The Berkshire Echo

The Newsletter of Berkshire Record Office

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What happens now?

In less than a year's time (on 31 March 1998 to be precise) Berkshire County Council will cease to exist, and its functions will be taken over by six Unitary Authorities. Shire Hall will be sold and all County Council staff will move out to their new destinations. Well, not quite all...Berkshire Record Office will still be here and open for business in Shire Hall until 31 March 2000. We will have to move out after that date, but the wheels are in motion to find a suitable site for a new purpose-built Record Office in the Reading area. Your comments in the user survey will help us in planning the new office. Watch this space for developments...

Exhibitions

The first exhibition to be displayed in our show cases in Shire Hall this year was on Musicians and Playmakers in Berkshire, and included a selection of records from Reading's Progress Theatre, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary season. Kenneth Branagh was a member of the Progress student group in the late 1970s, and the exhibition included programmes of Progress productions in which he appeared. Amongst other items on display were programmes of musical events at Windsor Castle in the 1890s; a ballad relating to the true story of the murder of two policemen near Hungerford, 1876; a scrapbook of programmes from the 1890s, compiled by Dr Marion Arkwright, relating to her life as an amateur musician in the Newbury area; and a handbill advertising the Abingdon Music festival, which comprised a concert and ball. A ticket for both events cost 10s 6d for ladies and 15s for gentlemen.

This was followed by an exhibition to coincide with the publication of a booklet, *The High Sheriffs of Berkshire. 1000 years of Shrievalty in the Royal County*. The booklet, which is a co-operative project linking the incoming High Sheriff and staff of the Record Office and Reading University, is the first history of the shrievalty in Berkshire to be written. The exhibition included a selection of records illustrating the work of the sheriff (the monarch's representative in the county) in the Royal County from Saxon times. A facsimile of the Berkshire section of the Domesday Book, for example, mentioned Godric, the former sheriff. Fourteenth century writs from the sheriff to the bailiffs of Wallingford illustrated how orders were conveyed.

Orders issued by Charles I's council of war at Oxford in 1644 to raise auxiliaries for the defence of Reading during the Civil War showed the sheriff in his military capacity: command of the troops was given to Col. Richard Nevill, the high sheriff. The expenses of being sheriff could mount up as revealed in the steward's accounts of Richard Powlett Wright Benyon. The total bill spent in connection with the Lent assizes in 1816 came to over £230, which was spent on accommodation, food, officials, hats, clothes and ribbons for the retinue and the fanfare at the judges' arrival. Also on display were prints of Coley House (the home of Thomas Vachell who was sheriff on the eve of the Civil War) and of Ockwells, near Bray. Ockwells was built in the fifteenth century by Sir John Norreys, himself a sheriff, and was subsequently lived in by other holders of the office, including members of the Fettiplace family and, at the turn of this century, Sir Edward Arthur Barry.

Coley House, by Kip

The High Sheriffs of Berkshire **is available from Berkshire Record Office at £3.25 plus 70p postage and packing.**

Katie Willis and Elizabeth Hughes

Victorian Housing Horror

Among recent new accessions to the Record Office Library are photocopies of six *Reports to the General Board of Health*, for Reading (1850 and 1852), Maidenhead (1851), Newbury (1852) and Eton (1849 and 1851). They arose out of the Public Health Act 1848, under which public inquiries were held into sewerage, drainage, water supply and the general sanitary condition of populations in about 300 urban and industrial areas where illness and disease were prevalent. We already had in the library an original *Report* for Windsor (1849), and these photocopies now give us complete coverage for Berkshire old and new.

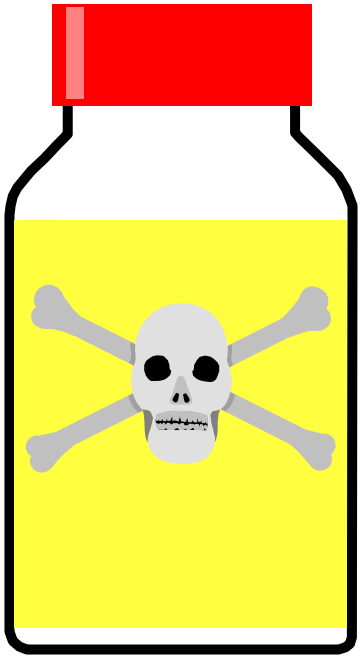
In Reading as in towns elsewhere in the country, concern over poor sanitation and ill-health had been rising for some time. Attempts to tackle the problems by a private Act in 1847 had failed, but cholera in 1849 led to the 1850 inquiry under the new public Act. The resulting report of William Lee, the superintending inspector, lists the "seats of disease" in the streets and courts of the borough forwarded to him by the local registrar, and records both his impressions from personally touring them and the evidence accumulated during a five day hearing. Oral testimony was received not only from the influential but also from the lowly, and occupants' opinions of their squalid living conditions are often recorded verbatim. The noxious effects of burial grounds and slaughterhouses are also considered, past efforts and future plans for improvements to water supply and drainage are assessed, and finally conclusions are reached and recommendations made.

