

BERKSHIRE RECORD OFFICE

ANNUAL REPORT

2007-2008

INTRODUCTION

During the past year we have continued to make excellent progress on our externally-funded projects, completing one on target, and winning substantial additional funds that have enabled us to extend another and embark upon a third. Thanks to this funding details of our major collections of manorial records are now available on-line, the nationally-important archives of Broadmoor Hospital will shortly be open for research, and a new index to our important collection of Berkshire probate records is in prospect. All this was carried out alongside the core work of maintaining the public service, where we continued to achieve high levels of satisfaction; of negotiating with depositors and securing new archives for the collections; of accessioning and cataloguing the many new acquisitions received during the year; of carrying out essential conservation and preservation work; and of supporting educational and community use and enjoyment of the records. We again performed well in the national self-assessment exercise for archive services monitored by The National Archives.

All these achievements and more are recorded in the pages that follow. None would have been possible without the hard work of an able and committed staff and the support of colleagues in Reading Borough Council and the other Unitary Authorities in Berkshire, of members of Archives Board, of our depositors, volunteers and our many friends. I thank them all most warmly. It is also a pleasure to be able to record on his retirement my thanks to the former Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire, Sir Philip Wroughton, who has been a warm friend of the Record Office throughout his time in office, and whose interest in and support for our work has been enormously valued.

Peter Durrant
County Archivist
October 2008

PUBLIC SERVICE

Searchroom and enquiry services

It is an important part of our job to ensure that everyone who makes contact with the Record Office receives a welcoming and friendly service. We would like all our customers to feel that we have listened to their needs, and done the best we can to meet them. Because of this we are always keen to receive comments on how we have fared, and are always pleased to report how positive these comments are. Examples received over the past year include:

The staff were ALL well-informed and VERY helpful. It was a pleasure to visit.

A very well-organised and extensive research room with friendly, helpful and patient staff.

Absolutely wonderful that this service exists.

I really appreciate the RO being open till 9pm on Thursdays.

I wish all Record Offices were so efficient and friendly.

I would like to thank all the staff. They were great - the best.

As well as customer comments, we also measure our efficiency through our service guarantees. Over the year these stand at:

- 99% of visitors get their first choice of visit time
- 97% of written enquiries are answered within 5 working days
- 99% of copies are supplied within 6 working days
- 99% of original documents are produced for visitors within 15 minutes of order

During the year we have continued with our oversubscribed 'Introduction to the searchroom' sessions, aimed principally at new visitors to the Office. We have also piloted a dedicated research evening for Berkshire Family History Society members, which was very well attended and which we are hoping to make a regular event in the future. We would also be interested in extending such evenings to bring in other groups. In terms of improvements to the service, we have successfully created some new guides to records covering World War II, and schools in Bracknell Forest and Wokingham council areas. These are available both in hard copy and on our website. We have also begun a revision of our various information leaflets, to update both their look and contents, and this will complete next year.

The trends in use noted last year have continued. A substantial growth in the number of resources used by researchers was matched by a drop in the number of visits. This led to very contrasting output figures for the year, where the 7701 original documents consulted was the highest figure recorded in the new Record Office, and the 5522 visits were the fewest received. For many years the number of visits was a reliable indicator of the 'busy-ness' of the Office, but this appears to be no longer the case. Written enquiries, meanwhile, fell by a little under 4% to 2480.

Remote access

Towards the end of the year we finally received some usage statistics for the service website, www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk. These are the first we have had since November 2004. They show that for the full year 2006/7 we received 189,083 visits to the site. The figure for 2007/8 is likely to be higher again, and for the period up to 31 December showed 150,779 visits. We received our highest-ever monthly total of visitors - 22,382 - in July 2007.

Since then, the supply of statistics has dried up again. This is something that should be solved by the creation of a new service website, based on a content management system. Contractors have been appointed to design and build the new site, and we hope that it will be ready by the end of 2008/9. In the meantime very little additional content has been added to the present site during the year.

Catalogues available on www.a2a.org.uk, received 56,000 views during the year, a little down on last year. The National Archives has said that it will no longer be seeking to add data to the website, and it is unclear whether its status as a national gateway will be maintained or whether it will gradually become seen as redundant.

