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### From the Editor

The First World War centenary is upon us.

In August, the Record Office will begin its 'real-time' blog about how the War affected – and was reported by – the Berkshire home front (see right hand side of this page); while across the globe, countries involved in the War will begin to remember the fighting and commemorate their dead.

The autumn of 2014 is bound to be a somewhat reflective time. Although the generation that fought the War is now gone, they remain close enough that many of us will have known them. Their past is not a distant past, but one that informs directly our own values. The result is that the anniversary of 1914 feels more relevant than – for example – remembering Waterloo will do in 2015.

It was also by marking the first world peace in 1918 that individual nation states began to consider the international dimension to society. This is another trend that still influences us. An era of intergovernmental bodies and multinational companies evolved after the War, as did the growing transit of people between countries and continents.

This is interesting because the 1914 centenary is being recognised not in a multinational way but along those earlier, individual lines. In the UK, it is quite noticeable how much the idea of 'the nation' is at the heart of the Government's commemorations. In Germany, there has been criticism of the country's leaders for failing to engage with the centenary to the same degree as Britain or France. While for those participants on the Eastern Front, 1917 is the more important date for revolutionary Russia, as 1918 is for the reconstituted Poland.

Such insular defaults probably owe themselves to practicalities as much as anything. They might also suggest that, ultimately, commemorating a War is a very personal thing. Our focus on British losses, as well as British anniversaries may be inevitable.

This Echo narrows things still further, by taking you into Berkshire's early days of War: mobilisation and refugees. In August 1914, these were new experiences for the residents of the county. What they did not know was that things would get a lot worse for them before they got any better.

### 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 6 October and 9 February, at 2 pm. To book your place, telephone: 0118 9375132 or email: [arch@reading.gov.uk](mailto:arch@reading.gov.uk).

#### Small Objects of Power

If you visit the Record Office over the summer, please do pop into the Wroughton Room to see our exhibition of decorative medieval seals. The exhibition is open until the end of August.



Mark Stevens  
Senior Archivist





# The Spencers Go to War

One family whose wartime experiences are recorded vividly at the BRO is the Spencer family of Cookham, whose most famous member was the artist Stanley.

The First World War loomed large in the Spencers' family life. When, years later, Stanley's older sister Florence came to write her memoirs, she recalled the day that War was declared:

'On the afternoon of August 4th, my birthday, 1914,

I was pacing the Causeway of Cookham Moor sometime during the day with my brother Percy, gravely discussing with him the family scene, when he suddenly said quietly, "Of course dear, if it's War, I shall have to go."

Then for the first time were brought home to me with a sickening shock the full implications of war which had hitherto seemed so remote...

"Not you!" I cried sharply.'

Yet four of Florence's brothers did go into military service. Percy signed up for the Army almost immediately, and was a great success, rising through the ranks to become a commissioned officer. After the war he studied at Cambridge and became an educationalist. Younger brothers Stanley and Gilbert joined up in 1915, both initially serving in the Royal

Army Medical Corps. Only Sydney Spencer did not make it home: he fought in France with the Norfolk Regiment and was killed in action in September 1918.

Florence, Sydney and Percy will feature heavily in our First World War blog.

*Above: Percy Spencer (believed to be second from the right in the front row) with his unit (D/EZ177/7/19)*

## DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

### World War I blog launched

In August we will also be launching a blog recording the First World War as seen through Berkshire eyes. The contents will include diary entries, letters from soldiers to loved ones, entries in school log books and church magazines, and every entry will relate to that day or month 100 years earlier. <http://berkshirevoiceswwi.wordpress.com>

### 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. It costs £37.50 per person including lunch, and you can pick up a booking form at the Record Office. For more details, see [www.berksfhs.org.uk/conference](http://www.berksfhs.org.uk/conference).



# Joining Up



Left: Three soldiers enjoy a cigarette (D/EE/234/5)  
Right: Soldiers leaving Reading (Reading Standard: Berkshire and the War supplement)

One of the untold stories of the war is the way in which the first flurry of many young men to join the armed forces was met with a shambolic response.

Percy Spencer was not impressed in September 1914. At his barracks in St Albans, there was not enough food to go round, the tents leaked and kept blowing down, and his army boots let in water. Some men even had to sleep on the grass with no cover, and it was only the commanding officer's personal vigilance that ensured they at least had a blanket each. The men did their best to keep cheerful, but as Percy wrote in one letter, 'If there is not an enquiry into the management of Kitchener's Army after the war, I shall be surprised.'

