The Berkshire Echo

The Newsletter of Berkshire Record Office

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What's New?

During our annual stocktaking in November we tackled a number of projects both in the strong rooms and in the searchroom. In the strong rooms we have begun vital re-boxing in preparation for the move to new premises in 2000. This may seem a long way ahead but we have to be sure that all four miles of records get to the correct shelf in the correct box in the new building, and the sooner we start the better!

More immediately noticeable will be the changes in the searchroom. We were very aware that access to records on microfiche was over-complicated; the staff certainly had trouble with it! So we have done something about it. Firstly, we have separated out microfiches of particular classes of record and put them together (e.g. parish registers, tithe maps, electoral registers and probate). Secondly, we have rearranged the parish register fiches in parish name order; and thirdly, we have created new, simpler (and we hope easy-to-understand) parish register lists.

There is plenty of staff news this issue. Two long-serving members of staff left us for pastures new on Christmas Eve. Katie Willis started a new job as Archivist to the Salters' Company in London at the beginning of January, and Jean Hackett left to pursue new projects. Meanwhile, we have a new Archives Assistant, Gill Gough, who joined us from the Library Service in December.

Elizabeth Hughes

Outreach Events

Touring Exhibition

Some of you may have already seen the exhibition which is touring the county on a thousand years of government in Berkshire. It shows how the Sheriff, the Parish, the Quarter Sessions and, of course, the County Council got things done from Saxon times to the present day. It includes, for example, the notorious Speenhamland resolution, which the Berkshire magistrates passed in 1795 to supplement the wages of the poor from the rates according to the price of bread, which was inflated because of the Napoleonic Wars. The scheme was adopted in other counties, but became discredited since it put a heavy burden on the rates and allowed employers to keep wages low.

Also revealed are the antics of William Budd, the Clerk of the Peace and chief administrative officer of the county. During a meeting in 1837 Mr Budd, who was reported as being "under the influence of

strong liquors or under mental excitement" climbed on the table, sat on the box of statutes, interrupted the court "by loud talking as well as gestures" and insulted the justices.

Some of the fifty or so other items on display include the poster issued by the Wokingham Police when Agatha Christie disappeared from her Sunningdale home in 1926; and photographs of a Brightwell classroom around 1910, of pupils at Datchett Infants School in 1915, and of gas mask practice at Oakfield childrens' hostel during the Second World War. There are also plans and photographs of County Council buildings, including the Assize Courts building, where the Council met until 1980, and the "new" Shire Hall which opened in the Forbury in 1911. A photograph of a Berkshire County Council staff outing to Cookham in 1911 shows how times have changed - the staff, ranging from Chief Officers to clerks and typists, are all male.

Portrait of William Budd, Clerk of the Peace for the county, 1835

The exhibition has already been to Slough and Wokingham libraries. It will be at Shire Hall from 20-30 January, at Bracknell Library from 3-14 February, and at the Maidenhead Heritage Centre from 17-28 February. We are also hoping to display it at Lambourn Library.

Out and About

Come and see us again with your family and local history queries - this time we'll be at the Family History Fair in **Bracknell**, at the Sports Centre on Bagshot Road, from 10 am to 5 pm on **Sunday 25 January**. Our usual selection of family/local history related books, maps of Berkshire and cards will be available for sale, so don't forget your spending money!

Elizabeth Hughes and Katie Willis

New Book Chronicles the Lives of the Poor in Eighteenth-century Berkshire

In January 1817 Sarah Warman was arrested in Whitchurch, Shropshire, as a rogue and vagabond. She was taken before the magistrates and questioned. It appeared from her answers that she originally came from Chieveley, so in accordance with the laws of the period the magistrates issued an order, on 22 January, for her removal back to that parish. Her journey started more or less straightaway. By 25 January she had arrived in Boningdale (about six miles north-west of Wolverhampton, and some thirty miles from Whitchurch). The following day she arrived in Tettenhall, Staffordshire (just

outside Wolverhampton). From there her journey took her through Birmingham to Yardley, then southwards through Solihull to Knowle, which she had reached by 1 February. From Knowle she travelled east to Balsall, then south to Wroxall, and on to Warwick, arriving two days later. On 3 February she left Warwick for Tredington, a village just north of Shipston on Stour on the Birmingham to Oxford turnpike. From Tredington she travelled southwards via

Burmington and Little Rollright to Oxford, where she probably spent the night of 5 February in the Bridewell. Leaving Oxford she continued her journey through South Hinksey, again on the turnpike, to Abingdon, and through Abingdon to Sutton Wick and finally to Chieveley. Most of the journey was probably by carrier's cart, and altogether it took just about a fortnight.