Outreach

We attended various events during the year. As well as our regular appearance at the Bracknell Family History Fair, we also attended Family History Days at both Reading and Wokingham Libraries, and a Local History Day in Faringdon, which had been organised by Oxfordshire Record Office. All these events were well-attended, and both the Reading and Faringdon events attracted significant local media coverage. We also sponsored a concert by the Nash Ensemble as part of Reading's Cultural Services classical music season. We were able to provide some tickets to say thank you to our volunteers, and we also benefited from an advert in the concert programme. It is hoped that we can repeat this venture in future years.

We also continued to respond to requests for talks and visits from local groups and societies. We have spoken to groups from Windsor Evening Townswomen's Guild, Tilehurst Methodist Women's Fellowship, East Garston 'Church in the Community' Festival and Woodley Library's Local History event. Mark Stevens also spoke at The Wellcome Trust's Research Resources in Medical History Winter Conference in Edinburgh. We have received visits from the Bracknell Forest Heritage Forum, Phyllis Court Family History Section, Museum of English Rural Life staff, Reading's Cultural Services marketing team, Yell press team, and the Town and Manor of Hungerford. Additionally we took tours of the Record Office over the annual Heritage Open Days, and hosted a meeting for the South East Region of the Society of Archivists.

We published a further four issues of the new-look *Berkshire Echo* during the year, and the mailing list for this continues to grow. BBC Radio Berkshire

picked up on a piece in the autumn issue about the burning of Wargrave church, allegedly by suffragettes, and we gave them an interview on the subject. We also continued to place news stories within the *Berkshire Family Historian* and contributed our regular column to the newsletters of both the Berkshire and Oxfordshire Local History Associations. After the local floods at the end of July, we also gave an interview to ITN News about past flooding in the Thames Valley.

This year also saw the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the twinning of Reading with Dusseldorf. The Record Office holds an extensive archive from the Reading-Dusseldorf Association, and items from this were exhibited in Reading's Civic Centre throughout June.

Copies of documents from the Record Office's collections were included in the exhibition 'Reading's Slavery Links' promoted by Reading International Solidarity Centre, and the Office also supported exhibitions and displays at a number of locations in Berkshire, including Cranbourne, Easthampstead, Reading Minster, East Garston, Lambourn and Wallingford.

Lectures and educational work

The main support we provide for educational work remains help for the self-directed learners who visit or contact us asking for information or advice. This year we have once again spoken to the University of Reading's history undergraduates, and also to the University's MA in Medieval Studies students.

In terms of educational events, we have held three day schools with the Departments of Continuing Education of Reading and Oxford Universities - church and schools in nineteenth century Berkshire; records of the new poor law; and manorial records, the latter of which was inspired by our Manorial Documents Project. We also spoke at the Museum of Reading's 'Improving Literacy through History' teachers' conference.

ACCESSIONING, CATALOGUING, RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION

Accessioning

During the year under review we received 207 accessions amounting to over 6 cubic metres in volume and ranging in date from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first. If in terms of volume this was less than in the previous year, there was certainly no reduction in terms of variety and interest. Once again a significant proportion came from a single source: patient files from Broadmoor Hospital accounted for approximately one-third of the total. The remainder came in varying quantities from a wide variety of places, including parish and non-conformist churches, town halls, parish councils, schools, businesses, local societies, individuals, and in a couple of cases the sale room. The earliest record was a deed of property in Thatcham dating from 1408; the most recent items were copies of this year's parish magazines from numerous parishes across the county. Parish records figured large, accounting for nearly one-quarter of all accessions, and it was particularly encouraging to receive a number of nineteenth-century registers through a generous scheme funded by the Berkshire Family History Society offering new registers for old on condition that the old registers were deposited in the Record Office. Non-conformist records were also prominent, including not only a fine collection from St Paul's United Reformed Church in Bracknell, but also property deeds of some ten United Reformed and Congregational Churches dating back in some cases to the eighteenth century. Records came from all parts of the county - and included some from our own doorstep (deeds of a house in Coley Avenue, barely one hundred yards away).

Cataloguing

Cataloguing is often thought of as a 'backroom' task in record offices. To the extent that it is not carried out in the public searchroom this is certainly true. But in every other respect it is one of the key front-line tasks of an archive service, for it is only through cataloguing that records yield up their riches and that the evidence once hidden becomes available for research. The year 2007/2008 saw output maintained and a good number of important archives made available.