It was the same story at Brock Barracks in Reading. Here, Broad Street Congregational Church helped out: 'Under the circumstances it seemed imperative that something should be done to relieve the situation, and so our buildings were thrown open for the use of our soldier friends from 5.30 to 10 pm each evening. Arrangements were made for a "wash and brush up", for shaving, writing, reading, games (including billiards, bagatelle, etc), a smoke and sing-song – all free of expense – and for the provision of refreshments at a moderate charge.'

## Safe House: Belgian Refugees in Berkshire

Although the path to war is still the subject of fierce historical debate, at the time it is clear why the people of Berkshire thought that war had been declared: because of Germany's invasion of Belgium. In the circumstances, most local people thought that the only honourable thing to do was to defend their neighbouring country against hostile attack.

Germany's invasion allowed Berkshire folk the

opportunity to put a personal face to the reasons for fighting. For many Belgians fled the onslaught and sought refuge in Britain, and some of those men, women and children found asylum in our county.

The members of Maidenhead Congregational Church rented a house, for example, to provide a home for three families from the Belgian town of Boom, near Antwerp. 'M. Asselberghs was traveller for a milling firm;

M. Van Hoof was the proprietor of a boot and shoe shop, and M. Van der Plannken was a boatbuilder on the banks of the river Rupel.'

The three families had fled their homes on 20 September 1914. Initially they had lodged in Antwerp, but then been forced to leave on foot when the Germans began bombarding the city. Then the refugees walked to Ostend where they were able to board a boat for England.

The children were found places at the local Catholic school, where another Belgian had been employed to teach them and other similar children who had arrived in Maidenhead. As the Congregational church magazine put it, 'we are repaying to Belgium a small part of an obligation which seems greater the more we think of it.'



## New to the Archives

### The Spencer family of Cookham

As mentioned, we have received two substantial quantities of papers of the Spencer family of Cookham (D/EX801 and D/EZ177). The new material is particularly rich in the First World War diaries and correspondence of soldier brothers Percy and Sydney. We also now have a photograph from around 1958 of Stanley Spencer with the converted pram which held his painting equipment (D/EX2266).

### From the Civil War to World War II

In the midst of the commemoration of the First World War, we haven't forgotten other conflicts that have affected the county. We have purchased the commission of Richard Fielding as Lieutenant General of the Royal Artillery, 1644 (D/EZ179). Another recent acquisition is a report on the management of evacuation in the Wantage area in 1939, which is full of interesting details (D/EX2382).

### The medieval church

We have now completed the cataloguing of the 14th century Reading Abbey formulary we purchased in 2013. This fascinating document was written in the 1340s as a tract on conveyancing and legal documents, and incorporated various examples taken mainly from the (now lost) archives of Reading Abbey and its daughter house in Leominster, Herefordshire. Of particular interest for local history are the number of documents relating to the election of Richard Bannister as abbot of Reading in 1262. From a national point of view, there is a copy of the act of homage sworn by John Balliol, king of Scots, to Edward I in 1292, which was later used as justification for the English king's overlordship of Scotland. This is written in Norman French, though most of the other documents were in Latin, which was the formal legal language of the day. The documents cover a range of secular and ecclesiastical subjects, including legal disputes, a deed for setting free a serf, probate matters (such as the denunciation of the executors of Hugh, servant of Gilbert Stynt of Pangbourne, for keeping his goods instead of handing them to the heirs, in 1321); disputed marriages; crimes; and even specific coroners' inquests (although disappointingly these are not Berkshire cases).

Two beautiful illuminated manuscripts from the pre-Reformation Church have also been transferred here. One is part of an antiphoner, music and words for the sung liturgy, which comes from an unknown monastery, the other consists of pages from the Gospel of Matthew (D/EX2278).



A soldier on duty (R/D137/6/3)

### Maps

Our map collection has been augmented with a small copy of Speed's 1611 map of Reading – the earliest known (D/EX2385). We have also acquired a plan for the sale of building plots on the “breezy Caversham Heights estate”, c.1908 (D/EX2408). A small group of plans which have strayed from the Englefield Estate archive have also found their way here (D/EZ175).

### 20th century culture

We have gained a glimpse into Reading's hidden radical underground and pop culture of the 1980s thanks to the deposit of a small collection of fanzines (D/EX2260).

### 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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