This is just one of many true stories revealed in a new book published by the Berkshire Record Society. Edited by County Archivist Peter Durrant, it contains abstracts of over 1700 documents from south Berkshire parishes, dating from 1654 to 1834. The documents, created under the provisions of the Old Poor Law, contain information about the lives of many people who would otherwise be virtually unknown. Information about hirings, employment patterns, wages, domestic service, apprenticeships, illegitimacy, travel - the documents are full of it. Although most of the people spent their whole lives within a few miles of their birthplace, a significant minority journeyed considerably further afield. William Waters, for example (examined in Chieveley in 1797) had worked in Devon, Somerset, the Channel Islands and Blackwall in south-east London. The temporary nature of much employment and the difficulties men (in particular) had in finding and keeping work are well illustrated. Between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three, Thomas Withers of Thatcham had had five jobs and had spent a year out of work.

Berkshire Overseers Papers, 1654-1834, is available from Berkshire Record Society, c/o Berkshire Record Office, price £25 (plus £2.50 p&p). Information about membership of the Berkshire Record Society can be obtained from the same address.

Just Catalogued

Church records take pride of place in this issue, as we have had some very fine deposits. The records of Coleshill parish, 1768-1994 (D/P 40), include registers of burials 1813-1986, and baptisms 1887-1990, as well as some interesting poor law material - including a settlement certificate of 1803 for illegitimate twins! The Brightwell parish records, 1639-1997 (D/P 25), include charity accounts from 1837 and a survey of parishioners in 1884-6, which gives notes on character such as “fond of drink”, “steady” or “shiftless”. Best of all is the volume of parish memoranda kept by rector Thomas Wintle, 1775-1814, including details of the process of the inclosure of 1810-1812, as well as many other fascinating details about parish life (soon to be published by the Oxfordshire Record Society).

Sotwell parish records, 1830-1982 (D/P 114), include a fascinating perambulation of the parish in 1830, noting the nonconformist chapel in Chapel Lane, where “the Parish of Sotwell only Clames (sic) that Part of the Chapel that the Pulpit stands in (therefore the Sectarian stands in Sotwell Parish and preach’s (sic) to is (sic) Hearers in Brightwell Parish)”. The writer also thoughtfully advises his successors to take a ladder and board to cross a deep ditch by the brook at the southern boundary of the parish. Also received was a draft register of baptisms and burials for Arborfield, 1804-1831 (D/EX 1472).

Nonconformity is also strongly represented with the records of Newbury Congregational (now URC) Church, 1696-1995 (D/N 32) - the oldest archival material deposited here for any Congregational church. The vicissitudes such records are subject to are reflected in the story of the earliest church book, 1696-1734, which remained in the hands of the minister’s family. A descendant of this family married a later minister of the church, and he restored the book to its proper place in the archives. This volume traces the splitting of the congregation into Presbyterian and Independent/Congregational churches in 1696-7, and a later book has one of the earliest records of Methodism in Newbury, with the 1789 withdrawal of member

William Perkins, "he having become a member of Mr Wesley's Society".

The largest individual collection to be made available recently consists of the papers of the Treacher family of Sonning, 1662/3-1922 (D/EX 1457). Successive Treachers served as surveyors to the Thames Navigation Commission, 1791-1862, overseeing such matters as the building of locks and making new cuts in the river above London. The papers include detailed accounts, specifications and plans for work done for the Commission, 1787-1862, and for other clients including the building and repair of various bridges, 1792-1861, and the rebuilding of Hungerford Church tower in 1810. Sonning parish records, mostly poor law related, include a letter identifying the mother of a foundling left in Sonning as Reading woman Martha Wellman. The private papers include an account of James Treacher's voyage to Jamaica in 1814-5, and the diary of his nephew John (b 1816), 1837-1842, which includes comments on the immorality of the people of Sonning - "one of the most dark ignorant and depraved places anywhere", their ill-treatment of Primitive Methodist preachers, a riot at the Bull Inn, and even an early instance of trainspotting after the opening of the local branch of the Great Western Railway in 1840.

We have catalogued the memorandum book of John Watts, twice mayor of Reading in the 1720s, and chamberlain of the hall revenues, 1724-1727 (D/EX 1456). He commented acidly on previous chamberlains' habit of ordering "the Workmen to patch up the repairs as it may last their time, Saying, let the next Chamberlain do it better". His own achievements, he thought, included attempts to "suppress Wickedness & Vice" in the form of public entertainment, and the institution of searches of houses known to harbour vagrants, "by which Method the Town was not So infested with Such a Number of idle people as it was wont to be". We have also acquired some fine maps of Reading, 1792-1964, especially for the Whitley/Coley areas (D/EX 1455).

An interesting collection of photographs and promotional artwork has been deposited by Vincents, the Reading coachbuilders and horsebox manufacturers, 1903-1972 (D/EX 1401), including a photograph of three elephants being led into a Vincents Super Three horsebox in Station Square, Reading. Albums of 19th and 20th century photographs of Pusey and Hatford, and drawings and photos for other Vale parishes supplemented the papers of local historian Violet Howse (D/EX 1303), and a couple of additional 1st edition OS maps for Newbury have been slotted into the searchroom series. Also catalogued were an 1812 poll book of Reading Borough (D/EX 1460), papers relating to Reading Gaol, 1857-1949 (D/EX 1444), and the papers of William Wing of Caverham, architect and surveyor, c1882-1905 (D/EX 1468).

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