

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The last Dying Speech and Confession

The Berkshire Echo

From the Editor

Welcome to the summer edition of the Berkshire Echo, the Berkshire Record Office newsletter. This time around we are looking at the courts – the Assize court to be exact as it coincides with the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the Reading Assize courts. As we see in the background piece to the Assizes, the court was set up to deal with heavier crime such as rape or murder. Lesser crimes such as stealing potatoes were dealt with in the lesser courts of Quarter or Petty Sessions.

Although the assize records are at the National Archives, we discover some fascinating aspects about the Assizes due to the survival of the papers of Thomas Noon Talfourd of Reading. Talfourd was a judge and we find out more about his interesting work in 'A Reading Judge'. We wouldn't normally get such detail, but for the fact that he wrote so much down. It's quite revealing really.

Similarly, in 'Applause in court', if it were not for the juror writing down what took place in court, we would not get such revealing details. Official court records tend to only record specific details rather than 'sensationalist' details. The writings of the juror make it more like a narrative piece of journalism and therefore more exciting. Another item which is quite fascinating is actually in the 'New to the Archives' section where we have the confession of a convict who was then executed in 1817. Always worth a look to see what's new too.

Don't forget to look at the What's On section for the latest events at the BRO and remember to like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter (@berksarchives). We hope you enjoy reading.

Ivone Turnbull
Senior Archivist

July 2017

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- A Reading judge
- Applause in court: the juror's tale
- New to the Archives

WHAT'S ON

Heritage Open Day

Saturday 9th September 2017,
10.00-13.00

The Berkshire Family History Society will be giving a 'Beginner's Guide to Family History' talk at 10.00 (30 places available); BRO will be giving tours (10 places available) at 11.00 and 12.00 showing the strongrooms, conservation studio as well as a look at some historical documents. All completely FREE! To book a place, please email arch@reading.gov.uk or call 0118 937 5132.

How to Read Old Handwriting

25th September 2017, 10.15-14.45
Always wanted to know how to read old handwriting? Come along to our introduction to reading handwriting found in documents at the BRO from c.1500 to 1700. The cost is £20 per person. There are 10 places available and booking is essential. Please email arch@reading.gov.uk or call 0118 937 5132.

Preserving your Family Memorabilia

9th October 2017, 12.00-16.00
Discover how to take care of, protect and preserve cherished keepsakes, family history items and more with our conservator. Cost is £25 per person. There are 6 places available and booking is essential. Please email arch@reading.gov.uk or call 0118 937 5132.