Prominent among the catalogues completed were two important local authority archives: the minutes and related agenda papers of Slough Borough Council and its predecessors, and rating and valuation records from Reading. The former represented the latest stage in an on-going project to make Slough records available. Slough, of course, was in Buckinghamshire until 1974, but by agreement with Slough Borough Council and the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies we will hold the records of the present council and its predecessors. The earliest records date from the creation of the Slough Local Board, which was set up in 1863 to deal with matters relating to public health. It was replaced by Slough Urban Sanitary Authority in 1876, and by an Urban District Council in 1894. Slough was incorporated as a municipal borough in 1938. Minutes of all these bodies, and of the committees they set up, are among the more than 250 volumes in the

collection, providing evidence of local services in the town over a period of more than a century. Together with rating and valuation records catalogued a few years ago, over 660 volumes of Slough Borough records are now available for study. The Reading rating and valuation records, part of Reading Borough Council's enormous archive, comprise nearly 500 volumes dating from 1850 to 1963, and contain a wealth of information about the growth of the town during that period.

A number of other catalogues of local authority collections were also completed, including records of Wallingford Rural District Council, 1873-1973, and of five parish councils, among them Finchampstead (records from the inauguration of the council in 1894) and Hurley (a very large collection including some items pre-dating the council, and much detailed correspondence on parochial matters).

Some 45 parish and 37 non-conformist collections were catalogued during the year. Notable among the parish collections were East Challow, 1795-2006; Denchworth, 1814-2007; Farnborough, 1813-2007, including baptism and burial registers from 1813; Frilsham, 1837-1961, including a marriage register from 1837; East Garston, 1742-2005, including the tithe award and map, 1843, and designs for a proposed restoration of the church, 1874; Tilehurst, 1803-2005, including a list of recipients of a bread charity, 1803, and churchwardens' accounts, 1864-1931; and Wallingford St Mary, 1667-1973, including churchwardens' accounts 1667-1827. Outstanding among the non-conformist archives was that of St Paul's United Reformed Church, Bracknell (formerly Bracknell Congregational Church), founded in 1813, whose records go back to the very beginning of the church's history. Other non-conformist collections catalogued included additional material from Thatcham United Reformed Church, 1785-2005, including the first church book, 1811-1886; Spencers Wood United Reformed Church, 1812-1949, including a certificate of registration, 1817; and Wallingford Independent Chapel, 1776-1905, including papers relating to the revival of the chapel in the late 1890s.

In early 2007 we received a large collection of records of local building societies (in excess of half a cubic metre by volume) from the Bristol offices of the Bristol and West Building Society, which had absorbed them in 1957. This deposit included minutes and financial records of the Reading and County Building Society, 1852-1930, the Reading Building Society, 1930-1947, and the Reading and High Wycombe Building Society, 1947-1957. The catalogue was among those completed in 2007/2008, so that an important source for the economic history and for the history of housing in Reading and the Thames Valley is now available.

Among the other collections catalogued is a varied assortment including the deeds of the Maiden Erleigh estate, 1673-1896; a group of photographs of Maiden Erleigh School, 1930s-1950s (that is to say the school that occupied the former mansion, not the present Maiden Erleigh School); additional records of Berkshire Women's Institutes, 1919-1996; a commemorative medal from the Maharajah's Well, Stoke Row, 1872 (the well is actually in Oxfordshire, but was built by a Berkshire firm); a small group of eighteenth and nineteenth-century maps and plans of various parts of Berkshire; and

(the oldest document this year) a deed of land in Thatcham dating from 1408.

Altogether some 152 catalogues were completed, representing 193 accessions and comprising over 2400 items.

Research and Publication

Once again the most popular subject of study was family history. However, research in the Record Office was not limited to this, and local, regional, political, religious and economic studies (not all of them limited to Berkshire) drew upon the resources of the Record Office during the year. Subjects of study have included mediaeval seals, nonconformity in Berkshire, Victorian churches, religious observance in nineteenth-century Berkshire, the Thames Navigation, brickmaking, war memorials, black history, council housing, eighteenth-century opera audiences, war-time evacuation, sugar plantation technology, and staff members of the East India Company.

Two members of staff contributed articles to this year's *Berkshire Old and New*: Kate Tyte on 'Fair Mile Hospital, Cholsey 1870-1948', and Jeremy Taylor on 'Berkshire County Council Building Contracts 1892-1939'.

Other publications arising from research in the Record Office are noted in the section on the Office's library.

The Library

Some 300 titles were added to the Record Office's library during the year, encompassing local historical studies, guides to records and research, reference books and professional literature. Several were based on research carried out in the Record Office.

