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The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

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The Berkshire Echo

From the Editor

Welcome to the summer edition of our newsletter, the Berkshire Echo. This time we look at how Berkshire assisted its poor within the county. Since the time when monks looked after those in need there has been some form of provision of assisting the infirm and the poor. In the seventeenth century various acts were passed to provide poor relief and help find work for the able-bodied. Changes in the eighteenth century formulated the process even further.

In 1782 the Gilbert Act divided counties into districts providing unions of parishes to be controlled by Boards of Guardians in order to benefit the old, the sick, the infirm and orphans. During the First World War many workhouses were used as war hospitals. By 1929 many were renamed Public Assistance Institutions and continued to house unmarried mothers, the old, the mentally ill and vagrants with responsibility being transferred to local authorities.

1948 saw the birth of the Welfare State and the NHS. The NHS focused on medical care and the principal idea behind it was that everyone paid into it according to their means and therefore everyone could receive medical treatment. The Welfare

State now provided for the poor and the elderly through the provision of pensions, benefits and care homes.

This edition looks at the history of public assistance, how it changed, how it looked after the poor and the infirm as well children who not only needed foster care, but a chance to learn how to earn a living through apprenticeship. In “The pauper taint persists” we read about the stigma attached to staying in the institutions as they were still thought of as the old workhouse – somewhere you only went to if you absolutely had no other choice. Providing for the poor has certainly evolved and changed over the centuries and its history proves an interesting read.

Don't forget you can still see our free exhibition which is on until 29th July – see the Dates for your diary section for more details. Also take a look at what's new to the archives – you never know what may interest you.

Ivone Turnbull
Senior Archivist

- **Public Assistance in Berkshire: a new way of helping the poor**
- **Children in care**
- **After the war**
- **New to the Archives**

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Universities of Revolution

There is still time to see this exhibition which marks the centenary of the 1916 Irish Easter Rising. It's free and available during our opening hours (Tuesday and Wednesday 9am to 5pm, Thursday 9am to 9pm and Friday 9am to 4.30pm). Why not come along and take a look.

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 1914-1918 war unfolds before Berkshire eyes. Why not take a look: <http://berkshirevoiceswwi.wordpress.com/>.





Public Assistance in Berkshire: a new way of helping the poor

The first half of the 20th century saw a complete overhaul of provision for the sick and poor, culminating in the launch of the Welfare State in 1948. The first big change came with the introduction of an Old Age Pension in 1908, initially means-tested, and only for those over the age of 70. In 1911 David Lloyd George's reforming Liberal administration then brought in a contributions-based national insurance scheme which provided contributions-based health insurance and unemployment benefit, without the stigma of applying to the workhouse or charities.

Under the Local Government Act of 1929, the Poor Law Unions, which had administered poor relief and healthcare for the poor for almost a century, were abolished. Responsibility for poor relief passed to local authorities from April 1930. Berkshire County Council took over all the former workhouses in Berkshire apart from Reading, which was taken over by Reading Borough Council. They also took on the Scattered and Cottage Homes for children in care, just as the Great Depression of the 1930s hit.

The 1930s

The county (excluding Reading) was divided into five Relief Areas: Abingdon (encompassing the former Unions of Abingdon and Wallingford), Newbury (Bradfield, Hungerford and Newbury), Wantage (Faringdon and Wantage), Windsor (Maidenhead and Windsor), and Wokingham (Easthampstead and Wokingham). Between 1930 and 1940, each Relief Area was managed by a Guardians Committee, which reported to the council's Public Assistance Committee. Abingdon closed in 1932 as it was not fit for purpose, soon followed by Faringdon. Gradually, the old workhouses, rebranded as Public Assistance Institutions, began to specialise in particular areas, but these changes took place over a period of years, so until 1940 they all acted partly as ordinary Public Assistance Institutions. The reorganisation of the system was completed in 1940.

Of the former workhouses, Newbury and Wallingford became mixed institutions with sick and casual wards (the latter for vagrants); and Maidenhead, Wantage, Windsor and Wokingham became mixed institutions with sick wards. Easthampstead Workhouse, renamed Church Hill House, became a home for men and boys with learning difficulties, while women and girls were assigned to Bradfield Workhouse, renamed Wayland House. Hungerford increasingly became an extension of Fair Mile Hospital, under the name Hungerford House, and took in mainly elderly women suffering from dementia. Some mentally ill patients were also housed in the infirmary at Newbury.

Children in the garden at Oakfield (D/EX1362/1), c. 1940-1941



Children in care

Children over the age of three were looked after in dedicated children's homes (the Cottage Homes), usually separated from siblings of different genders. There were homes at Easthampstead (associated with Church Hill House, but for boys and girls), Maidenhead (St Edmund's Home for boys), Wallingford (for boys and girls), Old Windsor (Albany House, for girls) and Wokingham (for boys and girls). Family members could visit occasionally, and if the parents were in one of the Institutions, they would be granted travel costs. Where possible, children were fostered (known as being 'boarded out') in private homes, with the aim of giving them what the council called 'the invaluable influence of home life'. However, this option was open only for those children who were permanently in council care due to the parents having abandoned them or treated them cruelly, and not to those whose parents might eventually reclaim them. Babies and toddlers stayed with their mothers in special nursery units.