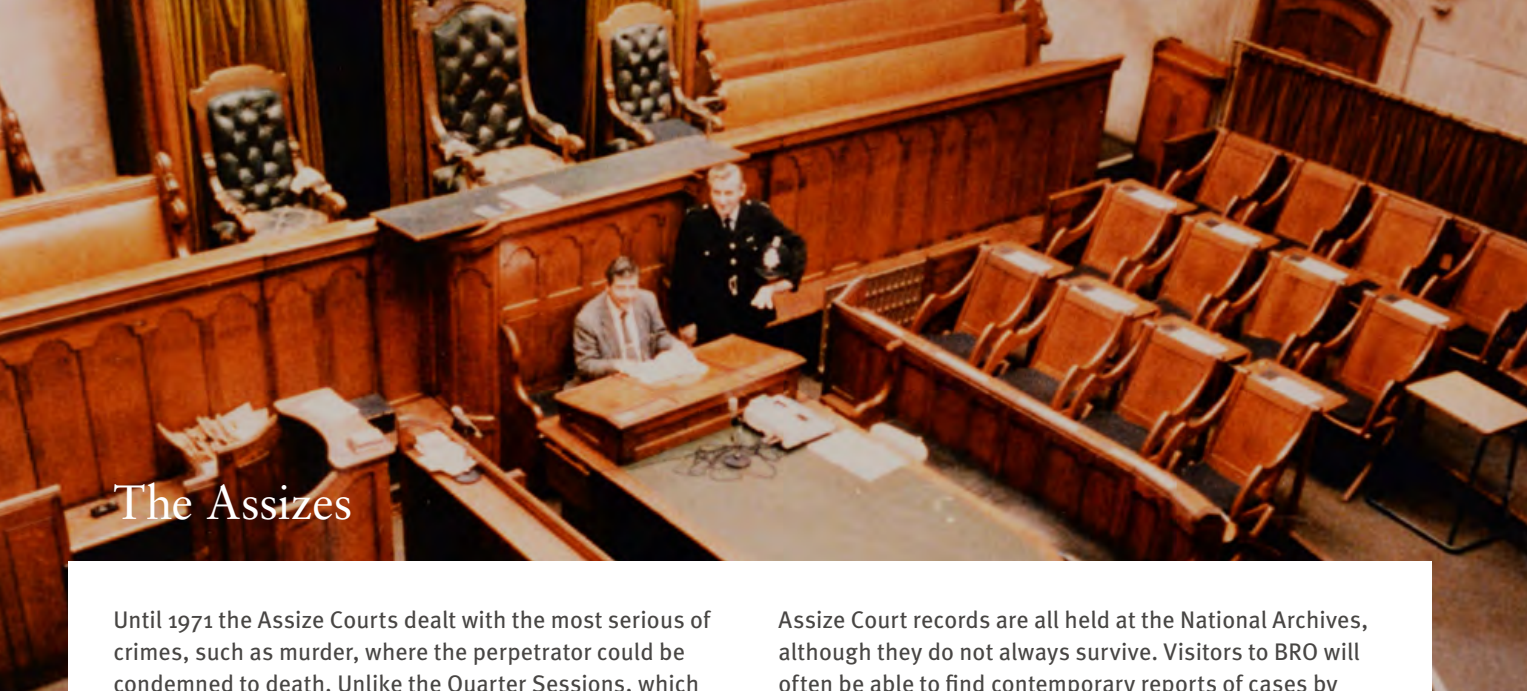


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The Berkshire Echo July 2017
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The Assizes

Until 1971 the Assize Courts dealt with the most serious of crimes, such as murder, where the perpetrator could be condemned to death. Unlike the Quarter Sessions, which were presided over by unpaid lay magistrates from the local gentry, the Assizes had professional judges paid by the Government. The Berkshire Assizes, which heard cases from across the county, were held alternately at Reading and Abingdon until 1867, when it was decided that they should always be held in the new Assize Courts in Reading.

Assize Court records are all held at the National Archives, although they do not always survive. Visitors to BRO will often be able to find contemporary reports of cases by searching British Newspapers Online, to which we have a subscription. Visit <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> and <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/criminal-trials-assize-courts-1559-1971/#8-assize-circuits>

A Reading judge

One of the Assize Court judges was Thomas Noon Talfourd, born in Reading in 1795. Son of a Friar Street brewer, and grandson of the minister of Broad Street Independent Chapel (now Waterstones bookshop), Talfourd was educated at Reading School before studying law privately and becoming a barrister in 1821. He supplemented his income by working as a legal reporter on the Oxford Assize Circuit (which included Berkshire and several other counties) for the Times. When he died, the Law Magazine's obituary described him as "a sound rather than a first-rate lawyer", at his best when sympathising with his client's cause.

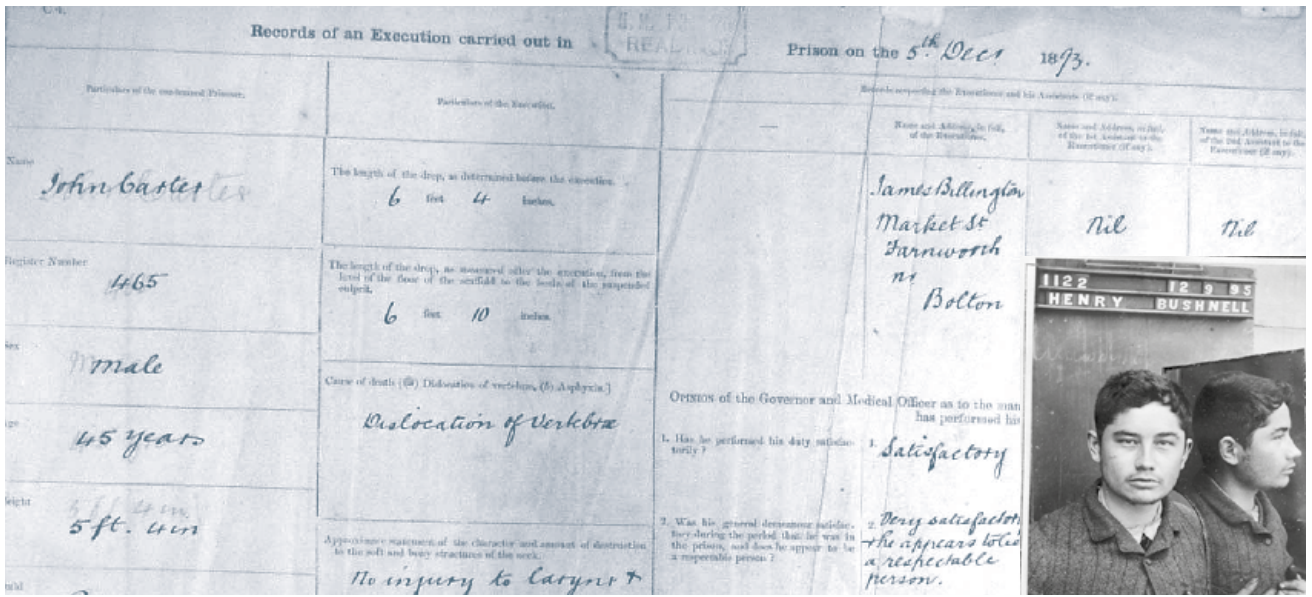
Talfourd was elected MP for Reading three times in 1835, 1837 and 1847. He became a judge in July 1849, and kept a rare set of notebooks recording depositions (the statements of witnesses) at the cases he heard (D/EX1410). Although his handwriting is a deplorable example of mid 19th century scrawl, the notebooks provide a rare glimpse into the Assizes, with almost verbatim accounts of witnesses' depositions, recounting crimes in harrowing detail. They also provide an insight into everyday life in Victorian England.