Recent publications acquired included local histories of East Challow, the manor of Hidden in Hungerford, and Sandhurst; family histories of the Berkshire families of Buxey and Dunsdon; reminiscences of Tilehurst; studies of Town and Countryside in Western Berkshire, 1327-1600, of Reading, 1640-1690, and of late churches and chapels in Berkshire; a study of Berkshire windmills, a guide to Datchet parish church, a histories of Reading Athletic Club and of Wilson School, Reading, and guides to the Pang Valley and to Windsor Great Park; and a fine biographical dictionary of Quakers in business (with, of course, many Berkshire entries).

Some of the titles were acquired as gifts, both from authors and from friends, and we are grateful to the donors for their generosity.

CONSERVATION

Conservation and Preservation

Conservation and preservation, like cataloguing, are 'behind-the-scenes' activities in a record office. They are also, like cataloguing, essential to achieving our access agenda. Without a rigorous and disciplined approach to collection care and without a positive approach to conservation, damaged documents would remain inaccessible, whilst documents in good condition would lack the protection they need to preserve them for the future. Much of the work carried out in the Conservation Unit is unglamorous, involving such things as the removal of rusty paper clips, sewing pamphlets, and replacing acidic wraps with acid-free packaging, but all of it is essential.

During the year the conservation team made folders for nearly 1200 documents and encapsulated - that is, placed within an inert plastic sleeve - nearly 750 more, secured over 700 loose pages in volumes by the process known as 'tipping-in', re-sewed nearly 2800 pamphlets, and provided first-aid to deal with minor damage in a further 700 cases. Preservation work of this kind is divided between reactive work - responding to need identified during cataloguing or when documents are issued in the searchroom - and a planned programme of repair and packaging for priority collections. Chief among the latter during the year were early twentieth-century building plans from Slough (a very large collection) and an important and heavily-used series of valuation maps prepared under the Land Duties Act of 1911. Both of these projects continued work begun in the previous year and have now been concluded. During this year we began work on two new projects, one to repair and package a large collection of drawings from the Borough Surveyor's office in the former borough of New Windsor and the other to make useable a number of district council rating and valuation records. The permanent staff were once again supported in their work by a team of volunteers from the Berkshire Federation of Women's Institutes, for whose assistance we are very grateful.

Some documents needed more substantial conservation work. Among these was a very early commission issued by Queen Elizabeth I appointing Sir Henry Neville and Sir Thomas Parry joint Lord Lieutenants of Berkshire in 1560. The great seal attached to the document had shattered, though most of the fragments remained, and it was possible by painstaking work to put it back together again into a recognisable shape. We also repaired some sixteenth-century court papers from the manor of Cookham (unusual because they dealt in some detail with civil business brought before the court) and a nineteenth-century sale catalogue from Windsor, and we remounted and bound, using archival materials, the souvenir album recording the celebration of 'Berkshire Golden Youth' held at Bisham Abbey during Her Majesty's jubilee year, which had been deposited by the Lord Lieutenant's office. In addition we undertook repairs to an important sale catalogue of Shaw House, near Newbury, to make it fit for display in the newly-restored mansion.

Microfilming

We continue to use microfilming as an economical and effective way of providing substitute copies of documents as a necessary precaution against over-use. Parish registers of baptisms, marriages, burials and banns and school admission registers are particularly at risk, and we aim to film these as soon after receipt as possible. This year we have also focussed on cemetery records and coroners' inquest files and began work on a programme of filming rate books, as these have often been weakened through heavy use in rating offices before they ever reach us. Altogether we filmed 95 parish registers, 10 school admission registers, 58 cemetery books, 21 rate books and 37 bundles of coroners' files, as well as other items, achieving a total of over 50,000 pages.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

Historic Mental Health Records: Broadmoor

During the year our Broadmoor Project has continued, and both our archivist and conservator have spent the whole year engaged in work which will result in the Broadmoor archive becoming available at the end of 2008. The fact that the whole year has been spent cataloguing and repairing items give some clue as to the vast scale of the work. This has subsequently been recognised by The Wellcome Trust, the project's funders, who have given us an additional grant of £22,000 to extend the cataloguing work by eight months, and also £91,000 to carry out a further three years' conservation work to around 7,000 badly damaged papers amongst the very important collection of Victorian patients' files.

