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From the Editor



Disease and epidemics are something we are used to seeing in the news, but they are also something that we tend to view from afar. The recent outbreaks of ebola, or bird flu, or swine flu are, we assume, problems in the developing world rather than our own.

But of course, we were the developing world once. As this Echo shows, Berkshire has not been immune from struggles against disease. The archives show how our ancestors faced exactly the same problems of contagion and control as many other people now face elsewhere.

Diphtheria, smallpox, plague. These are all diseases that we have overcome. History demonstrates that. So while it is impossible to imagine the near total destruction of our social fabric that was

caused by the Black Death, it is also reassuring to know that we can recover from being so close to an apocalypse.

This is where archives can offer a glimpse into the future as well as into the past. Because the developing world will overcome disease and epidemics in time. We shan't always be watching an ebola outbreak on the news.

That is not to say that we won't encounter new threats to our wellbeing. One of the things that history teaches is that things repeat themselves – more often than we might think – but another lesson is that nothing stays the same for long. The human race has a good track record at beating disease – and the stories in the Echo are evidence of that.

Above: Contemporary depiction of victims of the Black Death

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. The next date is Monday 9 June, at the new time of 6 pm. To book your place, telephone: 0118 9375132 or email: arch@reading.gov.uk.

World War I blog

The blog continues to grow on a daily basis. Each post relates to that day or month 100 years earlier, as the war unfolds before Berkshire eyes. Check it out at <http://berkshirevoiceswwi.wordpress.com/>.



Mark Stevens
Senior Archivist



The Black Death: one family's story

Between 1348 and 1350, almost half the population of England died from the same disease. Bubonic plague, carried by fleas feeding on rats, devastated the country. Symptoms included high fever, seizures, and the characteristic swellings which gave the plague its name. It can now be treated by antibiotics, but in the middle ages was almost always fatal.

Because the Black Death predates the existence of most archives, it can be hard to personalise the suffering caused to so many people. And that makes the identification of likely victims a rather special thing.

Adam Lambard of Binfield was almost certainly one such victim. In May 1349 - perhaps knowing he was dying - he gave all his property to his wife's brother John atte Westende from Warfield, and Binfield man John Baronn. By August, Adam was dead, and the two Johns returned the land to Adam's widow Christina.

These two conveyances, contained in a small bundle of property deeds (D/EX125/7), show how Adam used the two Johns as temporary trustees. He was trying to ensure that Christina inherited all of his estate, rather than the third that widows were usually entitled to. He succeeded.

It is hard to imagine the desperate personal circumstance that the family might have experienced. The existence of the deeds suggests that there were no children of the marriage of adult age – quite possibly, the plague had already claimed them, and Adam was only the latest in a succession of Lambards to die.

Christina was one of the lucky people who were resistant to the Black Death. She was still alive in 1352, when she sold the property, and became lost from the archives once more.

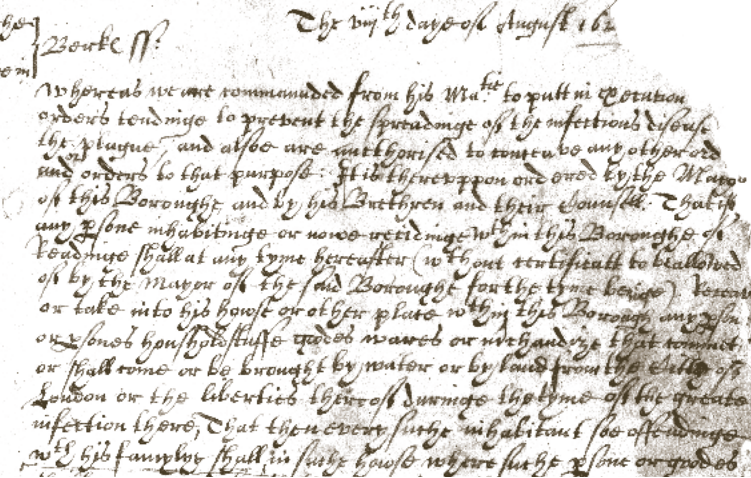
Above: Did Christina look like this? Painting of medieval lady by Sydney Langford Jones (D/EX1795/3/23)

DID YOU KNOW?

In the spring of 1315 Berkshire was hit with the first of three disastrous harvests. Historians estimate that up to 10% of the county's population died over the next few years.

Before Reading's 'pesthouse' was built to isolate plague sufferers, its site had a number of tents for sick people to stay in.





Fighting diphtheria in Long Wittenham

In the first half of the 20th century, dealing with infectious diseases was one of the responsibilities of local authorities. One of these diseases was diphtheria.

Diphtheria is a very contagious disease which affects breathing. It can

be fatal, especially in children, and although a treatment had been developed in the 1890s, there was no vaccine until 1921. So when there was an outbreak in Long Wittenham in 1900-1901, it would have terrified parents.

Wallingford Rural District Council put its emergency plan into practice. Water in local wells and milk from nearby dairies were sent to be tested for the bacterium responsible for the disease. The milk was cleared, but some wells were found to be contaminated.

The Sanitary Inspector visited houses where there were outbreaks and made sure patients were quarantined as far as possible. Schools attended by sick children were closed and the premises inspected. If family members could not care for the patients, the council arranged for a nurse to be brought in. Unaffected family members were inoculated. They had hoped to close the school and use it as a temporary isolation hospital, but its lack of water supply made that plan impractical.

Once the patients had recovered, articles used in the sickroom were broken and buried to avoid spreading the infection. Owners of the affected cottages were ordered to improve the poor sanitary conditions. A number of pet cats in the village had died suddenly, and one was dissected and its organs tested for the disease.

