations Union. New records of sports clubs include Berkshire County Ladies' Golf Association (D/EX2303) and Sonning Lawn Tennis Club (D/EX2305).



Herne's Oak: Situated in Windsor Great Park, this was believed in the 19th century to be the tree called Herne's Oak in The Merry Wives of Windsor (from Tighe & Davis, Annals of Windsor)

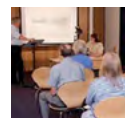
We have also acquired the records of Hampstead Norreys Horticultural Society (D/EX2379) and Crowthorne Natural History Group (D/EX2364).

Printed miscellanea

We have been given an interesting little brochure for owners of river launches, produced by the Thames Conservancy in 1963 (D/EX2346), and programmes for Maidenhead and Henley Regattas in 1939 and 1945 (D/EX2358). A set of Pangbourne Magazine, 1976-1993, gives a glimpse into life in the village (D/EX2264). We have also acquired a collection of parish magazines and printed miscellanea relating to Sandhurst (D/EX2265).

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.



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

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