The criminal cases heard included rape (including some instances of what we would now call child abuse), murder, manslaughter, burglary, housebreaking, robbery, theft, assault, infanticide, arson and bestiality. Talfourd's most famous case as a judge was probably that of Robert Pate, sentenced to 2 years imprisonment at the Old Bailey in July 1850 for attacking Queen Victoria in the street. The most tragic was that of Ann Good of Wallingford, tried at Reading Assizes in March 1853 for cutting off the head of her newborn child. She was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Perhaps the most disturbing case was that of Jacob Tribbeck or Trebeck, accused at Winchester Assizes in 1849 of raping his young stepdaughter. Two years later he appeared again, accused of the same offence against the same victim, still under 12 years old. This time he was found guilty 'of the attempt'.

Talfourd died suddenly of an apoplexy at Stafford on 13 March 1854 while in the middle of a speech addressing the jury on the subject of the estrangement of the classes in English society. He was buried in Norwood Cemetery, London.

Top: Reading Assize Court: the judges' chairs are at the back and the jury seats (some of which are now at the Record Office) on the right (D/EZ112/1/5)





Applause in court: the juror's tale

Jurors are not supposed to share the details of their service, but one member of an Assize Court jury in February 1877 did confide the details to his diary (D/EX902/1). Alexander Elliot was a Windsor shopkeeper.

“Feby 17th. At Reading today, called on the jury as soon as the Court opened. Only decided two cases in the whole day. The first case was one in which a young man shot at his sweetheart because she had broken off an engagement. We brought him in guilty of firing at her with intent to do her grievous bodily harm. There is little doubt he intended to murder her, but we gave him the benefit of the possibility of his intention not being quite so cruel. His sentence was 10 years penal servitude.

The other case was a peculiar one. A butler, having saved a little money, employed a builder to build a house upon a piece of ground he had purchased. The house was built and the family moved in. Not many weeks after, the man was sleeping in the same room with his wife and two children, when at about 4 o'clock in the morning he heard strange noises & remarked on it to his wife. Soon after they increased to such an extent that he remarked to his wife that the room was certainly falling & that they had better get out of it into another. Scarcely had he said so when down went the room & its occupants into the basement, covering the family with the fallen debris. Neither of them was much hurt except an infant of about 12 months old which was taken out dead. The coroner's inquest committed the builder for manslaughter.

The theory of the prosecution was that the concrete of which the cellar walls had been built was mere mud & so had given way & let down the structure & caused the accident. The theory of the defence was that in consequence of the heavy floods of this season, water had accumulated in the cellar, penetrated the sand beneath the foundation, caused a cavity beneath the concrete & brickwork & let down both into it, the house in consequence falling.

We, although the so-called concrete was certainly very bad indeed, took the defence's view of the case, and stopped the case, without troubling the counsel to address us a second time, with a verdict of 'Not guilty'. The verdict was followed by applause in court, which was immediately suppressed...

Feby 19th. Again at Reading on the jury. Among other cases tried one for bigamy. The man's first wife seems to have been a bad lot & they had long been separated. The judge, Baron Pollock, told him what a naughty man he was to marry a second time while his first wife might be alive & finished up by sending him to jail for a fortnight without hard labour....”

Elliot's notes – never intended for public consumption - provide a fascinating insight into the court of the 19th century.