Not all the local people co-operated. In April 1901 Mrs Wingfield of Long Wittenham refused to permit her house to be turned into a temporary hospital, and to allow nurses to help her children. Indeed, she had actually spread the infection by giving some of her sick daughter's clothes to a 10 year old who was running errands for her. This child then contracted diphtheria herself. The Council wrote Mrs Wingfield a letter of censure for her irresponsible act, although they decided not to prosecute. Her son, already a delicate boy, had died of the illness – the only one to do so in Long Wittenham, which the Sanitary Officer thought was due to polluted water from the family's well.

The parish church and schools were disinfected to prevent further infection, and the outbreak eventually petered out, but not before it had spread to other parishes in the area.

Plague became endemic in the English counties, with periodic outbreaks until the second half of the 17th century. One such epidemic in London in the summer of 1625 led to Reading getting closer to the heart of government. King Charles I and his court (including his teenage bride Henrietta Maria) moved out of disease-stricken London to the healthier air of Berkshire and Oxfordshire. Parliament sat in Oxford, and parts of the government structure, including the law courts, ended up in Reading. Unfortunately, they brought the virus with them, and Reading was faced with plague. The first known Reading victim was a child of the Parr family, described as 'full of blue spots' when he died.

This brought the system of caring for the poor, usually funded by poor rates on property, to breaking point, as so many breadwinners were sick. Special taxes had to be levied to pay for caring for them – and the economy was also disrupted.

The sick were removed to the newly-built 'pesthouse' in a field in Whitley, then outside the built up area of the town. Meanwhile, the houses where they lived were boarded up, with no access permitted. There was a ban on importing goods from London, with a month's quarantine for anyone who was found in possession of them. Two women (Mary Jerome and Anne Lovejoy) were paid to examine dead bodies for signs of the disease.

We don't know how many died. There is no spike in the parish burial registers, but that may just mean the bodies were unceremoniously disposed of in plague pits, as

happened elsewhere, for fear of infection. However, it seems that the Corporation's quick actions were effective in preventing further infection.

This was one of the last great local outbreaks of the plague. By the end of the 17th century – for reasons which are still unclear - it had effectively disappeared.

Above: Orders to prevent the spread of plague in Reading, 1625 (R/Z3/11)

The plague comes to Reading



New to the Archives

Reading Borough deposited collections

We have been working on various collections of documents which were acquired by Reading Borough when it ran its own archives service. Most consist of deeds of properties in the historic town of Reading from the 16th to the 19th centuries, and together they help to build up our picture of what the town was like in past centuries. Premises include Coley Hill Kiln (R/D28), Red Lane Farm (site of the Redlands building estate) (R/D40), Willats Wharf (R/D43), and Whitley Farm (R/D133), as well as many shops and homes in the town centre. There are also some papers relating to the Blandy and Hooper families (R/D61 and 64). More unusual items include a letter from the Chief Superintendent of Reading Police offering a candidate a job, 1877 (R/D62) and the probate inventory of Mawditte Glass, a bargeman, 1615 (R/D67), while the Reading Philanthropic Institution (R/D137) provided food parcels for the poor, among other charitable efforts between 1859 and 1937 – a precursor of today's Food Banks.

Bellringing and sailing: local clubs and societies

Various clubs and societies are represented in our new collections. These include the records of Cookham Reach Sailing Club (D/EX2260); the Sonning Deanery Branch of the Oxford Diocesan Guild of Bellringers (D/EX2436); the Mothers' Union at Tilehurst St Mary Magdalen (D/EX1480); a scrapbook for Reading Tuberculosis Care Association (D/EX2407); and Radstock WI, Earley (D/EX2419). Additional records of WIs have been received from the Berkshire Federation of Women's Institutes (D/EX2007). We have also listed records of Arborfield and Barkham Mothers' Union, 1977-2013 (D/EX2452).

Charities

Deeds relating to a number of Berkshire charities have been transferred here from the Charity Commission (P/CC2). The most unusual charity provided a big Christmas dinner for the poor of Old Windsor, and was established in 1841. Others include the Reading School of Industry for Girls, and charity schools at Chaddleworth and Kingston Bagpuize.

Deeds

We have received the trust deed of Maidenhead Cottage Hospital, 1917 (D/EX2388). Also now available for house and local history research are deeds for various properties in Abingdon (D/EX2393); Aldermaston and Beenham (D/EX2420); Binfield (D/EX2317); Caversham and Emmer Green (D/EX2204); Cookham and Shaw-cum-Donnington (D/EX2389); Grove, Hatford, East Hendred and Wantage (D/EX2335); Hungerford (D/EX2286); Lambourn (D/EX2448); Lambourn, Newbury and Thatcham (D/EX2171, 2199, 2221,

2227, and 2239); Letcombe Regis (D/EX2304); Reading (D/EX2165, 2201, 2279, 2283, 2295, 2316 and 2380); Sunningdale (D/EX2378); Wallingford (D/EX2231 and 2294); Wantage (D/EX2257); Winkfield (D/EX2242 and 2378); and Wokingham (D/EX2424).



Self portrait of Sydney Langford Jones (D/EX1795/3/1)

Peace and porridge

The extensive papers of the artist Sydney Langford Jones of Blewbury (D/EX1795), a Quaker and pacifist, include two small sculptures he created out of porridge whilst interned in Pentonville Prison as a conscientious objector during the First World War.

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

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Closed Mondays, Weekends and Bank Holidays.
Please call us for further details.

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