Those with special needs, the blind, deaf or physically disabled, were usually sent to institutions out of the county, with the fees and other expenses paid for by the council. For instance, in May 1930, the council considered the case of Doris Stimpson, described as 'a cripple child' living at the Waifs and Strays Cripples' Home, and agreed to pay for her summer holiday at the seaside, and for a new dress for the occasion. This often continued in adulthood.

Children received more than the bare necessities of life. They were allowed small amounts of pocket money. Those who were members of the Boy Scouts or Girl Guides had uniforms purchased and were allowed to go on camp. The council took responsibility for launching the children into adult life. Some were apprenticed, some sent on training courses, some were found jobs, and some were sponsored to emigrate to the colonies. For instance in 1930, teenager Frederick Bartlett, who had been at Wallingford Cottage Home, was placed with Mr and Mrs Vowles of Pangbourne to train as a dairy farmer, while Sidney Tindall from Windsor underwent a training course at the National Nautical School and was then sent off to a new life in Canada.

Need somewhere to hold a meeting?

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After the war

The war had a major impact on the homes and institutions, particularly with regards to healthcare. The old workhouse infirmaries had always provided much of the nation's hospital care, and as time passed they accepted greater numbers of patients. Hospital childbirth, previously mainly taken care of at home except in the case of unmarried mothers, became the standard practice. Evacuation from London meant the population of children increased markedly. The infirmaries were also designated as Emergency Hospitals, and treated air raid victims.

In the end, the County Council was responsible for poor relief for less than 20 years. Over the past half-century there had been a slow but steady shift to greater centralisation and a lessening of the stigma attached. At last, the very concept of poor relief was abolished when the Welfare State was introduced by the post-war Labour government, culminating in the formation of the National Health Service in 1948.

(Sources: Records of the BCC Public Assistance Department (C/PA); minutes of Public Health and Housing Committee, 1930 (C/CL/C3/5/5); Public Assistance Committee minutes, 1931-1933 (C/CL./C3/13/1).)



Below: Children in the garden at Oakfield (D/EX1363/1), c. 1940-1941
The entrance to Reading Public Assistance Institution, formerly the workhouse (D/EX1638/65/60)



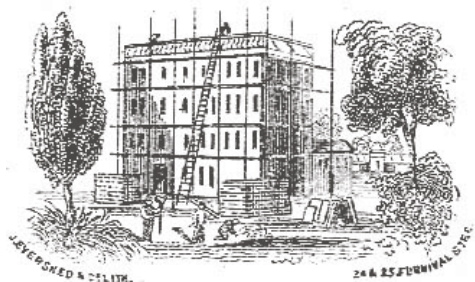
The pauper taint persists

The Revd William Stride, rector of Besselsleigh in north Berkshire, wrote to a relative in 1934 to discuss the situation of some of his elderly parishioners. One old lady, Mrs Pickett, had come to the conclusion that she 'can't stay another winter' in the unheated cottage she shared with two others. Stride, oblivious to her fears, reported blithely,

'She also says that she "doesn't want to go into the Workhouse", ignoring the differences between that & the present Institutions, whose inmates are, so to speak, Paying Guests, inasmuch as their Old Age Pensions, which are already theirs by right, go towards their maintenance & save them from what used to be called "the pauper taint".'

One suspects that many continued to see the Public Assistance Institutions as workhouses, despite the shiny new name. It seems that the stigma of the workhouse persisted, long after things changed on the surface.

(Source: Draft letter from Mr Stride, 11-12 January 1934 (D/EX1533/21).)



New to the Archives

Work on some longer term projects means that we have relatively little to report this time. Nevertheless there are some interesting items to report.

New for family history

We have received the following parish registers: Ruscombe: baptisms, 1906-2008; marriages, 1837-2005; banns, 1825-1937; burials, 1813-1940; a register of graves compiled in 1932; and MIs copied in 1939.

Sulham: marriages, 1981-1999.

Twyford: marriages, 1955-1995; and banns, 1986-2005.

Other church records

We have been given some rare early parish magazines for Easthampstead, 1889 (D/EX2354). Meanwhile preaching plans have been discovered for Reading Wesleyan Methodist Circuit dated 1877 and 1893. These documents list which ministers and lay preachers were due to preach at each church in the circuit over a three-month period.

Enjoying the river

We have been given some photographs showing a group outing on the Reading-based steam launch 'Queen Of The Thames' (built by Newbury firm Plenty & Son), in the 1920s or 1930s (D/EX2372).

And finally

We have acquired a bill from Streatley builder James Smallbone for repairs at Streatley House, 1891 (D/EX2355).

Opening Hours

Tues 9-5, Weds 9-5, Thurs 9-9, Fri 9-4.30.

Closed Mondays, Weekends and Bank Holidays.

Please call us for further details.

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