*Top: Some prisoners convicted at the assizes were sentenced to be hanged. Page from the Reading Prison execution book (P/RP1/14/1)
Inset: A convicted prisoner (P/RP1/5/2)*



New to the Archives

A gang of thieves

Executions were public affairs, a combination of deterrent to other criminals and public spectacle. Descriptions of both crime and punishment were often published in printed handbills, precursors of today's 'true crime' genre. One such example, recently donated to the Record Office, is entitled 'The last Dying Speech and Confession of James Castle, executed at Reading, for sheep stealing, August 2, 1817' (D/EX2486). Castle, 30, had been convicted at Abingdon Assizes with his brother Henry, 26, of stealing seven sheep from John Hoare of Sutton Courtenay. The brothers were leaders of a 'gang of thieves, who have long infested the neighbourhood of Abingdon' and stolen over 100 sheep over the course of a year. The handbill was published by Reading printers Cowslade & Co, and would have been sold widely in the area.

Life and death in Berkshire: coroners and hospitals

We have now listed the coroners' inquests for Maidenhead District, 1918-1943 (COR/M), Reading District, 1918-1941 (COR/R), and Reading Borough, 1935-1941 (COR/RB). Among material added to the Fair Mile Hospital archive is a register of coroner's inquests there, 1870-1992 (D/H10), although closure periods apply. We have also acquired an inventory of the contents of Wayland Hospital, Bradfield, 1948-1952 – just after it became part of the NHS (P/HA2).

Family history

We have received the following parish registers:
Binfield: *burials, 1957-1992 (D/P18)*
Bourton: *marriages, 1860-2000 (D/P112D)*
Brimpton: *marriages, 1982-2010; banns, 1909-2007 (D/P26)*
Compton Beauchamp: *banns, 1824-2010 (D/P42)*
Reading Christ Church: *baptisms, 1963-1998; marriages, 1990-2007 (D/P170)*
Speen: *marriages, 1992-2016 (D/P116)*
Sutton Courtenay: *marriages, 1986-2005; banns, 1968-2010 (D/P128)*
Uffington: *marriages, 1989-2016 (D/P134)*
Watchfield: *marriages, 1960-1974 (D/P112C)*

Need somewhere to hold a meeting?

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The last Dying Speech and Confession of JAMES CASTLE,

EXECUTED AT READING, FOR SHEEP STEALING, August 2, 1817.
JAMES CASTLE, aged 30, and his brother HENRY CASTLE, aged 26, labourers, were convicted at Abingdon Assizes, on the 15th of July, 1817, of stealing Seven Sheep, the property of Mr. John Hoare, of Sutton Courtenay, in the county of Berks.—When atrocious offenders are overtaken by public justice, curiosity is naturally excited to enquire into the course of their iniquities, and the particulars of the crime for which they suffer. The course of this unhappy man, has been the course of thousands. No man, we are told, is ever desperately wicked at once; it is by degrees that he arrives at that point, which calls for severe punishment. This was the case in the present instance—his crimes were progressive: from a neglected education proceeded Sabbath breaking, from Sabbath breaking idleness, drunkenness, adultery, and all other kinds of dissipation, from these poverty and want, from these violence and robbery, which have brought him to this untimely end.—It is a satisfaction in cases like the present, that the unhappy man should be brought to a full sense of his crimes, and be sensible of the great offences he has been guilty of.

Records from Maidenhead St Luke include property records from the 1860s and a set of transcripts of the parish registers, compiled from the parish magazines as the originals were tragically destroyed in a fire at the church in 1991 (D/P181). We have also received parish magazines for Waltham St Lawrence, 1925-2012 (D/EX1241).

Manorial records

It is always exciting to discover hitherto unknown manorial records, so the highlight of a small miscellaneous collection of mainly family papers was the 1547 survey and rental of Benham Lovell manor in Speen (D/EX306). Also of interest is a 17th century statement regarding the custom of Warfield manor relating to inheritance by daughters (D/EX332).

Clubs and societies

We were pleased to receive the records of Reading Athletic Club, 1884-2006 (D/EX2096). The records of a number of local Women's Institutes have been catalogued (D/EX1925). Reading Guild of Artists has also added to its archive here, covering the period 1958-2015 (D/EX1656).

Top: Extract from the handbill about James Castle (D/EX2486/1)

Opening Hours

Tues 9-5, Weds 9-5, Thurs 9-9, Fri 9-4.30.
Closed Mondays, Weekends and Bank Holidays.
Please contact us for further details.

Contact Information:

Tel: 0118 937 5132 Fax: 0118 937 5131
Web: www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk
Email: arch@reading.gov.uk

The Berkshire Record Office,
9 Coley Avenue, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 6AF

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