The report is a treasure trove of local detail. Although 80 pages long, there is no padding, the language is direct, and the detail is often graphic. These entries are typical of the evidence received:

St Lawrence's parish: Oxford-street, North-court and *Ball-court*.--There have been cases of fever and dysentery in both. Leonard Hall is tenant of one house, with a

privy cesspool against the wall. His daughter-in-law said:

"The house is damp. We have lived here 11 years, and pay 2s. 4d. per week rent. There are six of the family: father, mother, daughter aged 16, son 13, son 8, and daughter 9. We have only two lodging-rooms."



Mr Vines, medical officer, said he had attended the house for small-pox; and Mr Muggeridge, surgeon, said he had attended the father and mother for bad diarrhoea.

Abbey-wall.--About 18 houses with foul piggeries, offensive privies, and no drainage. Fetch their water from the Holybrook, and their refuse also runs into it. The brook has previously received the filth of a considerable portion of the town. Nearly every house has had small-pox since September last, and some have it now. Inspections of the other Berkshire towns produced similar evidence of recurring nuisances (although Edward Cresy who inspected and reported on Windsor and Eton is more reluctant to name the actual occupants than Mr Lee in Reading, Maidenhead and Newbury). It is difficult to conceive today how the inhabitants managed to tolerate the filth and the stench which are everywhere described. The resulting Reports gave powers to Local Boards under the 1848 Act to supply pure water to every house, to install new systems of underground drainage to replace cesspools, and to improve paving and street cleaning (aspects of life we now take for granted), and led to the closure of overfilled church burial grounds which were a danger to health.

Their influence was monumental, and almost 150 years on now give us a fascinating insight into urban living conditions of the time. For the local historian, their value as primary evidence of life in the mid-19th century is inestimable, and they align themselves very neatly with the 1851 census enumerators' returns of households. They probably enable most of us to imagine our predecessors in a far more accurate light than ever before.

Bob Hale

Just catalogued

The already full and valuable collection of records of Newbury Workhouse has been supplemented by a substantial additional deposit covering the period 1875-1948 (**G/N**), including a complete series of admission and discharge books, 1875-1947, register of births, 1914-1947, outdoor relief order books, 1897-1899 and 1903-1906, an almost complete set of indoor relief lists, 1913-1947, and registers of inmates, 1934-1948. These are mostly subject to a 75 year closure rule, due to the sensitive information included. Received with these were records of Sandleford Hospital, which occupies the old workhouse building, 1948-1959 (**D/H 5**). These show that the hospital continued to have some role in poor relief until at least 1956, particularly for vagrants, who were given overnight accommodation in what was called the "casual ward".

The records of several influential Reading clubs and societies have also been made available. These range from gentlemen's clubs like the Berkshire Athenaeum Club and its predecessors, 1776-1995 (**D/EX 1323**) to Caversham and Reading Cricket Clubs, 1920-1982 (**D/EX 1363**), and two societies which highlight the increasing education and interests of the burgeoning middle classes of nineteenth century Reading: the Reading Mechanics Institution (later the Reading Literary, Scientific and Mechanics' Institution), 1827-1847 (**D/EX 1431**) and the Reading Literary and Scientific Society, 1878-1929 (**D/EX 1432**). By coincidence, also catalogued were the papers of Reading architect Charles Smith and Son, 1857-1911 (**D/EX 1411**). The elder Smith was a President of the Literary and Scientific Society, and his drawings for new buildings added to Reading Workhouse (now Battle Hospital) in 1894 were pasted into the Society's minutes when he hosted a visit to the workhouse. The Society was initially rather radical - one early lecture advocated the establishment of a republic!

Two interesting estate surveys are now available: **D/EX 1425/1** is a survey of Samuel Dabbe's estate in Eastbury and Hadley, Lambourn, 1654-c.1672, and **D/EX 1424/1** is a particularly fine survey of Viscount Barrington's estate in Shrivenham, 1771, (**D/EX 1424/1**) which is notable for the coloured maps of farms he owned in the parish, most of which are still there today. Accounts of Abraham van den Bempde's estates in Beenham, Compton and elsewhere, 1666 (**D/EZ 108/1**), were purchased, and we catalogued farming accounts from Tilehurst (**D/EX 1423**). Also added to our collections were deeds and papers relating to property in Bucklebury, Burghfield, Cookham Dean, Greenham, Hungerford, Lambourn, Newbury, Remenham, Sunninghill and Whitley (**D/EX 1403,1406,1417-1420** and **D/EZ 108**).

Parish records for Finchampstead, 1870-1991(**D/P 56**) included registers of baptisms, 1908-1973, and marriages, 1949-1986. Transcripts of the parish registers of Hatford, Radley and Sotwell were received, together with a transcript of Faringdon Independent and Primitive Methodist baptisms, 1803-1887.

Twentieth century logbooks have been transferred by three schools: St Mary's CE School, Stratfield Mortimer (**97/SCH/2**), Lynch Hill County First and Combined Schools (**96/SCH/1**) and Uplands County Primary School (**97/SCH/1**).

Finally, catalogues have been completed for records of the Reading Dispensary Trust, 1803-1940 (**D/EX 1426**), and the papers of the family of the Revd John Marten Butt, the mad vicar of East Garston, 1806-1857 (**D/EZ 106**) *(More of him in the next Echo - Ed).*

Lisa Spurrier

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