By the end of the year most of the cataloguing work had been completed in first draft, and work to refine this and provide detailed explanatory notes had begun. Similarly, most of the conservation work had been completed to items other than the patient files. During the year we also continued discussions with the Hospital about access to the records, and at the very end of the year the joint access protocol was finally agreed. A piece about the project appeared in the spring 2007 issue of *The National Archives' RecordKeeping* magazine.

Manorial Documents On-line

Although the formal launch events took place after the year's end, the Manorial Documents On-line project was substantially completed by the end of March 2008. Information about all known surviving records of Berkshire's manorial courts may now be found on-line. Approximately half of these are held in Berkshire Record Office, whilst the others (due to the vagaries of manorial inheritance) are found in record offices up and down the country (a good few in The National Archives). As part of the project we investigated our own uncatalogued collections and in so doing found a small number of hitherto unknown records. These have now been catalogued and details are to found in the database. At the end of the year, as mentioned above, we promoted a very successful day school under the auspices of the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education. The project, run in association with Royal Holloway University of London, The National Archives and the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, received financial support from the Marc Fitch Fund, for which we are very grateful

Berkshire Probate Project

During the year we successfully raised the funds necessary to embark on a project to create a wholly new index to Berkshire Archdeaconry probate records, 1508-1653. Work will start in 2008.

ASSESSMENT AND REVIEW

The National Archives' Self-Assessment of Local Record Offices

In the summer of 2007 The National Archives conducted its second self-assessment exercise for archive services in England and Wales. The results were notified to participating services at the end of the year. Berkshire Record Office was again awarded a 'two-star' rating (on a scale from zero to three). The survey was divided into five categories: governance, documentation of collections, access and outreach services, preservation and conservation, and buildings, security and environment. Notwithstanding our admitted problems with humidity we scored three stars in the first and last sections, with two stars in the remaining three. Our scores were above UK averages in all areas, and above the average for county record offices in three out of five categories. This is an excellent result, and we can be justifiably pleased with it, particularly since it was achieved on a budget that was amongst the lowest in the country per head of population and on staffing levels that are no more than merely average.

Service Review

During the year the Record Office embarked on the second quinquennial review required under the terms of the joint agreement. Terms of reference were agreed by Archives Board in April, evidence gathering took place during the summer and autumn, and a outline proposal for a final report was presented to Board in January.

The terms of reference were drawn from the results of The National Archives' inspection report (which was reported to Standing Conference in 2007) and from Archives Board's request that the service challenge its efficiency. Key themes of the review were environmental control of the collections, IT development, survey work, current and future contractual arrangements for delivering the service, the use of staffing resources, current and future income streams, and storage capacity. We took evidence from a variety of sources, including local stakeholders and other record offices, and we compared ourselves with the regional picture using information extracted from national statistics published by the Institute of Public Finance.

The review revealed a generally economical and well-run service which compared favourably with other record offices in the region. It also suggested a number of areas for action. The final report was not complete at the year's end, but was due to be presented to Archives Board at its meeting in May 2008. Following approval, an action plan will be prepared to guide the strategic planning of Record Office during the next five years.

STAFFING

During the year we said farewell to Ben White and Zoe Darani and who had worked with us as, respectively, temporary archivist and temporary archives assistant, and we welcomed Rhonda Niven as conservator on the Historic Mental Health Records project, Ellie Thorne as archivist. Andy Blake as archives assistant, and Alison Day as searchroom assistant. We were delighted to congratulate Julie Grisman on gaining an MSc in Archive Studies from the University of Aberyswyth, and Jeremy Taylor on registration with the Society of Archivists. We also congratulated Ivone Turnbull on the birth of her son. Sadly we have also to record the death at the age of 94 of William Smith, County Archivist from 1962 to 1968.

Several members of staff contributed significantly to professional matters nationally and to the promotion of historical and archival concerns locally. I served as Vice-President of the Berkshire Family History Society, as General Editor of the Berkshire Record Society, as Treasurer of both the Reading Branch of the Historical Association and the Friends of Reading Abbey, on the Council of the British Records Association, on the London and South East Committee of Newsplan, and on Douai Abbey's Library Committee. During the year I was appointed a Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of History at Reading University. Mark Stevens served on the (national) Council of the Society of Archivists and was chair of its Committee for Corporate Affairs. Sabina Sutherland served on the Council of the Berkshire Record Society and was elected to the committee of the Reading Branch of the Historical Association. Lisa Spurrier continued to serve on the editorial board of *Berkshire Old and New*.